



## CROSSED THE BAR

**John Desmond Fisher MBE 21 May 1920 – 24 September 2009**

**Gravesend Sea School 1936**

John Desmond Fisher was born in Brandon, Manitoba, on 21 May 1920, the eldest of three sons of Nesta and Thomas Fisher. His two brothers pre-deceased him; Robbie was an officer in the Merchant Navy, and the youngest brother, Gordon, a Pilot Officer in the Royal Air Force, was killed in a flying accident at the age of twenty-one.

He was nine years of age when the Great Depression started, causing Nesta to take her three sons home to England. On leaving school in 1936, he joined the merchant navy as a deck boy, working his way up through the Hawsepipe he obtained his second mates certificate, setting himself onto his lifetime career as a MN officer. Sailing from Southampton John's early ships were Union Castle Cunard, NZSC, Federal boats then when the Ministry of War Transport took over a stream of Empire boats.

In February 1942 on the NZSC 'OPAWA' he was 'discharged at sea' when she was torpedoed off Newfoundland. The crew took to three lifeboats, only one of which was to survive, and this was the boat in which the ship's captain had ordered John to join him.

After a week, they were picked up by a Dutch freighter, the cold, damp conditions had led John to contract the painful condition known as trench foot. Put ashore in New York, John was billeted with a certain Professor Parrott, and in later years, he was to recall having dinner with Albert Einstein when the great man came to visit.

After his recovery, John returned to sea, this time with the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, engaged in the task of supplying the Navy. After the War, John remained with the RFA and back in England in 1947, he met a young lady named Gwendoline. they were married in Portsmouth on 2 July 1947.

The outbreak of the Korean War on 27 June 1950 saw John once again in a combat zone, this time on the hospital ship HMS Maine. John's years of dedicated service were rewarded when he was promoted to Captain in 1960. Postings followed in Malta, and then in Singapore, where he was Marine Superintendent. The sea was in John's blood,

however, and he subsequently returned to seagoing service with the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. His last command was HMS Apple Leaf, which was later transferred to the Royal Australian Navy as captain of the Westralia. John retired in 1980, and spent a great deal of the following ten years caring for his ageing mother and other close relatives. In his retirement year, a working lifetime of selfless service to his country was recognised with the award of the Order of Commander of the British Empire. The day of his investiture at Buckingham Palace by Queen Elizabeth the

Queen Mother was one of the proudest days of his life.

John and Gwen's son, Nick, had moved to Australia in 1969, during the course of frequent visits they had come to know and love this country. They made the move to Australia in April 1991, and settled in Canberra. John loved family life, perhaps as only a seafarer who has perforce spent long periods away, can. His great granddaughter Isobel was the apple of his eye, and he loved watching her grow up week by week, in a way that he had not been able to watch the progress of his own son. His family remembers a calm man with a good sense of humour, who made friends very easily. As Gwen put it, he would "talk to anybody". One of his favourite sayings was "if you are nice to people, invariably they will be nice to you in return."

John loved his garden and planted trees named for members of his family, he enjoyed club life, and was active in the local Probus Club. John also loved to get away with Gwen to the beach house they owned at for a number of years at Narooma.

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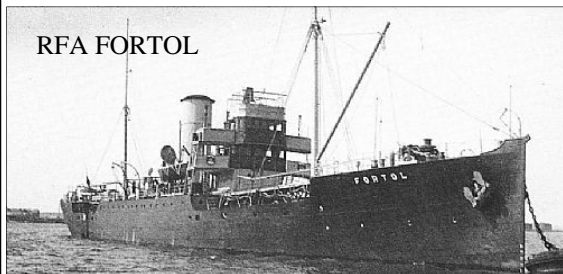
*John Mears was in touch with the family to express our condolences. What a career John Fisher had, a remarkable life from a start at Gravesend. He certainly had a remarkable knack of serving on some remarkable ships, each worth their own story, the 'RFA Fortol' built in 1916 and served in both world wars! The RFA hospital ship 'Maine' he was captain of in 1950 for the Korean war was built as the Italian liner 'Leonardo da Vinci' in 1924, captured by the British in 1941-became the 'Empire Clyde' serving as a hospital ship.*



'Dunvegan Castle John's first ship



NZSC OPAWA



RFA FORTOL



Leonardo Da Vinci - RFA Maine



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