

One Seaman's Life Aboard the RCN Frigate "HMCS Kirkland Lake"

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After enlistment in the RCNVR as an Ordinary Seaman, Montreal-born Steve Wheeler of Toronto, took his basic training in that city at HMCS York. His advanced Seamanship training took place at HMCS Cornwallis at Digby Nova Scotia, and his Specialist training at HMCS Stadacona at Halifax.

By mid-August 1944 he was drafted to HMCS Chaleur II, the Manning Depot in Quebec City, where he was ordered to board HMCS Kirkland Lake, moored at the jetty. Unfortunately, his hammock and his seabag, containing all his personal gear hadn't arrived with him on the train and he went aboard the ship without them.



Steve Wheeler
on
His 60th Birthday



"Imagine going aboard a new vessel, all freshly painted and prepared for commissioning in a few days, and all you had were the clothes you're dressed in," he stated in an interview decades later.

The Coxswain on board told him to go below and stay out of view of any officers until his gear arrived. "I can tell you, at that point, without a friend around, I felt very much alone," recalls Wheeler, who was 18-years-old at the time.

Finally his gear did catch up with him, and he was able to present himself in time for the distinguished guests coming aboard, from the town of Kirkland Lake, who came to Quebec City for the commissioning.

The group included Reeve Anne Shipley, who Wheeler described as a lady along the lines of the 52-year-old movie star Mae West." According to him, she made quite a hit with the officers and seamen with her large hat. She especially made her presence known in the seamen's messdeck by playing poker with the men and even beating some of them.

Other attending dignitaries were Temiskaming Member of Parliament Mr. Walter Little and Mrs. Little, Mrs. W. Rumball, Mrs. Robert Armstrong, Mrs. William Brennan, and Mrs. Jesse MacDonald.

The townspeople were very generous to the HMCS crew, providing them with town souvenir crests to sew on their jackets and a record player along with hit records of the period. A good time was had by all.

This 301.5 foot ship was originally launched as the 'St. Jerome' on 27 April 1944, but was recommissioned in Quebec City as 'HMCS Kirkland Lake' on 21 August 1944 and placed under the command of Lieutenant J. A. Tollis, RCNR. Her pendant number was K337.

Twenty-nine other similar River class frigates were also commissioned during the war and all carried the names of Canadian towns and cities. For example, one named "North Battleford" had a Kirkland Lake connection due to the fact that a sailor named Joe Mavrinac served on her. Joe became the town's mayor from 1980 to 1997, and was so notable that our local recreation centre was named in his honour.

The frigates were commissioned into the RCN to bolster the defences of the sea lanes in the north Atlantic and the Mediterranean Sea. All these River class frigates were durable, quick, inexpensive and anti-submarine capable.

The frigate selected as "Kirkland Lake" was in recognition of the town's contribution to the war effort. Although the town had only a population of 21,500, by the spring of 1941, it had contributed 1600 men to the services. Also, the local gold mines and their qualified engineers, machinists and mechanics were put to work to make steering engines and valves for the ships of the RCN and the U.S. Navy. At home, Kirkland Lake women knitted socks, sewed clothing and sent off parcels to men overseas. Many Victory bonds were purchased locally. The Kirkland Lake miners' strike during the winter of 1941-42 caused many families to move away from town and relocate in industrial areas of southern Ontario. These centres manufactured munitions and equipment for the war effort and hired former hard-working miners and their wives to work in their industries. Other experienced miners left to get jobs in the nickel mines of Sudbury. Nickel was a well-needed commodity during the war as the metal was used in the manufacture of hard and durable alloys. Other unique, local activities earned money for the men at war. For example, in 1940 a 'Stamp Out Hitler Night' was organized at the four local theatres. Packed houses hosted speakers and entertainment. Interestingly, over at the Strand Theatre, a large portrait of Hitler was placed on the stage and spectators paid for the privilege of placing sticky stamps on the Fuhrer's face, one at a time. The performance was concluded when Roza Brown, a renowned local personality, paid a large sum to be allowed on stage to perform the last indignity - to give a kick or two to the now irreverently masked portrait, much to the resounding cheers of the audience. But the performance didn't end there. Before walking off stage, she coughed up a lump and spat on the face of the now much damaged portrait that was lying on the floor. When a total tally was made at the four theatres, it was realized that about \$4000 had been collected that evening.

Following the commissioning of the HMCS Kirkland Lake, RCN routines were back in force on board; and it was time for the crew to practice at their watch stations, working with fellow crew members and officers. It wasn't long before they were on their way down the St. Lawrence River, sailing towards the

east coast. The dark grey coloured ship arrived at Halifax on 10 September 1944.

While there, approximately 200 depth charges were loaded on board, along with a similar number of primers, depth charge pistols, detonators and other miscellaneous gear required for duty at sea. Also, the crew had been busy bringing aboard live ammo for the forward guns and other required weapons. Of course, the ship needed food, water, and fuel plus a few more crew members to bring it up to its full complement of about 140 men.

The men were informed their next port of call would be Bermuda, but not for a holiday, of course. A special training would take place called "workups" whereby everyone from the captain down to the lowliest crew member would be tested in various ways to determine the seaworthiness of ship and crew.

"It seemed we wouldn't ever get there," states Wheeler. "Twice, the ship had to turn back to Halifax for repairs. Our condenser broke down, meaning no fresh water for the boilers. We began to get a reputation around the Halifax dockyards. There were comments bandied about such as 'the Navy's newest garbage boat' and 'fancy harbour craft.' Finally, on the 20th of November, 1944, after leaving port for the third time, the ship headed for Bermuda, incident-free. There, the scheduled 'workups' and training were completed satisfactorily.

In December, the frigate was assigned to meet up with a group of corvettes and mine sweepers escorting merchant ships from Boston and Halifax to St. John's, Newfoundland and then out to sea to make the cold Atlantic crossing with other ships. As the escort group of three, including HMCS Kirkland Lake, HMCS Clayoquot and HMCS Transcona, were heading in to meet the ships coming out of Halifax early morning on Christmas Eve, the minesweeper Clayoquot, had its stern blown off by an acoustic torpedo launched from a German U-boat. The vessel sank stern first in a matter of minutes. Eight members of the crew were lost, including a chap with whom Wheeler had gone through torpedo training.

This incident brought the teen-aged Wheeler to the realization that war was serious business, and gave him an appreciation of the value of his recent, rigid training. "When the action stations sound, you're too busy to think of being scared," he relates. "That was a Christmas I've never forgotten."

While one of the other escorts went to work rescuing survivors floating in the water or on life rafts, the HMCS Kirkland Lake went after the submarine. The ship's skipper was determined to do whatever it would take to even the score. The crew was closed up to action stations until late afternoon, before changing over to port and starboard watches, whereby each crew member spent four hours at his station and another four hours, resting or performing other duties. Of course the Asdic team was working steady, so every time a contact was made the action bells would sound and the whole crew would return to action stations. There wasn't much rest for anyone. This routine, punctuated with depth charge or hedgehog attacks when a good Asdic contact was made, carried on all Christmas Eve, Christmas Day

and on into late afternoon of Boxing Day. The ship then broke off the search and returned to Halifax to take on more depth charges and hedgehog bombs. That night, after loading up, the crew finally had a chance to get a deserved rest. On the quarterdeck, the crew had never been given information concerning the status of the sub, but during those few days some crew had noticed the ship churning through oil-covered water, containing three visible floating human bodies.

Later, the HMCS Kirkland Lake was assigned with four other frigates, and their accumulative duty was mid-ocean escorts for merchant convoys. "One of our first jobs was to provide an escort for the beautiful 'Ile de France', the pride of France's passenger fleet before the war," says Wheeler. "For wartime service, she had been painted pure white with large red crosses, signifying her as a hospital ship. We met her about 100 miles off Halifax, and swung around very smartly, five ships abreast, to proudly escort this beautiful liner."

While sailing and plying the routine zig-zag course customary during wartime, the senior officer advised the Captain of the Ile de France to do the same. However, it wasn't long before the fast, powerful liner was running right up behind the HMCS Kirkland Lake. The senior officer advised the liner to steer a broader zig-zag course to slow her progress, while the frigates continued to steer straight ahead. She still gained and finally the liner Captain thanked the escorts very much for their help but insisted he had a valuable load of people needing attention. He went on ahead, passing the convoy with a most impressive bow wave. She was soon hull-down on the horizon, leaving the frigates plodding along near their maximum speed of 19 knots. "We didn't feel very helpful that day," recalls Wheeler.

Things did improve in the following weeks. More specific escort work for slower ships was completed and depth charge attacks were frequently carried out. "We made all sorts of loud noises, manned our action stations for hours on end, experienced the cold, wet North Atlantic in winter. Often hungry, cold and tired, we still did our jobs, all the while developing more and more confidence in the ship, the officers, and ourselves."

On one of the crossings, about 34 days out at sea, the HMCS Kirkland Lake ran out of bread. The galley crew was ordered to bake more. Wheeler states, "the Navy doesn't always check completely the qualifications of all personnel and it soon became evident that our chief cook didn't know how to bake bread. We couldn't eat the loaves so we used them as footballs on the upper deck! Eventually it was discovered that the Yeoman of Signals had been a baker on civvy street and was ordered to assist the chief cook in baking. The bread became edible, and we had fewer football practices."

After delivering her charges to Britain, the HMCS Kirkland Lake would slip up the River Foyle to Londonderry to take on more fuel, and re-arm when necessary. She was based at various times at "Derry" and once at Portsmouth.

As proof of how small the world had appeared to become, Wheeler went ashore one time for a few hours and wandered into a Salvation Army canteen for a snack. There he met a 'Sally Ann' officer whom he'd known back home. The officer asked Wheeler if he'd be around for a bit, as he knew someone who Wheeler might want to meet. The officer returned in a few minutes with an RCAF chap who Wheeler recognized as a ball player teammate back home at a summer resort they both frequented. After speaking with him, Wheeler learned his buddy was an RCAF navigator in a flying boat based in Northern Ireland. He was a part of a squadron flying out over the western approaches as air cover for incoming convoys. Those planes were always a welcome sight to the crews of ships as they neared Ireland. The planes always had the knack of keeping U-boats clear of those waters.

"One time we were sent to Loch Alsh on the west coast of Scotland, where we underwent more 'workups' similar to those in Bermuda, but these were more arduous as they were under Royal Navy discipline. However, as expected, the experienced crew fared well on the tests. The location was beautiful; and one afternoon, after a passing rain shower, some of us were fortunate enough to see a full Scottish rainbow...only in Scotland, you say."

Later, the ship was assigned to 'Striking Force', meaning no more slow, tedious convoy work. "We were now to go out into the Atlantic at speed to hunt and kill U-boats wherever they were detected."

Other missions entailed trips to Gibraltar, escorting troop carriers back to Britain, bringing Army personnel returning from Italy, Malta and Egypt.

In 1945, the ship escorted two convoys to Gibraltar and two back. On the last trip, the ship was in the middle of the Bay of Biscay on 8 May 1945, 'Victory in Europe' day. All lookouts were ordered to be on watch for surfacing and surrendering U-boats. None were spotted by the HMCS Kirkland Lake until Gibraltar, where a number of them were tied up at dockside. "We had a chance to go ashore and view prisoners kept in some very nice open spaces, soaking up the sun and fresh air. The Italians seemed to be pleased, but the Germans seemed to be unhappy," said Wheeler.

Leaving Gibraltar for the last time, the ship returned to Londonderry, then on to Greenock for a boiler clean, which meant a few day's leave for most of the ship's company. This gave the men the opportunity to visit relatives or go to places they'd only read about.

Eventually, after one more trip back to Derry, the ship returned to Halifax, where a number of crew were drafted off, some for discharge. Many had been in the service since hostilities broke out. The rest of the crew, mainly those who had volunteered for the Pacific campaign, stayed aboard and sailed to Quebec City in June 1945. There, HMCS Kirkland Lake was dry-docked to be worked on for tropicalization refit

for service in the Pacific. Most of the remaining crew was then placed on Pacific leave.

Of course, following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Japanese surrendered and it was obvious the ship wouldn't be going to the Pacific; therefore, the crew was called back from leave to sail the ship to Halifax in early November. Once there, they were told the HMCS Kirkland Lake, along with most of the other vessels, would be taken out of service. The crew set to dismantling all armaments and anything of a portable nature; the rest was painted or greased to prevent rusting. By December, Wheeler was one of three or four ratings left to complete the 'mothballing' of what he considered a wonderful, useful ship which didn't deserve such ill treatment. She was paid off on 14 December 1945, to maintenance reserve in Bedford Basin and sadly broken up for scrap at Sydney, Nova Scotia in 1947-48.

The men who sailed the HMCS Kirkland Lake always felt they and the ship had done an honourable job. The ship had honoured her namesake and her country and for this, the people of Kirkland Lake are thankful and proud.

Only a few months before the Town of Kirkland Lake celebrated its 60th anniversary in 1979, the ship's bell was brought to its rightful home and placed at the local Legion where it is presently located in an honourable setting.

A four-foot-long model of the ship built by Joseph Miseferi will be placed with the bell, hopefully during the summer of 2006. A celebration to commemorate this occasion will be held at that time to once again honour the union of the ship, its bell, and some of her crew, after a wait of 62 years.

Additional Notes:

Some of the men who served on board the HMCS Kirkland Lake:

Able Seaman Asdic "Abe Abramson" - Alberta.

Lieutenant "John Black Aird" Signals Officer, (b. Toronto, 1923) who was later to become Lieutenant Governor of Ontario 1980-85.

Petty Officer Engine Room Artificer "Balash"

Able Seaman "Blenkensop" ? Montreal, Quebec.

Petty Officer Electric Artificer 4th Class "Ray Brandow" - Stoney Creek, Ontario.

Able Seaman Torpedoman "Tommy Burnside" ? Madoc, Ontario.

Petty Officer Submarine Detection "Donald Cameron" - He was on board from commissioning to decommissioning.

Leading Seaman "Joe Carisse" - Halifax

Lieutenant Commander "Norman Vincent Clark" Order of the British Empire, B.E., R.D., RCNR

Commanding officer of HMCS Kirkland Lake from 14 November 1944 to 2 September 1945. This Officer had been in command of HMCS Ships almost continually from the commencement of hostilities and had displayed great devotion to duty. By his exemplary conduct, he had set an example to others and contributed to the efficiency of those under his command.

Petty Officer Gunnery "Clarke"

Petty Officer Engine Room Artificer "Corbeil"

Able Seaman "Ron Davidge" ? British Columbia.

Lieutenant "G.O. Dickinson" Paymaster, of Kirkland Lake, who was very proud of a cousin named Jean Dickinson, a much admired singing star at the Metropolitan Opera.

Able Seaman Asdic "Wayne Doxsee" V79113 (b. 1925) A long-time resident of Kirkland Lake, Ontario. He was in his late teens when he served in the Navy. He was posted to the HMCS Kirkland Lake for service in the the south seas. For weeks he worked with crew mates preparing the ship for the south. Among the duties were to paint the ship lighter colours and renovate the awnings for a tropical climate. Doxsee had served on many ships during the war, cruising on escorts on the Atlantic and waters surrounding Europe. After two years service, he volunteered to serve in the war against Japan and was posted on the HMCS Kirkland Lake. However, the war ended before the ship left port and was paid off into reserve at Halifax on 14 December 1945.

Leading Seaman "Colin Drew"

Chief Engine Room Artificer "Elston"

Chief Engine Room Artificer "Falkenham"

Seaman Petty Officer "Fitzhugh" - His job was Buffer aboard the ship. This meant he was responsible for the cleanliness and tidiness of the upper deck, gangways and passageways of the ship at all times. You can imagine, when the alarm sounds and a bunch of guys who were previously sleeping, working, or eating and are suddenly called to action stations, they had to move quickly in all directions. The passageways couldn't have hoses all over the place, nor garbage cans, brooms and mops scattered about. Therefore, that was one of the Buffer's main functions, to ensure that those areas are clean and clear at all times. The young sailors thought the the buffer was a royal pain, but since those days have realized more about housekeeping and can now appreciate the job he did.

Leading Seaman "Edward Foster" - Ottawa, Ontario.

Sub Lieutenant "Giles" Assistant Torpedo Officer

Able Seaman Torpedoman "Gougeon" - Quebec.

Stoker Verne Goyer - Brockville

Yeoman of Signals "Grantham"

Lieutenant "Grayson" Assistant Engineering Officer

Lieutenant "Hartie" Executive Officer

Leading Cook "Robert (Bob) Harper" - Vancouver, British Columbia.

Able Seaman "Henri Labadie" - Quebec City.

Able Seaman "J.J. Lamont" ? Port Arthur, Ontario.

Petty Officer Engine Room Artificer "Larsen"

Able Seaman Torpedoman "Don Lawson" - Toronto, Ontario.

Able Seaman Asdic "John Lenz" - Steven, Saskatchewan.

Petty Officer "Radar Lewis"

Able Seaman "Lawrence MacDonald" - Cornwall, Ontario.

Able Seaman Asdic "William (Mac) Mackenzie" - Calgary, Alberta. Injured when standing on a bridge wing lookout while on night maneuvers at Bermuda. A wayward signal rocket shot across the bridge and caught him on the side of the head. He lost part of his ear, went for some surgery and took sick leave. Only returned to the HMCS Kirkland Lake for a short while and was transferred to shore duty.

Able Seaman (Quartermaster) "Mac McIntyre" ? Prince Edward Island.

Lieutenant "McCain" gunnery Officer

Chief Shipwright "McLeod"

Able Seaman Asdic "M.D. McMyn" - Pitt Meadows, British Columbia

Petty Officer Torpedoman "Rae McQueen"

Sub Lieutenant "Mair" Assistant Signals Officer

Coxswain "Marshall"

Petty Officer Stoker "Marshall"

Electrical Artificer 4th Class "Mayer"

Stoker "William (Bill) Ocean" - Hamilton, Ontario

"Robert Overton" - In HMCS Kirkland Lake from 1943 to 1945.

Lieutenant "J.K. Rhymes" Torpedo Officer

Able Seaman Asdic "Tommy Rich" - Swansea, Ontario.

Sub Lieutenant "D. F. Robertson" Assistant Gunnery Officer

Lieutenant "Rowe" Engineering Officer

Chief Stoker Petty Officer "Robert Semple" - Athol Ville, New Brunswick.

Chief Petty Officer Semple, while serving in HMCS Kirkland Lake, performed invaluable service in connection with the organization of the Stoker ratings in his charge. He, at all times, set an inspiring example to his subordinates.