

From the Toronto Star by George Gamster
www.thestar.com
Feb. 15, 2004

Requiem for a gallant fighter

Fingers. Think of them as fingers, touching lives. Reaching out from the twisted remains of an ill-fated Canadian ship resting on the ocean floor. Still beckoning survivors like Norm, Ted and Don. Still gripping victims like Len, Abe and Jim. And still tempting the young ones, who cannot resist the seductive call of the sea ...

Was that what drew Don German from his Niagara Falls home to Hamilton in the winter of 1942 to sign on with the Royal Canadian Navy?

There was a war on, you see, and Don didn't want to miss it. So the navy was happy to oblige, dispatching the 17-year-old to be a stoker on one of the best ships we had: HMCS Skeena.

Yes, the Skeena was special. Along with her sister ship, HMCS Saguenay, she was known as the Rolls-Royce of destroyers.

And, like a Rolls, she was sleek and swift, perfect for escorting convoys of food-and-arms-laden merchant ships on the deadly "Newfie-Derry" run from St. John's to Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

She was a happy ship, with a gung-ho all-Canadian crew sprinkled with a few Brits in the officer ranks. Mischief-makers they were, delighting in pelting the crew of rival destroyers such as HMCS Qu'Appelle with salvos of potatoes when they pulled alongside.

You can bet the boys had a few laughs over those "potato wars" when their daily tot of Demerara rum was issued. Of course Don, being under 21, was not allowed the two-ounce pick-me-up, always mixed with water for the lower ranks.

Why?

"To prevent the men from hoarding their tots," Don recalls. "After a few hours, the water would spoil the rum. Mind you, the petty officers were served their tot neat. You can bet they hoarded it for the next party."

Not that it was all fun-and-games. Mostly, it was life-and-death, with wolf packs of U-boats sending many Allied convoy ships and crews to the bottom.

But Skeena paid them back, particularly on July 31, 1942, when she and the corvette Wetaskiwin located, pursued, and depth-charged a German sub in a perfectly executed attack some 700 miles east of Newfoundland.

BOOM! Kapitan Viktor Vogel of the U-588, who'd bagged seven allied merchantmen, was destroyed along with his entire 45-man crew.

Many times, the crew of the Skeena flirted with death.

Like the time they boldly steamed with the Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan and Retigouche right into the heavily fortified harbour at Brest in Normandy to attack the Kriegsmarine U-boat base, blazing away with their deck guns against mighty shore batteries and larger, heavier-armed German ships.

And the closest call of all: The day, while protecting the Normandy invasion force in the Channel, that Skeena becomes the target of a German torpedo headed for her broadside.

Alerted by a lookout, skipper Pat Russell urgently orders "hard a-port!" The helmsman responds instantly, spinning the ship 45 degrees to face the missile head-on.

Don German, on duty in the boiler room below the waterline, recalls what happens next:

"We heard that thing go buzzing by, right down the whole length of the ship. Sounded exactly like my mom's sewing machine back home."

Whew! So close. And Skeena would evade seven more torpedoes over the next two days. How long could the charm hold?

Not long. On Oct. 24, 1944, Skeena and four other Canadian warships on anti-submarine patrol are caught in a violent storm. Ordered to seek shelter, they make for the harbour at Reykjavik, Iceland.

There, they anchor for the night near a desolate island. But the Icelandic seabed is mostly volcanic ash. When a violent squall hits the ship, the anchor heaves free of the powdery bottom, leaving the ship adrift in the vicious wind.

Lurching backward in a hailstorm, the ship crashes stern-first onto offshore rocks before being hurled violently against a jagged reef. Its bottom ripped, the Skeena spews oil into the pounding surf and begins to die.

Scrambling up to decks awash with oil, the crew is assailed by the confusing sounds of sirens, steam, crashing waves and wind in the darkness.

Suddenly, the word is passed: "Abandon ship!"

Many are reluctant to do so, preferring the steel decks to the roiling waters. Still, some are lowered over the side in oval-shaped rubber rafts called Carley Floats.

It's a disaster. Many are flipped immediately into the frigid water. Others are smashed against the side of the ship or washed out to sea. Some drown. Some freeze. Others perish on the rocks. Fortunately, the order is soon rescinded. Most of the 218-member ship's company remain on board through the long night as rescue craft try unsuccessfully to reach the stricken

vessel.

Finally, after a gruelling trek across the island led by an enterprising Icelandic seaman named Einar Sigurdsson, a rescue party manages to get a lifeline to Skeena and the survivors are hauled ashore.

Three days later, in the largest military funeral in Icelandic history, 15 crew members are buried at Fossvogur cemetery. Among them is a well-liked 21-year-old named Abe Unger from Winnipeg, whose brother Isaac would later write an authoritative book titled Skeena Aground.

Now, as the 60th anniversary of Skeena's sad end approaches, does anyone really care? Or even remember?

Hey, you'd be surprised. For the memory of this hard luck ship, named after a salmon-spawning river in British Columbia, is still revered just down the road ? in Port Hope.

You see, back in 1941, they started a Sea Cadet Corps there called "Skeena." And, thanks principally to a former Royal Canadian Navy skipper named Tony German (who happens to be Don's cousin) and a hard-working former lakeboat engineer named Chris Barker, they've built a real shrine there to her memory.

Having raised \$120,000 to refurbish the cadets' 149-year-old Navy League building on Mill St. in 2000, Tony, his friend Ian Tate and others also dedicated a handsome bronze memorial plaque inscribed with the names of the 15 victims of the Skeena disaster.

That plaque, along with the annual memorial service and parade staged by the Port Hope cadets, has become an emotional touchstone in the lives of Skeena survivors.

Proud men like Ted Maidman of Oshawa, a retired GM autoworker who was just minutes from being dropped into the deadly waters before the ill-advised "abandon ship" order was withdrawn.

When he came home in 1945, he had to tell the parents of Len Watson, his buddy from Oshawa Collegiate, how their son had died in a tragedy long soft-pedalled by navy and government.

Skilled men such as Ted's friend Norm Perkins of Toronto, a retired Loblaws employee who laboured as a stoker with Don and built a perfect 100-centimetre scale model of the Skeena now proudly displayed at the Navy League building.

Compassionate men such as Ed Parsons of Welland who lost his friend Jim Silk of Windsor in the wreck and still pays regular visits with his wife to the widow of Ed Hurley, another Skeena crewman from Brantford.

Like many of his shipmates, Ed has donated Skeena artifacts to that Port Hope memorial. But

there's one war memento he held back: His lucky rabbit's foot that carried him through 32 convoy missions.

"No, I passed that on to my grandson, Glen, in the Signal Corps with our Canadian boys in Afghanistan."

Come October, Ed, Norm, Ted and a number of others will be heading overseas themselves. For the 60th anniversary of the Skeena's demise, they're joining a small contingent of cadets in Iceland to pay their respects to the victims and revisit the place where their beloved ship came to such an ignominious end.

Or did it?

There's no trace of Skeena in Iceland now.

You see, after the war, the hulk had been acquired by a salvage firm planning to recycle it into razor blades and tin cans.

But while being towed toward Scotland on a barge, Skeena's tow rope broke in a storm, sending her to the bottom of the North Atlantic.

"We all feel good about that," smiles Ted Maidman. "Because that's where she belongs."

In an honourable grave, at the bottom of the sea.

Still reaching out with long fingers of memory.

Still touching lives.