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Building HMC Ships *Iroquois* and *Huron*

By Captain (Navy) (Ret'd) Don Wilson

In the 1960s, the development of the Royal Canadian Navy's DDH-280 Program had reached a point where the two shipyards that would be building the four tribal-class destroyers could be announced: Marine Industries Limited (MIL) in Sorel-Tracy, Québec was named as lead yard for *Iroquois* (DDH-280) and *Huron* (DDH-281), while Davie Shipbuilding in Lévis, Québec was identified as the follow yard for *Athabaskan* (DDH-282) and *Algonquin* (DDH-283).

LCdr Ron Hahn and I (also a LCdr at the time) were duly identified as the Engineer Officers-Designate for *Iroquois* and *Huron*, respectively, and it would be our responsibility to oversee the building of our respective ships as members of the staff of the Principal Naval Overseer (PNO) Sorel, later 202 Canadian Forces Technical Services Detachment (202 CFTSD).

Construction of *Iroquois* got underway on Jan. 15, 1969; *Huron* would be laid down months later on June 1. As the initial construction units were being fabricated under cover from the weather, keel support blocks for the two hulls were set up outside in the yard adjacent to MIL's marine railway. Once completed, each construction unit was moved out of the shed and welded to the adjoining unit already on the blocks, and in this way the ships gradually began to take shape as the TSD staff monitored the shipbuilder's operations.

The shipyard had implemented a quality management system manual, prepared in the Naval Central Drawing Office in Montréal, and published as QUAL-1-01. The Canadian naval standard was designed to ensure that work proceeded well and progress was documented. The TSD staff was impressed by the fine work being performed by the MIL team, and as the months went by, *Iroquois* and *Huron* really started to look like warships. Many of the ship compartments now contained equipment and systems, including the propulsion engines, gearboxes, flexible couplings, shafting and variable pitch propellers. Electrical and other cabling, and piping, were being installed as the units came together.



The DDH-280 Tribal-class destroyers *Iroquois* (left) and *Huron* under construction at Marine Industries Ltd., Sorel-Tracy, Québec circa 1970.

Once the shafting and propellers were installed, construction reached the point where the hulls needed to be set into the water temporarily to establish the line of shafting and positioning of intermediate bearings. Blocks with wheels were installed under the ships' hulls to allow the two ships to be traversed onto the marine railway cradle to be prepared for the launch. While it was not as glamorous as seeing a ship slide down the ways with banners flying and crowds of dignitaries in attendance, that preliminary launch was quite significant. With the afloat configuration readings for the shafting established, the ships could be pulled from the water for final positioning of the A-brackets and other shaft supports. The ships were eventually launched formally on Nov. 28, 1970 (*Iroquois*) and April 9, 1971 (*Huron*).

In the summer of 1972, after fitting-out, *Iroquois* was ready for alongside trials, followed by contractor sea trials. Marine Industries had engaged Michel Goulet, a merchant master, and retired RCN marine engineer Cdr Gord Smith as the team leaders for the initial alongside set-to-work and subsequent sea trials. As the ships' engineer-designates, Ron Hahn and I were also involved. *Iroquois'* launch and alongside trials

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Iroquois fitting-out alongside at the MIL shipyard.

went very well, following which the ship set sail for contractor sea trials in the early summer, travelling down the St. Lawrence River to the open waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence. With these trials also successfully completed, *Iroquois* returned to MIL to be prepared for commissioning on July 29, 1972, and then sailed to join the fleet in Halifax.

The same series of events took place for *Huron* and, in due course the ship was commissioned on Dec. 16, 1972. *Huron's* passage down the St. Lawrence on the way to Halifax was a bit more of a challenge than what *Iroquois* had faced in July, as the river was by this time largely frozen over. An icebreaker accompanied us down river, but when we reached the Quebec Bridge we encountered broken ice more than four metres thick. During our passage from Sorel, the ship's firemain pressure had kept falling off as ice clogged the pump intakes. Needing this water to cool the propulsion system, I dispatched a roving gang of stalwarts that went from one intake to the next, closing the isolating valves and opening the intakes to remove the crushed ice. Keeping the five pump intakes clear kept the gang busy, and someone in the party was heard to suggest the ice could be delivered to the wardroom and galley. We eventually got through at Québec, and the rest of the passage was uneventful. A welcoming committee led by *Iroquois* came out to greet *Huron* on our arrival in Halifax Dockyard.

In addition to their Sea Sparrow missile point-defence role, the DDH-280s were able to provide the RCN with a robust anti-submarine capability, both through the use of fitted ASW sonar equipment and weapons on board ship, and in concert with the deployment of the two embarked Sea King helicopters that carried dipping sonars and ASW torpedoes. Helicopter trials for the new ships would normally have been conducted by *Iroquois* as part of the first-of-class trials, but the ship's commanding officer, Cdr Doc McGillivray, had no previous DDH command experience. Since *Huron's* CO, Cdr Dick Hitesman, did have prior experience with helicopters as commanding of HMCS *Margaree* (DDH-230), our ship was tapped to conduct post-commissioning helicopter trials.



Contractor's Engineer Officer Gordon Smith (right) turns over the machinery system "ignition" key to LCdr Don Wilson, HMCS *Huron's* Engineer Officer on commissioning.

Not long afterward, *Huron* found itself cruising off the Nova Scotia coast near St. Margaret's Bay with two Sea Kings in the hover, ready to be recovered. One at a time they flew in over the flight deck to be hauled down and secured by the bear trap, then traversed into the twin hangar. A third Sea King then arrived on scene, and this too was hauled down and secured to the flight deck by the bear trap. The purpose of this trial was to confirm that, even with the "barn" full of helicopters, a 280-class DDH could still provide a safe landing deck for a third Sea King. An elated Cdr Hitesman couldn't resist sending a message back to Maritime Command HQ to report there were three helicopters on board *Huron*, and that his cup was truly running over.

As the years passed, the DDH-280s served the RCN very well. All four destroyers underwent a Tribal Class Update and Modernization Program (TRUMP) refit in the late 1990s that saw them fitted with new missile systems, and redesignated as DDGs. By 2017, the last of these remarkable ships had been paid off. My own ship, HMCS *Huron*, was taken out of service in 2000, paid off in 2005, and subsequently sunk as a target ship off the West Coast in 2007.

Captain (N) Don Wilson, P.Eng, CD, RCN (Ret'd) was the Engineer Officer aboard HMCS Huron when the ship commissioned on Dec. 16, 1972.



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