

The End of HMCS St. Croix

William Fisher

The following story tells of the end of HMCS *St. Croix* and HMS *Itchen*. It was written by the sole survivor of *St. Croix*, a stoker. The story which follows originally appeared in the *Royal Canadian Navy Monthly Review* in August 1944. It is printed without embellishments or alterations.

I had been in the RCNVR [Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve] for one year and eleven months when this story begins.

It was a calm sunny September day in 1943. We were anchored in the Plymouth Harbour taking on a few supplies, a Fighting French Destroyer tied up beside us. Toward evening, about four o'clock, two British ships left the harbour and as they sailed past us we sounded the bosun's whistle and stood to attention.

A few minutes later we weighed anchor, and started down the river leaving Plymouth. A few of the boys tried to take pictures from the hatch as we were not allowed on deck and as we sailed out to sea the pipes went for last dog-watch to supper. After supper the lad going on watch went to the upper deck.

We were alone. There was a slight wind blowing and a fairly heavy swell. As we sailed out we could hear the shore batteries firing; we could see flames from their guns but not the target.

The boys sitting around were discussing where we were going. Some said the Med while others thought it would be the Bay of Biscay. We slowed down and the last dog-watch went on duty. Towards dark three other ships reached us, the *Itchen* and two corvettes [the rest of Escort Group 9]. There were a few signals exchanged then we took up our positions.

We could see a couple of freighters with balloons flying over their decks. As night fell it turned chilly and we all went below to play cards. The night passed quietly. As dawn broke we could see where we were going; it was in a south easterly

direction. We kept that course all day and night. The next day we altered course as we received a signal to turn back and catch a North Atlantic convoy [ONS18/ON202].

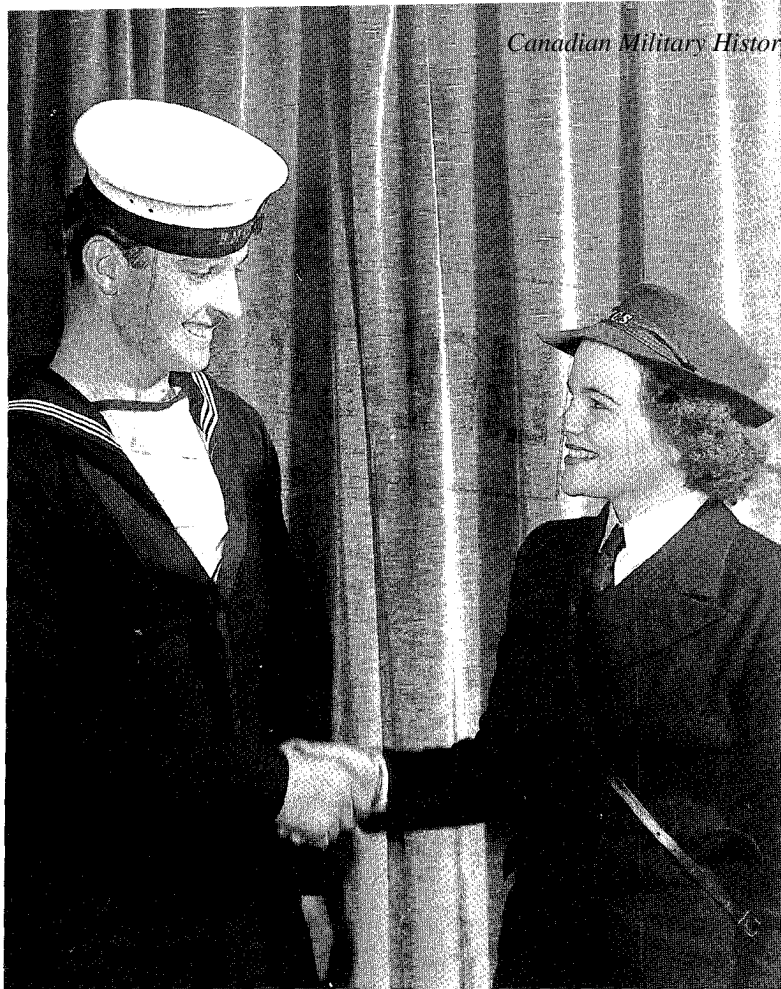
We steamed on through the day and night. On 19th September we came in sight of the convoy and stayed some distance behind. Then we had some action. The other ships dropped depth charges. On 20th September we came up to the convoy and took on fuel from one of the tankers.

Around three o'clock we contacted a sub and dropped charges but lost contact with it and proceeded back to where the *Itchen* and corvettes were stationed. There was a British destroyer too. The *Itchen* had her black flag flying which meant that she had contacted a sub.

As we were dropping a few patterns of charges one of the corvettes had her black flag flying and also was dropping charges. After a while we were joined by another convoy. We were cruising around trying to pick up the sub. Then action stations! But after a while things quietened down and we all had supper.

After supper we came up on deck; there was a cold wind blowing and a few green ones coming over the side. As we were standing there we heard charges going off in the distance and the roar of a plane. One of the lads finally spotted it. As it came in flying low, it signalled to us that it had dropped charges and disabled a sub. We answered and signalled the *Itchen*, our senior ship, for permission to go back.

The stoker went down and flashed the two boilers. Black smoke was rising out of three and



Canadian Forces Photograph R529. Courtesy Directorate of History and Heritage.

Stoker William Fisher, the sole survivor of the sinking of HMCS St. Croix.

Floats drop. Some of the injured boys came up to the well deck. The doctor and SBA [Sick Berth Attendant] were bandaging them as best they could. Some other lads brought two chaps up who had been killed; they had been blown into the air and had landed on the upper deck by the engine room.

The 1st Lieutenant gave orders to get the whaler and motor boat ready and take the injured off, then abandon ship. I went and got into the motor boat and made it ready. The injured were brought up beside the motor boat. The doctor passed them on to me. Some of the boys were in very bad condition. I was talking to a chap who had been shaving in the washroom when we were hit. He had a cut from his razor; he said he hadn't realized what had happened, his head was also split open. The other chap who had been in the washroom at the time didn't have a scratch except for a bump on the top of his head. After we had all the injured in the motor boat we were lowered into the water. By this time I had the motor going and moved away from the side of the ship.

four funnels as they were forcing the other two boilers. We were laying a perfect smoke screen which we did not want. Some of the seamen remarked "That's stokers for you."

We revved up to twenty-four knots and proceeded to follow the plane. Finally the stokers got the smoke stopped in one and two funnels but number four was still smoking a little. Then as we started to cut speed a little I came up on deck sweating and very hot. We proceeded on and saw the plane flying low and circling. As we neared the place where the plane was circling and started to cut speed the first torpedo hit us. There was a violent explosion and another soon followed. Two torpedoes had hit us in the stern. The ship listed and stopped. Just before we had been hit some of the boys had been standing on the aft deck. Some were killed and others were blown into the air and landed on deck or in the water. At the time our watch had just been getting ready to go on duty. We all ran to the well deck. Some of the boys were very frightened while others didn't realize what had really happened. The Captain [Commander A.H. Dobson, RCNR] was on the bridge looking aft and was very worried. Some of the boys started loosening the Carley float beside the bridge. The First Lieutenant said not to let any of the Carley

After circling around we were called back to the ship's side. A signalman got into the motor boat and passed us some papers and a signal lamp. As we were leaving the ship we were called back again to hook onto two Carley floats that were filled with men, we took them from the ship's side and around to the stern. As we came around the other side there was a man in the water. One of the boys from the motor boat dove over the side, swam to him and brought him back to the motor boat. When we got them both back in the boat the lad was almost gone. We then went to the ship's side and hooked onto two more Carley floats, we took them to where the other two floats were and had them tied together. Then we started to pick up the boys that were in the water. We had quite a few of the boys in the boat when we saw smoke rising from one and two funnels. No one could understand why smoke should be rising from them as they had both been shut off before we had been hit. I was later told that the Captain had given orders to get up steam and see if they could make way. The smoke had been rising for about three minutes when the *Itchen* came over the horizon. A few minutes later there was a terrific explosion and flames leaped into the air. The third torpedo had struck the ship. The stern of the ship disappeared quickly, but from amidship forward stayed up from

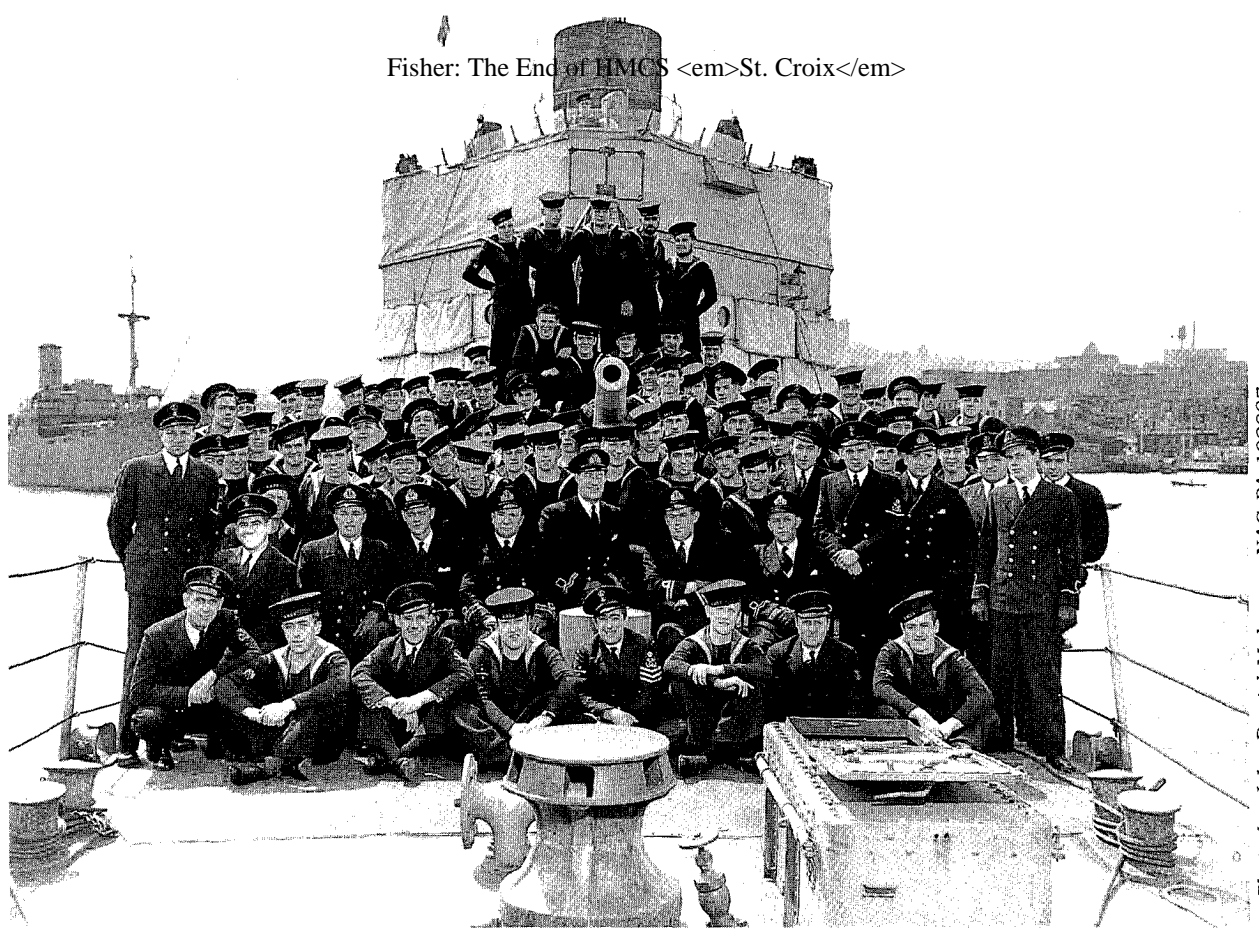


Photo by John Daniel Mahoney, NAC PA 192997

This is the last known photograph of the Ship's Company, HMCS *St. Croix*. It was taken in St. John's, Newfoundland on 30 May 1943. William Fisher is at the right end of the second last row, just below the porthole.

3 to 5 minutes, then she turned her bow into the air and went down.

When we had been struck a white ensign had been run up, and as the ship disappeared the white ensign seemed to quiver before going under. The Captain, several officers and ratings were still with the ship when she was hit the third time and some of them managed to get off before she went down. As we kept picking survivors out of the water, the oil was so thick that we could hardly recognize some of the boys. As the *Itchen* came up she signalled the motor boat that she was going to make a sweep and was waiting for a corvette to come up too. The *Itchen* circled around us and the spot where the *St. Croix* had gone down. Suddenly there was an explosion right behind her, we couldn't make out what had happened. We thought she might have dropped a pattern of charges but couldn't figure out why she should do so among the men.

We then picked up more men who were around us and went alongside the whaler which was taking in water. The Captain was in the whaler, he asked for some men as he had quite a few injured men with him. Another lad, George Vquarte and I

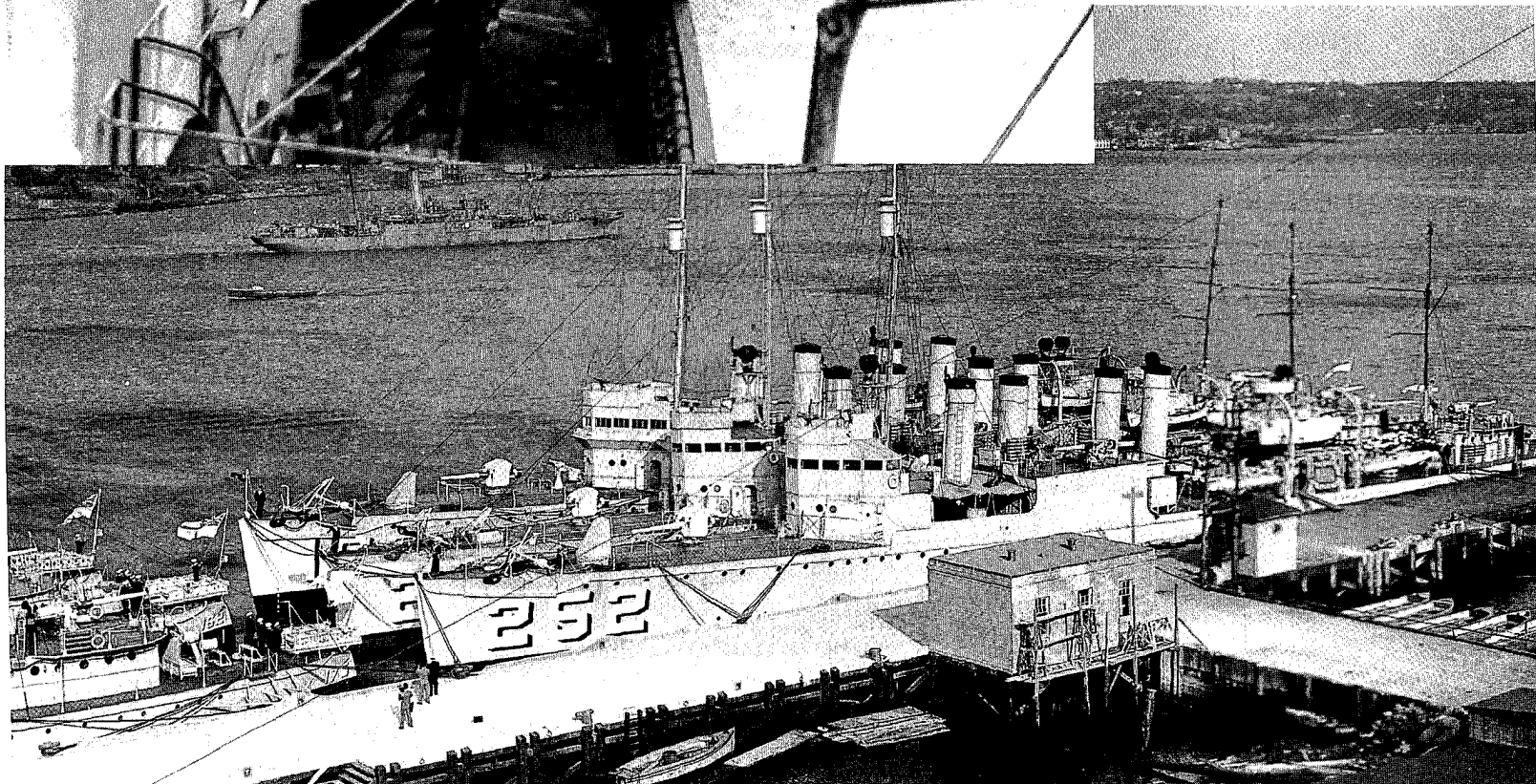
volunteered and transferred into the whaler from the motor boat. It was quite dark then but I noticed there were four Carley floats tied to the whaler and all were loaded with men, Vquarte and I started bailing water, but it came in as fast as we could bail it out. One of the boys decided to look for the leaks in the whaler, and found two of them. We tore up a life belt and managed to plug the leak fairly well, then we all started to bail and got most of the water out. One of the lads had a flashlight and held it for George as he tried to fix the holes. As we kept on bailing we finally got the whaler patched up so that too much water couldn't get in. One of the lads held his feet on the plugs to hold them in. Then a green one would come over the side and the whaler would roll and toss. The lad who was holding the plugs in would lose his balance and out they would come again. Then more bailing. Around two in the morning we were all tired and cold. Some of the injured boys were groaning and others on the Carley floats were hollering. For awhile we were singing but as night drew on we all got pretty tired and asked for a cigarette. There weren't very many dry ones around. Vquarte and I played ourselves out bailing. The lad who was holding in the plugs said his feet were awfully cold and numb and asked for a relief. I said I would sit

Ken Macpherson Collection,
courtesy of Robert Eakins



Left: HMCS St. Croix shown in August 1943, the month before being sunk by U-305. Photograph taken from the corvette HMCS Arvida.

Below: HMCS St. Croix lying at berth in Halifax harbour shortly after being commissioned into the Royal Canadian Navy, 27 September 1940. The ship still carries pendant number 252 of its previous life as the USS McCook.



there and hold them, there I sat from three o'clock until we were picked up. George finally got the holes plugged so that we only had to bail about every half hour. I had only a sweater on and a pair of wet dungarees. The boys were beginning to get hungry so we opened our ration boxes and the food seemed to warm us up a bit. A couple of the boys in the Carley float nearly passed out and so we had to take them into the whaler. We had 24 in the whaler then.

All during the night we sent up flares, and got answers. We could see star shells and hear depth charges going off all around us. There were sixty men in our group and we didn't lose a man. When daylight came we could see who was in our group, and there were seagulls flying around. As it grew brighter we started looking around for subs, just in case they wanted prisoners or the Captain. The Captain held the tiller all night. When some of the boys on the float wanted to get into the whaler, the Captain said "Hold on a little longer and if a ship doesn't come soon I will get onto one of the floats myself and let one of you take my place."

When we had been hit the first time a lot of tin helmets had fallen onto the deck. The chief stoker was a strange sight, he had picked one up and worn it all night, 54, I remember was the number on it.

As we were straining our eyes looking for help, one of the boys spotted a smudge on the horizon, no one knew what it was, we just sat and looked finally could make out a mast. We shot a couple of flares in the air then made a smoke smudge. One of the lads tore his hat and tried to burn it; then we put a smoke flare on one of the oars and lit it but the colson from it dropped back on us, so we tied a rag to an oar to try to attract the ship's attention. The ship looked as though she were altering course. As we were watching she suddenly signalled us. We were all happy, we were saved at last.

It was the *Itchen* and she had a corvette with her. She made a wide sweep then came in beside us. The Captain of the *Itchen* asked if there were any subs around. Our Captain answered he hadn't seen any. We rowed up beside her and the boys on the Carley float went up first. Then the injured were helped aboard; I sat there holding the plugs in the holes. There was another chap and I left in the whaler. When I tried to move I was so stiff I

almost fell overboard. One of the boys from the *Itchen* came to aid me. I tried to crawl up the scramble net but couldn't manage. They put a rope around me and pulled me up. I was never so happy in all my life as I was when I reached the deck of the *Itchen*. I hung onto the motor boat davit for a minute or two then one of the *Itchen* boys helped me into the shower room. He helped me off with my clothes and gave me a good rub with hot water and restored circulation in my arms and legs. He told me that the *Polyanthus* had been sunk too, that is why they hadn't come in and picked us up. He also told me that they had picked up four subs on the surface that night. We picked up one officer of the *Polyanthus*. He said the *Polyanthus* had gone down in about thirty seconds and the boys hadn't had a chance to get off.

When we were at last picked up by the *Itchen* we had been adrift 13 hours. The Chief ERA [Engine Room Artificer] was in the washroom and also one of the stokers. After awhile they gave me some dry clothes and took me into the seamen's mess for some hot coffee. There were two other stokers in the mess and we got talking and wondering who had been saved. One of the stokers had been on watch when we had been hit. He said he didn't know we had been hit as he had the vaporators on and he thought we had dropped a shallow pattern of charges. Then he noticed that No. 1 turbine shaft wasn't turning. He went into No. 1 engine room and told the ERA that the shaft wasn't working. The ERA sent one of the stokers up to get the engineer. When the stoker came up and saw what had happened he hollered down, "We've been hit." The stoker then went back to the vaps and closed them.

The coxswain of the *Itchen* was giving the boys rum. I walked around to see who had been picked up but there were quite a few of the boys missing. There were three boys lying in cots; they were nearly gone and I couldn't recognize them. As I walked on further there were three boys giving three of our boys artificial respiration. One of the chaps survived the respiration but the other two died. Then I met my chum Mackenzie; it was certainly good to see him again. He was not hurt. Mac and I went and made rounds to see who we knew.

We were talking to one of the petty officers who told us that they had taken too many men on the motor boat. It had filled with water and some of the panic stricken boys had started to jump over the side. They hadn't a chance and were drowned.

He said the motor boat hadn't gone right under but when the *Itchen* pulled up beside it there was only one man in it, the First Lieutenant.

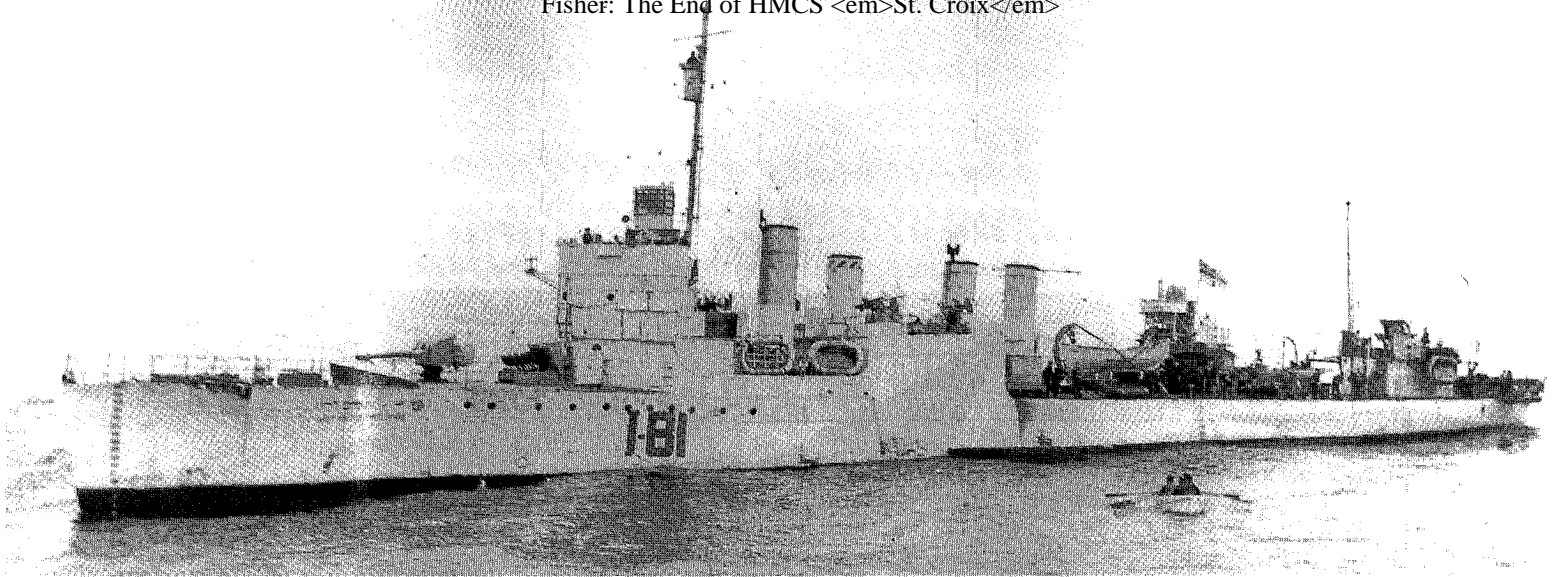
Then another stoker came up and he was telling us that when the *Itchen* came in sight there had been about ten men on the Carley float with him. The *Itchen* came toward them, then altered course. The boys got panicky and figured the *Itchen* had seen them and about eight of them lost their balance and had drowned. They took a count of the boys and there were 76 ratings and five officers left out of 147 men. That afternoon, 21st September, they cleared lower decks and buried the two boys who had died. A salute was fired and the flag flown at half mast.

We found a place to sleep, the night passed quietly and part of the next day. Around four o'clock action stations sounded. The *Itchen* dropped a few charges. The boys were talking of what they were going to do – stay with the convoy or go into port. At about six o'clock we were all at supper – a very good supper too – when action stations sounded again. We all went up on deck. We dropped some charges, then things quieted down. I was talking to the SBA and he said the injured boys were all fine. Then around eight we had action again. We dropped charges and made another sweep around and came in and dropped one charge. We made another quick sweep and came in and dropped a big pattern. The conning tower of the sub came up and then disappeared.

There were a lot of bubbles and oil and we were sure we had got a sub and we were happy. We all went down below and tried to sleep. About a quarter to nine, 22nd September, action stations went again. We went to the upper deck where it was quite cold and very dark. Around nine our searchlight went on and there was a sub in the beam. I was standing by the funnel and had hold of the railing around the funnel. I looked past the bridge and could see the sub about three hundred yards ahead. It was cutting across our bow. Then the forward gun went off but the shell landed short and the bridge gunners started to fire. There was an explosion. We had been torpedoed. I was blown about thirty feet and landed against a gun deck. I got up, the ship was listing and I could hear water rushing in. I couldn't see a thing. I got the davit of the skiff, reached out with the other hand to get to the railing. Just before I jumped over the side I called for my chum Mackenzie, but there was no

answer. So I dove over the side. As I hit the water there was a terrible explosion. I was sucked under and nearly lost consciousness. My insides seemed to be squeezed out of me. I was choking as I struggled back to surface again, got a breath of air, and a wave took me under. I came up and started to swim away from the ship. I swam about thirty or forty feet and looked back at the propellers of the *Itchen* which were just disappearing. She had gone down in about forty seconds. It has been forty-nine hours between torpedoing of the two ships. I started swimming around and remembered to take my shoes off. I reached down to take my right shoe off and it was gone, I reached and took off my left one. I had on a big duffle coat and I unbuttoned it but forgot to undo the mouth piece. It slipped under my chin and started to choke me but I finally got it off. There were quite a few star shells in the air; the water was rough. I saw a lad holding onto a board, and swam over and took hold of the board with him. The water was very cold and I started to get cramps. I held onto the board for about one hour only. Then the lad passed away and I started to run into quite a few bodies. I could hear a few of the boys hollering. Then the convoy started to pass us. The wash from the ships would wash us back and forth; we would go under and choke and there was a lot of oil and small boards that would slap us in the face. Then the star shells stopped going up and it got very dark. I saw a small flare and hollered out to a fellow and asked him what he had. He said he had a float, so I swam over towards him. He had two life savers. He gave me one, the one with the calso flare on it. I put it around me, then a wave parted us. There was a splash and I could hear voices. I looked and there was a freighter [*SS Waleha*] which had dropped one of its floats, I tried to swim to it but I was too weak, so I hollered at them and they said they were coming. It was good news, I saw a light but it seemed far off, then I heard the sound of a motor boat. I could hear voices but couldn't see a thing except the light. Then I felt something hit my face and heard somebody say grab the rope. Then I saw the motor boat when it was nearly on top of me.

They threw me the rope again, I caught it and was pulled up to the side of the motor boat. A hand grabbed me and pulled me inside. I lay there coughing and too tired to move; I was cold. I couldn't understand what they were saying. I finally moved beside the engine and tried to get some heat. They circled around and picked up two more boys. They pulled alongside of their ship and as they pulled



Ken
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collection

HMCS St. Croix, August 1943. The ship was originally commissioned as USS McCook in 1919. In 1940 it was transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy as part of the "Ships for Bases" deal and was recommissioned as HMCS St. Croix. From 1942 on, St. Croix worked as a convoy escort in the North Atlantic. On 24 July 1942 it sank U-90 and on 4 March 1943 combined with HMCS Shediac to destroy U-87.

the motor boat up I felt a lot of hot water go over me it certainly felt good. It was the exhaust from the engine. One of the lads they had picked up was doing a lot of groaning. Finally they got the boat up and put blankets around me and helped me into the officers' wardroom. They gave me a full glass of rum. I drank it all and it warmed me up. I was a frightful looking sight covered with oil from head to foot, but they got some towels and rubbed the oil off and put my feet in hot water. I had been in the water 3 hours when I was picked up for the second time. The other lad lay on the floor groaning. They were rubbing him with whiskey and trying to get him to drink some. I asked the other chap who he was and he said he was off the *Itchen*. The lad on deck was off the *Itchen* too. I had been saved for the second time but all our boys were gone.

I looked at my watch; it was broken but the hands said ten after twelve. The men said that was about the time they picked me up. The rum and oil I had didn't mix and I got rid of most of the oil. Then I had some whiskey and we got the other chap on his feet. The Captain asked us who we were. I told him I was off the *St. Croix*, he asked us if we had any means of identifying ourselves. I showed him my identification bracelet and he said that was all right. "At first," he said, "we thought you were Germans." The men who had rescued us were Poles and were very good to us. We sat up till around four as I was extremely nervous. I went to bed in the 1st officer's cabin. About five, one of the seamen came down to wake me up, he said be ready to leave. Being as nervous as I was I went into hysterics for about fifteen minutes before he got

me calmed down. Later I was sitting in the wardroom when a wave hit the ship. I jumped up and started to go outside.

One of the officers caught me and told me to sit down. I didn't sleep at all, my back, leg and heels were very painful. The 3rd officer came in and looked at me. I had a cut in my back. He took a piece of lead out of the wound and bandaged it up. He also bandaged my leg and rubbed my foot with liniment. They told me at breakfast why they had had to awaken me. They said a ship opposite us had been hit and they figured we would be next.

After five days on the ship we spotted land. The convoy broke and ships started for different ports.

We stayed aboard the ship that night and part of the next day; than we went to Brooklyn to the British receiving station, HMS *Sakar*. There we received clothing and were taken to the hospital.

I didn't know until I got to the States that I was the only survivor off the *St. Croix* or that the two English boys were the only survivors from the *Itchen*. It was hard to take after serving fourteen months on the *St. Croix* and the boys had all been old hands and old friends.

After the war, William Fisher worked at a small drilling company and a number of other small oil companies. He retired in 1982 and still resides in Alberta.