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Alexander Milton 'Jimmie' Johnson

The North Atlantic, 1939-40

Many times we overlook the important role the Royal Navy and the Royal Canadian Navy played in the Battle of the Atlantic during the Second World War. The Battle of the Atlantic was the longest battle of the war beginning in 1939 and lasting until the fall of Germany in 1945. It proved to be a dangerous voyage for Allied supply ships sailing from North American waters to Europe given the lurking German warships and U-Boats. German U-boats operated all along the North American coastline including the Gulf of St Lawrence. The Royal Navy and the Royal

Canadian Navy (RCN) played an important role in defending against naval attacks including the protection of convoys.¹

Not all warships were originally designed for combat. In August of 1939, the Royal Navy requisitioned a British liner by the name of *Jervis Bay*. After its incorporation into the navy, HMS *Jervis Bay* was initially tasked with duties in the South Atlantic before being assigned to Halifax for convoy duties in May of 1940. In the early years of the war it became apparent supply ships would need naval assistance to stave off German attacks. Armed naval vessels including the HMS *Jervis Bay* would escort convoys to the United Kingdom ready to come to their aid if they were attacked. The HMS *Jervis Bay* played a heroic role in defending Convoy HX-84 when it came under attack by the German battleship Admiral Scheer on November 5th, 1940.²

Alexander Milton 'Jimmie' Johnson



Alexander Milton "Jimmie" Johnson was born on March 2, 1903, in Port Elgin, Ontario. Johnson had two brothers, George and Jack, and a sister, Emma. Jimmie worked in Owen Sound at Keenan Brothers where he lost a finger on his left hand due to an industrial accident. In his younger days, Jimmie and his brother Jack sailed on the Dan Proctor, a lumber carrying barge owned by

Keenan's. Given this nautical experience, John Johnson (Jimmie's nephew) argued that Jimmie was "well prepared for the Navy". Johnson moved to Montreal where he worked as a stationary engineer. He married Margaret Taylor on January 12, 1923, and by 1940, the couple had four children including Nancy, John, Marion, and Sheilah. When war broke out in 1939, Johnson first served with the Merchant Marine. On August 9, 1940, as the Battle of the Atlantic intensified, Johnson transferred to the Royal Canadian Naval Reserve. On August 24, Johnson was mobilized for active service and posted to HMCS Stadacona, a naval shore establishment. Subsequently, on October 25, 1940, Jimmie Johnson was posted to the *HMS Jervis Bay* as Stoker, 1st Class. Just a few days later, *HMS Jervis Bay* sailed from Halifax leading a convoy across the North Atlantic bound for Great Britain.³

On October 28, 1940, Convoy HX-84 sailed for England. The convoy consisted of 37 merchant ships with only one escort accompanying them, *HMS Jervis Bay*. On November 5, 1940, the German pocket battleship *Admiral Scheer* located the convoy southwest of Iceland and attacked immediately. Captain E.S.F. Fegen of the *HMS Jervis Bay* ordered the convoy to scatter before launching a counter-attack on the *Admiral Scheer*. After some initial fighting, the *HMS Jervis Bay* was disabled. According to some accounts, Stoker Johnson was able to make it off the ship into a life raft, but was reported to have slipped off the crowded raft into the freezing water. Jimmie Johnson is remembered by family members as a hero; the *HMS Jervis Bay's* crew fought valiantly until the ship went under the waves. Captain E.S.F. Fegen

was posthumously awarded a Victoria Cross for his actions that day. According to his nephew, John Johnson, Stoker Johnson is remembered as "a heck of a nice guy", and was the first citizen of Owen Sound to be killed serving during the Second World War. Alexander Milton "Jimmie" Johnson was awarded the Canadian Volunteer Service Medal and the 1939-45 Star. ⁴ Jervis Bay Park was created in honour of Stoker 'Jimmie' Johnson's service and sacrifice and the fact that he was Owen Sound's first fatal casualty of the Second World War.



Commemorative plaque located in Jervis Bay Park

1. [Military History Online](#)
2. hmsjervisbay.com

3, 4. [Library and Archives Canada: Service Files of the Second World War](#)

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