

HMCS SACKVILLE continues to serve

As naval historian Marc Milner recounts in *HMCS SACKVILLE 1941-1985*, May 15, 1941, dawned cold and rainy at Saint John Shipbuilding and Drydock Company as Mrs J.E.W Oland, the ship's sponsor, intoned, "God bless His Majesty's Canadian Ship *Sackville* and all who sail in her" as the ship slipped down the ways into Courtenay Bay.

The christening and launch of the 205-foot Flower Class corvette 81 years ago this spring marked the beginning of a storied career for a national icon that continues to serve as Canada's Naval Memorial and a National Historic Site.

HMCS *Sackville* was one of 123 corvettes to serve in the Royal Canadian Navy during the Second World War. Of the 269 Allied corvettes that played a crucial role in ensuring victory during the pivotal Battle of the Atlantic *Sackville* is the last survivor of that class of ships.

The late Lieutenant Commander Alan Easton, captain of *Sackville* 1942-1943 and author of the classic *50 North* captured the ship's "versatility and character' as a warship and peacetime oceanographic research vessel in his foreword to *HMCS SACKVILLE 1941-1985*, "...she guarded her flock and drove off the wolves in time of war, mounted high seas with confidence and would lie patiently while the hydrographer did his work."

With the recent easing of COVID-19 requirements the spiffy *Sackville* and her volunteer crew and summer guides are geared up to welcome visitors at her downtown berth on the historic Halifax waterfront after undergoing an extended hull and ship refit in 2021.

Captain(N) Bill Woodburn (ret'd), Chair of the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust that maintains and operates *Sackville* says the hull refit (including cladding below the waterline) carried out by the Fleet Maintenance Facility Cape Scott, HMC Dockyard was essential to ensure the ship's watertight integrity for the next 10 years before having to reskin the hull below the waterline.

"The Navy's support has been first-rate and the refit has injected new life in the ship," he explains.

“At the same time, we have launched the “Just for Hull of It” fundraising campaign and planning continues to develop new initiatives and focus current efforts to assure the long-term preservation of HMCS *Sackville* for generations to come. As well we are supporting development of a Canadian Maritime Heritage District on the Halifax waterfront of which *Sackville* will be an integral part.”

Commander Gary Reddy (ret'd), Commanding Officer of *Sackville* lauds the work of the volunteer crew with regard to the ship's refit and says, “we are anxious to commence operations at our summer berth at Sackville Landing including welcoming the return of cruise ship visitors this year.”

With exhibits, artifacts, audio-visual presentations and aided by guides there's plenty for visitors to experience about the war in the Atlantic and life aboard a wartime corvette.

Winston Churchill said the Battle of the Atlantic (1939-1945) was “...the dominant factor throughout the war” and described the quickly constructed corvettes as the “cheap but nasties. ”They were the workhorses of the North Atlantic, escorting convoys and engaging German U-Boats to maintain the critical lifeline to Britain. *Sackville* and her sister ships played a significant role in ensuring Allied victory at sea.

The 123 Canadian corvettes were crewed primarily by reservists. They formed the core of the ocean escort groups defending convoys of merchant vessels from the enemy U-boats. On any given day, dozens of ships carrying food, fuel and other war materiel departed Halifax and other East Coast ports for the United Kingdom.

Sackville served in several well-known escort groups escorting convoys from St John's, NL to Londonderry, Northern Ireland and was one of the original members of the famous Barber Pole Group. Named after the Town of Sackville, NB she certainly earned her stripes.

Sackville's most memorable engagement occurred in early August 1942 in the North Atlantic when under command of LCdr Alan Easton she engaged three U-boats in a 24-hour period and put two out of action before they were able to escape.

As part of a western bound convoy, 250 miles east of Newfoundland, *Sackville* encountered a U-boat on the surface. At a range of less than a quarter mile, she fired a starshell and forced the U-boat to crash-dive. She then steamed into the swirl of water left by the submerging U-boat and fired a pattern of depth charges. The powerful blast threw the U-boat to the surface before it slipped back into the water and disappeared.

And 90 minutes later, *Sackville* engaged another surfaced U-boat in a lethal zigzag ballet before *Sackville* fired a four-inch shell that punched a large hole in the base of the conning tower forcing the sub to return to port.

In September 1943, *Sackville* was part of another escort group for the combined westbound convoys ON 202 and ONS 18 that came under attack. During the engagement the U-boats sank several merchant ships and four escorts including HMCS *St Croix*, all with a heavy loss of life. During the action, *Sackville* was rocked by an explosion that severely damaged her number one boiler, probably caused by one of the corvette's depth charges detonating a torpedo close alongside.

Later, when efforts to make repairs were unsuccessful, it was decided to take *Sackville* from active service, remove the defective boiler and use her as a training ship for HMCS *Kings* officer training establishment and a harbor looplayer. After the cessation of hostilities, Canada's other corvettes were sold to other navies or scrapped but *Sackville* was converted and continued to serve as a naval and civilian oceanographic research vessel until she was paid off in 1982.

In 1983 the former Naval Officers Association of Canada (now Naval Association of Canada) took the lead and the volunteer Canadian Naval Memorial Trust (CNMT) was established to acquire and restore *Sackville* to her 1944 configuration.

The mission of the CNMT, with approximately 1,000 trustees in Canada and abroad, is to preserve *Sackville* as a memorial to those who gave of themselves or their lives in service to Canada and as a symbol of a defining national achievement in winning the war at sea.

In 1985, the Government of Canada designated *Sackville* as Canada's Naval Memorial to honour the 2,000 sailors who lost their lives at sea and to honour all generations of Canadian sailors including those who continue to serve.

During the summer and fall *Sackville* is berthed next to the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic and in HMC Dockyard in the winter. The ship supports various naval, community, youth and corporate events and activities throughout the year.

On June 29, 2010, in conjunction with the 100th anniversary of the RCN, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II and His Royal Highness the Duke of Edinburgh visited *Sackville* during the International Fleet Review in Halifax and unveiled a plaque to mark the significance of Canada's Naval Memorial.

HMCS *Sackville* is an enduring symbol of the Battle of the Atlantic and those who served and continue to serve Canada at sea.

Come visit and experience the “versatility, character and confidence” of ‘The Last Corvette.’

For more information on the Trust and Ship and how to support the “Just for the Hull of It” campaign check out: <https://hmcssackville.ca/join-and-support/donation-form>

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Photos:



HMCS Sackville alongside summer berth next to the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic welcoming visitors.



HMCS Sackville dressed overall at winter berth in HMC Dockyard during Christmas 2021.



HMCS Sackville undergoes hull cladding in submarine shed 2021.



HMCS Sackville hull refit nears completion 2021.



Queen Elizabeth unveils plaque to mark significance of Canada's Naval Memorial 2010.



HMCS Sackville Chaplain Andrew Cooke (foreground) conducts committal of ashes service aboard Canada's Naval Memorial during the Battle of the Atlantic ceremony May 1 at the Halifax Memorial, Point Pleasant Park, Halifax. (Douglas Struthers photos)