

BY AN OLD HYDROGRAPHER

Survey Vessel Acadia

On July 5th 2003 the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, the Canadian Hydrographic Service and former officers, staff and crew of the CSS Acadia, gathered in Halifax, Nova Scotia, to celebrate her 90th birthday. The Acadia was the pride of the Canadian Hydrographic Service fleet for many decades. Now, as the museum's largest artefact, she draws considerable attention, respect and admiration from those who appreciate fine vessels.

The Canadian Survey Ship (CSS) *Acadia* was designed and built for hydrographic surveys by Swan, Hunter and Wigham Richardson Ltd. at Newcastle-upon-Tyne, England. She arrived in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on July 8th 1913 and served her country admirably for the next 56 years.

Acadia, is a 170-foot ship with a displacement of 1,700 tons. She was strengthened for work in ice with extra framing and 7/8-inch plating. She has coal-fired boilers and triple-expansion steam reciprocating engines. She had a complement of sixty, including up to ten hydrographers. In addition to her work as a hydrographic vessel, she served proudly in both world wars and was extremely fortunate to survive the very disastrous 1917 Halifax explosion.

Hydrographers were eager to serve aboard the *Acadia*, one of the reasons being that she operated during an era when hydrographers were considered the elite aboard the vessel. Accommodations for hydrographers were excellent. Beautiful mahogany and oak panelling and well-polished brass fittings were found throughout the hydrographic areas. The quarters for the Hydro-grapher-in-Charge were particularly spacious and elegant. It was estimated that his quarters represented 20% of the total accommodation space on the ship. He had a double berth and a private bathroom, complete with the only bathtub on the ship. The Hydrographer-in-Charge was treated like the owner, and he was truly in charge.

The Captain and his officers and crew were there to support the hydrographic programme. The officers manned the bridge, ensured that the ship was ready for hydrographic activities and were responsible for the safety of the ship and those on board. Provided the weather was suitable, the captain would have the ship in the work area and ready to lower the launches by 08:00. The many good officers and crew who served aboard this grand old ship made a very significant contribution to the hydrographic programmes. They worked hard and long hours, year after year, quietly and effectively contributing to the surveys and routinely making the hydrographers 'look good'.

Hydrographic surveys by the *Acadia* were conducted in the ice packs of Hudson Bay and Strait, along the rugged shores of Newfoundland and Labrador, in the stormy waters of the Gulf of St. Lawrence and along the coast of Canada's Maritime provinces. I was very fortunate to have the opportunity to serve aboard her for two survey seasons, 1962 and 1963. A survey season, at that time, was typically six months. As I recall, life on *Acadia* was good. It was interesting and pleasant. We worked hard and at times played hard. The hours were long and overtime was not part of the vocabulary. There were no computers – not even calculators! We had log tables and complex computation forms. There was healthy competition to see who could get the most number of sounding fixes during a day, who carry out the greatest number of 'geodetic' calculations or ink the neatest sounding.

The food on the *Acadia* was basic but plentiful. Many meals were cooked in the steamer in the galley, as steam was readily available. At times one could bite into a potato, carrot or turnip and they all tasted the same. Often when we were out in the launches and missed the scheduled supper hour, the pork chops would be curled up at the edges after sitting around for a few hours. There are also rumours of pork chops being used, by the crew, as hockey pucks on the ship's deck.

Coastal communities where she carried out her surveys welcomed the Acadia. Locals would often come to visit. Occasionally, a movie would be projected from the ship to a screen on a dockside building and members of the community would join the ship's complement in watching the show.

There are many good stories of the men of the *Acadia* integrating with people of the coastal communities. It was said that the *Acadia* used to leave a port with a better reputation than she had upon arrival. She was well known and easily recognised along the Atlantic seaboard for her unique trail of black smoke. Because *Acadia* often worked in remote areas she was frequently called upon to assist in rescue missions. There are many positive stories recorded of her exceptional service to people and communities. Her greatest work of mercy was the evacuation in 1961 of about six hundred men, women and children from areas threatened by raging forest fires along the East Coast of Newfoundland.

When I joined the *Acadia* one of the traditions, very noticeable, was the segregation aboard the ship. The crew was not allowed in the hydrographers' quarters and fraternising was discouraged. These 'rules' were strictly enforced. This clear and so very

obvious distinction between groups of people was accepted as the way things were to be; it was not questioned.

The ship's officers and crew tended to stay with the ship for extended periods of time. Many served ten to twelve consecutive years and occupied the same berth year after year. As a result they knew the ship and their jobs very well, and it was the crewmembers that quite often taught the hydrographers how to build a station and carry out other repetitive aspects of the surveys.

As young hydrographers we had complete trust in the coxswains to safely run the launches in all kinds of weather, and many times in shoal infested waters. Our trust was in good hands.

The very capable seamen would row us ashore in a dory and then tell us when to jump for the rock just exposed by a receding wave. The crew, almost exclusively from the Maritime provinces, made our job as hydrographers so much more effective.

Following a long and illustrious record of service, the *Acadia* was decommissioned in 1969. After a decade of remaining idle she, due to the significant contribution she had made to Canada and the Canadian Hydrographic Service, was declared of national historic significance. In 1982 she was moved to the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. This was a great achievement for the hydrographic community and a wonderful new opportunity for the Maritime Museum.

The Museum staff has done a marvellous job of preserving the *Acadia* and making her part of living history. It is obvious that the *Acadia* is an integral part of the museum's collection, as she continues to be well maintained and new programmes are being developed to encourage visitors and educate the public about her significant work. The museum staff is also to be applauded for organising the celebration of significant events in *Acadia*'s life. Bringing back former crewmembers and hydrographic staff to celebrate her 75th and 90th birthdays were very laudable initiatives. These 'special' occasions bring back many fond memories for those that served aboard her.

The most recent *Acadia* celebration was for her 90th birthday in 2003. The party was well attended by a good mix of officers, crew and hydrographers. The oldest guest was Cliff LeBlanc, who served aboard the *Acadia* as a seaman during her surveys in Hudson Bay during the early 1930s. Mr LeBlanc shared the honour of cutting the birthday cake with Ross Douglas, who was a junior hydrographer on the *Acadia* in 1960.

The Maritime Museum of the Atlantic is a great organisation and is doing good things for the Atlantic Provinces and for all of Canada; it deserves a lot of thanks and support from the hydrographic community. The Museum is committed to maintaining this grand old ship in perpetuity for the people of Canada. The next time you come to Halifax, a visit to the museum and the *Acadia* should be on your agenda.