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Shelburne farm life lacked one crucial lesson for Navy vet

By Brock Weir

Growing up on a farm outside of Shelburne, Jack Crone didn't think he had any reason to learn how to swim.

But the Second World War gave him other ideas.

Serving with the Royal Canadian Navy in a number of ports, he found himself doing training exercises in Bermuda in 1943 where he and his fellow crew members had to practice the best and most efficient ways to abandon ship.

?We were supposed to jump over the sides,? says Mr. Crone, now 91. ?I was born on a farm and I never learned how to swim, so I hid in a gun locker for three days, but they eventually found me and threw me over the side. I found out in salt water it takes considerably longer to drown!?

Well, thank heavens for salinity!

Mr. Crone lived to tell the tale, and tell it he did, sharing stories of his service with students ? and the Shelburne Free Press ? on Remembrance Day.

Back on his family's farm three miles east of Melanchton, Mr. Crone vividly recalls leafing through the photographs taken by his aunt when she herself served in the First World War. Her images gave a no-holds-barred view of life in the trenches of what was supposed to be the ?war to end all wars.? But when this moniker appeared to be false a couple of decades later, and the world was in conflict again, these images sprang to mind when it was time for the 17-and-a-half year old Jack to do his bit for King and Country.

By this time, the family had lost the farm due to the great depression and had moved to find work in Toronto. In 1943, he was studying at St. Michael's College when he and his friends decided to sign up.

?I didn't want to be part of any of that stuff,? says Jack, harkening back to his aunt's army photos. ?We had an opportunity to get on the ships in Toronto and that is probably when I became interested in the navy.?

Also a factor: Army conscription began at the age of 18, but the Navy let you in when you were 17. A perfect solution for a young man who didn't want to let the grass grow under his feet.

After taking basic training on the Plains of Abraham near Quebec City, he went to Cornwallis where he took gunnery, before heading to Halifax to join the frigate Strathadam. That was a non-starter as the ship developed a problem with the propeller shaft, and training was moved to the frigate Arnprior, which took him on that fateful trip to Bermuda.

Following training, Jack worked with the convoy ships travelling to and from Halifax, taking journeys himself. After the war in Europe ended, several of the navy's finest ? including himself ? signed up to serve in the Pacific.

?We got about halfway to Hawaii when they dropped the bomb on Japan, and that was the end of that,? he says. ?We came back to Halifax [where we worked on the ammunition dumps]. There was everything you needed there ? depth charges, shells, everything ? but we got to the job every morning, loaded up the corvette, went 150 miles out to the ocean and dumped it. Certain big shell casings didn't sink, so we had our old captain up top who said, ?Shoot that crap until it sinks!' We did and that is how I lost my hearing. We had no earplugs and we did that for six months.?

That continued until March of 1946 when his ship was decommissioned and he headed back to Toronto.

On Remembrance Day he remembers his nine fellow crew members who did not make it out of the war.