

H M C S SKEENA

Invasion of France - June 6, 1944

(this document was kept by a sailor who served on the Skeena)

1944

April 12 - Sailed for St. Margaret's Bay, Nova Scotia for evolutions.

April 29 - Arrived in Londonderry, N.I.

May 9 - Began evolutions at Lock Foyle with three Canadian Destroyers
 - HMCS Qu'Appelle - SO I69
 - HMCS Skeena - SO I59
 - HMCS Saskatchewan - H70
 - HMCS Restigouche - H00

May 18 - Returned to Londonderry

May 27 - To anchor at Movile we are under immediate sailing orders.

June 2 05:00 - Hoisted anchor

June 3 - Proceeded down Irish sea at 15 knots

June 4 10:00 - Land off, our Port bow turning into English Channel

10:15 - Sighted RN and US bombardment forces, 6 Battleships, 24 Cruisers, 600 Destroyers, many Minesweepers

10:30 - Started asdic sweep. Our job at present to guard Atlantic entrances to channel against any subs trying to enter.

20:15 - Captain told us that at 02:00 tomorrow bombardment will start to shell coast, followed by 5000 plane raid at 07:40. Troops will land to establish beach head. Paratroops to be dropped 3 hours before hand.

20:20 - 3 small echoes 6 1/2 miles. Maybe E boats.

21:30 - Investigation proves to be MLS (Mine Layers). Have been told invasion cancelled 24 hrs, flying conditions bad.

June 6 07:30 - Bombardment force passed us near Lizards Head.

15:00 - Plymouth for oil

20:30 - Leaving Plymouth on our own, remainder still there.

20:40 - Passed 60 landing barges carrying US troops

21:30 - Taking up position

24:00 - Joined by rest of group

June 6 - All hands keeping close watch, as all D Day night aircraft has been over us.

June 7 - 12 German destroyers on loose 75 miles away. Radar keeping close watch for them.

12:15 - U boat dead ahead. After manouvouring for an hour, dropped charges, no luck D W

20:05 - Acoustic torpedo exploded 30 yds of Port quarter. Action station streaming cat gear.

20:55 - Torpedo hit H70 cat gear

	21:05	- Action station picked up torpedo port side amid ships altered course 90, Missed.
	21:30	- U boat contact dropped hedge hog. Investigate
	21:45	- Torpedo missed stern by 30 ft
	22:10	- Torpedo missed H70 by 20 ft
	22:30	- Torpedo missed H69 by 30 ft
June 8	01:30	- Asdic contact Action station non sub
	02:00	- Secure Action
	05:00	- Asdic contact Action station
	05:30	- Dropped hedge hog negative
	06:00	- Secure action station
	08:30	- Action station torpedo blew up 30 yds of starboard beam, went in for attack.
	08:40	- Sighted two periscopes close together, opened fire with close range weapons.
	08:41	- Dropped hedge hog on periscopes. Large explosion and oil bubbles come to surface. Think we got him.
	08:42	- Torpedo passed our bow 30 ft away. Port 30, full ahead both.
	08:43	- Dropped depth charges, explodes, torpedo heading our way.
	09:15	- Asdic contact, dropped depth charges and hedgehog.
	10:15	- Asdic contact dropped hedgehog.
	11:20	- Asdic contact dropped charges and hedgehog.
	21:20	- Action station 5 German destroyers 30 miles South reported heading North with E boat escort. If they try to enter Channel we shall engage, course South, speed 15 knots. Haidia, Huron, Tactor engage.
June 9	01:00	- No further contact with German Destroyer. Steamed West at 32 knots to investigate reported sub.
	02:00	- Searching area of report
	05:30	- No contact. Secured Action station
	22:00	- 5 radar echoes to the East. We change course and steam at 25 knots to engage - US destroyers.
June 10	00:30	- Radar contacts sub on surface. Open fire with star shell, sub dives.
	00:35	- Dropped calcium flare
	01:00	- Contact Action station
	01:15	- Dropped hedgehog, negative
	02:30	- No further echoes, Secure Action station
	10:30	- Entering Plymouth for oil and ammunition
June 12	13:00	- 3 leaving, H70 remained for repairs, damaged by torpedoes.
	16:45	- taking up new station.
	16:46	- asdic contact Action station.
	17:30	- False echo secure

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June 14	16:00	- Asdic contact Action station.
	16:20	- Dropped depth charges, oil and wreckage came to surface, picked up exhibits, believed to be sunken tanker. Will be checked ashore.
June 15		- We have successfully driven subs from this patrol.
June 19	12:15	- Left patrol area at 32 knots to rendezvous.
	13:00	- Attached to HMCS Anson as Destroyer screen. Proceeded to Plymouth at 32 knots.
	18:00	- Arrived at Plymouth, oiling up.
	23:00	- Left Plymouth for new patrol area
June 22	19:00	- Asdic contact Action station.
	19:05	- Depth charge, negative.
	19:45	- Secured Action station after testing contact with deep sea sounding machine.
June 24		- Left patrol area proceeding to Derry for boiler clean and repaint.
June 25		- Arrived in Derry.
June 30	06:00	- Left Derry for new patrol
July 1		- Steaming down Irish Sea
July 2		- Taking new stations
July 3		- Torpedo exploded 150 yds off stern. Captain remarked "Thank God these German torpedoes don't work."
July 4	12:45	- Left patrol steaming at 25 knots to rendezvous
	15:30	- Joined U.S.S. Texas battleship with her depot ship. Proceeded as her escort to Plymouth at 22 knots.
	23:45	- Arrived in Plymouth for mail and supplies.
July 5	05:00	- Leaving Plymouth heading towards France
	12:35	- Aiding aircraft who dropped charges on sub and started oil leak.
	13:00	- H00 and us ran a barrage attack on sub dropped 56 charges in a small area sending up great geyser of water. No sub but still oil.
	13:20	- Carried out 10 charge pattern, still oil.
	14:00	- Secured action
	17:00	- Captain spoke to ships company. "At 23:45 we will be off Brest harbour, at 6 1/2 miles. There has been an intelligent report that 5 German ships with E boat aid and 2 U boats. We will have no air protection and we will be in range of German coastal guns."
	22:30	- Ship has gone into Action stations.
July 6		- "ACTION"
	00:30	- Going into Brest harbour
	00:31	- Altering - heading Northwest
	00:35	- 5 radar echoes

- 00:27 - closing echoes at 32 knots are challenged but we remain silent.
- 00:40 - German's have challenged us 24 times. We are now less than a mile from them.
- 00:42 - We challenged German's with letter U, at same time firing rockets to illuminate them.
- 00:43 - Radar echoes prove to be 3 large Flak ships (2000T) and two subs (large). Opened fire with every thing we have. We have now closed to 1/2 mile. Close enough to see Jerries going for their guns, passing them at 32 knots, our shells tearing them apart.
- 00:50 - Turning and heading back to them. We are now Senior Officer, S.O. H69 seriously wounded we are now in full command.
- 01:00 - Let our torpedoes go, one of the ships fairly blew to pieces.
- 01:05 - Passing the other Nazis who are firing crazily. The whole sky is alight with rockets and tracers, one of the enemy is ablaze.
- 01:15 - Turning and going in again, firing with everything that will bear. The two subs have headed home at top speed and are out of the fight. You can see our 4.7 shells (HEDA) High Explosive Direct Action blowing the enemy to pieces. One literally blew the bridge apart. There is now only one enemy left.
- 01:30 - Turning and going in again at the last enemy ship, she is ablaze and we are gradually disintegrating her.
- 01:40 - She has stopped firing back. You can see the Hun's diving over the side in wild confusion. Their screams can be heard above our roaring guns.
- 01:45 - Cease fire, steaming out of Brest at 32 knots. Job well done. Although we remain at Action stations until we are well out of range of coastal batteries the crew is very tired and dirty from smoke and gunpowder, but are very happy in the long run about the whole thing.
- "RESULTS"
This was the first all Canadian action of this war. I59 fired 365 4.7 shells, 4860 Oerlikon shells, three torpedoes and thousands of 303 and other small arms. At the completion of the action, casualties were counted as 2 dead, 54 wounded from 4 ships.

The enemy must have lost from 3 to 5 hundred men. We now count 5 of our comrades dead. Two serious cases from our ship.

08:00

- Arrived in Plymouth to disembark dead and wounded. Received minor repairs and ammunition. We were hit 19 times by 20 mm shells along our starboard side. One larger shell hit our first whaler.

July 8

- Attended funeral of our dead. It has been claimed we were fired upon by shore batteries. The raid was a complete success. It cost us 1/2 million dollars to sink the Huns who were valued at 1 million dollars. However there is also the great loss of life to the already weakened German Navy. Our surprise raid has been claimed by high ranking Naval Officers as being "One of the most daring raids of the Navy this war." A great reason for our success was largely due to our form of surprise and attack. We came near to the coast and by losing ourselves among the large rocks there preventing the Germans radar sites ashore from picking us up and in doing so they didn't pay us any great attention. When the action started the shore batteries could not open fire for fear of hitting their own ships. We were only 15 miles from the actual town of Brest, the action taking place at the harbour mouth. The effect of the raid on their morale must have been terrific. They could see and hear the fight clearly from their own homes, and also the Jerries being sunk by our guns. If one of these 11" on shore had hit us it would have meant our finish. These shells weigh a ton each.

July 9 06:00

- Left Plymouth

14:00

- Took up station in sight of French coast.

July 10 11:00

- Flashed lighthouse on the Ushant Is. (Island off the coast of France) and dared the Jerries to send out some ships. They answered "Message Received" but that was all.

July 13 19:00

- We have been told we are going to act as support group for 7 R.N. (Royal Navy) M.T.B.'s (Motor Torpedo Boats) who are going to try the stunt we pulled in Brest.

July 14 01:00

- We are 20 miles from Brest. M.T.B.'s now going in.

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- 01:15 - Star shells of the enemy can be seen everywhere. Shore batteries open fire. M.T.B.'s have to come out. The raid is unsuccessful. They have to withdraw.
- July 16 04:00 - Arriving in Plymouth
- July 17 18:00 - Leaving for new patrol
- 22:00 - Joined two R.N. frigates - started asdic sweep
- July 18 13:00 - Left frigates, are on our own.
- 14:00 - One frigate which we have just left has been sunk by sub.
- 20:00 - New area between Portsmouth and Sherbournge.
- July 19 08:00 - Just off coast of France, can hear big guns plainly.
- 12:32 - Passing through heavy oil slick where U.S.L.S.T. (United States Landing Ship Tank) has been sunk.
- 12:50 - H69 picked up four US survivors
- 13:34 - H70 picked up body of US sailor
- 14:05 - We picked up 2 carley floats heavily coated with oil. 1 has many large shell holes in it.
- 16:00 - Entered Plymouth
- July 20 20:00 - We will be going to stand by M.T.B.'s in a dredger. Are expecting air attack. Have cover of Canadian built "Mosquitos and Spitfires".
- 22:15 - German fighters on horizon. Our fighters are after them.
- 22:20 - Action station attacked by 6 German bombers (JU88 and DO) (Junkers 88 and Dorners) with glider and rocket bombs.
- 22:23 - Glider bomb hit off our starboard beam approximately 6 ft away. It shook the ship and pieces of it landed on our upper deck. No damage. We are keeping up a heavy Anti Aircraft barrage.
- 22:30 - Bomber have expended their bombs. There is another bomb which exploded off our stern. No casualties. They have left us and returned home. We put up a devastating barrage keeping the enemy at great height, therefore spoiling their aims.
- 23:55 - Secure action
- "SUMMARY"
- The bomb that exploded on our beam cracked our side, denting a few of our plates. All through this action we were doing 32 knots. The concussion of the bomb knocked several of

- the crew on their backs, some were not hit, as the shrapnel from this bomb littered the upper deck cutting through canvas like paper.
- July 25 11:30 - Left patrol. Are proceeding to aid aircraft which surprised sub 28 knots.
- 13:00 - Aircraft disappeared, sub disappeared doing asdic sweep.
- July 30 to Aug 11 - Missed nothing interesting
- Aug 11 - Have been doing asdic sweep off coast of France for past few days. Inboard ship not a mile off the mainland.
- Aug 12 - Action again. Captain spoke to messdecks in the evening. Said we would be doing much the same thing as the last raid. The actions to take place in a small bay South of Uskant Isles. Ship would be going action station around midnight. One R.N. Hunt class destroyer joined to give us a hand.
- 01:40 - Start run
- 02:15 - Contact by Qu'Appelle, stationary target.
- 02:23 - Contacts show movement, at estimates of 12 knots.
- 02:24 - Altering course towards contacts; bearing green 50.
- 02:25 - All guns load. Contact bearing green 65.
- 02:26 - Enemy in sight; green 85. Leading ship left of moon, X green bearing on leading ship.
- 02:28 - There are three ships. Skeena to engage ship in moon. A Gun on bearing.
- 02:31 - Enemy dead ahead. "Illuminate."
- 02:33 - "Broadsides"
- 02:34 - "Rockets fire left"
- 02:35 - Bearing red 90. "Broadsides", "Shoot"
- 02:37 - Cerlikon's opened fire.
- 02:42 - Ordinance artificer to A guns "Cease fire."
Note: There were some very good hits scored.
- 02:43 - Started a new run up Starboard side.
- 02:45 - "Open Fire"
- 02:56 - "Cease Fire"
- 02:57 - Started a new run. Enemy is on fire.
- 03:00 - Enemy is bearing just off our Port bow. "Open Fire".
- 03:02 - "Rockets fire right, centre and left."
- 03:05 - The three targets have been driven ashore.
- 03:07 - "Open Fire"
- 03:08 - "Cease Fire"
- 03:09 - X Gun has expanded H.E.D.A. (High Explosive Direct Action using S.A.P. (Semi-Armour Piercing). X gun on target fired one round.
- 03:16 - One ship reported under way.
- 03:17 - Bearing green 160. X gun on target, "Open Fire".

- 03:18 - We have scored some more good hits.
 - 03:19 - "Fire all rockets"
 - 03:20 - "Cease Fire"
 - 03:21 - "Open Fire"
 - 03:22 - "Cease Fire"
 - 03:26 - "We have collided with Qu'Appelle, "Skeena" Badly damaged. The bow has been pushed in the collision bulkhead. It is not to healthy sitting here with shells falling all around us.
 - 03:45 - Shore batteries have commenced to open fire on us.
 - 03:55 - Have started to proceed under way.
 - 04:04 - Working up to 12 knots.
 - 04:15 - Qu'Appelle is now doing 12 knots.
 - 04:45 - The shore batteries are still firing at us.
 - 05:25 - We have now left area in which action took place.
- "REMARKS"
- It was a very good shoot, three ships are reported sunk. Total rounds - A gun 127, X gun 145. From 05:25 - Proceeding to "Plymouth" for repairs arrived in "Plymouth" next evening and will be laid up for some time for repairs.
- Sept 15
- We are nearly ready to go to sea again. This concluded our channel operations. We observed a day light raid on Brest. It was picturesque. Rocket firing typhoons accompanied high altitude bombers. We spent over a month in Plymouth getting necessary repairs done to our bow. We then proceeded to Londonderry, Northern Ireland. Retigouche to Ottawa of E.G.-11, left for Canada. We joined a new group known as E.G.-11. The ships composing are Qu'Appelle, Skeena, St Laurent, Assiniboine, Chaudiere.
- Oct 1
- We done exercises for three days at Larne, Ireland.
- Oct 4
- Sailed for Belfast to await further orders.
- Oct 5
- Qu'Appelle dragged her anchor and ran aground, at 20:30 we sailed for Milford Haven.
- Oct 8
- Sailed from Milford Haven. We are to meet three aircraft Carriers off the NorthWest coast of Spain then escort them to Greenock, Scotland.
- Oct 9
- Sweeping 150 miles SouthWest of Brest.
- Oct 10
- Picked up three carriers.
- Oct 11
- Proceeding north up Irish Sea.

- Oct 15 - We have a new patrol from Cape Ross Northern Scotland to Iceland. Our job is to intercept and destroy any subs going to or from their bases in Norway.
- Oct 15 to Oct 24 - Nothing exciting, just constant patrolling with lots of rough weather off the coast of Iceland.

- At approximately 22:00 we received a signal stating that it was too rough to carry out operations, to proceed to harbour. Our Captain requested to stay at sea but the request was not granted. We proceeded to harbour and were at anchor in Reykjavik at about 22:45. At 01:00 we were all awakened and informed that we were dragging anchors. When we dropped the other anchors which was useless as the bottom was rock and there was over a 100 mile an hour gale blowing and it was below zero. We started the engines but by this time it was too late as we had already ran aground and it tore off our props screws. We all worked hard after this preparing to get towed off with all hopes of getting a tug or another ship close enough to tow us. We already had all the floats over the side and the boats swung out all ready to abandon ship if it should be necessary. After about an hours hard work with that icy water splashing on us we found that it was all in vain as the other ships could not get near us for fear of going aground themselves.

By this time we were pretty well smashed up and had a very bad list to Starboard. They opened all the oil tanks so to prevent an explosion if possible, so the water was full of oil and when you got sprayed which was almost steadily, the diesel oil got into your eyes and mouth so that you swallowed a lot of it and you couldn't see. They also let all the steam off by the siren so as to prevent the boilers from exploding, which was a weird sound and frightened me more than anything else.

We were all afraid that she would either explode or roll over. We got the order to abandon ship which was not liked very much as we knew that the water was cold and we also knew that we couldn't do much out there in a float, however some of the boys went over the side, while more of us stayed to take our chances with the ship. P.O. Moorecraft came around and asked for a volunteer boats crew to try to get a boat ashore with a line so that we could pull it back and forth to get the crew off a few at a time. I went but when we got over in the boat it was over half full of water. We were numb up to the knees after we had been in it for a few minutes, however we stayed there and tried as hard as we could for nearly two hours but in vain we couldn't do it, so we decided to get back aboard. A lot of the boys were sick including myself from the oil and salt water that we had swallowed, but as soon as we brought it all up we felt better. We were told that help would arrive as soon as it was day light so we decided to stick it out which was not at all easy as we were all soaked through and covered

with oil which was burning us badly. We had no heat so we just sat there and shivered and prayed that everything would be alright on the old wreck of a ship that was ready to explode or roll over any minute with a 100 mile an hour gale blowing and about 10 degrees below zero, so you can imagine what it was like, "It wasn't hot."

Well, I never thought that a couple of hours could be so long in all my life. All we did was smoke and worry and smoke some more and help out the sickest ones to keep warm. After a horrible two hours, daybreak finally came and the help was out on the Island. They sent us over a line and again came the time that each and every one of us had to get in the water so that we could get ashore. They asked for three seamen to go first so I didn't think twice, I grabbed a line and slid down into the float and standing in water over our knees we secured a rope to each end of the float and signalled to the men on shore to start pulling. They pulled us ashore and our men pulled the float back and so on nearly all forenoon three or four at a time until every man was ashore. We all stood there for a moment just looking at her sitting there with her back broken and all broken to pieces. She would be of no more use to the Navy, she was through. Thirteen years, hard years, she had spent patrolling and fighting for the R.C.N. To think that a fighting ship H.M.C.S. Skeena had to meet a horrible death like that was just a little more than we "the crew" could stand. She was "our" ship, our pride and whats more, our home and had been our home for the past two or three years of war. Yes, I don't think there was a man in the crew that wasn't proud of her and proud to tell his chums ashore that he was on the Skeena, because she was the pride of the Royal Canadian Navy and known as the fightingest ship afloat, but now, now she was gone, we couldn't believe it and we all said that she would come back but I am just beginning to realize how untrue those words can be.

After looking at her for a second we all turned and ran across the Island about 1 1/2 miles to a Yank landing barge that was waiting at the other side. When we got there, we were almost frozen, but were cheered up again to find four of our chums there that had got on the Island the night before. When we were all aboard the barge, the Yank's took us to the mainland and we ran from there up to the American Army base where we were really used good, we got warm, cigarettes and some dry socks. From there trucks took us to the R.N. base where some went to hospital and the rest of us were sitting in the canteen getting warm and singing songs when the doctor off the Assinaboine came in and had a look at us all. It was then that one of our officers came in and told us that they had picked up 13 bodies and there was still two missing. It was pretty hard to take but we knew that they could never stand it in the water. They would have died from exposure.

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This is a list of the "men" that we lost.

Leading Seaman	Jim Silk	Windsor, ON
Leading Seaman	Andy Blais	Montreal, PQ
Able Seaman	Johnny Johnston	Hudson Bay Junction, SK
Able Seaman	Abe Unger	McMahn, SK
Able Seaman	Lloyd Gabourel	Toronto, ON
Able Seaman	Ken Stewart	St. Catherines, ON
Leading Stewart	Archie Apostolos	Kingston, ON
Cook	Desmond Cook	Vancouver, BC
Steward	John Pressner	Montreal, PQ
Able Seaman	Newf Ellis	Bathurst, NB
Able Seaman	Len Watson	Oshawa, ON
Able Seaman	J. Janos	Outlook, SK
Coder	Ritchie Seath	St. Lambert, PQ
Leading Signalman	Ralph Hancock	Vancouver, BC
Able Seaman	Gordon Davidson	Montreal, PQ

After we left the canteen we had showers and got some clean clothes "battledress". We all stayed in Iceland for a few days and we went out and salvaged some things off the ship. Then our first lieutenant told us that we would all be going back to the UK on the rest of the destroyers in our group except for about forty that had to stay for a salvage party. He asked for volunteers and he got them all. We hated to see all the rest of the boys go and us having to stay in that godforsaken place, Reykjavik, but after they were gone we got used to it and had some swell times ice skating and playing basketball in the evenings, we went out to the ship in the daytime and worked hard to get all that we could off her. We stayed there for three weeks and then they told us that we would be catching a troopship back to the UK. When we got on the trooper it was a Polish one the Ploest. I think, we were on her for about five days when we arrived in Greenock, Scotland. From there we went to the R.C.N. barracks there H.M.C.S. Niobe. I had heard a lot about it but had never been there and believe me, I never want to be again. In Niobe we met up with the rest of our gang. We had been there for about a week when they told us that some of us would be coming home on the next troopship, but it wasn't us, it was the rest of the gang. We were pretty sore as all we wanted to do was to get home on leave then. Well after we had been there another week they told us that we were leaving so we were all ready but had to wait for another week until finally one morning they got us all together and piled us on trucks and took us to the station and we knew then that we were coming home. We took the train from Greenock to Glasgow and from there we took another train to Liverpool, England. There we got on the Troopship Mauretania and sailed the next morning for home, but it wasn't all fun as we had to stand gun watches. I stood mine on a six inch gun. We were on her for seven days when we pulled into Halifax and boy did it look nice.

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This was on Dec 14 th and all that we were worrying about was how long before we would get our leave. This wasn't long as the next night I was on my way home with leave from Dec 15 th to Feb 14 th, 1945 so we were all happy. Now we have to wait until we get back to see what lies in store for us.