CHAPTER 16

CANADIAN NAVAL HISTORY PRESERVED – The Founders

Chapter Fifteen outlined the founding and growth of the Naval Museum of Alberta and the three key players in that evolution, Laraine Orthlieb, Frank Saies-Jones and Bill Wilson. This chapter aims to provide some highlights of the lives of these three players.

Commodore Laraine Orthlieb CMM, CD.

Laraine Orthlieb was born and educated in Saint John N.B. She was an R.N. nursing instructor and worked in various hospitals in New Brunswick and Alberta. She enrolled in the Naval Reserve at HMCS *Brunswicker* as a Sub-Lieutenant in 1959. In 1960, she moved to Edmonton and transferred to HMCS *Nonsuch*.

In 1974, she moved to Calgary and joined HMCS *Tecumseh.* On promotion to Lieutenant-Commander in 1977, she attended the Senior Officer's Study Course at Royal Roads Military College. As a Naval Control of Shipping officer, she worked on naval exercises in Norfolk, Seattle Montreal and Halifax. She was appointed Aide de Camp to the Lieutenant Governor of Alberta in 1980 and in 1983 as Aide de Camp to the Governor General of Canada.

She was promoted to Commander in 1980 and appointed Executive Officer. All the while, she was balancing a civilian career that had evolved into her being a real estate developer and Vice-President of Orthlieb Associates Ltd., an international management consulting company.

She was appointed the first female Commanding Officer of HMCS *Tecumseh* in 1983. She attended the Naval Reserve Officer's Course at the NATO Defence College in Rome in 1984 and was promoted to Captain (N) in 1985.

September 28, 1985 marked the official sod turning for the new HMCS *Tecumseh* building. In that same year HMCS *Tecumseh* was named the “Best Naval Reserve Division in Canada”, this despite the tumult of the previous four years resulting from the devastating 1981 fire. The new HMCS *Tecumseh* building was officially commissioned on March 1, 1987. Laraine was attended the National Defence College of Canada from 1987 to 1988.

In 1988, she was assigned to NDHQ Chief of Reserves and Cadets as Senior Staff Officer (Sea). In 1989, she was promoted to the rank of Commodore and was appointed the Senior Naval Reserve Advisor to the Commander of Maritime Command. She was the first female flag officer in the Canadian Navy.

She was elected President of the Maritime Defence Association of Canada in 1987 and received the Woman of Distinction Award Y.W.C.A. Calgary, for Business, Labour and Professions in 1988. She has been the proud sponsor of HMCS *Regina* since 1991 and she was made a member of the Women's Hall of Fame, New Brunswick Branch of the United Nations Association of Canada in 1993. She retired from active service in 1993. She was employed as a management consultant in Santa Cruz and La Paz Bolivia by Petro Canada from 1994 to 1998.

In summary, the young lady who began her career as an unassuming nurse in the Naval Reserve rose to meet the challenges presented to her at every turn of her career. Reaching more senior rank in what was once thought of as a man’s career, she demonstrated her natural leadership abilities and resolutely faced the extreme challenges of the *Tecumseh* fire and the renewal and preservation of her “Ship”. Her enthusiasm and ‘can do’ attitude was emulated by the ship’s company turning a disaster into an exciting future for HMCS *Tecumseh*. Her recognition of the need to preserve elements of naval history motivated her to mobilize the naval community to participate in the clean-up after the fire. Inspired to don gumboots and sift through ashes, HMCS *Tecumseh* Ship's Company and the naval community joined forces to restore HMCS *Tecumseh* to its intended role and form the beginnings of the Naval Museum of Alberta.

Now retired, Laraine Orthlieb looks back with pride on the events that occurred during her lengthy tour of duty in HMCS *Tecumseh*. She is quick to reflect on a long list of those who worked so hard under her command. Her Executive Officer, Cdr Greg McKenzie, said that he had always admired her leadership abilities and that she appreciated straight talk and had little time for circumvention of issues.

In his words, “To me, the mobilization of the naval community was an essential morale builder. It turned people from despair to action after the 1981 fire. She picked up the fact that there were concrete things that could be done immediately. The gathering and housing of artifacts and canvassing the community for replacement items lost were all imperative to the maintenance of pride and the traditions of the RCN. I believe that Laraine is a natural leader who instinctively reacted to a very serious situation and led by example with energy. Her enthusiasm, determination and leadership were very heartening and inspiring to those of us who served under her command”.

Lieutenant Commander Frank Saies-Jones, CD

The establishment of The Tecumseh Historical Society by Laraine Orthlieb marked the beginning of an institution that has become one of the best of its kind among scholars and general interest students of military history. As one of her major contributions to the naval community prior to her retirement as Commanding Officer, she sought to recruit LCdr Frank Saies-Jones, who at the time was Commanding Officer RCSCC *Undaunted*, a Calgary sea cadet organization

Responding immediately to her request, Frank replied enthusiastically that he was ‘ready aye ready’ to take on any role assigned to him. His knowledge of naval matters was based on his vast experience in both the RN and the RCN in both peace and at war. In his book “Joining the Grey Funnel Line”, Frank provides a unique history of many of the naval battles of WW II. The following biography provides a sketch of the Saies-Jones story in encapsulated form.

Frank was born in Jamaica, British West Indies. He was the eldest son of Donald Saies-Jones, a Canadian merchant marine officer employed by Canadian National Steamships and his wife Edith, a British nurse, daughter of Methodist missionaries living on the island.

He attended school in Kingston, at which time his parents agreed to his enrolment as a cadet in the naval training ship, HMS *Conway*, located in Liverpool, England. The outbreak of war in 1939 called for these plans to be changed and in 1940 he travelled in his father’s ship to Vancouver, British Columbia, where he attempted to join the Royal Canadian Navy. Due to his age, he was unable to enlist in the RCN, and on his return to Jamaica in January 1941, he persuaded his parents to allow him to follow the original plan to enter the Royal Navy through HMS *Conway*.

Leaving home in March 1941, Frank took a passage to Bermuda in the CN liner, Lady Rodney, expecting to transfer to another vessel in Hamilton for onward passage to England. On his arrival in Bermuda, he learned that all convoys across the Atlantic were being formed in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and sought help from the naval authorities in Bermuda for a passage to Halifax. His request being granted by the Commander-in-Chief, West Indies, he travelled to Halifax in HMS *Buxton*, a former American destroyer loaned to the RN. On arrival in that port was able to enlist in the Canadian Navy at HMCS *Stadacona,* claiming to be 17 years of age. When his true age was discovered in a matter of days, he prevailed on the authorities to transfer him to the Royal Navy, and in due course was drafted to the armed merchant cruiser HMS *Rajputana*, which sailed from Halifax on March 22, 1941, as the sole surface escort for Convoy HX-117 comprised of 40 ships bound for Britain.

On meeting escorts based in the UK, *Rajputana* sailed independently to Iceland, where it was expected that Frank would be transferred to another vessel for passage to England. Before this could be arranged, however, she was dispatched to intercept a German raider reportedly attempting to break out into the Atlantic through the Denmark Strait. Three days later *Rajputana* was torpedoed and sunk by the German U-Boat, U-108 and, on being picked up by the destroyer HMS *Legion*, Frank finally landed in Iceland.

Sailing from Iceland in the rescue ship, SS *Copeland*, Frank arrived in Greenock Scotland on April 18, 1941, where he was enlisted into the Royal Navy as a Boy Seaman, once more having claimed to be 17 years of age. On being rated an Ordinary Seaman the following year, he saw service in the Mediterranean in the destroyer HMS *Kelvin* in 1942, following which he returned to the UK for training in anti-submarine warfare.

He was later posted to the Anti-Submarine School in Bermuda as an instructor for the next nine months and, on his return to England in 1944, joined the Submarine Branch of the Royal Navy in which he served until his transfer to the Royal Fleet Reserve and return to Canada in April 1949. During his nine years in the navy, Frank served in the Mediterranean and in South African, Indian, Australian, US, and Canadian waters.

After leaving the navy, he settled in Toronto, and at the outbreak of the Korean War enlisted in the Royal Canadian Regiment. On being injured in Fort Lewis, Washington, prior to sailing for Korea, Frank received a medical discharge from the army and spent the following five years living in the USA. Returning to Toronto in 1957, he joined the Toronto Scottish Regiment (Canadian Militia) in 1958, later moving to Calgary in 1959 and transferring to the Calgary Highlanders.

While serving as a Warrant Officer III with the Calgary Highlanders in 1969, Frank was commissioned as a Sub-Lieutenant in the Canadian Forces Reserve (CIL) and joined the Royal Canadian Sea Cadet Corps based at HMCS *Tecumseh*, Calgary.

The Tecumseh Historical Society was formed in late 1984 and Frank became one of its first directors. During one of the early meetings of the Society, the discussion turned to how the interior of the new building housing the aircraft should be decorated. Following lengthy discussion, Frank suggested that other artifacts could be added. This suggestion was accepted by all board members and because of this meeting the museum broadened its mandate.

Following his retirement from naval service on August 21, 1985, in the rank of Lieutenant Commander, Frank began his search for artifacts that would contribute to the story of the Royal Canadian Navy in a new museum that was designed around the three vintage naval aircraft. In 1988, Saies-Jones was appointed President of the Tecumseh Historical Society and began to direct the continued growth of the Naval Museum of Alberta, a post he held until 2001.

Captain (N) W.H. Wilson OMM, CStJ, CD

Another of the important central figures in the early NMAS story and who dedicated his energies full time to the development of the Naval Museum of Alberta was Capt(N) Bill Wilson. Bill Wilson had a 37-year career with the Canadian Naval Reserve. At the age of 18, Bill Wilson joined the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve in 1942 for the duration of the Second World War. For three years he served as a seaman gunner in destroyers and minesweepers in the North Atlantic, English Channel and Bay of Biscay. At the end of the War he continued in the Naval Reserve in HMCS *Chippawa* (Winnipeg), HMCS *Donnacona* (Montreal) and HMCS *York* (Toronto) where he was commanding officer.

After leaving the wartime Navy, Mr. Wilson joined Canadian Pacific Railroad in 1947 and was employed at the Winnipeg Head Office. He transferred to the Corporate Research Department in 1954 and served in a variety of transportation research positions in Winnipeg and Toronto. In 1968, he was appointed Director of Industrial Engineering, System Headquarters, in Montreal and then as Director Operations, CP Transport in 1973. Subsequently, he was seconded to the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline project in Calgary as Director of Transport in 1976 and then to Foothills Alaska Highway Gas Pipeline Project in 1978. He returned to CP Rail in 1982 as Special Assistant to the Vice-President Engineering, Rogers Pass Tunnel Project. He retired from Canadian Pacific in 1984 to join the organizing committee of the XV Olympic Winter Games as Manager of Transportation. Following the Games, he became President of Transnova Transportation Consultants.

Bill Wilson maintained close ties over the years with HMCS *Tecumseh*, various naval organizations and as an early chairman of the Tecumseh Historical Society. He was a member of the National Advisory Committee to HMCS *Haida* and a Trustee of HMCS *Sackville*. Bill is a member of the regimental associations that together represent The Museum of the Regiments. He was appointed from 1993 to 2014 as an Honorary Captain (N) RCN SUBRON1, MOG4 (Minesweepers, Fleet Diving Unit, Maritime Forces Pacific).

An enthusiastic supporter of the establishment of a naval museum in Calgary, Bill Wilson joined forces with Laraine Orthlieb in her drive to resurrect the old Stone Frigate from her fiery grave. He brought another strong voice to the lobbying strategy.

“Captain Bill”, as he is known in the local community, also became renowned throughout naval circles as the “Rabbiter”. At this point it is useful to note a colourful saying relating to naval history. The word rabbit has in the past been frequently used as another word for a gift or something that has been ‘acquired’, which is a euphemism for the illegal, or barely legal, process of obtaining a naval stores item that is in short supply.

The word originated in the naval dockyard at Chatham UK where a small island inside the harbour area was over-run with rabbits. These were often taken home by sailors as a welcome (and free) source of fresh meat.

In his book, Sea Slang of the Twentieth Century, Wilfred Granville describes a rabbit as “illicit goods, smuggled ashore by naval ratings proceeding on leave”. At one time men were allowed to take food with them such as pieces of prime meat and rabbits which, with their insides removed, made excellent hold-alls for pouches of duty-free tobacco or flasks of the naval rum issue which had been saved over a period of time. Thus, a “rabbiter” is one who makes a habit of smuggling rabbits ashore.

Capt(N) Bill, in his adopted role as ‘Rabbiter”, began his quest across Canada, North America and the Commonwealth, to let it be known that a naval museum on the prairie was underway and all contributions would be gratefully received. Artifact donations began with a trickle gradually building to a crescendo where finally, five years after its construction, the Naval Museum of Alberta added an extension to the existing building. This provided an additional and much needed 15,000 square feet of floor space in which to display the now constant flow of donated artifacts. The “Rabbiter’s” persistent campaign for valuable artifacts from the beginning complimented the growing NMA collection that has expanded well beyond all expectations of the early organizers. These contributions were turned over to The Tecumseh Historical Society and now form part of an extraordinary collection under the ownership of the Naval Museum of Alberta Society.

Throughout the period beginning with the Tecumseh Historical Society, through the fund raising and construction of a new building that began its life as cover for naval aircraft and evolved into a museum of major proportions, and finally into the folds of Calgary’s Military Museums, Capt(N) Bill has made a major contribution throughout the life of the Naval Museum of Alberta. He also served on the Sharing Our Military Heritage Campaign that raised over $26 million for construction of the new Military Museums facility. He later served on the Board of Directors of the Calgary Military Museums Society

It is Laraine Orthlieb, Frank Saies-Jones and Bill Wilson to whom the Naval Museum of Alberta owes its fundamental beginnings. Today, the unique affiliation between the Naval Museum of Alberta and the University of Calgary, Faculty of Military Studies has combined to provide the most comprehensive history of the Royal Canadian Navy. The intense activity by so many willing people over the years has marked the evolution of what the Naval Museum of Alberta has become today, the largest naval museum in Canada. It will be preserved for generations to come.