

D-DAY: HAMILTON'S NAVY CONNECTION

By Robert Williamson CD, CDR RCNR (Ret'd)

This story started in 1985 when I was appointed Commanding Officer of HMCS STAR, Hamilton's Naval Reserve Division. I believed that blowing the ship's horn was one of my responsibilities, figuratively speaking. That meant do everything possible to promote a naval presence in our region, so far removed from the ocean. My plan was to tow the last of our 30-year old post-war Destroyer Escorts from Halifax to Hamilton. Then convert it into a training facility for sea cadets and a naval museum, preserving it as an example of the first naval vessel completely designed and built in Canada.

However, I must admit that I had an ulterior motive. Hamilton's naval base was built quickly during the austerity of WW2. It was badly outdated and in need of replacement. A retired warship at dockside could provide an ideal temporary facility during construction of a new naval base. I sent the proposal to the Maritime Commander in Halifax and the Heritage Minister in Ottawa. Considering the cost involved, the Admiralty dismissed the plan and it looked like it would die on the vine despite being a brilliant multi use concept.

But if you plant a seed you never know what may grow. With great expectations in 1990, Toronto made a bid to host the 1996 Summer Olympics on their Ontario Place waterfront site. Their plan did not include HMCS HAIDA, a rusting WW2 memorial warship that had graced Exhibition Park since 1970. This provided an opportunity for the Federal Heritage Minister to get on board. It so happened that the Heritage Minister was our very own Sheila Copps. She recognized the advantage of HMCS STAR's bay front pier. Thus Hamilton became the new home of HMCS HAIDA, Canada's "fightingest" ship in the navy. Recently designated "Ceremonial Flagship" of the RCN, the ship is the last of Canada's WW2 and Korean War Tribal Class Destroyers and the last of nine Canadian destroyers that were present at D-Day.

During the weeks leading up to D-Day and "Operation Overlord", Haida patrolled the French coast of the English Channel participating in 19 missions to suppress enemy activity. On June 8/9, Haida engaged a flotilla of four enemy destroyers attempting to sneak into the invasion perimeter in the dark. Haida sank one destroyer and the rest withdrew. Similarly, on June 24, an enemy submarine U-971 was sunk off Land's End. On the night of July 14/15, Haida intercepted an enemy convoy, sinking several ships. By war's end, she had

sunk more enemy tonnage than any other Canadian warship.



Photo courtesy HMCS STAR

HMCS HAIDA, a national historic site, is the last of her class and Hamilton's naval connection to D-Day.

But our D-Day connection does not end there. When I moved into my commander's office at HMCS STAR, I found a very large ship's bell buried at the back of my closet. It was inscribed "HMS RAMILLIES 1917". After some research I discovered that it belonged to a former British Battleship that had served in World War Two protecting Canadian Atlantic convoys and in 1944 was a bombardment ship suppressing enemy defenses on the eastern flank of the Normandy invasion beaches where Canadian paratroopers and soldiers fought on D-Day. When the battleship was scrapped in 1947, the bell made its way to Canada as part of a sea cadet exchange involving local cadets and eventually made its way to HMCS STAR for safe keeping. In recognition of the significant role that HMS RAMILLIES played in our naval history, I had it installed as a memorial to the 75th Anniversary of the Canadian Navy in 1985.

Photo by Williamson



Mountain Memories, written by historian Robert Williamson for the Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society appears monthly. For information on events and publications, see the Society's website <Hamiltonheritage.ca>