

## Obituary: Ralph Hennessy's storied life at sea



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Vice-Admiral Ralph Hennessy, who died June 13 at age 95, won the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions aboard HMCS Assiniboine during its battle with U-210 during the Second World War.

Wayne Cuddington / Ottawa Citizen

Ralph Hennessy was an army brat who took to the sea.

Hennessy's father, grandfather and great-grandfather were all soldiers, but captivated by stories of the Royal Navy's high seas exploits, he enlisted in the Royal Canadian Navy in August 1936 as dark forces gathered in Nazi Germany.

He would become part of a storied U-boat confrontation during the Battle of the Atlantic; take part in the hunt for Bismark; meet Winston Churchill (and offer him a brandy which, shockingly, he declined); and be decorated by King George VI.

Hennessy survived 80 convoy escorts during the war then went on to an ascendant career in the navy, becoming Canada's senior naval officer in the late 1960s during the tumultuous integration of the Canadian Forces. He retired as chief of personnel of the Canadian Armed Forces in 1971 whereupon he launched a second career as executive director of the Standards Council of Canada.

It wasn't until he was into his mid-70s that he went to university and earned a history degree from the University of Waterloo. He even made the Dean's Honours List.

Hennessy was the country's oldest living vice-admiral when he died June 13 at the age of 95 at The Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre.

"Canada has lost a faithful son and a true giant among men," said Daniel Clapin, executive director of the The Perley and Rideau Veterans' Health Centre Foundation.



Ralph Hennessy in his dress white naval uniform. Hennessy died June 13 at age 95.

Wayne Cuddington / Ottawa Citizen

Retired Rear Admiral Ron Buck, former vice-chief of the defence staff, said Hennessy was "every inch" the admiral: tall, distinguished and a gifted leader.

"He was a great Canadian, an outstanding naval officer, and a true gentleman," Buck said. "I'd go so far to say he was a Canadian hero."

Ralph Lucien Hennessy was born in Edinburgh, Scotland on Sept. 5, 1918. He arrived in Canada two years later when his father, a decorated officer in the Canadian Army, was transferred back to Winnipeg after serving in the First World War. (Col. Patrick Hennessy would be killed in action during the Japanese invasion of Hong Kong in December 1941.)

Ralph Hennessy always knew his future would be in the military, but he surprised everyone, particularly his father, when he announced that he wanted to pursue a career in the navy. It was a career choice to which his father gave only a reluctant blessing.

“I was the black sheep of an army family,” Hennessy told the Citizen in a 2012 interview.

Hennessy trained with Britain’s Royal Navy between 1936 and 1939, and was aboard a patrol ship shelled by forces of the Spanish Civil War. When the Second World War broke out, he joined HMCS Assiniboine, a British-built destroyer that played a small role in the hunt for the feared German battleship, Bismark, in May 1941.

By August 1942, Lt. Hennessy was second-in-command on Assiniboine when it was assigned to protect a convoy of merchant ships from predatory U-boats on the Atlantic. At the time, one Allied ship was going down every four hours.

During the ocean crossing, Assiniboine engaged a German submarine, U-210, in a surface battle fought through dense fog. The Canadian ship was set ablaze when the sub’s deck guns hit the ship’s store of motorboat gasoline. Hennessy led the crew’s fight against the fire as the ship’s captain, Lt. John Stubbs, directed the attack against U-210, first with 120-mm shells, then with the ship’s bow. Assiniboine sent the sub to the bottom of the Atlantic by ramming it twice.

Hennessy was presented with the Distinguished Service Cross by King George VI for his actions during the encounter.

Buck said Hennessy never trumpeted his role in the battle even though they were critical to the day’s success. “By his leadership and his actions in mobilizing the crew, he saved Assiniboine,” Buck said.

Hennessy would twice take command of Assiniboine during the war — the first time when he was just 24 years old. He told the Citizen that he mostly remembers wartime as cold and wet.

“Unlike today’s ships where the bridges are enclosed, destroyers in those days had open bridges,” he said. “It could be miserable in the North Atlantic.”

After the war, Hennessy would go on to command the destroyers HMCS Micmac and HMCS Algonquin.

In retirement, he indulged his passion for naval history, travel, golf and wry humour. Hennessy is survived by his wife, Diana, and four children from his first marriage to the late Constance O’Neil.

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