

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

CANADIAN NAVAL HISTORY PRESERVED

On April 30, 1981, the main building at HMCS *Tecumseh*, known as A Block, was razed by fire. It was one of the most spectacular fires in the history of Calgary, with a black plume of smoke visible throughout the city. The WW II building, constructed entirely of wood, was completely gutted. The fire destroyed the training office, records, training materials and the drill deck. Little was left standing above the rubble other than the old stone chimney.

HMCS *Tecumseh* was under the command of Commander (Cdr) William Evelyn at the time of the fire. The ship's company was devastated but two days later, on May 2, 1981, the Battle of Atlantic Parade was held on the lower parking lot, facing the rubble of the fire.

Tecumseh's Executive Officer, Cdr Laraine Orthlieb (who would become Commanding Officer in 1983), recognized the need to preserve elements of naval history and this motivated her to mobilize the naval community to participate in the clean-up after the fire.

As the smoke cleared, volunteer members of *Tecumseh* put on their gum boots and took up rakes to sift through the ashes and mud from the fire. They discovered numerous articles of historic significance including ship's bells, trophies, plaques, silverware, a ship's wheel and an 1880s ceremonial 9-pounder gun with carriage and limber. A multitude of damaged naval items worthy of preservation were found, cleaned and set aside, pending decisions for their disposal.

The property also held three historical naval aircraft, a Seafire, a Sea Fury and a Banshee. They proudly guarded the grounds of HMCS *Tecumseh*. The fire had scorched and damaged them and, if left to the elements, they would badly deteriorate. What to do with the three aircraft and the artifacts retrieved from the fire? What to do with all the donations of historical artifacts that long retired veterans donated to *Tecumseh*, hoping their items might replace some of the items lost in the fire.

To address this, Cdr Orthlieb founded the Tecumseh Historical Society (THS) in 1983 and it became a registered charitable organization in 1984. The THS began with a small group of dedicated individuals who were tasked with raising the funds needed for a suitable facility to protect and maintain the salvaged aircraft. Cdr Orthlieb then turned her attention to the Calgary naval community and enlisted their support. By 1985, the THS had 200 members and a bold idea to create a naval museum to house the aircraft and historic artifacts emerged.

As an initial venture into the arena of fund-raising, the THS pursued provincial government and city grants. Initial funding came from two sources, both administered by The City of Calgary (the "City"). The first was a Province of Alberta grant in the amount of \$144,750, provided the naval museum was constructed on DND land. This led

to tense negotiations with the Federal Government to authorize a lease for the land. Cdr Orthlieb was tenacious in seeing an Order in Council signed by the Prime Minister that authorized a 40-year renewable lease agreement for land to build a museum on the *Tecumseh* property.

The second source was a Special City Capital Grant. City Council directed in 1986 that the funds under both Grants would be held by the City pending confirmation of legal rights to the site and verification of total project costs and matching funds from the THS. Fund-raising by the THS for the construction of a naval museum was underway. The whole naval community worked hard to raise the matching funds necessary.

Through a generous donation of \$50,000 from Lieutenant Commander Merritt Chisholm CD, RCNR (Ret'd), President of Bedford Petroleum, and contributions from the Naval Officers Association, the Calgary Naval Veterans Association, the Navy League, and a myriad of other societies and corporate and community organizations, a final tally of over \$310,000 was raised which covered the initial construction. A preliminary design for a structure of 64,000 square feet was proposed by the THS.

The Seafire, Sea Fury, and Banshee aircraft were refurbished with the assistance of the Aero Space Museum of Calgary, the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology, CFB Calgary and CFB Edmonton. The three historic aircraft ultimately became the main attraction of the new Naval Museum of Alberta (NMA). As the word spread, the naval community of Calgary and interested Calgarians volunteered their time and effort in support of this new initiative.

In 1988, the NMA opened with the three historic aircraft, a Corvette bridge mockup, big guns, story lines of the Battle of the Atlantic, and numerous static displays. Many volunteers welcomed the public, including large numbers of school students. Other volunteers worked in an extensive shop doing restoration of artifacts and building displays.

Over time, a 7,000-volume library was assembled largely by local volunteer and naval historian John Burgess. Priceless within that collection are the "Pinkx", the pink-coloured Top Secret convoy records from WWII. Another priceless addition to the NMA was naval historian Ken Macpherson's collection of 60,000 photos. Macpherson and Burgess are also well known as co-authors of *The Ships of Canada's Naval Forces 1910-1981*.

The foundation for this wonderful museum was laid largely through the efforts of Cdr Orthlieb. In 1987, the torch was passed to Lieutenant Commander Frank Saies-Jones and Captain (Navy) (Capt(N)) Bill Wilson. LCdr Saies-Jones, who at the time was Commanding Officer Royal Canadian Sea Cadet Corps *Undaunted*, became president of THS and the first curator of the NMA. Capt(N) Wilson became a board member and scoured the country and the world for naval artefacts and the funds needed to grow the NMA into the biggest and best naval museum in Canada. While many have contributed to the success of the NMA, these three should be considered the founders.

Over its first decade, the NMA thrived. It built an addition to its building, but soon more space was needed. At about this time, the Museum of the Regiments, located just down

the road, was looking to expand. THS leadership seized the opportunity to collaborate with the Army museums to jointly build a common facility to house the Army, Airforce and Navy museums and the University of Calgary research library and archives. This made sense in many ways. The public could be better served by being able to go to one site rather than several. Also, the many World War II volunteers were becoming elderly and less able to be as actively involved as before. It was getting more difficult for the THS, renamed in 1988 as the Naval Museum of Alberta Society (NMAS), and its volunteers to operate the myriad tasks of a large and active museum. Moving to the new site also allowed the NMA to become an official DND museum. By so doing, DND provided staff and paid operating costs. The NMAS could shift to a role as supporter of the NMA.

The NMA was to be a new building attached to the former Museum of the Regiments on Department of National Defence (DND) property off Crowchild Trail. The naval community now got behind efforts to fund raise for The Military Museums (TMM). To help decide on what to display and how extensive input from NMAS, professional museum consultants and fabricators were hired to design and construct an interior layout to the new NMA. Much time, thought and consultation went into how best to tell the story of Canada's Navy. The layout of individual displays, the addition of The Convoys and the Battle of the Atlantic Exhibit and the development of improved interactive systems commenced and were made ready for the official opening. New, unfinished display cabinets were fabricated locally to NMAS specifications in the fall of 2007. These were finished by museum volunteers and made ready for the move to the new museum.

On August 6, 2007, the NMA lowered its ensign at the old building at HMCS *Tecumseh* and closed its doors to the public. Cleaning and packing began in earnest by an NMAS cadre of volunteers and by the end of September had begun the final preparations for the move. By the end of October 2007, the three naval aircraft had been moved down Crowchild Trail to their new home at TMM.

During the summer and early fall of 2008, the NMAS volunteer cadre busied themselves in sanitizing all artefacts to ensure that no parasites had joined the collection. Mannequins and their uniforms were put through a lengthy cold storage process to eliminate possible undesirable infestations, artefacts were cleaned and, where necessary, restored to mint condition as display plans took form. It all came together in time for the grand opening of the new NMA.

On October 16, 2008, the 20th anniversary of the opening of the original NMA, the Honourable Norman Kwong, Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, presided at the opening of a new and exciting naval museum that will be a source of knowledge of Canadian naval history for generations to come.

As the Department of National Defence assumed control of the museum in 2008, the NMAS became a supporting body to the NMA. The society owns most of the artefacts in the NMA but ceased to have a role as a museum operator. Instead, NMAS provides volunteers, funding, and a workshop to the NMA.