Captain Rolfe Monteith, Canadian teenage volunteer who survived the Arctic convoys

By Mungo Melvin

After four months at sea, he left the destroyer Hardy weeks before it was sunk, a loss that haunted him for years

Captain Rolfe Monteith, of the Royal Canadian Navy, who has died aged 101, was one of the teenage Dominion volunteers who crossed the Atlantic to serve in the Second World War, and one of the last survivors of the wartime Arctic convoys.

Inspired by family holidays in Charlottetown on Prince Edward Island, young Monteith was eager to go to sea. In 1941, aged 17, he volunteered for the Royal Canadian Navy and soon found himself on his first Atlantic crossing – not yet in uniform – aboard the armed merchant cruiser Laconia with convoy HX 147. The voyage was perilous, passing through wreckage from convoy SC 42, which had recently been mauled by German U-boats off Greenland.

Arriving in Liverpool in September 1941, Monteith was among 31 Canadians in the Royal Navy's Special Entry Course No 55 at Britannia Royal Naval College, Dartmouth. He aspired to become a seaman officer, but was instead sent to the Royal Naval Engineering College at Keyham in Plymouth. There, in a class with 12 Canadians and four Poles, he began a rigorous three-year engineering course.

Part of his training included four months at sea, notably in the destroyer Hardy on Arctic Convoy JW 54B in November 1943, from Loch Ewe to Murmansk. The long Arctic nights shielded the convoy from enemy attacks but exposed the crew to freezing, treacherous seas.

Monteith cherished his time at sea and was deeply affected when he had to leave his shipmates to return to Plymouth. Hardy was sunk a few weeks later; it was a loss that haunted him for years, until a reunion in 2017 when he met the son of Chief Petty Officer Fred Pearce, a Hardy survivor who had been his mentor. He later resettled in Britain.

Rolfe Monteith was born in Chatham, Ontario, on October 30 1923, the second son of a Bank of Montreal employee. After the war ended, he briefly visited Canada for the first time in four years before returning to sea in the cruiser Diadem to complete his marine engineering qualifications in November 1945.

From 1947 he held a range of appointments, specialising as an air engineer. As engineer officer of HMCS Sioux in 1953, he attended Queen Elizabeth II's coronation and the subsequent fleet review at Spithead.

He was director of air engineering in 1958-59 and engineering liaison officer with the Canadian joint staff in Washington from 1959 to 1962. While project manager for the Hydrofoil Escort 400 programme (1964-67), he also served for several months as director of marine and electrical engineering in 1965. Despite the hydrofoil's eventual failure, his work raised his profile, highlighting the challenges of naval procurement.

While attending the Imperial Defence College in London in 1968, Monteith decided to resign from the RCN and settle in the UK. He spent the following decades working with leading British engineering firms, including Babcock and Wilcox and the Weir Group. His expertise led to his appointment as chairman of the British Naval Equipment Association, maintaining strong ties with both the RN and RCN.

Retiring in 1990, Monteith travelled extensively and organised naval reunions, including the 50th anniversary of Special Entry 55 in 1991,

and gatherings in 1995 and 2001. He remained active in veterans' circles well into his 90s, marching on Remembrance Sunday at the Cenotaph, proudly wearing both the British Arctic Star and Russian Ushakov Medal. He was equally at home sharing stories and debating history over lunch at Champagne Charlies in Charing Cross.

Monteith met his first wife, Peggy Kelly, a Wren, during the War; they married in 1945. Peggy had lost her brother aboard the aircraft carrier Glorious, and Monteith retained a lifelong interest in that tragedy.

After Peggy's death in 1973 he met Ann Penketh in 1994, moving to her home in Brockweir and marrying her in 2013; she also predeceased him. Monteith, remembered for his warmth, humour and ability to connect with people from all walks of life, is survived by two sons, one a former RN surgeon lieutenant, the other a lawyer.

Captain Rolfe Monteith, born October 30 1923, died July 22 2025