

Waiting for The Next War

FORTRESS HALIFAX

By KEN BURKE

Tchink! Tchink!

Behind me and my new buddy, a bunch of small boys have just hit the jackpot by the side of the flight deck. With cropped hair, short sleeves, and bargain-basement Bermuda shorts, they look like time-warped tiny versions of Vally and the Beaver as they scramble for position. Tchink, finally, their find gets passed on to the smallest of the lot who struggles to operate a real live submarine gun almost as long as he is tall. With a heroic effort, he manages to tug the bolt back in place, level the thing and — tchink! — fire an empty round into the grinning British marine overseeing the fun. "Tomorrow's commandos," laughs my grandfatherly companion as we trudge off for more of the sights this blazing hot Halifax Sunday.

Militarism can be more than a "temporary insanity" defense for society — sometimes it can be a way of life. One week in Halifax, Nova Scotia's Summer of '85 brought the connections between past and present, war and patriotism, and militarism and money into focus.

It was the good and loyal folk at the *Halifax Herald* Ltd. who gave it all away. At the peak of its too-big-to-be-called-extensive coverage of the event, an editorial inscribed "To the Navy!" in both its daily newspapers noted majestically, "We mark the Navy's 75th anniversary with fervour." When they wrote that, they probably weren't thinking of one none-too-majestic definition of fervour — "intense heat". All the same, that pretty much sums up the biological state this city was in from June 27 through Canada Day when the NATO fleet plus special guest warships crowded in port for the occasion.

Militarism can be a way of life

The people and officials of the place Kipling called "the Warden of the Honour of the North" put on a wing-ding to honour the Navy that went way beyond simple recognition of a statistic. This wasn't just any excuse for feel-good time in summer — this was a celebration, an affirmation of the place itself. It was the latest chapter of a romance between the city and the ways of war that's lasted as long as white folks have crawled over this hump of land clogging up the harbour.

Canada's commitment to NATO and our tired old Navy have special resonance in such a climate.

Into a place that conjures up images of fishing villages, Cape Breton coal mines, or Annapolis Valley apples, the Department of National Defense quietly dropped \$868 million in 1983 by its own estimate. That's more than the money spent that year on fishing, agriculture, or mining combined, according to figures of the Nova Scotia Department of Development.

It works out to 21,645 of what the DND calls "person years" of employment, with 14,700 of those bottled up in Halifax harbour. Add families to that, divide it into a population of about 200,000 in the Halifax-Dartmouth area, and you have about one in four human beings here depending directly on the military for their daily break. That's not counting the jobs indirectly relying on that military base.

Halifax Mayor Ron Wallace knows all this. Wallace, whose wrinkles bear a striking resemblance to Ronald Reagan's in the right light, is no great communicator but still understands the politics of feeling good. He likes upbeat things like civic celebrations, and isn't that crazy about down-beat things like peace activism in a harbour regularly visited by US nuclear submarines with enough nuclear missiles to wipe out a continent.

His fellow aldermen think the same way, and that's why in 1983 City Council refused to let the public vote on the issue of making Halifax a nuclear-free zone. Among other referendum would estimate of \$50,000, which is ten times more than Vancouver spent on the referendum.

When another attempt was made to bring about a referendum this year, the all-male city council (minus the two women who were the only dissenting votes earlier) termed it a "non-municipal issue" and initially refused to even debate the question. A second try at having the referendum approved showed just what these politicians were made of. Despite a commissioned poll showing that 78.1 percent of Haligonians favoured holding a referendum, it bogged down in council. One alderman suggested they ask the military what to do before voting on the question. Alderman Murray Doehler tried amending to the referendum so it would only forbid "unnecessary" nuclear weapons and component systems, whatever that means.

In the end, nothing was done again. Perhaps the councillors were worried that of 193 Canadian municipalities to hold disarmament referenda, the citizens voted for disarmament in the majority 191 times. And a "yes" vote could upset the nice men at Maritime Command Naval headquarters.

"The Tattoo brings together the military and the people of Nova Scotia, conscious of their common heritage, common interests, and their common way of life." — Program notes for the Nova Scotia Tattoo.

Militarism is a strange animal as far as nasty social habits go. If pressed, most people seem to agree that tetching war and violent conflict resolution isn't too bright an idea, especially with so many nuclear weapons lying around. But that doesn't mean they'll unilaterally mentally disarm, either. As long as there's a need for guns an' stuff, we may as well feel good about it, eh?



Enter the Nova Scotia Tattoo. Since 1979, this five-night extravaganza has been wowing audiences packed into the Halifax Metro Centre as it reminds the masses of all the good things war's given to us over the years — like marching bands, military music, community spirit, and bright and shiny uniforms. Col. Ian Fraser is the guy who's masterminded all six NS Tattoos plus the "Canadian Armed Forces tattoo" which toured the country this summer, and he understands his audience well. A few years back he said they were aimed at "the sort of guy who'd take the wife and kids out to watch a street parade. That's the type of cat we're reaching, and that's 90 percent of the population." Since then, the 1985 Tattoo, "hailed as one of the most creative and energetic entertainment events in the world," by its own programme notes, is bigger, louder, and more war-obsessed than ever for this Atlantic Naval Assembly show.

Beginning with CBC radio legend Don Tremaine playing Phil Donahue to the crowd ("How many New Brunswickers do we have here tonight?" Cheer. "Any ... Americans?" Applause.), the atmosphere was filled with down-home excitement on opening night. Prince Randy Andrew injected the sex appeal into the opening ceremonies while riding around the concrete rink surface in a white convertible, but there was no shortage of excitement in the rest of the show.

For almost three hours, the 8,000 ladies and gentlemen, children of all ages in the Metro Centre were able to: SEE! exciting production numbers taking place at different periods in Halifax's Naval History!; HEAR! six full marching bands playing music you love to march to, including the Quantico Band of the U.S. Marine Corps," prepared (says the programme) at any time to put aside musical instruments and take on any tasks the corps assigns"; CHEER! As Premier John Buchanan promises the unveiling of the "New, navy blue" \$55 million uniforms at the Canada Day performance; WINCE! at ceremonial gun salute after gun salute, bringing new meaning to the term, "More bang for your Buck"; and THRILL! to the action of men in simulated combat and training drills "designed to quickly separate the courageous and agile from the timid and frail."

Amid such action and excitement, the Tattoo does take time out for a few sombre moments in salute of "the sailor who patrols our sea now, and tomorrow, and all our tomorrows so that freedom may live on our tide-washed shores." But it never does get around to mentioning the Halifax Explosion, which incidentally killed more Halifax residents than ALL the Canadian sailors lost in the Second World War. Nor does it create any production numbers to re-enact the postwar riots of 1918 and 1945 when the city was ripped apart and looted by celebrating troops.

Mentioning any of that would only spoil the tattoo party, co-funded by the provincial department of Tourism and Maritime Command to the tune of over \$400,000 in provincial funds alone. There were 8,000 paying customers on opening night who wouldn't change a thing, with 32,000 more waiting in line. And the customer is always told they're right.

*"Would I lie to you
Would I lie to ya honey
Now would I say something
that wasn't true?
I ask you pretty baby would I
lie-ie-ie to you?"*

— The Eurythmics, playing over the West German frigate *Rheinland-Pfalz's* speakers during open house weekend.

Like most blowout parties, Halifax's Naval celebrations peaked late and strong, lasting until the very last guest had left. When good and then gorgeous weather broke through the non-stop rain and grey on Saturday, the first day the ships were open to public viewing, HMCS Dockyard became the place to be during the after-

noon visiting hours. It accumulated the look, and feel of a street festival as thousands of people spilled onto the jetties and streets in between ships anchored as many as three abreast. Chip-wagons were on the scene, as were hundreds of cameras, trendy mirror sunglasses, and black baseball caps bearing the name of a favorite ship and gold oakleaf clusters. This was a crowd made up mostly of young women and young men, nuclear families, and older people tweaking their nostalgia glands for vivid WWII memories and beyond. They chatted, smiled, and pointed their fingers. They asked questions. They looked intently at large grey rectangular containers containing Exocet missiles and had their pictures taken with them. And they got in line for boarding the ships, drawn closer together by the shared experience of being there, partying patriotically on a special Canada Day weekend.

In all, about 45,000 people came to see the ships, not counting repeaters frustrated by long lines for their favorite vessels on earlier days. And even that doesn't include the number who had earlier admired the warships from land while they were anchored in the harbour's Bedford Basin for the Naval Review.

In Halifax, NATO is spelled 'NEAT-O'

As soon as the 34-ship, 13-country fleet had assembled in parallel lines for the Review, the dual pilgrimage had begun in earnest. As thousands of sailors left the fog and rain of the harbour for the fog and rain of the city, Haligonians returned to the gawk by crawling around the highway surrounding the Basin, creating "some of the longest lines of traffic the Bedford Highway had ever seen," according to the *Halifax Daily News*. But they were not so close you could touch 'em, and people were attracted to the ships like awkward teenagers to a Chuck Norris flick.

It was a week in Halifax when NATO was spelled NEAT-O, and sailors gleefully supplied their visitors with enough statistical information to keep war junkies content for a year. There were a few outsiders like the Brazilian and Finnish ships, but on the whole, these were decent, god-fearing fighting machines from "our side", parked on our private lot. The Soviets, who had one of the most popular Tall Ships in last year's Parade of Sail, didn't get the call this year. They were too busy playing "the enemy" off the coast.

It was easy to spot who were the stars and who were not just by watching the lines to get on board. Despite this being their anniversary and supposedly a celebration for them, the Canadian Navy was not the main attraction on those docks. They were older, and didn't have enough firepower to match the real stars — Falkland/Malvenas veterans HMS *Brilliant* and HMS *Alacrity* and the American guided missile frigates USS *Richard E. Byrd* and *Stephen W. Groves*. The *Brilliant's* sterling young officers proudly pointed out to the admiring throngs each patched square bit of super-structure where "we caught a bit of Argentine fire", while reassuring us they gave as good as they got — and then some — to the "Argies."

If the sweet stench of British victory was a sexy attraction to many, so was the cool appeal of the *Richard E. Byrd*. All its visitors had to check their cameras, bags, or anything large enough to carry something nasty before boarding and walking up to the sleek, single missile perched upright on the ship's prow. The *Byrd's* special charm, besides the fact that it's American and thus automatically very powerful, lay with that calm-looking missile launcher up front.

"Well, it has three kinds of missiles I can talk about," says the young Marine guide, looking both very alert and very bored, "and then there's the one I can't tell you about." He pauses for timing, begins nodding his head and slides, "But it's here,"

he points out to me, as if the most reassuring thing he could possibly say at that moment was that I was standing on a floating stockpile of nuclear weapons.

My travelling companion for the day, a Halifax man in his late sixties, was here for the last Naval Review during the Canadian Centennial Celebrations, and doesn't remember it being at all like this. "This is — well, it's almost like a carnival.

"In '67, it was more sombre," he recalls. He thinks he has the reason for the good times here, too. "It makes people appreciate it (the military) more. Now" — he gestures about at the packed dock — "they wanna show their gratitude." It's an intriguing idea, somewhat similar to reasoning that blames increasing rape and pornography on a feminist "threat" to men.

I think my temporary buddy was way off the target in figuring the Halifax scene. What's going on here is not because of anything new that's happening, it's because of all the old things that haven't changed. Like sailors and the role of women, for instance. When officials arranged a telephone hot-line for 600 women to volunteer as "dates" for sailors at a ball, Lt. Chris Davies, the "official cupid" of the 75th anniversary celebrations, called it "a tremendous opportunity for women." This was just months after several women were fired from a Nova Scotia base because they're lesbians. Nothing new there.

At the ball, the *Chronicle-Herald* quoted a young British marine comparing Halifax to the Falkland Islands. "Port Stanley is a bunch of wooden huts with sheep roaming around. Halifax is a big city with women roaming around." The *Daily News* ran a photo of a young woman talking to a sailor at the ball with the cutline "Spoils of War." Nothing much new there either. Some things, like misogyny and militarism, just keep coming back for more.

There were equally familiar links between war and business at the Atlantic Naval Assembly as well. A *Mail Star* article coyly titled, "European Navies Just Won't Salute" pointed out the urgency with which several countries were trying to sell the Canadian Navy on their designs for destroyers and frigates — which just happened to show up on display in the harbour. They were looking for what an Italian vice-consul called a "piece of the action" now that the Tories were in office and the military was expected to be boosted. So Britain, France, Italy, West Germany, and the Netherlands all sent over some hot little models to this floating trade fair for the war business. The line-up in Bedford Basin and at the docks was like a supermarket display the Canadian Navy was picking through for lunch. It looked like something else as well.

As the warships lined up in row upon row in Bedford Basin for the sail-past of Governor-General Jeanne Sauve and Prince Andrew, it struck echoes of similar lifeless Soviet celebrations of military might. As Jeanne 'n Andy sailed through the floating steel corridors topped with cardboard cut-out sailors silhouetted in the sky, there was a void at the centre of the event. It was almost an unstated feeling in the air that we were only witnessing a dress rehearsal for something, like a repeat of the glory days of the harbour in the Second World War. Or a mass funeral.

Most residents of Halifax seem to live with the former feeling, not the latter. It was no mistake that the assembly of warships in the Bedford Basin bore a striking resemblance to photos of convoys waiting in the port during the Second World War. That photo is still where people live, where there are still "good wars" to be fought and won, and good times to be had in them. As if on cue, one week after the assembly, yearly testing began on the city's nuclear defence sirens to make sure they are operational. Halifax is ready to serve until there's nothing left to serve.

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