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Valour In The Navy

Part 14 of 18 by
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From top: Victoria Cross recipients Rowland Richard Louis Bourke, Robert Hampton Gray and Frederick Thornton Peters.

All three Canadian naval recipients of the Victoria Cross earned the decoration while serving with the Royal Navy. One was for bravery in World War I, the other two were made for actions in WW II.

Born in London, England, on Nov. 28, 1885, Rowland Richard Louis Bourke moved to Canada in 1902. He left his fruit farm at Crescent Bay, B.C., to serve in WW I, but was rejected by all branches of the Canadian military because of defective eyesight. Undaunted, Bourke sailed for England and was accepted in the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve with which he participated in the most daring naval raid of the war.

Frederick Thornton Peters was born in Charlottetown in Sept. 17, 1889. He was the son of the attorney general and first Liberal premier of Prince Edward Island. When he turned 16 his parents gave him permission to travel to England to join the RN as a cadet. He graduated as a midshipman a year later and during the prewar years served aboard a RN gunboat in the Orient protecting British interests. In 1913, he was decorated by the Italians for helping to evacuate people threatened by the eruption of Mount Messina.

During WW I, Peters was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for a naval engagement in 1915 off Dogger Bank in the North Sea, and later the Distinguished Service Cross for gallantry in action. After the war, Peters retired from the navy with the rank of lieutenant-commander. He re-enlisted at the start of WW II and was given command of a flotilla of light vessels, whalers and trawlers, against German submarines off the coast of Scotland.

Robert Hampton Gray was born in Trail, B.C., on Nov. 2, 1917, and received his school education in Nelson. He attended university in Alberta and British Columbia before joining the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1940. In England, he served with the British Fleet Air Arm. In 1944, Gray was with 1841 Squadron aboard the aircraft carrier HMS Formidable which was engaged in air strikes against the German battleship Tirpitz holed up in Altenfiord in German-occupied Norway. On Aug. 29, he was mentioned in

dispatches for an attack on three Narvik-class destroyers in which his plane's rudder was shot off.

In April 1945, Formidable joined the British Pacific Fleet located between Formosa (now Taiwan) and Okinawa. By July the war had moved northward and the carrier was engaged in strikes on the Japanese mainland. That same month he was awarded the DSC for aiding in the destruction of a destroyer in the Tokyo area, notes the book *Canada's VCs*.

By April 1918, the British Admiralty realized that the only way to destroy the U-Boat menace was to attack its source. The Germans were operating from Bruges, Belgium, eight miles inland from the coast. Although shallow, the canals between Ostend and Bruges and Zeebrugge and Bruges provided access to shipping—in particular 30 submarines. The British Army's attempt to capture the port had been stopped short, and so it was up to the navy to see it through.

The plan was to render Bruges useless by blocking the entrance to the canals with obsolete British cruisers filled with cement and charged with mines. Under a heavy smokescreen, the Royal Marines were to be put ashore to occupy a mile-long breakwater and create as much damage and confusion as possible. This would allow enough time to move the obsolete ships into position and set the charges. Also, the crews had to get back to the awaiting rescue launches. The initial attempt on April 22, 1918, did not come off as planned.

At Zeebrugge, a southeast wind blew the smokescreen out to sea, exposing the raiders to relentless fire from defenders on the breakwater. Casualties were heavy. Nevertheless, demolition squads scrambled ashore and created havoc by blowing up buildings, storage sheds, hangars and other structures as well as a submarine loaded with munitions. By the time it was over, three obsolete British cruisers were sunk across the neck of the canal in a V position, effectively blocking the canal's entrance.

The raid on Ostend fell far short of success. The Germans had shifted one of two lighted marker buoys that the RN intended to use as navigational aids and had removed the other. In addition, the blockships were blinded by enemy searchlights. As a result, the first one was sunk a mile east of the canal entrance. Then—in the inky darkness—the second obsolete light cruiser rammed into it from astern, driving it further into the sand.

At the outset of the operation, the commander of the Dover Patrol had called for 1,600 volunteers. Rowland Bourke was among the first to volunteer. As commander of the 80-foot launch ML276, his job was to take the crews off the blockship once it had been sunk.

In the attack on Ostend, ML532 was badly damaged. Bourke quickly came to the rescue. Then, while ignoring enemy fire from the piers, he pulled his craft alongside the sunken cruiser *Brilliant* and took off 38 officers and men. He then towed the crippled ML532 out of the harbour where the launch proceeded home under its own power. For this, Bourke received the DSO.

When a second operation against Ostend was called, Bourke's motor launch was found to be too damaged. Bourke, who was eager to participate, volunteered to give up his

command so he could serve on another vessel, ML254. In the end, Bourke's own vessel was accepted as a standby.

On May 9, at the outset of the second raid, one of the two cruisers designated as blockships had to turn back due to engine trouble. That left HMS Vindictive, which had played an important part at Zeebrugge, as the sole means of bottling up the Ostend canal. In thick fog, Vindictive's captain managed to steer the ship into the harbour's mouth, but as he moved into position he was killed by a shell that landed on the ship's bridge. His first lieutenant took over, but by then it was too late. The cruiser had run aground and he had no choice but to order the crew to abandon ship.

The motor launch ML254 took off 40 of the cruiser's crew. Then, as it drew away, the charges set aboard Vindictive blew up. The blockship sank to the bottom. Lying at an angle across the canal, it only partly obstructed traffic, but it was considered good enough.

Bourke steered his ML276 towards the area where the cruiser sank, and despite relentless fire from the piers he used his launch to rescue an officer and two sailors who were clinging to an upturned lifeboat. All three were badly wounded. During the rescue, a six-inch shell landed in Bourke's vessel, killing two of his crew. Altogether, his launch sustained 55 strikes to the hull and upper structure. The citation to Bourke's VC reads: "This episode displayed daring and skill of a very high order...."

On Nov. 8, 1942, Frederick Peters had been placed in charge of Operation Reservist in support of the North African landings. The capture of Oran Harbour and the town itself was vital to landing the United States 6th Armoured Corps. Fourteen well-armed Vichy-French warships, ranging from a heavy cruiser to a submarine had to be taken out of action. The plan called for several motor launches to lay down a smokescreen while two former U.S. Coast Guard cutters, Walney and Hartland, acquired by the RN under the lease-lend agreement, would ram a boom lying across the mouth of the harbour.

Once inside the 3,000-yard breakwater, Hartland would draw fire while Walney, captained by Peters, would steam up the quay and unload four canoe teams equipped with self-propelled mines. These teams would take the French warships by surprise. After that, American troops from the two cutters would go aboard the warships and commandeer them. Then, with the port and vessels in Allied hands, the surrender of the town would be a mere formality. But this was also the stuff from which dreams are made.

Allied intelligence laboured under the delusion that French resistance would be passive. It appears they failed to take into account that Oran was the key

Axis port in western North Africa. And because Americans and British troops had landed elsewhere two hours earlier, the element of surprise had disappeared. The French gunners were ready and waiting at 2:45 a.m. on Nov. 8 when the two boats approached in the darkness backed by the British light cruiser Aurora and a flotilla of destroyers. Searchlights flooded the two

cutters and enemy gunners opened up with small arms fire. Ignoring this, Peters used the ship's bullhorn to demand the enemy's immediate surrender.

This only made matters worse. The defenders answered with a fearful barrage at point-blank range from shore batteries and warships. Walney, with launches on either side, broke through the boom and came face to face with the French destroyer La Surprise. Peters tried to ram it, but missed. The French ship levelled a concentration of fire that damaged the cutter's engines and caused casualties. Walney managed to limp further into the harbour towards another destroyer, Epervier, which Peters hoped to board and use as a base for his canoe teams.

To get there his ship had to run a gauntlet of fire and steel with submarines to the north and Epervier to the south. Walney's boiler took a direct hit and exploded. Another shell struck the bridge which burst into flames. Wounded in the shoulder and blinded in one eye, Peters was blown clear of the bridge. By this time, Walney was nothing more than a blazing wreck with most of her crew and landing troops dead or wounded.

Some of the soldiers found their way to the decks and lobbed hand grenades at the submarines and sprayed them with machine-gun fire. Some of the injured were carried below to the wardroom, but a shell exploded in the confined space and killed them.

To help put mooring lines ashore, Peters moved the cutter forward, then aft. When he realized he would never get his ship berthed, he gave the order to abandon ship. Finally, with her survivors overboard, Peters jumped into the water and swam for shore. Between nine and 10 in the morning, Walney rolled slowly onto her side and sank.

After Walney smashed the boom, Hartland made her way into the harbour and immediately came under shell fire. A brief broadside brought her to a standstill and attempts to berth her alongside a trawler failed. Ablaze from stem to stern, she drifted into the centre of the enclosure. By 4 a.m. most of those aboard had been killed or wounded and the survivors abandoned ship as best they could. At dawn, Hartland blew up and sank.

Casualties were staggering. Between the two ships, 270 men were killed and 157 wounded. Approximately 75 men survived and were taken prisoner, among them Peters. Two days after his capture, Peters was freed from a French prison in Oran by Allied troops who liberated the town. In the parade

that followed, he was carried through the streets on the shoulders of grateful citizens.

At 8 a.m. on Aug. 9, 1945--three hours before the United States Air Force dropped the second atomic bomb on Japan, Robert Hampton Gray was in the

cockpit of his Vought Corsair fighter-bomber, some 800 miles northeast of Nagasaki. With his plane's engine running, Gray was awaiting the green light for takeoff.

One section of Corsairs was already in the air. Gray, the senior pilot in his squadron, was to follow with his two sections of eight aircraft as soon as the aircraft carrier Formidable turned into the wind. The target was Matsushami airfield. However, at the last minute he was given fresh orders. Now his flight was to attack Japanese shipping in Onagawa Bay in northeast Japan.

The unit was well equipped for the assignment. The Corsair was one of the most formidable fighter-bombers built. Designed to outmanoeuvre the Japanese Zero, its cranked inverted gull wings gave it a lethal appearance. Best of all, it had tremendous speed.

After climbing to 10,000 feet, Gray and his unit flew west for approximately 150 miles when they crossed the mainland coast north of Kinkasan. Several major ships were moored in Onagawa Bay, including the ocean escort ship Amakusa, two minesweepers, a training ship, small submarine-chasers and shipping vessels.

After reaching a point northeast of the bay, the Corsairs turned 180 degrees. They began losing height and picked up speed racing down the harbour valley to the harbour mouth. They crossed the shoreline around 9:45 a.m. at low altitude and in sight of their targets. This was a skip-bombing attack, assuring maximum accuracy but also rendering the planes highly vulnerable to anti-aircraft fire from both the ships and the shore batteries. Suddenly, a curtain of intense fire enveloped the Corsairs.

Gray took aim on Amakusa which was anchored in the middle of the harbour. As he swept in, a cone of fire zeroed in on him. Ack-ack shrapnel struck his aircraft and knocked one of the bombs away. It also set his Corsair on fire. Gray pressed on with flames streaming behind him. He managed to close

within a very short distance before releasing his remaining bomb. It was a perfect strike amidships. Gray's plane turned slowly to starboard, then rolled over on its back and dived into the water. Neither the pilot nor the Corsair was ever found.

In the raid, 157 Japanese were killed, 71 of them aboard Amakusa when it sank. The action was the last in WW II for which a Canadian was awarded the VC. In recommending Gray for the decoration, the Royal Canadian Navy Pacific Task Force commander, wrote: "I have in mind firstly his brilliant

fighting spirit and inspired leadership; an unforgettable example of selfless and sustained devotion to duty without regard for safety or limb."

Bourke received his VC from King George V on Sept. 11, 1918, during an investiture at Buckingham Palace. For his exploits the French also conferred the Chevalier of the

Legion of Honour upon him. Following the Ostend raid he was promoted to the rank of lieutenant-commander. Demobilized in 1920, Bourke returned to his fruit farm in British Columbia. By 1930, however, his eyesight had deteriorated to the extent that he feared he was going blind.

He gave up farming and moved to Victoria where he worked as a civilian clerk at the navy's dockyard at Esquimalt. Later, he was appointed to organize the Fisherman's Reserve in Vancouver. During WW II, he joined the RCNVR and was given administrative duties.

After the war, he returned to Esquimalt where he worked for the Canadian civil service until his retirement. While he attended several VC functions, he would only allow his picture to be taken under the strongest protests. He liked to joke that the only reason he earned the VC was because he couldn't see well enough to get out of the way. Bourke died on Aug. 29, 1958, and was buried in Royal Oak Burial Park in Victoria.

Five days after the Oran battle—on Nov. 13, 1942--Peters and four other naval officers boarded a flying boat for England. Just before takeoff, Peters told the flight engineer: "You know we navy men are superstitious.... We shouldn't be taking off on Friday the 13th." It was as if he had some sort of premonition.

Though it was calm and clear for takeoff, the weather rapidly deteriorated with head winds of over 40 knots, hail, sleet and lightning. By the time they reached England the aircraft was down to 15 minutes of fuel. Restricted visibility forced the pilot to try to make an instrument landing but the dials failed him. With 600 feet showing on the altimeter, the aircraft crashed into the sea and turned turtle. The pilot and crew managed to make their way out of the flying boat, but the five passengers were drowned.

Peters, who lost his life at age 53, has no known grave but his name appears on the Naval Memorial at Portsmouth. His VC, the Commonwealth's highest decoration for valour and the only one awarded to a Prince Edward Islander, was presented unceremoniously through the mail to his family with the standard letter of acknowledgement. By contrast, General Dwight D. Eisenhower dispatched two of his senior officers to formally present Peters' American DSC to his mother in a private ceremony.

Then there was the British Admiralty's shilly-shallying over whether or not Peters' bravery should be recognized for fear of offending the French. In the end, they decided to announce the award posthumously.

In Sakiyama Park on the main island of Japan, a cairn and plaque have been erected near the site where Gray earned his VC. Countless other tributes in many forms have been paid to him. The dependant school at Canadian Forces Base Shearwater, N.S., home of the RCN Air Service, is named after him as is a swimming pool in Nelson.

In February 1946, Gray's VC was presented to his parents by the governor general, the Earl of Athlone.