

REMEMBERING HAMILTON'S D-DAY VETERAN ARTIFACTS

Story # 104 by Mountain Heritage Columnist Robert Williamson

Examples of large military machines surviving World War II are rare in Canada, especially those that are veterans of major battles on distant shores such as Normandy. With the Anniversary of D-Day, June 6th 1944, approaching, what better time to take an inventory of our local military heritage. Hamilton appears to have an impressive collection of D-Day artifacts. Recognizing that our D-Day veterans are all but gone, these artifacts will soon be all that is left to remember them by. Each passing year these rare memorials, the last of their kind, become more important. Their story, connecting them to our veterans and our heritage, must be told before they too are lost.

Let's begin with the Douglas C-47 Dakota No. FZ692, a military version of the versatile DC-3 transport aircraft built for the United States Army Air Force. It was used for parachute drops and glider towing. Transferred to the Royal Air Force in 1944, it dropped the 3rd Airborne Brigade, including the 1st Canadian Parachute Battalion on the vital eastern flank of the Canadian amphibious assault at Juno Beach. The entire success of the invasion depended on isolating large enemy formations defending the Pas de Calais to the northeast opposite Dover.

Post-war this C-47 was assigned to Search and Rescue work at Canadian Forces Base, Trenton, then to Environment Canada for Mineral and Environmental Surveys. In May 2014, the aircraft was donated to the Canadian Warplane Heritage in Hamilton and restored to its veteran wartime colors of 437 Squadron RCAF.

Next, we turn to Toronto's bid to host the 1996 Summer Olympics on their Ontario Place waterfront site. The plan did not include HMCS HAIDA, a rusting WW2 memorial warship that had graced Exhibition Park since 1970. This provided a chance for the Federal Heritage Minister, Sheila Copps, to declare the ship a National Historic Site with a new home, abetted by the Commander of Hamilton's Naval Reserve, at HMCS STAR. Declared the "fightingest ship" in the Canadian navy, HMCS HAIDA, on May 26, 2018 was designated "Ceremonial Flagship" of the RCN, the last of Canada's destroyers to serve on D-Day.



Photos courtesy, clockwise: C-47 - Derek. Mickeloff, Haida - Parks Canada, HMS Ramillies - Wikipedia, Ship's Bell - R. Williamson.

During the weeks leading up to D-Day and "Operation Overlord", HAIDA patrolled the French coast of the English Channel participating in 19 missions to suppress enemy activity. On June 8/9, HAIDA engaged a flotilla of four enemy destroyers attempting to sneak into the invasion perimeter in the dark. She sank one destroyer and the rest withdrew. Similarly, on June 24, she sank an enemy submarine U-971 off Land's End. On the night of July 14/15, Haida intercepted an enemy convoy sinking one anti-submarine vessel, a supply ship, two minesweepers and a fast patrol boat. By the end of the war, she had sunk more enemy tonnage than any other Canadian warship.

But Hamilton's D-Day connection does not end there. When moving to my commander's office at HMCS STAR in 1982, I found a very large 180 pound brass ship's bell hidden and almost immovable at the back of my closet. It was inscribed "HMS RAMILLIES 1917". My research established that it belonged to a former British Battleship that had served in World War II protecting Canadian Atlantic convoys and in 1944 was a bombardment ship suppressing enemy defenses on the eastern flank of the Normandy invasion beaches where Canadian paratroopers and soldiers fought on D-Day. Her 15 inch guns helped the Canadians make the deepest penetration of the Normandy beachhead.

When the battleship was scrapped in 1947, the ship's bell, the spiritual heart of one of the largest bombardment ships on D-Day, made its way to Canada as part of a sea cadet exchange program involving local cadets. It was eventually passed on to HMCS STAR for safe keeping. In recognition of the significant role that HMS RAMILLIES played in our naval history, I had the bell mounted and installed in the entrance lobby (Quarterdeck) of Hamilton's Naval Reserve as a reminder of Canada's role in the D-Day Invasion and a 75th Anniversary Memorial to the Canadian Navy in 1985.