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St. Johns High School

Home of the Redwings!

Fraser MacKinnon

Interviewed by Jessica Walsh

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Mr. Fraser MacKinnon was drafted at the age of eighteen. He was in college at the time, and was willing to enter the service. He hoped to be in the Navy, since he had always enjoyed being on the sea, and he was lucky enough to be placed there. He was first sent to boot camp for a few weeks, and he then was transferred to signal school at the University of Illinois. After three months there, he went to Norfolk, Virginia, which was a staging area. Mr. MacKinnon was assigned to the U.S.S. Swenning in the Atlantic Ocean, a destroyer escort. While the ship was in the Atlantic, it was painted different colors in order to blend in with the unique atmosphere, which creates random shapes and mirror images. The ships were designed to combat the German U-boats. The ship carried two types of airplanes, and contained around 112 men. The U.S.S. Swenning was 300 feet long, which is actually small as far as ships go. The ship was named after a heroic sailor who died trying to rescue people after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Mr. MacKinnon worked as a signalman on the ship, and his duties were to manipulate various flags and lights for communication when radio silence was necessary. His crew had at least eight U-boats to their credit. In his off-duty time, he was expected to clean his area on the ship, and after that he would eat and play cards. He landed in foreign ports such as Bermuda, Trinidad, Casa Blanca, and Cuba, to name a few. He was in Pearl Harbor on V-J Day (victory over Japan). The most nerve-wracking part of his experience was when a German sub was cornered, and he did not know whether it would surface and start firing or not. Only once did this happen, but the sub was already in the process of going down so it did not last very long. It was also alarming when they encountered rough weather. At one point during a severe storm, his ship listed to a 34-degree angle. Despite experiencing some violent storms, Mr. MacKinnon was seldom seasick. Mr. MacKinnon's group also sunk the only Japanese sub to travel in the Atlantic Ocean. The sub was a final effort on the part of Japan to try and get supplies through to Germany. This episode was recently featured in National Geographic, since it is now thought that the sub contains 13 million dollars in gold and attempts are being made to locate it. Mr. MacKinnon was ranked as a signalman, first class. He was the eldest in rank on the bridge of the ship, so he was in a way the supervisor of the other signalmen. Mr. MacKinnon served in the Navy until a few months after the war ended. To this day, he still attends reunions of his fellow crewmen. His group was awarded the Presidential Unit Citation. He feels that he was very lucky in his war experience, since nothing terribly bad ever happened to him, and he is

not affected today by his war experience. Mr. MacKinnon believes that everybody has an obligation to serve their country, and that the youth of today should feel a stronger sense of patriotism.