

BACKGROUND

Captain (Navy) William H. Wilson, OMM, AOE, CStJ, MSM, CD

William (“Bill”) Hargen Wilson was born in Winnipeg, Manitoba, on November 5, 1924, the first child of Thomas and Marion (née Hargen) Wilson, both Scottish immigrants. Bill’s father, who was from Govan, Lanarkshire, on the south bank of the River Clyde and part of the City of Glasgow as of 1912, came to Canada to seek employment in 1920. His mother—known affectionately as Minnie—was also from Govan. She arrived in Canada in 1923, and Bill’s parents married in Winnipeg in July that year.

Bill was not quite 15 when Canada declared war against Germany in September 1939. Although still a teenager, he was determined to follow the example of his father, who had served during the Great War. Tommy Wilson saw action with the Highland Light Infantry at Gallipoli in 1915 and was reportedly wounded on several occasions while later serving on the western front.¹ Bill wanted to secure a place with the Highland Cadet Corps, but recruitment limits prevented him from doing so. On a whim, he decided to join the sea cadets, which were accepting applications. Formed in 1920, Winnipeg’s Royal Canadian Sea Cadet Corps was named after John Travers Cornwell, who died heroically in the Battle of Jutland in 1916 at age 16 and, for his gallantry, was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross.

Three years later, when he reached the age of 18, Bill enlisted with the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR) in Winnipeg.

Convoy duty in the Atlantic—and D-Day

Most of Bill Wilson’s wartime navy experiences were spent as a seaman gunner with *HMCS Ottawa* (H31), a former Royal Navy G-Class destroyer that was commissioned as *HMS Griffin* in 1936. The ship had participated in the Norwegian Campaign of April and May 1940 and later transferred to the Mediterranean Fleet. In 1943 the *HMS Griffin* was transferred to the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and commissioned at Southampton as *HMCS Griffin*; however, within a month, the ship was renamed *HMCS Ottawa*—the second RCN ship with that name, after the former Royal Navy C-Class destroyer *HMS Crusader* was also transferred to Canada’s navy.

The D-Day landings in France on June 6, 1944, are a vivid memory for Bill.

“We had no idea of the magnitude of the operation, and the amount of detail that had gone into the planning,” he explained 70 years later in a video interview for Valour Canada.²

“By 5:30 in the morning, we weren’t quite sure what we were going to see. And what we saw had never been seen by any man on this earth before...No one had seen that many ships before. You’d stand there with your mouth open. And it was never-ending.” The magnitude of that day’s events was not lost on Bill, who in his words was “too young to be scared.” “All we concentrated on was doing the job. We were trained to do a job, it was drilled into us, we worked at it. We exercised and exercised and exercised, and now, ‘here we go,’” he remembers. Would he do it again? “In spades. It was a great day for the world,” he says.

¹ Wilson obit, The Winnipeg Tribune, 11 September 1978, p14.

² Canada on D-Day: Operation Overlord, D-Day June 6, 1944 - Extended Version, <https://valourcanada.ca/video-documentaries/canada-on-d-day-operation-overlord/>.

Onward to victory in Europe

On the morning of May 8, 1945, *Ottawa* and another destroyer, *HMCS Restigouche*, were secured on the Dartmouth side of Halifax Harbour, having just escorted a troopship into Halifax with returning wounded and many war brides.

When victory in Europe was declared, Bill volunteered to serve in the Pacific theatre, but the war with Japan ended before he could redeploy. He was discharged in the fall of 1945 and awarded the Atlantic Star for his wartime service with that, Bill Wilson could look back and appreciate that he was part of an extraordinary story.

The Royal Canadian Navy started the war with six ocean-going ships and 3,500 officers and men (both regular and reserve) in uniform. At the war's end, Canada had one of the largest navies in the world, with more than 430 commissioned vessels, including cruisers, destroyers, frigates, corvettes and auxiliaries, and some 95,000 men *and* women in uniform, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs.³

Post-war life

After his discharge, Bill returned to Winnipeg and attended business college. He later found work with Canadian Pacific. In Toronto, Bill married Patricia Murphy and became a stepfather to a daughter and father to a son. Sadly, Patricia died of a heart condition in February 1970. In 1975, Bill married Phyllis Young of Toronto, and the couple parented a blended family of five children.

Bill's career soon took him to Alberta, where secondments to work on the Mackenzie Valley Pipeline Project in 1976 and the Foothills Alaska Highway Pipeline Project followed. He then returned to CP Rail in Calgary as special assistant to the vice-president of engineering for the Rogers Pass Tunnel construction project. Bill retired from Canadian Pacific in 1984 to join the organizing committee for the XV Olympic Winter Games, and subsequently served as general manager of transportation for the event's five Olympic Villages. In 1988, he joined Transnova Transportation Consultants in Calgary and was the firm's president until his retirement in 1993. Throughout his civilian life, Bill remained dedicated to naval service. He spent almost 42 years in the Naval Reserve and rose through the ranks in Winnipeg, Montreal, Toronto (where he served as Commanding Officer from 1973 to 1975), and Calgary, until retiring in 1979 with the rank of Captain(N). Even then, he continued to serve the naval community. He was a driving force behind the creation of the Naval Museum of Alberta, which opened its doors in 1988, and later The Military Museums of Calgary—combining the city's former Museum of the Regiments as well as the relocated Naval Museum and an Air Force Wing—which opened on June 6, 2009, the 65th anniversary of D-Day.

Honours and awards

In 1992, the Royal Canadian Navy appointed Bill Wilson Honorary Captain of the First Canadian Submarine Squadron in Halifax, in recognition of his many years of service and tireless efforts to promote greater awareness of Canada's rich naval history. As Honorary Captain, Bill was instrumental in forging a special bond between the province of Alberta, city of Calgary, and *HMCS Calgary*, a Halifax-class frigate that has served in the Canadian Forces and Royal Canadian Navy since 1995, the award added.⁴

³ Second World War, Veterans Affairs Canada, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/remembrance/people-and-stories/royal-canadian-navy/sww>.

⁴ Veterans Affairs Canada, <https://www.veterans.gc.ca/eng/about-vac/who-we-are/department-officials/minister/commendation/bio/388>.

That same year, Bill also became one of only a few Canadians to receive a fourth clasp to his Canadian Forces Decoration (CD), denoting more than 52 years of honourable service. “In addition to his wartime and reserve duties, he has served the military community as a trustee of the Canadian Naval Memorial Trust, past-national president of the Naval Officers Association of Canada, past-president of the Royal Alberta United Services Institute, advisory board member for the University of Calgary Centre for Military and Strategic Studies, and life member of the Navy League of Canada,” The Alberta Order of Excellence profile observed. “He has also offered community service as past president of the St. John Ambulance Calgary Board and as a board member of the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires, Southern Alberta Division.”⁵

In addition to The Alberta Order of Excellence (AOE), Bill Wilson is an Officer of the Order of Military Merit (OMM) and Commander of the Order of St. John (CStJ). And, along with his wartime service medals, he holds the Queen’s Silver, Golden and Diamond Jubilee Medals, the Alberta Centennial Medal, the Canadian Confederation Medal and Long Service Medals from St. John Ambulance and the Canadian Corps of Commissionaires. In 2008, Bill received the Calgary Military Museums Society General Sir Arthur Currie Award, which recognizes Canadians “who, by demonstrating leadership and determination, have made an outstanding contribution to Canadian military heritage and community,” and the Admirals’ Medal from the Admirals’ Medal Foundation as acknowledgement of his role in advancing maritime affairs in Canada. In 2013, he received the Navy League of Canada Robert I. Hendy Award, which is also granted to individuals to recognize achievements of national or international significance in maritime affairs.

“Although Bill Wilson has earned many distinguished titles, his fellow Calgarians and members of the naval community across the country know him simply and affectionately as ‘Captain Bill,’” Bill Wilson was presented with the Meritorious Service Medal by the Governor General of Canada, The Right Honourable Julie Payette, during a ceremony at Rideau Hall in Ottawa on February 28, 2018.

The NAC - Calgary Branch would like to thank Parks Canada, and in particular the support and cooperation of France Faucher and Ron Hallman, for allowing us to use their Backgrounder document outlining the biography of Captain (N) William H. Wilson.

⁵ William H. Wilson, OMM CStJ CD, Inducted in 2013, https://www.lieutenantgovernor.ab.ca/AOE_Legacy/Member/141/Full.



Bill Wilson as a young seaman gunner in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve, while serving on *HMCS Ottawa*.



Able Seaman Bill Wilson, aboard *HMCS Ottawa*, holding a copy of a local newspaper that reads “Germany Quits,” marking victory in Europe and heralding VE-Day on May 8, 1945.



HCapt(N) William H Wilson, OMM, AOE, CStJ, MSM, CD, RCN in 2013 on receiving The Alberta Award of Excellence. For his profile: “What makes a good citizen? I think a good citizen is concerned with everything. He has to be concerned about his contributions to the community. He has to be concerned about educating those he can educate.” *Photo credit: Lieutenant Governor of Alberta.*



HCapt(N) William H Wilson and Her Excellency, The Right Hon. Julie Payette, the Governor General of Canada, after he received the Meritorious Service Medal (MSM) at Rideau Hall in Ottawa on February 28th, 2018. *Photo credit: Sgt. Johanie Maheu, Rideau Hall, OSGG, 2018.*