

When the Navy came to town

Wartime memories of Liverpool Town Hall



During the war the I.O.D.E. set up a welcome center on the second floor of the Liverpool Old Town Hall. Katie Ingram

“We’ll be busy at the canteen tonight girls, a frigate came in today.”

Words from a diary, memories of an age as I remember it, and apology for the facts I may have distorted. It’s about the part played by the Liverpool Old Town Hall during the war years.

There’s a part of our town history we tend to forget. It was during the Second World War, when the Canadian Navy overwhelmed the town. It became a town of perpetual activity — the streets full of sailors, restaurants open until late at night, several dances a week, basketball games, wrestling matches, etc.

And the ships in the harbour: Corvettes and frigates that sailed into port after long weeks at sea. The ships were here to be refitted at two machine shops — one at the Mersey Paper plant in Brooklyn and one at Thompson Brothers on the Liverpool waterfront.

During the war the I.O.D.E. set up a welcome center on the second floor of the Liverpool Old Town Hall; we called it the canteen. It was for the boys from the ships. We called them boys, for many were not long out of high school. Ladies of the I.O.D.E., along with many helpers, were there to serve hot drinks and sandwiches, or just sit and chat or play cards with the boys. There was one older lady who stood out and because of her bearing, we all called her “Admiral Nell.”

When these men joined the Navy, could they have realized what they would face in the years ahead? They were to be part of a convoy that accompanied Europe-bound supply ships. Not only did they face constant attacks from the German U-boats, but should they be hit or separated from the convoy, they were on their own. No ship could leave the convoy to rescue them. Then they had to deal with the Atlantic Ocean with its fierce storms and turbulent seas.

When the ships entered our port, the men knew that, for a while, they could be free from the dangers of warfare. It was then that the town came alive. People welcomed them into their homes, and lifetime friendships were formed. The place that became a second home to them was the I.O.D.E. canteen, the upper room in the Old Town Hall. It was a warm, friendly room with its game tables, its mementos that line the walls, each one a gift from a visiting ship.

In the diary before me is a list of the ships that visited in the fall of 1944 and up until D-Day. The Woodstock, the Sault Ste. Marie, the Dauphin, the St. Boniface, the Brandon, the Prince Rupert (a frigate), the Rimouski, the Ungava, the Port Arthur...

The boys liked to sing with the servers. They would gather around the piano, calling out requests. You knew where their thoughts were when they asked for: “I want a girl, just like the girl that married dear old Dad.”

The Navy set up its headquarters in the Elmwood Hotel, which was on lower Main Street, where you now find the Museum parking lot. A large building was erected behind it, and it was there that we went to the Navy dances. It was the jitterbug age — two favourite tunes were: In The Mood and String of Pearls.

Each visiting ship put on a dance. Beside the Elmwood, dances were held in the Masonic Hall, the school auditorium, the yacht club and at Happy Landing (an Air Force Dance). There were long lines, from the Astor Theatre to past the corner shoe store, waiting for the opening movie. The Radio Café on Main Street was a popular place to go.

The evening church services were well attended. For medical needs, Mrs. McNeil on King Street ran the Cottage Hospital.

The Navy boys were walkers. It was as if they needed to feel the ground beneath their feet. It was solid, it was steady — no ocean moving beneath them. They walked the roads, the railroad tracks, the hills, the ledges. They walked to White Point Lodge.

And then the War ended. The boys went back home and our loved ones returned. We grieved for those who would never come back. The future was before us. We wanted to forget the War with its terrible losses, and memories that for some were so hard to bear.

So we close the book on that period of our history. Is it too late to tell our young people about the part that Liverpool played in the War years? At night, when the town sleeps, and you approach the town hall...are those footsteps you hear...footsteps of Navy boys ascending the stair, and the voice of Admiral Nell:

“We’re going to be busy tonight girls, there’s a frigate in.”

Barbara Brittain Tutty

Grade 1V teacher, 1944-45

A class of 46 pupils

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