

Lest We Forget - Remembering John Smith

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I never had the opportunity to meet either of my grandfathers, they both died at a very young age when my parents were just adolescents. I understood very early on just how fortunate I was to have two parents in my life supporting me during my many challenges and successes. My parents struggled mightily when losing their father figures as they would live the majority of their lives without the support and love of two parents.

Growing up, I heard stories about both of my grandfathers; however, this reflection will focus on only one, his name, John Smith. It is hard to imagine a more contrasting last name to my current moniker, Cavalluzzo. As a side note, I was named after my grandfather John and my father, Paul. The stories I remember hearing about John were of a man dedicated to his family and country. John was a Petty Officer in the Royal Canadian Navy during World War II, which took him into action throughout the Atlantic Ocean and the European Theatre. My grandfather fought in one of the most historically significant and dangerous battles, the Battle of the Atlantic. For the Allies, the importance of this struggle lay in being able to transport supplies, resources, and reinforcements from North America to their regiments in Europe. I can only imagine how challenging those times must have been. The North Atlantic Ocean on a good day is menacing with its consistently large swells, frigid temperatures and propensity for wild weather. Frank Curry of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) wrote these words in his diary aboard a corvette in 1941, during the Battle of the Atlantic, a battle that would be called the longest of the Second World War.

“What a miserable, rotten hopeless life... an Atlantic so rough it seems impossible that we can continue to take this unending pounding and still remain in one piece... hanging onto a convoy is a full-time job... the crew in almost a stupor from the nightmarishness of it all... and still we go on hour after hour (2017).”

Throughout this six-year-long struggle for supremacy of the Atlantic, German U-Boats sought to disrupt Allied merchant and Navy ships from entering European waters, thus

diminishing the Allies strength in Europe. My mother, an avid historian, a few decades ago decided to research her father's time in the Canadian Navy. She grew up seeing first hand the effects of war, as my grandfather suffered from 'post-traumatic stress.' What my mom witnessed was her father thrashing around his bed at night shouting out orders to people she did not know. She knew that one of his ships, HMS Broadwater had been torpedoed in the North Atlantic; however, that was not the end of the story. As my mother began to research her father, she was presented an article from the Midland Free Press from one of her relatives. In the clipping, my grandfather tells a reporter what it was like for him to be torpedoed on the HMS Broadwater. His vessel was posted in the Atlantic Ocean and was escorting a British destroyer when it was hit amidships by a torpedo from a German U-Boat that had been following the convoy. In addition, my grandfather's ship had sunk a U-Boat the previous night.

John managed to get up from the engine room to the deck and dive into the black oily water, getting a stomach-full in the process. He and 11 other shipmates clambered aboard a dingy in the darkness and floated about in the oil slick. They stayed there, in the frigid water for six hours. John suffered an injured back and a deep cut in his forehead caused by flying debris. But he said he wasn't thinking of the injuries at the time, "only just how awful glad he was to be on that float (1943)."

At dawn, they were picked up by a British trawler, one of two convoy ships that had been detailed to stay behind to pick up survivors. Of their crew of 150, only 40 men survived. Ironically, the HMS Broadwater had also picked up survivors the night before from another British ship that was sunk by a German submarine. Unfortunately, these survivors also died on the Broadwater. "Can you imagine the terrible luck, of these poor guys. Survive the night then die because the ship that saved them got torpedoed (1943)!"

My grandfather described his first reaction when the torpedo struck in the darkness. "The ship just shudders all over. You just hope you won't be trapped below decks...that's what I thought of first. Only one lifeboat and two Carlys (dinghies) got away from the sinking ship. The boys in the forward part of the ship didn't have a chance at all (1943)."

Even though I never heard my grandfather speak, I can actually hear his voice and the inflection as I read his words and goosebumps rise on my skin. Every November I think about my grandfather and his experiences on the Atlantic. What must this experience have been like for a working-class Canadian “boy” from Midland, Ontario? How would I have reacted under such extreme circumstances and distress? What would I have called my grandfather (papa, grandpa, grandad)?

This Remembrance Day I remember my grandfather, my many other relatives that represented our country in times of war and all other servicemen and women who have fought (and died) for Canada. I often reflect that each day I'm given the opportunity to become a better man because of those that came before. For we would not be living in a free and democratic society without the bravery they displayed during the battle and their overall commitment to our Canadian values.

This reflection was co-written with my mother, Jean Cavalluzzo.