



FRANCE CAME TO CANADIAN SHIPYARDS FOR SHIPS AFTER WORLD WAR II

H. David Vuckson

During the Second World War, ports, harbours and ships in Europe and elsewhere suffered immense damage and destruction during the hostilities, necessitating repairs and reconstruction in the post-war years. The shipyards on both sides of the Great Lakes were safe during the war, being separated from the war by vast oceans and being thousands of miles inland from those oceans and it is well-known that Canadian shipyards in Collingwood, Midland, Kingston and Port Arthur contributed immensely to the war effort building Corvettes, tankers, minesweepers and trawlers during that conflict. These four shipyards which all came under the ownership of Roy Wolvin during the Second World War were rolled into a parent company called Canadian Shipbuilding And Engineering. Following Wolvin's death in 1945, Canadian Shipbuilding And Engineering became part of Canada Steamship Lines in 1947.

It was to this company that the Government of France came in 1948 with a contract for fifteen hopper barges for use in restoring harbours along the coast of France and in the French colonies in northern Africa. The French port of Le Havre on the coast of Normandy was one of many ports requiring reconstruction, in particular because Hitler had established a naval base there in preparation for Operation Sea Lion, the planned invasion of England, and this made Le Havre a prime target for Allied bombing and massive destruction. The self-propelled

hopper barges were designed to carry dredged material such as sand, silt and clay to aid in cleaning up French harbours. In the bottom of each hull were hopper doors which opened downward so that the barge could dump its load either at sea in deep water or closer to shore for landfill purposes. The hopper barges were 171 feet long, had a cargo capacity of 525 cubic yards and were powered by twin diesel engines. The CSL Shipyards were not the only ones to secure contracts from France in the post-war years. Marine Industries Ltd. of Sorel, Quebec, built 10 cargo ships and 15 Trawlers for the Government of France in 1947-48.

The contract for the hopper barges was divided up among three of the CSL shipyards: Collingwood built three, while Midland and Port Arthur each built six. The Kingston Shipyard, because of its location at both the eastern end of Lake Ontario and the western end of the St. Lawrence River was ideally situated to service the Canada Steamship Lines fleet of canal boats which wintered at Kingston. These were small freighters of about 259 ft. in length that could fit through the old St. Lawrence canals in the era before the St. Lawrence Seaway. "Canallers", as they were popularly known, were the Kingston Yard's specialty and chief source of income. When the St. Lawrence Seaway opened in 1959, it spelled the doom of not only the small, aging canal boats but also the Kingston Shipyard itself. In its earliest years, the Seaway allowed ships of 715 ft. maximum length. Eventually this was increased to 730 ft. and, nowadays the maximum is 740 ft. It can easily be seen that fewer, but much larger, ships were needed and this translated to the need for fewer shipyards, hence the closing of Midland in 1954, and Kingston in 1967.

The building of the hopper barges got underway in Collingwood, Midland and Port Arthur in the spring of 1948. The Collingwood Yard delivered two of them before winter freeze up in 1948 while the third one, not launched until mid-November, spent the winter in town and left Collingwood on its way to France at the beginning of May 1949. The Midland Yard is recorded to have delivered all six of its share of the contract before winter freeze up in 1948. Of the six vessels built in Port Arthur, four were delivered before winter 1948 with the remaining two being delivered in the spring of 1949.

The first of Collingwood's three hopper barges was named, appropriately, *Collingwood*. It was the fourth steel ship built in Collingwood to carry our town's name. The other three were a freighter (1907), a Corvette (1940) and an Imperial Oil tanker (1947). Both building berths were used in the construction of these barges, numbered Hulls 140, 141 and 142.

An interesting mix of names was given to the ships. The other two barges built in Collingwood were named *Erable* and *Castor*. The Midland Shipyard named its barges *Midland*, *Algonquin*, *Iroquois*, *Esquimau*, *Original* and *Caribou*. The Port Arthur Shipyard named its barges *Port Arthur*, *Ontario*, *Erie*, *Niagara*, *Huron* and *St. Laurent*. Note that each Yard named the first barge after the town in which it was built. They would all sail away to far-off foreign shores, never to return. The Port Arthur barges are recorded as having still existed variously into the 1980's and early 1990's, and one of them as late as 1996 in shipping registers. The Midland versions are variously stated to have no further trace in a time period from 1970 to 1992. I have not found any mention of how long the three ships built in Collingwood lasted. Nevertheless, a life span of between 40 and 50 years is remarkable considering the heavy use which these barges were designed for.

When hopper barge *Collingwood* left town on its delivery trip on Wednesday, October 13th, 1948, among the crew was my father Dan. Working in the Sheet Metal Shop at the Shipyard since June 1947, he retained his Mate's Ticket from his days sailing the Great Lakes on steamships of the Algoma Central Railway. A photo of the hopper barge in an old photo album has the caption in my mother's handwriting, "Daddy went to coast for 12 days on this". Skip Gillam informs us in his book *The Ships Of Collingwood* that these barges "were to carry a crew of fifteen", although I suspect that number referred to when the ship was actually working. A smaller crew would have been needed to sail it down to Halifax where the French would take over. The Collingwood men had the experience of a cruise from Collingwood to Halifax and then a train ride back to town.

The Collingwood harbour during the years 1940-45 was a scene of intense activity as the town's shipbuilders worked round the clock to build ships for the war effort

and then, after the war, they laboured to build ships for the remediation of the casualties of war.

Ironically, the busy harbour in Collingwood had connections to not only the disruption to society *during* the war but also to the rebuilding of society on the other side of the world *after* the war. While the Collingwood Terminals grain elevator played its part in feeding the hungry post-war world through its role in the transfer of prairie grain by rail to Montreal for export, the Collingwood Shipyard, through the building of these three hopper barges, helped in the rebuilding of France and its African colonies in the aftermath of World War II.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. David and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C.