

ERNEST APPS AND THE RADAR OF MATAPAN

written and submitted by Stanley Burke

Remembrance Day is a good time to draw attention to a strange oversight in recognizing outstanding service in the Second World War. I refer to the action of Kingston-area resident Ernest Apps, who was the key main in one of the critical battles of the war. In the Battle of Matapan in 1941 in the eastern Mediterranean, he was the radar officer who detected three Italian cruisers, which were sunk in the principal action of the battle.

Apps, in the battleship *Vallant*, provided the range and bearing - or distance and direction - of the enemy ships, permitting the British fleet to move in to gunnery range. Then, as Apps noted in his diary at the time, Royal Navy battleships fired six broadsides with 15-inch guns and, as he said, it was "all over in five minutes. They never knew what hit them."

This was the key action in a battle win which one battleship was put out of action and four cruisers and 10 destroyers sunk. The battle changed the balance of power in the Mediterranean because, prior to Matapan, the large Italian fleet had to be presumed a potent fighting force and the freedom of action of the Royal Navy accordingly limited. The victory proved British superiority and freed significant forces for essential action such as the support of the offensive base in Malta and the subsequent offensive against Rommel in North Africa.

Matapan was historic in another sense, because it was the first naval battle in which radar was used for gunnery. Apps, as radar officer, proved the effectiveness of the new invention. During the battle, in addition to detecting the opposing fleet, App's radar provided range and bearing to the British guns so that, when the ships

arrived in firing position, virtually all that remained was to order Open Fire.

Following the victory, decorations when to App's commanding officer, to the ship's gunnery officer, to the officer in charge of the gunnery control system and to many others throughout the fleet. One went interestingly, to a midshipman who played a relatively insignificant role, simply ordering searchlights trained on the bearing indicated by App's radar. Then, when ordered, he had the lights switched on. He was a certain Prince Philip of Greece, nephew to Admiral Lord Mountbatten, later to marry Princess Elizabeth.

But why was the key man overlooked?

Because he was a Canadian?

Because the navy did not want to publicize radar? Perhaps, but a medal could have been issued without mentioning radar.

Because senior officers dismissed radar as gadgetry, preferring to think of this victory as achieved in the old Nelsonian tradition?

But there is one other possible explanation that's intriguing.

Apps had drawn the ire of his commanding officer because he was in love with a French girl, whom he intended to marry. His captain, pacing in his cabin, had angrily said that no British officer should marry a foreigner. Apps replied that he was not British and refused to break off the relationship. The Captain then made preparations to have him returned to Britain.

Through a Canadian in the British consular service in Alexandria, the couple then managed to arrange a civil service. The marriage being a fait accompli, the captain relented and allowed Apps to remain with the fleet, where he continued a career filled with

drama. For example, his ship, the *Vallant*, was next to the battleship *Barham* when she was sent to the bottom by a German submarine with a loss of 800 men, one of the worst losses of the war.

As Apps says, "it could have just as easily been us."

Apps was one of close to 100 Canadians who served as radar officers in the Royal Navy and received little recognition for their services. The Royal Air Force had recruited virtually all the young electronic engineers in the U.K., so the Navy looked to Canada and, in the early years of the war, virtually all RN radar officers were Canadians. They served in 76 battleships and cruisers. Four were killed, one was captured by the Japanese, many had ships sunk under them. Many were engaged in vitally important operations. They were involved, for example, in the sinking of the German battleship *Bismark* and *Scharnhorst*.

Along with Apps, another Kingston-area man who served as a RN radar officer was Able Trousdale of Sydenham. He agrees that Canadians did not receive the credit they deserve for naval services. Both Trousdale and Apps come from distinguished families. The Trousdales are a leading family in Sydenham; the Apps have long been prominent in Kingston.

Ernest's brother Syl Apps became noted as a hockey star, cabinet minister and businessman. Ernest had a distinguished engineering career and now lives, happily married to Paulette, in a beautiful home on Amherst Island. A modest man, he has never asked why his conspicuous service was overlooked.

It's not too late. Someone should see that recognition is given.