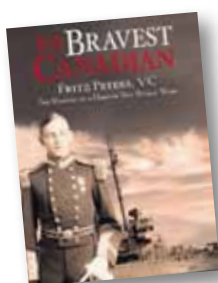


THE READING ROOM | BOOK REVIEWS



The Bravest Canadian Fritz Peters, VC: The Making of a Hero of Two World Wars

By Sam McBride

Granville Island Publishing, Vancouver, BC (2012),
xix + 209 pp, illustrations, appendices, bibliogra-
phy, glossary, notes, index, paperback, \$24.95,
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A review by Mike Young, NAC Ottawa

Frederick Thornton Peters, known to family and friends as Fritz, was awarded the Victoria Cross (VC) for his actions during a naval engagement in the harbour of Oran as part of the wider invasion of North Africa in November 1942. Peters was born in Prince Edward Island and raised in British Columbia, yet his exploits during both World War I and World War II are relatively little known in his homeland. His posthumous VC is not mentioned in the same context as that of the other and more famous, posthumous Canadian naval VC of World War

II, Lt Robert H. Gray, RCNVR. Perhaps the difference is that Gray was serving in a component of the RCN, albeit in a British aircraft carrier, while Peters was a Royal Navy officer commanding a British naval force at Oran, and had spent very little of his adult life in Canada. Ironically, Gray grew up in Nelson, BC, where nearby Mount Peters sits today.

Fritz Peters came from a distinguished Prince Edward Island family that was related to the family of Samuel Cunard and which produced a Premier of the province and one of the 'Fathers of Confederation.' Born in 1889, he was eight years of age when the family moved to Victoria, BC. At age eleven he was in England to attend school and from there joined the Royal Navy at age fifteen as a cadet in HMS *Britannia*, the training ship in Dartmouth. He followed the usual career progression serving in various ships of the Royal Navy until June 1913 when he resigned from the RN and returned to Canada to work. By August 1914, on the outbreak of World War I, he was back in uniform as a Lieutenant in HMS *Meteor*. In this ship he won the Distinguished Service Order and a Mention-in-Dispatches for actions during the Battle of Dogger Bank in January 1915. Commanding a destroyer in March Peters again left the RN after the end of World War I. There is some minor mystery as to exactly what he was during the inter-war period

and where he was doing it! It is known that he spent several years in the West African colonies, now Ghana, but for whatever reason the author has found little documentary evidence for this period. Returning to the RN following the outbreak of World War II, Peters was given command of a group of antisubmarine warfare trawlers in the rank of Commander.

His group sank two U-boats during his tenure in command and this resulted in the award of the second DSC. In August 1942, after several staff appointments and a further seagoing command, Fritz Peters – by now an Acting Captain – was selected to plan and execute Operation Reservist. This was a sub-operation as part of Operation Torch, the invasion of North Africa, and was intended to force and capture the port of Oran. The attack took place on November 8th, 1942. In the event, the attack was a disaster and the force suffered over 90% casualties. Although wounded, Peters survived and was taken prisoner. Two days later he was released and flew back to the UK, only to die in the waters of Plymouth Sound when the seaplane in which he as a passenger crash landed. In addition to the VC, Peters was awarded the US Distinguished Service Cross for the action at Oran.

The author paints a portrait of his great uncle as a man of the Empire; someone who was very comfortable in the Imperial service. Much of the book is comprised of a variety of correspondence and documents belonging to the Peters' family (Fritz Peters never married). In many ways, Peters appears as an anachronism – for example, he ensured his sword was sharpened before the attack on Oran – espousing attitudes and values that were of a different age, even by the onset of World War II.

He seems to have had little, if any, sense of Canadian nationalism or distinct identity, and none of his citations mention that he was Canadian. Also, there is no evidence presented that he ever considered a transfer to the Royal Canadian Navy after its formation or later. But, in the context of his upbringing and the family history as presented by the author, this is perhaps unsurprising.

Nevertheless, this is a fascinating look at an interesting man and the author has done a good job in giving the reader a glimpse of the character of him. Whether or not he deserves the accolade of the book title is a matter for the judgment of the reader.

Mike Young is a retired naval officer, member NAC Ottawa and former editor of "Starshell" who is enjoying life in Nepean, Ontario.