



This cluster of buildings, nestling in a valley near Greenock, Scotland, was commissioned during the Second World War as a ship of the Royal Canadian Navy—HMCS Niobe. Although the scene may bring to mind King Arthur's "many-towered Camelot", the establishment was manned by hard-working sailors and wrens, rather than knights in shining armour. (WD-832)

NIOBE IN THE VALLEY

Greenock, Scotland, has not forgotten the sailors and wrens from Canada who served there at HMCS Niobe during the Second World War and, if one may judge from the reminiscences of "R.M.S." in the June 1 issue of the Greenock Telegraph, the memories are pleasant.

Greenock's continued interest in the RCN was shown in an earlier issue of the Telegraph, which published an historical article during May in observance of the RCN's Jubilee.

The more recent article, which appeared under the heading "Canadian Naval Jubilee Recalls Old "Niobe" and which is reprinted here, ascribes the transfer of HMCS Niobe from Plymouth to Greenock to the savage bombing to

which the south coast city was subjected. This was probably the explanation current at the time and, on the face of it, a logical one. However, the official explanation is that the change was solely for operational reasons.

With Canadian warships operating in increasing numbers in United Kingdom waters an accountant officer was attached to the Royal Naval Barracks, Devonport, in July 1940. This was a prelude to the commissioning of HMCS Dominion at Plymouth on October 1 of that year. Because the cable address of the RCN establishment was often confused with that of the Canadian High Commissioner in London, the name was changed to HMCS Niobe on March 1, 1941. The establishment at Plymouth

was short-lived under its new name. In June, the Newfoundland Escort Force, based on St. John's, was established, with a consequent shift in the area of operations of HMC Ships. Niobe was paid off on June 30, 1941.

But the tempo of war increased—more Canadian warships were entering United Kingdom waters, more Canadian naval personnel were being drafted to the British Isles for duty or training. On December 15, 1941, HMCS Niobe was again commissioned—this time at Greenock, Scotland—to act as parent ship to Canadian warships and also as an accounting base, manning pool and hospitalization centre.

The rest of the story is told in warm, human terms by "R.M.S."

NIOBE, as every schoolboy knows, was a mythological Theban mother of twelve who became the personification of maternal grief when she was slain by Apollo. It was perhaps only natural for classically-minded Greenockians to read into the name of that Canadian "stonewall frigate", HMCS Niobe, some allusion to sorrowing war-time mothers.

A sentimental touch—but all wrong. Greenock's Canadian naval base was named after an old four-funneled cruiser, first ship of the Canadian Navy.

Whatever it means to Canada, Niobe to Greenock means the Canadian Naval Base which came into being at Smithston in 1942.

I well remember, just prior to the closing of Niobe after the war, a Canadian rhyming off to me his views of the Greenock base:—

Here's to grand old Niobe

May her name forever stand,

In the history of the Navy

Her name spread o'er the land.

She's muddy when it's raining,

She's dirty when it's hot;

But it's no use complaining . . .

It's the only home we've got!

This Canadian was one of thousands from the Dominion who found a temporary haven at our one-time Poor Law Infirmary, known once as Smithston Asylum, and now as Ravenscraig Hospital.

For five years in the Second World War, Smithston was under the flag of the Royal Canadian Navy. It was the only establishment of its kind in Britain taken over by the Canadians, and from the visitors Greenock learned much about the land of the Maple Leaf.

It was only by accident that the Canadians ever came to this district at all!

At the beginning of the European war they were stationed at Plymouth. When the English port was blitzed the Canadian Navy was shipped to Greenock. Here they found a home, moored out at the Inverkip Road, in a building meant for a very different purpose.

At one time, Niobe was the base for 3,000 Canadian sailors, and 300 Canadian wrens—of whom about 100 were on loan to the Royal Navy.

Greenock learned to love these men and women from the Canadian towns and prairies.

On numerous occasions wrens and sailors told me that, while they were longing to get back to Canada, they would always have a warm spot in their hearts for Greenock.

Indeed many of the Canadians who spent some of the war years at Ravenscraig have re-visited the district in

peace time. I have spoken to a number of them on trans-Atlantic liners at the Tail of the Bank. Many found sweethearts in Greenock, and while some took their brides to their Canadian homes, others married in Greenock and are still here.

The war-time activities at Niobe were covered by a blanket of censorship, of course.

As a member of the *Telegraph* staff, however, I had certain privileges which I treasured. Many a social gathering I attended, and I was always struck with the warmth of Canadian hospitality.

At the front of the main entrance to Niobe were 52 temporary huts which housed personnel and offices. At the top of the steps was the quarterdeck, neatly roped off. From there the main entrance was reached, and the first thing the visitor saw was a lifebuoy with HMCS Niobe painted on it.

Somehow the old building had the air of a real ship.

Everything was always spic and span. Everybody darted smartly around in typical "pusser" fashion. In spite of this, I must admit I felt more at home at Niobe than in any Royal Navy establishment.

The red tape was not quite so much in evidence, and the atmosphere was noticeably friendlier.

Smithston did not undergo much in the way of structural alterations to be-

come a naval base. About all I can remember is that a former waiting room was transformed into an officers' mess. And what a transformation! It had the most modern cocktail bar I had seen until that time.

On the walls were the murals in Walt Disneyish style of Hollywood stars and famous band leaders. The women celebrities had a mermaid look that would have done honour to Davy Jones' locker.

This was the exception rather than the rule. On the top floor of the building were the officers' cabins—which had not undergone any real change from pre-war Smithston times.

The confidence shown by the Canadians in the press was such that I was shown, on occasions, places definitely "out of bounds" to the ordinary individual. I recollect a visit to the communications room where I was impressed by their 120-line private telephone exchange.

It was all very business-like. All the offices and departments were wired up. In the torpedo room there was a broadcasting apparatus from which a daily "Niobe News Bulletin"—some of it in humorous vein—was broadcast to all parts of the building—even the galley.

Niobe had concert talent, too. It had its own variety party, a military band, and a dance band. The military band gave more than 100 broadcasts, including a number from London.



Time out for a brisk game of volleyball at HMCS Niobe on a sunny summer day during the Second World War. (HN-1317)

There were football, baseball, hockey, softball and ice-hockey teams.

I remember many a lively visit to Paisley Ice Rink, and the fun and frolics which followed the games.

But these Canadians did not only provide entertainment for themselves. I recollect several occasions when the matelots "put round the hat" at *Niobe* to bring joy into the lives of young people.

They gave many a treat to local children. They purchased perambulators and presented them to the matron of the orphanage at Smithston for her young charges.

There was an inconspicuous group of "old salts" at *Niobe* I well remember. They were nursing sisters who had served in hospitals in different parts of Canada and were brought over to restore health to sick men, and the wounded from ships. They did a grand job.

Niobe had many a distinguished visitor. Among those I recollect were Cardinal Villeneuve, the Hon. W. C. Woodward, Lieutenant-Governor of British Columbia; the Rt. Hon. Vincent Massey, Canadian High Commissioner to the United Kingdom; Naval Minister Angus L. Macdonald, and the Chief of the Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Jones.

There were a number of officers of outstanding personality in charge at *Niobe*, including Captain J. R. Hunter and Cdr. E. M. Detchon.

Eventually the reins of office at the base were in the hands of Cdr. C. E. M. Donaldson, now Member of Parliament for Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles.

In the Autumn of 1945 the Canadian flag was struck at Smithston and the building turned gradually back to its normal function as a hospital.

The name HMCS *Niobe*, however, has not been erased from the naval lists. It is at present borne by the Royal Canadian Navy depot in London.—R.M.S.

The War's Largest Trade Convoy

SIXTEEN YEARS AGO this summer, the largest trade convoy ever to sail the Atlantic Ocean arrived safely at its destination. The same day the convoy's close-escort, composed of the Canadian frigate *Dunver* and corvettes *Hespeler*, *Dauphin*, *New Westminster*, *Wetaskiwin*, *Algoma* and *Longbranch* lay at Londonderry, Northern Ireland, refuelling and taking on provisions. They had just completed what to them was a routine wartime escort job.

The delivery of convoy HXS-300 and its 1,019,829 tons of cargo was not a story of flaming guns and exploding depth charges and torpedoes, but rather one of quiet efficiency and teamwork.

HXS-300 originated from New York on July 17, 1944, when 109 ships were escorted to the first ocean meeting place by four Royal Canadian Navy and two U.S. Navy escort ships. There, 31 merchant ships from Halifax joined in a heavy fog.

They were still enveloped in fog the following day when 24 ships from Sydney, N.S., joined. Next came three ships from St. John's Newfoundland. Two days later, at the Western Ocean Meeting Place (WESTOMP), the ocean escort force, consisting of HMCS *Dunver* and the six corvettes, took over from local escort force.

The fullgrown convoy was deployed in 19 columns covering more than 30 square miles of ocean.

When HXS-300 reached the eastern tip of Newfoundland it had been fog-bound for 800 miles. It was to face another 300 miles of fog-shrouded waters, with additional hazard of icebergs and U-boats.

On July 26 the convoy emerged from the fog. In clear weather the ships began to exercise emergency turns. The

preparations were timely, for the next day an aircraft from one of the convoy's four merchant aircraft carriers sighted a submarine 50 miles to the north.

The convoy lumbered on its ponderous way in worsening weather. In the holds of the merchant ships lay the vital cargoes bound for Iceland, North Russia, Loch Ewe, Oban, Belfast, Liverpool and Bristol. On July 28, in conditions of squally weather and poor visibility, the escort began reorganizing the huge convoy to facilitate the splitting for their final destination.

Early the next day, 28 ships, of which nine were Russia-bound, detached from the main convoy. On July 30, 14 fast ships left, and still later the final regrouping took place. On August 3, 1944, safely in port, the merchant ships began to discharge their cargoes while

the escorts refuelled and provisioned at Londonderry awaiting orders for convoy back across the Atlantic.

More than a million tons of cargo was carried in the 167-ship convoy. This figure pales in comparison to the 181 million tons carried in 25,000 ships which were safely escorted by the RCN throughout the Second World War.

From a force of six men-of-war in September 1939 the Royal Canadian Navy grew to a formidable array of almost 400 fighting ships ranging from cruisers to destroyers, frigates, corvettes and smaller patrol craft. In mid-summer of 1944, the RCN was responsible for the close escort of all convoys sailing the North Atlantic. The safe delivery of convoy HXS-300 epitomized Canada's naval achievement.

VOICE FROM THE PAST

The following letter addressed to "The CO, Royal Canadian Navy", was received at Naval Headquarters in June:

Sir:

I have read in the press recently that the RCN is celebrating its fiftieth year, when the cruisers *Niobe* and *Rainbow* commissioned.

I was an able seaman then, and one of a party of about a dozen lent from the old battleship *Revenge* (later renamed *Retribution*), that fitted boat's falls and various odds and ends in the *Rainbow* in Portsmouth. We were to receive the sum of a shilling per day for 17½ days for the work, but, being drafted soon afterwards, I heard nothing more about it, and of course don't expect to after all this time.

My last connection with the RCN was taking a class in rangefinding at Whale Island on being recalled to the RN in 1939.

I am,

Yours truly,

(sgd) L. R. Tilly,

Ex-CPO RN

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P/235846

International Sea Cadet Cruise

Twenty-five Royal Canadian Sea Cadets sailed from New York on July 22 on a three-week U.S. Sea Cadet training cruise to the Panama Canal Zone and return on board the USN transport ship *Randall*.