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IN THEIR OWN VOICES ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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Alex Polowin

Interviewed 18 July 2022

Michael Petrou (00:00):

Today is July 18th, 2022. My name is Michael Petrou. I'm [the] Historian of Veterans' Experience at the Canadian War Museum, and I'm here with Alex Polowin, a Royal Canadian Navy veteran of the Second World War, who served in the Battle of the Atlantic, on the Murmansk Run, at D-Day, during the sinking of the German battleship the *Scharnhorst*. And we are meeting today in Mr. Polowin's home in Ottawa. Mr. Polowin, I'd like to begin by asking you why you enlisted in the first place.

Alex Polowin (00:41):

I felt older than I was. I was just a little bit underage. And, you know, there were many, many, many things. Number one, <chuckles> guys that were in uniform called me a draft dodger, you know, because I looked older, more mature, let's put it that way, at age 17, 16, than the average. And I think the Navy, I was intrigued by the Navy because I knew least about it, you know. And because there was Army camps around here and Air Force camps, so I was sort of more informed about them. But this, not knowing very much about the Navy and that, I became interested in that.

Michael Petrou (01:33):

And this was here in Ottawa, yeah?

Alex Polowin (01:35):

Right here in Ottawa. Right on Rideau Street and Chapel [Street] was the recruiting office. HMCS [His Majesty's Canadian Ship] Bytown or Carleton, no, Carleton it was called in.

Michael Petrou (01:47):

And how did the reality of service match your expectations? What was [...]?

Alex Polowin (01:55):

Well, I—it pretty well matched, it pretty well matched. I found that made some real good friends, they're all—I think the Navy were a little younger than the other two services somehow, somehow. And we had, you know, it was very easy to build up a friendship and do things together, which was something that wouldn't have happened had I been at home or one of the other services, you know.

Michael Petrou (02:32):

I'd like to ask you about a couple of the more significant events that you were involved in, and maybe I'll start with the sinking of the *Scharnhorst* [German battleship]. What do you remember about that?

Alex Polowin (02:42):

Wow, the sinking of the *Scharnhorst*. I will tell you what, prior to getting there, they cleared lower decks—that's an expression in the Navy that the seamen and that there's going to be a meeting. And Patrick Budge was the nickname, they called him Jimmy, second in command of the warship, told us what was happening, that we were going to go close to the Norwegian coast and attempt to get the *Scharnhorst* chasing us. And then our warships would get in behind it and block its entrance back to Norway. That was the plan.

Alex Polowin (03:40):

And there was going to be a diagram on the bulkhead showing us where we stand every day. And so, you know, we knew about the *Scharnhorst*, but when you start thinking, we were at 2,700, or even a little less, destroyer, it weighed 27,000 tons. That's what it was. It carried 12-inch guns on it. And this is what you think of. And every day we would look at that and see how much closer. And they had aircraft, the Nazis, they'd have aircraft screening us, our movements. And then I remember the name of the type of Blohm & Voss aircraft, they were research [reconnaissance] aircraft. And every day it became a little more frightening. Now they knew where we were. And it was a terrible feeling. This expression of anticipation is greater than arrival. So, your fears are greater than when you get there. And every day we get closer and closer and closer.

Alex Polowin (05:01):

And on the 26th day of January, excuse me, in December, I was on lookout on the quarterdeck then next to the depth charger. And the idea was that if I was a lookout, and if need be, the depth charge was there if we had a submarine attack, and I could easily pull the trigger on it. And I get a pipe down there to go up to the CBO's office, Confidential Book Office, and ask for a silhouette of the *Scharnhorst*. Well, I wasn't a bit worried. It was more important for me to hot dog. Hot dog. You know, I got a silhouette of the *Scharnhorst*. It was a big deal to me that I <chuckles> almost like, as if I sank the ship all by myself! So, I got that silhouette, and I went through the mess, the seaman's mess. It was about 20 people seasick. The stress of the *Scharnhorst*. These are people that were never seasick. They were laid out. And I went and I said, "Hey, fellows, look what I got a silhouette of the *Scharnhorst*!" And one guy, a leading seaman, which was like a sergeant, really, piped up, "What the hell are you talking about? You're just a young punk." He said, "I got to a wife and three kids to worry about." Boy, did I shut up in a hurry. And I brought that silhouette up there. And then we didn't get close enough for us to fire.

Alex Polowin (06:51):

And this was on the 26th, two Norwegian destroyers. We didn't get close enough. The machinery didn't even get close enough to see it. But there was two Norwegian destroyers, there, Stord and Scourge was their names. They were fleet-type destroyers. They carried eight torpedoes, each one of them. We carried four only. We were sort of an all-round type of warship. And so that meant a total of 16 torpedoes that could be fired. So, this was the 26th of December and at 2:00 in afternoon, the *Scharnhorst* went down. It only hit one of our ships, a cruiser. And they had a number of deaths on there. And what a feeling, I [...]. It was all over.

Alex Polowin (08:15):

And like I say, the anticipation is greater than the arrival. You know, for about a week you're tense, stressed, you've got relaxed action stations, which means you're sleeping at the guns you're or whatever action station you're on, you know. And they bring you kye, or cocoa really, but they called it kye, to the guns, and maybe biscuits or something. And at mealtime, you'd go down a few at a time and have your meal, and it was all over. And we went into Russia. The body of water is called the Kola Inlet, and we made it in there. We went to outside of *Murmansk*, it was called *Murmansk* convoys, but the name of the town was Polyarny, and the body of water was Kola Inlet. And we tied up there.

Alex Polowin (09:18):

And [the] next day there was a great big party we were invited. I thought it was for us, but it wasn't, no. It was one of these real Eastern European type parties with accordions playing and banjos and guitars and one thing and another and drums and dancing and singing and barrels of food. And then there was a general in charge of that area. He got up and he said, "I got good news for you. We stopped the Nazis. They're through. We stopped them in Stalingrad. It looks like the back of the Nazis was broken." And what a wonderful feeling that was. It was just amazing. Remember, like I say, the fears we had on the way down. It was just something you couldn't imagine you'd be that frightened, you know, being on a small ship like that we were on. And that's the way it was. And that was the sinking of the *Scharnhorst*. I never saw it, but, you know, it's like football. You got 12 men on a team. You only have one ball carrier. The same thing with that kind of a battle. We've got enough ships out there to take care of the larger ships. And the Nazis were so sure of themselves, or possibly they had a fuel shortage, they went out without any escorts, and that was their biggest downfall. It was all over. I wouldn't say that I was overjoyed knowing that 2,200 men went down with that ship, but I was happy that it was them rather than us.

Michael Petrou (11:12):

I want to make sure I understand. You said you were on lookout and then you saw the silhouette of the ship or [...]?

Alex Polowin (11:18):

No, no, no, no. They asked me to go to the CBO's office and ask for a silhouette of the *Scharnhorst*.

Michael Petrou (11:26):

Oh, so then you would recognize it.

Alex Polowin (11:27):

Yeah. That they would recognize it up on the bridge.

Michael Petrou (11:29):

I got it, okay.

Alex Polowin (11:30):

Yeah. Yeah.

Michael Petrou (11:34):

You were involved in the Murmansk Run for a while?

Alex Polowin (11:37):

Yeah, from about, let's see, early October? Till February, March. They didn't have that run in when it's warm out, when it's summer, because you'd be seen too easily. It isn't like now. Now they don't have to see you. They've got the equipment. They press a button and they're on target. It was different then.

Michael Petrou (12:10):

When you look back at that, what do you remember most about that run?

Alex Polowin (12:15):

About that run? <chuckles> I remember that—actually my brother, he said, telling me off way back before, just when I joined in the Navy, he started calling me a moron. I was stupid. “You should be going to school dances.” You know, look what you do instead. <chuckles> You know? I thought of all that, and I felt that I made it. You know, it was a good feeling that I lived through that.

Michael Petrou (12:55):

What about D-Day? Did you understand the importance of D-Day when you were involved in it? What do you remember now when you look back on D-Day?

Alex Polowin (13:03):

Well, D-Day, we were, our home port then was Plymouth, and we would, prior to D-Day, we were out a few times every day, every week rather, a couple of times, hunting, whenever—almost every time we went out, there was action because they had merchant ships and warships to protect them, just like on the way to *Murmansk*. And now that's all we were up against. We only got hit once. We were very, very fortunate. We outnumbered them. We outnumbered them. It was a very, very frightening thing. Visualise yourself—I've got a— where are my pictures? I just want to show you something. Yeah, I want to show you this picture over here [sifts through photographs]. Yeah. This was the gun I was on [pointing to photograph].

Michael Petrou (14:29):

Oh, my goodness.

Alex Polowin (14:30): Right here. The ship pitches and the ship rolls and two guys—one guy deserted, and the other guy cracked up being on that gun. That's when they put me on there, you know, because I had a good background. We were hit once, when I was in a magazine, and the water started coming in deeper, deeper and deeper. And I didn't chicken. The guy with me, Elton Smith, passed out. I didn't realize that actually he had a heart attack. They found out later. He died at age 22. He was only about 18 then. And that's what I remember. But I just wanted to point out that the ship pitches, its dangerous. It alters, you know, and you're on that gun, it's very easy for you to slip off. And they wouldn't stop to pick you up. That was the rules of war. You don't take a chance and lose the whole crew because of one person. He's got to drown, die, and that's it. And this was me then.

Cameraman: (15:55):
Sorry. Could you just repeat that? What gun it is?

Michael Petrou (15:59):
This was a gun here, I believe. [pointing to the photograph]

Alex Polowin (16:01):
A-gun, it's called A-gun. A-gun, B-gun, X-gun, Y-gun.

Cameraman: (16:05):
Okay, one more time, please. Can you just point it out to me?

Michael Petrou (16:08):
Show us again.

Alex Polowin (16:10):
This was A-gun. B-gun. Two guns forward. Four-point-sevens. Aft, they had [twin four-inch?], high-angle, low-angle. And they had another one, [twin four seven?], on the stern of that.

Cameraman: (16:28):
And which one were you on?

Alex Polowin (16:30):
Right here. This one right over here.

Michael Petrou (16:33):
And when you were hit, was that D-Day or was that earlier on?

Alex Polowin (16:37):
That was, no, that was in the channel, but earlier on. My action station had changed. My action station had changed. They just needed somebody else in there. You gotta be very, very strong to be on this gun. I'm not, pardon me, I don't want to sound like I'm being boastful, but this gun here is bad as well, but not as bad as this one over here. Yeah, his daughter sent me a Christmas card. His daughter. I met her on the [HMCS] *Haida*. She works for Parks Canada, which is looking after the [HMCS] *Haida*. So that's a story with it.

Michael Petrou (17:23):
Tell me what you remember about the day of the war ended.

Alex Polowin (17:27):
The day the war ended. The day we were crossing the Atlantic and I was helmsman on the Poundmaker. And there's an officer on there. <chuckles> What a clown. I got a photo of him. He was about six feet, eight inches tall, and he was a stand-up comedian, you know. He'd make me—and now that the war was—I mentioned to you, we never got any pings on our ASDIC [British version of sonar]. You know. So, he'd call me up to instead of waking up the crew by

saying having some comments on their, the wakey wakey call, he'd make me sing a song on there. <chuckles> And I did that. But he was that kind of a guy.

Michael Petrou (18:16):

What song would he make you sing?

Alex Polowin (18:18):

[starts singing] "Good morning, good morning. We danced the whole night through. Good morning, good morning to you!" You know? <chuckles> [inaudible] different things. And when I was helmsman, he had to do anything for a laugh, at that time. He said, "For crying out loud, Polowin, look. I don't mind you writing your goddamn name all over the ocean, but next time, try and dot the I in your name." You know <chuckles>. That was his humour!

Michael Petrou (18:52):

How were you writing your name in the ocean with [...]?

Alex Polowin (18:54):

No, no, my steering on the wheel! He meant that I was jagged with my steering. I was steering the right way, but he had to be funny. He came from Beaconsfield [Quebec] and I often think of the guy. He would have been [inaudible].

Michael Petrou (19:33):

You told me earlier that when the war ended, you felt a little bit of sadness. Why?

Alex Polowin (19:40):

The sadness wasn't because the war was over. The sadness was the good times came to an end. The good times, the last ship I was on. It wasn't like a *Love Boat* story. You remember that movie *Love Boat*? Not anything like that. But the fear of being torpedoed and all that was gone. You knew they weren't around anymore, and you knew everything was coming to an end. And you'd get into Halifax, and you saw all those warships tied up with no crew on there. You know. The thought of where now? What's the rest of your life? What are you gonna do for the rest of your life? And that's very, very frightening. What am I gonna do for the rest of my life?

Michael Petrou (20:36):

Why was that frightening for you?

Alex Polowin (20:39):

I wasn't trained for anything. I wasn't trained to go to university. I just, I was shook up. When you're on a gun like that, and they maybe fire 50 rounds in a battle, it does something to you. I don't care what anybody will tell you. You're just not strong enough to handle it. You get, what do they call it? The First World War. Shell shock. That's what happens. I believe that you're a bit shell shock, if not a lot. And you don't think the right way. You can't concentrate. You know, it's good. It's over. You're safe now. But what are you going to do for the rest of your life? The ball game is over.

Michael Petrou (21:29):

So, what was that transition like for you when you became a civilian again?

Alex Polowin (21:34):

Well, right away, I got a job with the feds and the government. I wasn't trained for anything, just clerical work. And not to be out there looking out on a vast ocean had a great effect. Now you're in a little office, and it does—it's like somebody having an arm lock on you. Rather, you know, what do you call it they get a grip on your body, and you can't move? They get you from behind like that. And that's the way your whole system works that way. It was too soon to be working inside like that.

Michael Petrou (22:21):

You were describing the friendships with your shipmates as being something special and unique. Tell me more about that.

Alex Polowin (22:29):

Yeah, I would say we had a little cliques. We had our cliques [sp?], and we'd go out. We'd sort of a little chummy on-board ship, and we'd go ashore. You'd have you go with them. I wasn't much of a drinker. That was not my style. They were a couple of years older, but it was nice having the camaraderie and storytelling that you heard from the other guys. And the sea time meant an awful lot. And the big rib was, "Alec, tell us about the [HMCS] *Huron*," because [HMCS] *Huron* had a very, very high reputation and if you're on the [HMCS] *Huron*, and particularly the [HMCS] *Haida*, boy, you'd conquer the world. That's the way it was.

Michael Petrou (23:28):

So, when you were a civilian again, I mean, you're reconnecting with some of your old friends from before the war. What was that process like?

Alex Polowin (23:39):

Well, they sort of got ahead of me and in my eyes, they appeared to be successful. You know, the work for somebody else had a good, decent job. Or one guy, for example, had a butcher shop. He was a butcher. And I think I told you he drove a Convertible Ford. And wow, his car cost me a fortune and it cost me \$3,000. \$3,000. took me four years to make that amount of money. It's already five a day. That was the high pay that I got. And <chuckles> to me, he was very wealthy because when he said it cost me a fortune, \$3,000. To me, it was a bigger fortune.

Michael Petrou (24:32):

Yeah.

Alex Polowin (24:33):

Unfortunately, he died nine years, eight years, ago.

Michael Petrou (24:38): You were saying earlier on that during the war you had changed and some of your old friends who hadn't been in the war had changed. What was reconnecting like?

Alex Polowin (24:48):

Oh, bit by bit there was a reconnection, I find, you know, the old went and the new bit by bit. Well, the old went and the guy from the same old times grew a little bit back to his old self. That's the way it worked, I believe.

Michael Petrou (25:13):

Were you able to keep in touch with the people you had served with, with your shipmates?

Alex Polowin (25:18):

With some of them, yes. With some of them. But the interest on their part was gone. Some of them, those that remained still the same way where they'd go the Legion and meet buddies, shipmates. And they never went far in life, far enough rather, that they might have, they lived with it. That was the big thing in their life. You know? I wasn't involved with that.

Michael Petrou (25:48):

Why not?

Alex Polowin (25:50):

It wasn't for me, you know? It wasn't for me. For me, the big thing was to get myself established in a career that could last a lifetime. And I hadn't found it yet at that time.

Michael Petrou (26:05):

You eventually did, with insurance, I believe, yes?

Alex Polowin (26:07):

Well, before that, I was in another business. Do you know what the debit insurance is like? Debit? It's the days that you'd go around and pick up \$5 a month, maybe from a client. You had a run of people. London Life [Insurance Company] was big in that. And MetLife was big in that, where they had part of their company—they don't do it anymore. You'd have a district where there were, for example, Metropolitan Life policyholders and you would detail to that area and every month you'd go around and pick up the premiums. They didn't have automatic policy premiums coming through every month like they do today. It was different then. Just about got started then after I was in a while and that ended, the business left. So, I changed companies. And I've been with Canada Life for 60 years now. I'm still licensed. I don't work, but I'm licensed.

Michael Petrou (27:24):

Oh, good for you. You're Jewish, if I understand, correct?

Alex Polowin (27:25):

Right, right.

Michael Petrou (27:26):

When did you learn about the full horrors of the Holocaust?

Alex Polowin (27:29):

Oh, I knew a couple of years before that.

Michael Petrou (27:32):

Tell me about that.

Alex Polowin (27:32):

Well, I knew that I had relatives there. And my mother, [I] saw my mother cry a couple of times. She got news that her brothers were murdered and so on and so forth. And I had uncles. I remember coming home in 1944 on leave on the [HMCS] *Huron*. And after the *Murmansk* [Soviet cruiser]—no, that was after D-Day—and my mother said, “Don’t mention a word about the relatives in Lithuania since your father lost his brother there and nephews and nieces.” So, you know, I thought possibly that might be. But I knew all the horrors before I joined up. You know, everybody that was Jewish knew that then. They didn’t speak about it very much.

Michael Petrou (28:37):

How would you know about it?

Alex Polowin (28:40):

Well, the US [United States] was not in the war yet. Prior to that, the US got into the war in 1941, the invasion of the battle with Japan. And prior to that, they were, they had all the exchange of news that you could possibly have. So, it came down very easily from [the] USA to Canada. So, my mother knew what had happened to her relatives, but from the relatives from the USA.

Michael Petrou (29:21):

Did that impact your decision to enlist or how you felt about yourself?

Alex Polowin (29:27):

It felt good that I that I took that interest, that I put my life on the hook for my family. And I really had only one dream about the war and that was about two days after peace came. My uncles came on board ship, and they hugged me, and they told me they were proud of me. I knew that they were dead. And they said, “We got regards from you, from our relatives.” <chuckles> I figured maybe I was going to heaven too! <smiles>

Michael Petrou (30:04):

My goodness. Did you experience any discrimination when you got home because you were Jewish as a Jewish veteran?

Alex Polowin (30:10):

Home or on-board ship?

Michael Petrou (30:12):

Back to Ottawa. Well, both, I should ask. But I was thinking after the war.

Alex Polowin (30:15):

I would say only one per cent of direct, you know, racism that I discovered. You know, there might have been more, probably possibly more, but one per cent that I, you know, maybe I had

seven or eight different bad words over that period of time with about seven different guys. But that's the way it was, automatically. I try not to think about it.

Michael Petrou (30:52):

What about afterwards when you [...] after the war?

Alex Polowin (30:54):

Well, there were certain things that you, for example, I went to the [Royal Canadian] Mint—I knew that they paid more—about a job, he says, “Well, you know, I don't mean to be discriminating,” he says, “But, you know, you Jewish guys, you try to get a business of your own. So, if I gave you a job today, maybe a year from today, you would have left and gone into business.” You know, it was—what do you say to a guy like that? You just, I just kept my mouth shut. I didn't fight it or do anything or see his superiors. But that's the way it was.

Alex Polowin (31:38):

There was a movie called *Gentleman's Agreement*. Do you remember seeing that? Gregory Peck, John Garfield. Gregory Peck was a journalist who wanted to see what if this thing called anti-Semitism, what it was like. So, he was doing a story on it, you know, in the movie. And these are the things that he discovered. He even discovered, which most of us know, that if a Jewish guy is got a good steady job with a company, he doesn't like another Jewish guy joining because there might be a problem there. And the other guy might create them, might take it out on him as well, you know, that type of thing. And you get that with other ethnics. As a matter of fact, I've heard of an Italian manager from Hamilton then say that he would never have two Italians working in the same office. You know, it just a certain something.

Michael Petrou (32:49):

You said you didn't join the Legion, but you did get involved in remembrance activities.

Alex Polowin (32:55):

Oh, yeah.

Michael Petrou (32:56):

Tell me about that and why you did that.

Alex Polowin (32:57):

Well, I found the Legion to be—I went to a few Legion meetings, well, they had good things going on, like dances and all that. That was wonderful. But then all that was cut out, and the Legion was merely a place for the drinkers to go and get drinks at reduced prices. You know, that's the way I found it. I may be wrong.

Michael Petrou (33:26):

So, what sort of commemorative activities would you get involved in then? Would you attend Remembrance Day ceremonies as?

Alex Polowin (33:33):

Well, I was always involved with some kind of community work. Always. My whole life. My whole life. I got awards from the lodge that I belong to. You can't do it anymore, though, because the union stepped in. I used to have, at Saint Pat's Home, I had a group coming down there every Christmas day to give the kitchen help a chance to be with their families, and the people that were waiters or waitresses in their a chance to be with their families. And I'd have enough people out there to do that. But you can't do it anymore. The union stepped in. They won't allow you to bring in entertainment. It's got to be entertainment that's unionized. So, everything is pretty well changed.

Michael Petrou (34:23):

You speak to schoolchildren about the war?

Alex Polowin (34:25):

I do. I do. Schoolchildren, like Montessori schools. I like the kids to ask me questions. They like my harmonica. <chuckles> The song at the end, I play harmonica. Songs like "Lili Marleen". The kids love it.

Michael Petrou (34:43):

Why do you do that? What do you tell them? What you want them to know?

Alex Polowin (34:48):

Well, I don't want to, you know, I don't want them to go home and start talking about killing and combat and that type of thing. I don't want to put fears into them. They're my pals out there. And when I, as a matter of fact, I hold back. The teacher made them come and hug me because I would stay away, you know? I mean, I didn't want anybody to see an old man getting too close to young kids. You know, with all the news that people are hearing now <chuckles>. I didn't want to be part of that type of a story or give the image that. So now when I go, and they stand up and they give me an applause and it's beautiful.

Michael Petrou (35:32):

Why do you do this?

Alex Polowin (35:36):

I do it because it's the best way I can help this beautiful country, Canada, by making kids better Canadians, happier people, feel more secure. And I feel wonderful that I've participated. And because of me, some of them have gotten more positive in their attitudes that they may not have had.

Michael Petrou (36:07):

I'm wondering, this is a bit of a philosophical question, but how do you think your time in the war changed you? What sort of impact did it have on the rest of your life?

Alex Polowin (36:18):

In many ways it changed me in that first I felt I belonged, you know, here, right here, in this country. Secondly, I became educated in other people's cultures and values and other places they came from. I learned a little more. Everything is not settled by fists. You've got to be a little

smarter than that. Before, it wasn't that way. Bad words would create a fistfight. I was on the boxing and wrestling team in high school, and part of that stayed with me. But all that changed, you know, And I don't, if somebody insults me, I walk away and nothing furthermore.

Michael Petrou (37:23):

So, when you look back at the war now, are these mostly happy memories or sad memories or what? What is foremost in your mind when you look back today?

Alex Polowin (37:33):

Well, when I look back at it, for example, I'm going to go to Holland in October or September, latter part of September, when I see the treatment of love and the kindness that they show us, then I really feel that I've actually done more than I have. Just because people see me in a different way now. Here, we take things for granted. Somebody does something great, well, you know, it's. But because they come in contact with us every day here in Canada, but over there, they don't. So, they make us, make me feel that we played a really big part in saving the world.

Michael Petrou (38:21):

Well, tell me about those, because you've made a number of trips back to Europe, yes?

Alex Polowin (38:25):

Yeah.

Michael Petrou (38:26):

Tell me where you've been and tell me about those returns.

Alex Polowin (38:30):

Well, I—Juno Beach. Juno Beach. The people there in Normandy were just tremendous. Just tremendous. They still, to this day, the great-grandchildren write to me. They'll send me a card. That's what I mean by writing to me. They'll send me a card. Suddenly I'll get a teacher in a high school over there, call me up and that type of thing. And so, the world became a different place for me. More bonding with the rest of the world. It's not important alone for me to concentrate on being Jewish. I'm many other things besides that. You know, I've learned a lot.

Michael Petrou (39:28):

You've connected with people from all over the world.

Alex Polowin (39:30):

That's correct. That's all correct. Don't forget this. If you start looking at any ethnic group, the Irish, Scottish, they all went through the same thing. They didn't connect immediately. You go now to 'Queo.' You want to hear an Irish pro? Go to 'Queo.'

Michael Petrou (39:56):

'Queo'?

Alex Polowin (39:57):

Quebec.

Michael Petrou (39:57):

Oh right, yeah.

Alex Polowin (39:59):

Yeah.

Michael Petrou (40:01):

Are you in touch with other veterans today?

Alex Polowin (40:07):

Veterans from the same war as I no longer exist. For me, I don't come in contact with any of them, you know. But I did. I was always in contact with a few guys, but no more. Can't find them. They're all gone.

Michael Petrou (40:30):

Do you think you had any sort of unique connection or unique understanding with those veterans when they were alive? What would you talk about? What kind of relationship did you have?

Alex Polowin (40:42):

Well, we talked about more the social things that we do. We never spoke about [...]. "Do you remember we fired our guns at so-and-so" or this or that? Nothing like that at all. We just don't talk about it. Just talk about other things or the good times in the military service, whichever they were in. You know, many of them grew up because of that. I had a friend that was a mommy's boy, and he went into the service, and he came back a different person altogether. His whole life altered in a more positive way.

Michael Petrou (41:22):

Well, you were talking earlier on about being beside those guns and the effect that'll have. So, you said the war kind of made you think less about violence and change you in those ways. But I'm wondering if your time on the guns, if that had any kind of a more difficult impact or a more negative impact. Where any bad repercussions for you personally?

Alex Polowin (41:48):

Well, I mentioned to you about this guy here who was a non-commissioned officer who reported me as being disobedient or something, because he threw a pail at me and said, "Go clean this up or I'll rattle you." That was an expression—I'll lay charges against you. I threw the pail back at him and I said, "You go and clean it." Well, he laid charges against me, and I think he got a good scolding with it from the person, the officer, that he spoke to, the second in command. But he tried, he gave me certain jobs that are non-existent, going up to clean the yard arm. You know, the yard arm I mentioned to you, there's a mast, and the yard arm is the part that goes across. Imagine washing that down and hanging on to a guy wire like that. He was hoping that I'd fall down and naturally I would be killed if I fell down. That wasn't while the ship was at sea. That was while the ship was buoyed, tied up to a buoy. They do that if the ship goes in for a refit. But I never thought of it then. It was an order, which I obeyed.

Michael Petrou (43:12):

You had a chance to get on the [HMCS] *Haida*, the sister ship to the [HMCS] *Huron* a while ago.

Alex Polowin (43:18):

Last year.

Michael Petrou (43:18):

Tell me about what that was like.

Alex Polowin (43:22):

It was like reliving a part of my life, reliving meeting people. Some of them cried when they met me. That was because they worked for Parks Canada. And in one case, the parents was a shipmate of mine. And meeting me, brought their parents back to them. You know, it's for real. That type of thing. And I get cards, I got Christmas cards. I get an occasional card from there. That group, Parks Canada, and I told them I'd come on my 100th birthday. To celebrate it, I'd go on the [HMCS] *Haida*, which I would do if I could make it physically.

Michael Petrou (44:26):

You told me earlier you're the only remaining crew member from the three ships you were on, yes?

Alex Polowin (44:33):

That is correct. That's correct.

Michael Petrou (44:41):

If you could call up some of your shipmates, what would you say to them? What would you like to talk about if there were [...].

Alex Polowin (44:49):

The good old days. I'd say, "Remember that day?" Like there was three, four guys. We went on a trip to London, you know, and we went into fancy bars and there was some beautiful ladies sitting one place at one table having a drink. And I says, "Okay," I said, "I'll introduce you." I went over and I took my cap off and I was, "My name is such and such. I'm from Canada. And I just came over to introduce myself and say hello to you ladies." And I introduced all the guys. <chuckles> They thought this was something that they couldn't believe, but it was just a very plain, simple thing, something that gave them joy, at that time, you know, just brought—I'd say, "I wish I could do that!"

Michael Petrou (45:41):

Have you had a chance to chat with Afghanistan vets at all?

Alex Polowin (45:48):

I think I might have. I'm just trying to recollect. Oh, I know what they went through.

Michael Petrou (45:55):

Yeah.

Alex Polowin (45:56):

I know. It was somewhat like *Murmansk*. You know, the threat of Afghanistan. They're in a zone that they know nothing about, really. And I feel for them. A lot of people can't imagine what they've been through. Have you spoken to many of them?

Michael Petrou (46:21):

Yeah. Yeah.

Alex Polowin (46:23):

What did you find out?

Michael Petrou (46:24):

Well, it's similar things to what you're telling me. A lot of them enjoyed the comradeship of the friendships that they had while they were serving.

Alex Polowin (46:35):

Yeah.

Michael Petrou (46:36):

Sometimes it's difficult when you're a civilian again, to recreate those bonds.

Alex Polowin (46:42):

That's it. Yeah, that's it. It's broken. The link is gone.

Michael Petrou (46:54):

You've been generous with your time, but is there anything more that you'd like to talk about that you think we should understand about what it's like to be a veteran, your after-war life, anything at all?

Alex Polowin (47:10):

Well, it's a very steep hill to climb. You know, if you want to get into a job, a business that you like, that you want to spend the rest of your life, it's very, very tough thing to do. A lot of people that got jobs are working forward to a pension and all that. That's why they're on the job, maybe. With me, I had to enjoy work every day and I did. Once I got the handle on things, I couldn't be happier going to work that day. We'd have coffee with one of the fellow agents and we'd discuss our various business cases, and we'd learn from each other. We had an exchange of ideas, and we help each other out. And a little bit of humour, a little bit of joking, and you'd get on to work. It's the way it was. Even they're gone!

Michael Petrou (48:15):

Yeah. A lot of, in your apartment here, a lot of the things you have on the walls have to do with the war. I mean, is the war become more important to you as you've gotten older, or it seems like a lot of your mementos are war related. I'm wondering why that is.

Alex Polowin (48:32):

Well, in the hall you're referring to?

Michael Petrou (48:38):

Yeah.

Alex Polowin (48:38):

Well, it's sort of a little mini museum. I like my kids, my grandkids, to know, realize, that I let them know that everything that I did was for them in a way, and make them aware of that. Do you think I'm overloaded with that?

Michael Petrou (48:57):

Not at all. I'm just wondering, because when you talked about when you came home from the war, it, you know, you didn't join the Legion and it seemed in some ways you wanted to move on with another stage of your life.

Alex Polowin (49:11):

Yeah.

Michael Petrou (49:14):

But maybe now, because you are unique and special, the only remaining crew member, I'm just wondering if the war has become more important to you now than maybe it was when you were, say, 40 years old.

Alex Polowin (49:29):

It is more important to me now, particularly when I see that what Russia's done to the Ukraine. You know, it's just, just terrible. It's inhuman, it's unimaginable. And to think that I was ten yards away from them in Normandy. And if you look at them, you can see there's a person with not too much humanness in them, you know, and look what's happening now. The market is down, everything is down. Prices have gone up and our food prices have gone up. On real estate, of course, now it dropped, but the whole world changed because of them.

Michael Petrou (50:18):

Do you think we could hear "Lili Marleen"? Is that possible?

Alex Polowin (50:22):

On the harmonica?

Michael Petrou (50:23):

If you can. I'd love to hear it.

Alex Polowin (50:24):

Sure.

Michael Petrou (50:27):

I hadn't played it for a couple of months.

Michael Petrou (50:29):

Do you want me to bring it to you?

Alex Polowin (50:30):

Yeah, okay.

Michael Petrou (50:31):

Where is the harmonica?

Alex Polowin (50:32):

Right in one of those [inaudible]. You'll see it.

Michael Petrou (50:34):

I'll go get it. Excuse me.

Alex Polowin (50:42):

How are you doing?

Cameraman: (50:44):

I'm doing great. Yeah. This is really interesting. This is really cool.

Alex Polowin (50:47):

Thank you.

Cameraman: (50:48):

I love hearing this. I love hearing from people who were there at the time, you know?

Alex Polowin (50:53):

Well, I'll tell you that it was, the memories are great. You know, it's, yeah. Thank you. I've had two new ones. I think this is [...] [plays harmonica] That's what the kids love.

Michael Petrou (52:28):

Thank you. How did you learn that? Where did you learn that?

Alex Polowin (52:30):

I learned that when I was about 12 years of age. There were about 60 to 70 cents. And I couldn't afford a guitar. And I think I made the right move because I learned that I could never be able to play the guitar properly because. See, this finger here is shorter because of an operation. So, it came in handy. I'd have it on a warship with me and I'll play it often, but sometimes.

Michael Petrou (53:05):

Well, it's been a real pleasure to talk to you. Thank you so much.

Alex Polowin (53:08):

Yes, it's a pleasure. Anytime, anytime. And anything new happening down at the War Museum?

Michael Petrou (53:16):

Let's see. Well, this—I'm speaking to many other veterans, which has been nice. So that's a new project. And we'll be doing something on the Korean War soon, which is good. There's a nice

exhibit called “Forever Changed”, which is about the Second World War. It tries to tell stories of the Second World War through individuals. So, they picked, I don’t know how many exactly, but they pick their own stories and have used that to kind of illustrate the war. And that’s very good. That’s a temporary exhibit. When was the last time you were there? Do you remember?

Alex Polowin (53:55):
At the museum?

Michael Petrou (53:55):
Yeah.

Alex Polowin (53:57):
Maybe two years ago.

Michael Petrou (53:58):
Okay.

Alex Polowin (54:00):
I promised a lady and her little boy that I’d take them both up there, you know, to have a meal and to see the [inaudible]. She’s the governor general’s former secretary. Yeah. She’s got her own communications company.

Michael Petrou (54:31):
That’s nice.

Alex Polowin (54:31):
Yeah.

Michael Petrou (54:33):
Well, I always like, I went there for the first time when I was a kid, when it was in the old location.

Alex Polowin (54:39):
I think it’s very important. I get a kick out of introducing a kid to it.

Michael Petrou (54:46):
Oh, good.

Alex Polowin (54:47):
You know, I’ve never taken one of my own, but I’ve taken kids out there with their parents. You know, and the fact that there’s no cost to the parents to drive in there for parking if you’re with a vet.

Michael Petrou (55:02):
Yeah.

Alex Polowin (55:03):

They all get in there and some people can't afford to go there normally.

Michael Petrou (55:10):

That's true.

Alex Polowin (55:11):

You know, so I feel good about that.

Michael Petrou (55:13):

Good. Dave, do you need anything else?

Cameraman: (55:17):

No. Actually, I would just like one thing. If you could hold this up with that hand. I don't know if you can turn it a little more to the camera. And could you? Just needed to get a good shot of it. I don't suppose you could point to your gun with your right hand, could you?

Alex Polowin (55:51):

Right here? [points to photograph]

Cameraman: (55:52):

Here. But from the around the front.

Alex Polowin (55:54):

Oh, yeah. Just a moment. Right there.

Michael Petrou (56:01):

Perfect. That's all I need.

Alex Polowin (56:03):

Good job.

TRANSCRIPTION ENDS