

**A Brief History of**

**HMCS FORT WILLIAM J311 / 195**

**Written for the sea cadets of RCSCC FORT WILLIAM**

**by John H. Rickard in 1995**

# HIS MAJESTY'S CANADIAN SHIP

## “FORT WILLIAM”

**H**is Majesty's Canadian Ship FORT WILLIAM was launched, without ceremony, in a shipbuilder's basin at Port Arthur, Ontario, on a cold winter's day, 30 December 1941. Ordinarily, ships are not launched in fresh water in the winter time. But these were not ordinary times. It was just a few weeks after Pearl Harbour that crushing attack that made the Second World War a truly global one.

**T**he war at sea had already raged for two long years and Canada's shipyards were just getting into the swing of production that was to produce a fleet of fighting ships that no one could have foreseen in 1939. So down the ways went the FORT WILLIAM, just a bare hull, but being afloat, her fitting out would go on throughout the winter months.

**L**ate the following summer the scene was quite a different one. Now the ship was quite a different one. Now the ship was a joy to behold. Her engines were fitted. Mast and funnel and bridge were all in place. Her guns and depth-charge equipment were mounted and she looked, as she was, spanking new. Most important, she was now a living thing with a growing personality. Her ship's company had joined and she was ready for salt water to join the fleet.

**H**MCS FORT WILLIAM, with Lieutenant Hugh Campbell, RCNR, was commissioned with fitting ceremony in the yards of the Port Arthur Shipbuilding Company Limited, 25 August 1942. Her steaming trials had been satisfactory and now with the White Ensign hoisted for the first time abaft her funnel. The ship's appearance suggested something of a festive occasion. All decked out in her best bunting, she received on board, for the short run to Fort William, the Mayor and Council of that City, the Mayor of Port Arthur, and the Honourable Mitchell F. Hepburn, Premier of Ontario. As she entered the harbour of Fort William, on the 26th of August 1942, crowds thronged the water front to welcome the ship named for their City. Uptown that evening, the City gave a fine banquet for the ship's company and many more gifts were showered upon them.



**O**n the 27th of August 1942, down at Ogilvie Dock, where the ship was secured alongside, some thousands of citizens of the Twin Cities witnessed a solemn Prayer of Dedication. At the farewell ceremonies it was most obvious that these people had a personal interest in "their" ship and wished them "Godspeed" and a safe voyage. With that, lines were cast off and HMCS FORT WILLIAM set course down the Great Lakes for salt water and battle.

**M**ore ratings joined the ship from the naval shore station, HMCS HOCHELAGA, at Montreal, and by the 17th of September 1942, HMCS FORT WILLIAM was outward bound from the port of Quebec.

**U**ntried and untrained as she was, the new ship was required for escort duty immediately, for German submarines had been sighted and had attacked in the Gulf of St. Lawrence.

**T**he Germans were carrying the sea-fight right into Canadian coastal waters. No less than eleven merchant ships were torpedoed in the St. Lawrence River and the Gulf during September and the Royal Canadian Navy suffered the loss of HMCS RACCOON and HMCS CHARLOTTETOWN in the defence of those waters.

**W**ithout incident, however, her charge, SS SRUCE LAKE deep-laden with a deck cargo of lumber was convoyed to St. Peter's Canal, Cape Breton Island, and HMCS FORT WILLIAM continued on alone. On the 24th of September 1942, with her new pendants, J311 flying from her signal halyard, HMCS FORT WILLIAM steamed into the harbour of Halifax for the first time.

**F**or the next few weeks, the ship's company worked hard to bring themselves, and their weapons, to a high pitch of operational efficiency. On the 15th of November 1942, HMCS FORT WILLIAM was allocated to the Halifax Force which meant her base was to be that port, and she was employed in convoying merchant shipping in North American coastal waters. Though classed as a Bangor Minesweeper, her duties for some time to come was to be the defence of Canada's trade at sea.



**H**MCS FORT WILLIAM displaced 672 tons, was 180 feet long, had a beam of 28.5 feet, and when fully manned and equipped, drew nearly 12 feet of water aft. Built of steel, her twin engines and screws were capable of driving the ship at just over 16 knots. On the forecastle she mounted a 12 pound High Angle gun and on the bridge superstructure there were two twin .5 Colt machine guns and a mounted 20 millimetre Oerlikon for rapid fire. Back aft, HMCS FORT WILLIAM mounted two depth-charge throwers and had two chutes also for depth-charges. These were used for attacking U-boats. Her ship's company numbered 8 Officers and 64 Ratings.

**T**hroughout the winter months of 1942-43, and on into the summer, the ship was engaged almost continuously in convoying merchant shipping. The enemy was not encountered during this time and all ships were brought safely to port. These convoys were between the following ports: Halifax, St. John's, Sydney, Saint John, Wabana, and Boston.

**W**hen the approaches to Halifax were mined by German submarines in June of 1943, it was fully expected that the strategic port of St. John's, Newfoundland, being closer to Europe, would come in for the same treatment. HMCS FORT WILLIAM sailed on the 19th of June 1943 to augment the Newfoundland Force for a period of six months.

**D**uring this stretch of convoy duties, the ship spent most of August and September in refit at Cornerbrook, Newfoundland, and Pictou, Nova Scotia.

**L**ieutenant S. D. Taylor, RCNR, was in command at this time, and Lieutenant Campbell returned to the ship in October of 1943. Out of refit, HMCS FORT WILLIAM, based in St. John's, continued her convoy duties until she was recalled to Halifax in January of 1944. Great events were brewing in the cauldron of all European waters and the ships of the Royal Canadian Navy were about to roll up their sleeves, so to speak, and have a hand at mixing the brew.



**B**y this time, plans were well advanced for "Operation Neptune", the naval part of the future invasion of Normandy in France. The tremendous industrial and economic resources of the Allies had been marshalled and the assaulting armies and air forces were being concentrated in the United Kingdom. Thousands of ships of all types were gradually gathering in British waters to bridge the English Channel and foil any attempts by the German surface and under-sea forces to thwart the enterprise.

**B**ut before these forces could penetrate the shores of France and even before the ships of war could lead the assault, a most forbidding barrier had to be cleared away. This was the host of German minefields that lay in french coastal waters within easy range of concentrated shore batteries. Free mines and moored contact mines, acoustic, pressure, and magnetic mines, were all sown in great profusion. Due to their variety, it presented a technical problem of the first magnitude. To cope with this formidable system of defences required a whole fleet of those little ships called minesweepers. HMCS FORT WILLIAM was one of these. For the dangerous mission that lay ahead of them, HMCS FORT WILLIAM's ships company set to with a will to become an efficient fighting team.

**F**itted out for the role for which she was originally designed, HMCS FORT WILLIAM, in company with HMC Ships BLAIRMORE, MILLTOWN, and MINAS, cleared Halifax on the 20th of February, 1944, for the waters of the embattled Europe. Refuelling en route at St. John's, and at Horta in the Azores, the little squadron arrived at Plymouth, England on the 8th of March 1944. Training in minesweeping began almost at once, mostly in the vicinity of Fowey and Torquay.

**D**uring April, the all-important heavy winch for controlling the sweep wires was overhauled and the boilers blown down for cleaning. On the 10th of April, HMCS FORT WILLIAM, now a member of the 31st Canadian Minesweeping Flotilla, sailed for the Solent. The next night, the flotilla took part in "Operation Trousers", a practice landing by the Canadian Army in brigade strength on Slapton Sands. Later in the month, a similar exercise was carried out, this time with American troops. At the end of April, the eight Bangor Class Minesweepers were engaged in clearing of a field sown with dummy mines.



**E**arly in May of 1944, what amounted to almost a full-dress rehearsal of an invasion on a large scale, "Operation Fabius" was performed. In this way, nothing was left undone that would bring the fighting men of both services to peak efficiency.

**O**n the 18th of May, 1944, the 31st Flotilla received its first operational assignment, the sweeping of a suspected minefield off Start Point to the Eastward of Plymouth. All eight ships participated and, of the ten mines swept and exploded, HMCS FORT WILLIAM, accounted for two; ...." the ship's company felt repaid for the long days and nights of practice, with a winch held together by baling wire and our prayers."

**T**he Flotilla shifted to Portland on the 27th of May, 1944, and that night the ships were subjected to a short but sharp air raid, a portent of things to come. As the German bombers swept in over Weymouth Bay, they dropped their bombs on the city and amongst the ships at anchor. With Nazi aircraft caught in the web of search light beams, the ships opened up with every gun.. HMCS FORT WILLIAM managed to fire twenty rounds with her 12 pounder gun and hundreds more with her light automatic weapons. As it turned out, this bombing raid was a "cover-up" for the mines that had been dropped on the way into the anchorage. More work for the minesweepers.

**T**he great day, for which all these days and nights of hard training had been endured, was near at hand. D-Day, the day of invasion had been set for the 6th of June, 1944, - - this after much anxious study of tides, currents, weather and the moon. But the mass movement of thousands of ships and millions of men, all on a strict minute-to-minute schedule, had to be commenced well before that fateful morning, for they had to come from widely separated ports all around the British Isles.

**I**n the Senior Ship of the 31st Flotilla, the long awaited signal came, and at 03:00 on the 5th of June, 1944, the Canadians steamed silently out of Portland in line ahead. Ships, CARAQUET, FORT WILLIAM, COWICHAN, WASAGA, BLAIRMORE, MILLTOWN, MINAS, MULGRAVE, and BAYFIELD, His Majesty's Canadian Ships all, were to be in the van in the assault on the Baie de la Seine. By 19:00 that evening, keeping well ahead of the convoys approaching from the west, the flotilla had reached the "Start of Sweep" position to the south of the Isle of Wright.



**N**ow, some forty sea miles from the minefields, the ships altered in the direction of the French coast and formed up in two divisions, each line staggered so that each ship was 800 yards astern and 200 yards off to one side of the one ahead. From the air, the port and starboard columns would appear like the head of an arrow. So, in broad daylight of that June late afternoon, the 31st Flotilla streamed its sweeps and headed in, knowing that upon it depended the safety of the transports and landing craft astern.

**J**ust as darkness was closing in, the barrier had been penetrated to a depth of eight miles. It was a nerve racking business to be under the "radar eyes" and the heavy guns of the French coast. Yet all was quiet. In formation, each ship covering the next, and with long wire sweeps streamed, it is almost impossible to take avoiding action in the event of air or gun attack. Sweeping continued throughout the dark hours, necessitating accurate navigation in such confined and treacherous waters.

**T**he Flotilla now crossed the area where heavy transport ships were to anchor. At 06:00, the minesweepers swept toward the beach ahead of the oncoming landing craft. It was now that the German gunners "opened up" with a vengeance. But, within five minutes, the Fire Support ships USS ARKANSAS and the French Cruisers MONTCALM and GEORGES LEYGUES silenced the batteries with their main armament. At this point some confusion had developed for the MONTCALM had run over FORT WILLIAM's wire and float but somehow the float bobbed up from under the cruiser's stern with its faint light still burning.

**I**n order not to crowd the big LCT's (Landing Craft Tank) which already were launching their amphibious tanks, CARAQUET and FORT WILLIAM were obliged to go further in than planned. Only 4000 yards from the beach, the men of the FORT WILLIAM had a hectic time cutting the chain of the mooring bouy at the mouth of the harbour of Port au Bessin which had fouled the sweep. This was ticklish business at point blank range.

**W**ith the first forces established on the beach, the flotilla continued to sweep away the mines. After dark, the ships would anchor some five miles off the beach and participate in the outer defences. Each day, from dawn to dusk, as thousands more troops were landed, HMCS FORT WILLIAM and her sister ships swept the approach channels and areas around them. This went on for eight days and nights till the 14th of June, when the flotilla sailed for Portland for fuel and repairs to the sweeps, returning to the French coast two days later. During this time, between the 8th and 10th of June, the Canadian 31st Flotilla accounted for 78 mines, HMCS FORT WILLIAM taking eight of them.



Lieutenant Campbell wrote: "The flotilla moved to the Solent on the 24th June, and with the 16th Flotilla, swept a channel to Cherbourg, thus finishing a month which will be long remembered, and during which time the ship's company cheerfully accepted the long hours and more arduous duties, knowing that they were part of a victorious force, determined to crush the enemy."

The same minesweeping operations were carried out throughout July, precise navigation and unceasing vigilance being the order of the day. On the 9th of July, when recovering the sweep, there was some anxiety when a mine was found to be lodged in that portion of the sweeping apparatus known as the "kite." It was something of a delicate operation disengaging the mine without detonating it so close to the ship.

During August of 1944, HMCS FORT WILLIAM was Senior Ship of the Flotilla in the absence of HMCS CARAQUET, and operations went on apace in the approaches to Cherbourg. On the 10th of August, the ship entered the French port for the first time and the crew had three hours ashore. After the strain of so many weeks of round the clock, hazardous duties, even this brief respite was most welcome. Three days later, HMCS CARAQUET came back from her "boiler clean" and her Aldis lamp flashed: "We have a basket on board to carry you back to Plymouth", for the Stokers and Engine Room Artificers of the FORT WILLIAM had brought the boilers through an unusual 1530 hours of steaming without a "boiler clean."

Securing alongside in Plymouth next day, repairs to equipment took up the rest of the month. With the installation of a new winch aft, the Commanding Officer could not refrain from remarking: "We watched the old winch over the side with mixed feelings. It had been the recipient of so many prayers and curses, and had been in our thoughts continually for so many months, that we saw it go with a twinge of regret. Maybe it wasn't such a bad old winch after all!"

Throughout the autumn months and winter, HMCS FORT WILLIAM and the flotilla continued to sweep areas in various parts of the English Channel where enemy submarines, and mine-laying vessels and aircraft were attempting to disrupt the steady flow of men and supplies to the armies ashore. The winter season often brought monotony to the Bangor crews for it was impossible to sweep in the short rough seas of the Channel's winter storms. It took four ships three weeks to clear one small field in the Dieppe area which normally would have been accomplished in a day or two.



**B**y February of 1945, HMCS FORT WILLIAM was long overdue for refit. Leaving the rest of the flotilla to keep the mines swept in the areas allocated to the flotilla, the ship cleared Plymouth bound for Halifax on the 19th of February 1945, HMCS COWICHAN in company. An uneventful passage was made by way of the Azores and St. John's, and on the last leg, a merchant ship was escorted into Halifax on the 8th of March 1945. This day being just over a year since the FORT WILLIAM had sailed from Halifax. The ship's company were proud and pleased to receive this signal from the Commander-in-Chief, Canadian North-West Atlantic, "Welcome home, Congratulations on a job well done."

**T**he Commanding Officer, Hugh Campbell, now promoted to Lieutenant Commander, and the Executive Officer, Lieutenant George Kelly, on their arrival home, proudly wore the Distinguished Service Cross for the fine work HMCS FORT WILLIAM had accomplished under fire in the English Channel.

**T**he same day, 8th of March, 1945, the ship was ordered to proceed independently for St. John, New Brunswick. In that friendly port, she was to spend three months receiving extensive repairs and new equipment. Leaving only a small duty watch on board, most of the ship's company proceeded on long leave and then returned to various training establishments for refresher courses.

**B**y the time HMCS FORT WILLIAM was ready in June to rejoin the fleet, the war in Europe was over. There still remained, however, much work to be done by the Bangor minesweepers. The ports of Europe were a shambles. Sunken ships had to be cleared away and the beaches and harbour mouths, littered with the debris of war, required immediate attention. Similarly, minefields, both enemy and our own, had to be swept to make the seas safe for merchant shipping. Without such operations, trade, that important factor of economic recovery, could not be rebuilt.

**N**ow under the Command of Lieutenant George Kelly, DSC, RCNR, formerly the ship's Executive Officer, HMCS FORT WILLIAM cleared from St. John on the 11th of June. From Halifax, on the 23rd of June, the ship sailed for Plymouth, HMCS MILLTOWN in company. It seemed strange to FORT WILLIAM's men to be sailing the Atlantic without zig-zag courses and burning navigation lights and yet still bound for most hazardous duty in mine-infested waters. Plymouth was reached on the 10th of July 1945.



**D**uring August, the ship destroyed seventeen mines off the south coast of England. On the 9th and 10th, the FORT WILLIAM and other ships of the flotilla swept a channel from Portland up-channel to Southampton ahead of the great liners (now troop transports) QUEEN MARY and QUEEN ELIZABETH.

**I**n September, the work of the Canadian minesweepers came to a close and preparations for the voyage home were soon in hand. Since its formation, the 31st Flotilla had accounted for 390 German, French, and British mines. The 11th was the last day that the ships worked together as a unit after which, in small groups, the flotilla headed for Canada. On the 21st of September, HMCS FORT WILLIAM departed from Devonport bound for the Azores and St. John's. With her were HMC Ships MILLTOWN, BLAIRMORE, and GEORGIAN. Five days later all ships refuelled in the tiny harbour of Ponta del Gada.

**A**s the other ships left St. John's to jettison their ammunition in deep water en route to Sydney on the 2nd of October, 1945. HMCS FORT WILLIAM was despatched up the east coast of Newfoundland on a rescue mission. At Belle Isle, a stranded air crew and a man requiring the immediate attention of a medical Officer, embarked in FORT WILLIAM, were brought back to port. It was the morning of the 5th that the ship re-entered the crag-walled, narrow gut that is the opening into the harbour of St. John's.

**A**t Sydney, Cape Breton, the next day, much equipment was removed. With HMCS SWIFT CURRENT, the ship then cleared for Shelburne, Nova Scotia, where Lieutenant Kelly paid her off into reserve on the 23rd of October 1945. The ship's bell was removed and in a fitting ceremony the following summer, 15 August 1946, this memento from a proud ship was presented to the City of Fort William by the Commanding Officer, HMCS GRIFFON.

**H**MCS FORT WILLIAM was reacquired by the RCN in 1951, but not recommissioned, and on the 29th of March 1958 was handed over to the Turkish Navy. Renamed **BODRUM**, she was finally removed from active service in 1971.

**T**oday, **HMCS FORT WILLIAM** wears the hard-won Battle Honours:

Battle of the Atlantic	1943 - 1945
Battle of Normandy	1944
Battle of the Guld of St. Lawrence	1942 - 1945