

Wartime Co-operative Shipbuilding

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The frequent mention of Algerine crews coming to Canada to pick up their RN ships is worth a bit closer look.

Of the 98 wartime Algerines that were HMS, both turbine-engined (29, all British-built) and the steam triple expansion reciprocating; only 19 of the latter were built in British yards. All the rest of the 50 were built in three Canadian yards, all on the Great Lakes. It was an example of excellent cooperation between the two navies, or at least their governments. But why was this?

In the 1940's, until the late 1950's, there was no St. Lawrence Seaway, with its major canals, and in particular its present 760-foot long locks. Between the upper Great Lakes and Lake Ontario was the seven lock system Welland Canal, and below that, from Lake Ontario down to Montreal, only the considerably smaller locks of the Soulangue and other canals, bypassing rocky rapids of the St. Lawrence. This meant that the Algerines, and dozens of Flower Class corvettes, Fairmiles and minor war vessels were the largest warships that could be built and pass down to the Atlantic. So in order to make use of the considerable shipbuilding facilities on those Great Lakes for warship building, a deal was made. Canada would build eventually 50 Algerines for the RN, in exchange for the British yards building and transferring to the RCN 10 frigates (7 River Class, 3 Loch Class) and 12 Castle Class improved (squid-fitted) corvettes, 22 in all, which ships could not have passed those smaller locks. All these British built vessels were commissioned as HMCS. In fact, only the Castles and a few of the frigates ever even saw Canada, being returned to the RN or disposed of after the war.

Contracted for in December, 1941, the Algerines were built in three yards, Port Arthur Shipbuilding (10) at the very upper reach of Lake Superior, some 2,000 miles from the sea, and 40 in Toronto on Lake Ontario, at Redfern Construction (7) and Toronto Shipbuilding (33). In fact those two firms were really the same outfit, with mid-war amalgamations causing considerable confusion. Toronto Shipbuilding was in fact a Government owned Crown Corporation, set up for the purpose when a local Italian contractor's businesses, including his modest local shipyard, were seized in July, 1940 when Italy went to war against the Allies. When these Italian-Canadians were released after some months, none-the-less the Government only agreed to a partial purchase of Jimmy Franceschini's shipyard and rather flim-flammed him out of its value by financial juggling. The Port Arthur operation was a privately owned long-standing shipbuilding operation, part of a multi-yard shipbuilding empire. Despite this, its Algerines took considerably longer to build than the Toronto ones. By 1942, the three yards, for

efficiency reasons, were concentrating on building only the Algerines, when before they had started with Bangor class minesweepers and a few corvettes. These were later contracted to several other yards around the Great Lakes. A start-up problem delayed initial keel-laying because in the U.K., from where the design plans were sent to Canada, the bows and stern portions of their Algerines were built in different yards, and the plans received not only didn't quite match up, but being very small, on enlargement were also ill-matched and hard to read.

Quite a few of the Algerines were, after launching, fitted out in other yards. Some, such as at Hamilton and Kingston, at the east end of Lake Ontario, simply because there were not enough fitting-out berths at Toronto. Others, such as at St. John New Brunswick and in Nova Scotia when rough-finished ships were sailed down the St. Lawrence before the winter freeze-up to make them available sooner. This latter was a false hope, as the final fitting-out was never completed before those finished during the winter in the Lakes arrived anyway. There were major and on-going problems for a country unfamiliar with major shipbuilding supply and organization demands, shortages of auxiliary machinery and electrics, and inability of the U.K. to supply items like asdic on demand as before due to requirements at home. One major advantage was that the Algerine and Bangor main triple-expansion engines were identical, so demand could be somewhat balanced with construction. The final RN Algerine built was HMS NERISSA from Redfern Construction in Toronto, in August, 1944. Five final Algerines were cancelled in November, as "no longer required."

Those three yards are all long since closed and there is no sign now of that contribution. As far as we know, not even a plaque to commemorate a valuable joint venture that helped win the war. Yet a lot of RN – RNVR and RNR – seamen spent quite some time in Toronto and Port Arthur awaiting completion of 'their' ship on occasion.

The 12 Canadian Algerines, all themselves built in Port Arthur, were used as ocean escorts only, like corvettes and frigates, and were not fitted even for minesweeping like the RN ships. Fraser McKee served in one, HMCS WALLACEBURG who brought in the last wartime west-bound convoy of the war to New York harbour as part of its W-VIII Western Local Escort Group, in mid-May, 1945.