

# New book describes role of Canadian Jews in Canada's wartime military

By LCdr (ret'd) Doug Thomas,  
Executive Director,  
Canadian Naval Memorial Trust

*Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II*, by Ellin Bessner, describes the contribution of the 17,000 Canadian Jewish men and women who served in our armed forces and the merchant navy in the Second World War. Many of those who did not come home lie in foreign cemeteries with the Star of David on their headstones, or in the case of the RCN and merchant mariners, were lost at sea and have no known grave.

Young Jewish men, some of them recent arrivals from Europe where persecution of members of their faith had been increasing for years, lined up at recruiting centres after war was declared. There was a great deal of discrimination against Jews in Canadian society in those days, and it was not easy for them to join the armed forces. Apparently this was particularly so in the Royal Canadian Navy, with fewer than 600 Jews (0.53 % of the RCN) on strength. Having said that, there were a number who served with distinction in the Senior Service. Petty Officer Irv Kaplan of Montreal was one of only 38 survivors of HMCS *Valleyfield*, the only RCN frigate loss. He was Mentioned in Dispatches (MiD) for his heroic efforts to save lives, and received another MiD for his contribution to HMCS *Assiniboine's* sinking of three German vessels in 1944.

Harry Hurwitz was one of the 87 Canadian sailors who were recovered from the sea by German warships, after the sinking of *Athabaskan* in 1944. He spent the rest of the war in a German Prisoner of War camp, keeping his religious faith a secret from his jailors. Another Jewish Canadian, merchant navy radio operator John Lazarus, was lost in the British passenger liner *City of Benares*, that was evacuating British children to other Commonwealth countries. One of the survivors from Montreal told Lazarus' family that he stayed at his post in the ship's wireless office while the ship sank:

"He could have saved himself. But stayed there after we had all left the ship."

*Double Threat* is well-researched and includes many anecdotes from those who served, reminiscences from family members who remember them and their families, and the reactions of friends and families who lost their loved ones. Throughout the book there is much discussion of individuals trying to practice their religion – in some cases it was made difficult by those in authority, and in others it was encouraged: Lt. Cdr. John Stubbs, commanding officer of HMCS *Athabaskan*, was aware that Harry Hurwitz was Jewish, and insisted he take leave while the ship was undergoing repairs in Plymouth to celebrate Yom Kippur.

There certainly were difficulties, but for many Jewish servicemen their time mixing with people from other backgrounds, and the skills they picked up along the way, led to opportunities. Navy veteran David Hart went back to school to become an engineer, but it was the training he received during the war that he credits for his success later in life. "In the service you run across a wide variety of people, some of whom you would never dream of associating with in normal life, and it was a real education."

Prime Minister MacKenzie King sent a letter to the Canadian Jewish Congress in 1947, thanking them for the contribution of Jewish troops to the Allied victory. He called the war and Hitler a "double threat" to the country's Jewish servicemen: they had fought not only against "Nazi and Fascist aggression" but "also for the survival of the Jewish nation."

I found the book to be very interesting, and particularly enjoyed the experiences of the many individuals whose stories are recorded in it.

*Double Threat: Canadian Jews, the Military, and World War II*, by Ellin Bessner, is published by New Jewish Press, University of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario, 2018, paperback, 358 pages. The book contains photos and an extensive bibliography and reference section.



A Boatswain in HMCS Nanaimo works to sew some privacy curtains on October 26, 2018 during OPERATION CARIBBE.

CAPT JENN JACKSON

## Boatswains... sew what?

By Capt Jenn Jackson,  
Op Caribbe PAO

When one thinks of the job of a Boatswain, sewing is probably not something that comes to mind. But sewing is in fact part of a Boatswain's job on ship and during OPERATION CARIBBE, one Boatswain is doing just that.

"It was a last minute decision to add a sewing machine to our kit," explains the LS Boatswain, who cannot be named for operational security.

"But it has already come in handy, allowing me to make some additional privacy curtains for around the accommodations pod."

Halifax-Class ships usually include a Boatswain as a sailmaker as part of their crew, but it is unusual to find a Boatswain at a sewing machine on a Kingston-Class ship like HMCS *Nanaimo*.

"You'd be surprised how much sewing is needed on a ship," adds the Boatswain. "Uniform repairs, covers for boats, name tags; I have even sewn some fancy napkins for a reception."

Learning the basics of using a

sewing machine is part of QL-3 Boatswain training and at the QL-5 level they are required to make bags and other small projects to hone their skills. While it is part of the core training for the trade, it's not always a Boatswain's first exposure to sewing.

"I first learned in junior high, and then learned more from my grandmother," adds the Boatswain.

"I actually like doing it. There's a rhythm to it that clears the head and it is great to see your finished project and the results of your hard work."

For this Boatswain, sewing is a regular part of his shift as a day worker during CARIBBE when he is not working on other duties, such as special sea duty helmsman or as a small boat coxswain.

"I am working on curtains now, but I am sure other projects will come up. There is almost always something to do on a ship at sea – sewing included. I am glad we brought a machine – it saves having to do big projects by hand."

As HMCS *Nanaimo* continues on OPERATION CARIBBE, our sewing needs will be well mended.

POSTED?

GET PRE-APPROVED BEFORE YOUR HHT

WE OFFER:

- Military clause for some mortgages
- A six-month mortgage protection plan, paid by us
- Instant pre-approvals
- A one-year home system warranty

SPECIAL DND OFFERS AVAILABLE. CALL TODAY!

Use the "Support Our Troops" Promo code for a .10 rate cashback on your approved rate. OAC.

1.800.991.7993 • MORTGAGEFORCES.CA