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Columnist Gorde Hunter – One man's opinion

We all have special memories of Christmas. Today's memory is that of Don McCulloch of our town and his memory is nearly 50 (now nearly 70!*) years old, but worth telling again. Don was part of the crew of HMCS Prince Rupert at the time.

"The three ships plowed on, forging slowly eastward into the teeth of the gale. The convoy had long since scattered in the blinding fury of nature's onslaught, and now, the rust-streaked corvette herded her charges, often a December gale in the North Atlantic. They had left Halifax four days ago, or was it five days? All sense of time was lost in the bone-wearying struggle to stay awake and gain another mile eastward.

"There was no sense searching for the rest of the convoy – the two labouring tramps on the beam were the convoy now and the corvette their sole escort.

"The only rhythm to the passage of time was the repetition of watch-on, watch-off, with a desperate grasp at sleep between watches. Hot meals had long since been replaced by sandwiches which hinted of mould. The constant shuddering jars as the bow crashed down from waves towering above the bridge would be followed by the tormented racing of the screw as the stern lifted high on the crest and she began her roller-coaster descent down the steep side of a passing wave. And so the corvette and her convoy clawed tenaciously at each hard-earned mile eastward. A sudden glitter ahead in the stygian darkness of the first watch brought four pairs of binoculars to the eyes of the bridge watch. The light shone briefly, then disappeared only to wink again. The star, for such it was, seemed to dip and sway across the forestay in an erratic dance, beckoning the ship onward, ever eastward. It was a sort of guiding star, thought the signal man, the star in the east guiding them. He realized with a start it was December 24 – Christmas Eve.

"And so the three ships, seemingly alone in the universe, in the vast turbulent expanse of a raging North Atlantic winter gale, struggled painfully for each mile as they followed the star ahead.

"A tap on your shoulder and your relief had arrived to serve his four hour watch. Somehow you felt sorry for him, because you'd be sleeping the sleep of the exhausted while he had four hours of eternity ahead.

"Having completed the ritual of relieving the watch, you added a postscript – 'Merry Christmas mate' and hastened down the ladder during a temporary pause between the slamming attacks of the oncoming wave and the racing shudder of a screw with nothing to bite on.

"And so the three wise ships lifted their eyes heavenward and followed the star in the east to the safe and timely arrival of the convoy in harbour."

Thank you, my matelot friend – at one time or another we have all been guided by that same brilliant star. May it guide you many more years – and you and you.

A warm Merry Christmas to all...