

# Not Lost at Sea: The Ajax Club of Halifax

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*Halifax was known as the least favourite wartime Atlantic port for sailors and roundly received criticism for the treatment of sailors ashore. The fate of the Ajax Club became a much-cited example of that belief. In May 1945 that displeasure would infamously come to a head in the V-E Day riots. The Ajax Club story and the naval badges received from ships' crews and naval authorities are a reminder of the uncertainty of public memory. The efforts and legacy of a civilian woman was a local story that played an unexpectedly larger role in wartime Canada and in subsequent years.*

*En temps de guerre, Halifax était connue comme le port atlantique le moins apprécié des marins en raison du manque d'installations de repos et de détente et d'une certaine frilosité de la part de la société locale. On a souvent cité comme exemple du caractère peu accueillant de la ville le sort du Ajax Club que Dolly McEuen a fondé pour accueillir les marins en 1940 et qui a fermé ses portes en 1942 suite aux pressions exercées par les partisans de la sobriété. Et le sort des insignes navals que le club recevait des équipages et des autorités navales reconnaissants pour décorer ses murs est un exemple de l'incertitude associée à la mémoire collective. Les campagnes menées par Dolly McEuen pour le bien-être des marins ont acquis une importance nationale pendant la guerre mais, malgré ses efforts de préserver et exposer les insignes navals en guise de mémorial, la collection a finalement été négligée et certains éléments ont été perdus. Le présent article fait partie d'un effort visant à récupérer et à préserver les insignes.*

It was certainly not the first time war came to Halifax, but the Second World War arrived in dramatic fashion when two hundred of the survivors from the SS *Athenia* sunk in the opening hours of the Second World War arrived in Bedford Basin on 13 September 1939. Bound from Liverpool to Montreal the liner had been sunk by *U-30* north of Ireland with the loss of 128 lives ten days earlier. Relying on the strategy employed during the First World War a convoy system was immediately implemented to provide protection for merchant vessels. This would thrust Halifax directly into the longest continuous campaign of the war, the 2,074 days of the Battle of the Atlantic. The decision to make Halifax the western anchor of the trans-Atlantic convoy structure meant a substantial naval force would have to be either stationed at or rotated through the port. The naval presence in Halifax initially was small and therefore inadequate for the task. The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) had only six ocean going ships in total with two-thirds stationed in the Pacific. As a result, Canada once again would have to rely upon the Royal Navy for initial defensive support and convoy escort. To paraphrase a well-known patriotic song, Britannia would have to rule the waves.

The first convoy departed Halifax harbour on 16 September 1939, and would be followed by 376 subsequent convoys totalling 20,000 ships over the next six years. From 1939 to 1941 Halifax served as the most important port in the western Atlantic for the war effort due to its excellent harbour and direct rail connections to central North America. Other eastern ports, such as Sydney and St John's, were hampered by the need for ferry connections and the relative lack of ship maintenance and repair facilities, or Montreal, Quebec City and Sydney by winter freeze-up. The resulting maritime traffic surge created an organizational challenge in Bedford Basin as there could be up to one hundred ships arriving or awaiting a convoy assignment at any one time. With some ships waiting weeks between sailings, the city of Halifax itself was overwhelmed by throngs of merchant and naval crews on shore leave seeking entertainment, a drink and relief from the terror and stress of the North Atlantic crossings. These needs for relief and diversion were crucial: over the course of the Battle of the Atlantic more than 3,000 merchant vessels and 175 warships were lost resulting in a total of 57,000 deaths.<sup>1</sup> In 1939 Halifax was a community still struggling to emerge from the economic depression of the 1930s. The response to the unexpected need to accommodate a massive influx of hundreds and then thousands of sailors initially fell upon volunteer organizations such as the YMCA, Knights of Columbus, Salvation Army and local independent churches and private initiatives. Their efforts were constrained by financial

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Dimblebey, *Battle of the Atlantic* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2016), xix.

issues and the lack of adequate facilities.

Into this wartime environment, Dr Stuart McEuen arrived from Montreal in late September. Dr McEuen had left his position as a medical researcher at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal to enlist in the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserve (RCNVR). The rapid expansion of the Canadian navy was underway and the need for medical officers was a priority. He was immediately posted to HMCS *Stadacona*, the RCN shore installation in Halifax. Accompanying him was his wife, Janet McEuen, who was universally known as “Dolly.”



Janet “Dolly” McEuen, undated photo (McEuen Scholarship Foundation)

The McEuens were born in the UK and were proudly Scottish. They had married in Canada and Stuart graduated from McGill with a medical degree in 1920. They were persons with important connections and influence in both the UK and their adopted home of Canada. With Dr McEuen engaged with duties at the Halifax naval base, Dolly dove into the developing world of local volunteer organizations. She initially signed on with the North End Services Canteen but found that their organization and aims fell short of her own

ideals. Dolly, it turns out, was a force of nature and as a result soon decided to strike out on her own.

She created the Interallied Hospitality Fund as a wartime charity and through this Dolly began to raise funds to realize her own specific vision. Initially this was limited to local excursions and picnic gatherings. To many of the sailors on shore leave the largest issue was the strict provincial liquor licensing law that made it a practical impossibility for a sailor to purchase beer or alcohol except from local bootleggers. Dolly’s solution was the creation of a naval service club exclusively for naval ratings providing food, recreation and preferably with a license to sell beer. She enlisted a trio of impressive official “patrons” comprising Rear Admiral Stuart Bonham-Carter of the Royal Navy (and senior RN officer in Canada), the Canadian Chief of Naval Staff Rear Admiral Percy Nelles (headquartered in Ottawa), and a civilian of the highest

provincial office, Nova Scotia Premier Angus L. Macdonald. With the backing of the Patrons, she began implementing her ambitious scheme in May 1940.

Dolly had to navigate an intricate web of different authorities and obstacles. Municipal, provincial and ecclesiastical authorities all played a determining role in either enabling or blocking her plan. Even the two navies themselves posed a challenge. The existence of a RN admiral in Halifax was the cause of some friction in their relationship. The senior RCN officer in the port initially held the rank of captain and under the protocol of the era would rank below Admiral Bonham-Carter even though the base and waters were Canadian. The operational awkwardness of this situation was dealt with by the having the RN officer conduct official business on a yacht that served as his tender (HMS *Seaborn*) moored at a pier and therefore not on the base grounds itself (HMCS *Stadacona*)<sup>2</sup>.

### **The Ajax Club, 1940-42**

With Halifax officer clubs already established, Dolly's efforts were aimed at both RN and RCN ratings, and she sought out appropriate premises to entertain them. This goal was complicated by the shortage of housing as the population of Halifax rapidly increased but eventually she was able to secure a lease on an old and unused mansion of twenty-five rooms near the harbour. It was in desperate need of repair and renovation but she was able to transform the building through work parties loaned for the purpose from the two navies. Despite a powerful pro-temperance environment that supported the very carefully regulated availability of liquor in Nova Scotia she was able by August 1940 to convince provincial authorities to issue a private club license to serve beer. The effort to acquire the permit and renovated quarters reflected Dolly's belief that the men deserved a glass of "beer in decent surroundings."<sup>3</sup>

The completed facility featured a library, lounges and a bar, and was eventually named the Ajax Club, using the insignia and motto from the Royal Navy Leander-class cruiser HMS *Ajax*. The selection of the name is a curiosity given that the *Ajax* had never visited Halifax before or during the war. It was a compromise decision since the initial choice of "Anglo-French Naval Club" became problematic after the fall of France in June 1940 and her preferred alternative "Royal Naval Club" failed to receive the necessary approval from the British Admiralty, unmoved by the fact that Dolly had already acquired

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen Kimber, *Sailors, Slackers and Blind Pigs* (Toronto, Doubleday Canada, 2002), 52-53.

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Dr. Isabel Macneill, Halifax, 29 March 1982, cited in James F.E. White, "The Ajax affair: citizens and sailors in wartime Halifax, 1939-45" (MA thesis, Dalhousie University, 1984, revised 2020), 24.



The Ajax Club (Ajax Club annual report 1940-41)

stationery, napkins and matchbooks with the name. Dolly later explained that Ajax was chosen since it was the best-known Royal Navy vessel at the time: HMS *Ajax* was one of three cruisers to engage and neutralize the armoured cruiser Graf Spee off the coast of Uruguay, a major news story around the world in December 1939.

Before renovations could be completed and the club officially opened, Dolly received a request from Rear Admiral Bonham-Carter to host a gathering of the survivors of HMS *Jervis Bay*, sunk by the heavy cruiser *Admiral Scheer*, and the crew of their rescuers from M/S *Stureholm*. The substantial press coverage of the August 1940 event was helpful in getting the club initial public notice. The Ajax Club officially opened in November 1940 and was an immediate success with the naval ratings. Illustrating Dolly's impressive connections, the club hosted several high-profile visitors including Governor General the Earl of Athlone and his wife Princess Alice (granddaughter of Queen Victoria), Crown Princess Marthe of Norway, and Prime Minister Mackenzie King.<sup>4</sup> The

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<sup>4</sup> Visitor book, Ajax Club, MG28 I409, volume 17, pp. 2-3, 16, Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

success of the club was evident from the changes made to the admission policy due to the number of visitors. Initially the club was to be open to all members of the RN and RCN (the latter as “Honourary Members”) but soon the club was required to limit RCN ratings to enter only if the premises was lightly attended by RN ratings.<sup>5</sup>

Dolly saw the club as “an experiment in social service”<sup>6</sup> but its success was limited by local resistance from the outset. A major problem was the existence



Sailors buying cigarettes and drinks at the Ajax Club (Ajax Club annual report 1940-41)

of the Fort Massey United Church across the street from the club. The potential for friction was identified early on and an understanding was arrived at between the minister and Rear Admiral Bonham-Carter. However, soon after the club began operation a new pastor arrived in the form of Reverend Gerald Rogers. The very pro-temperance Reverend Rogers was invited to visit the club, but he steadfastly declined declaring that a Christian gentleman would not cross such a threshold. Reverend Rogers also hosted a radio broadcast; his temperance message, alleging incidents of debauchery, became a recurrent theme across the city’s airwaves and was echoed by other local church leaders. Ironically, another problem came from the intense displeasure of local bootleggers who felt their black-market sales had lagged due to the club. As a result of this tension, Dolly on at least one occasion was “convoyed home” by RN sailors. There were other undeniable impacts on the immediate area. The popularity of

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<sup>5</sup> “Secretary’s Report,” Ajax Club [annual report] 1940-41, RG 2, container. 205, McGill University Archives (MUA).

<sup>6</sup> “A Message from the Controller ...,” Ajax Club [annual report] 1940-41, RG2, container 205, MUA.

the club led to some sex workers changing their locale from downtown to an adjacent street where the club's garden was located. Allegations of promiscuous behaviour in the garden was promptly dealt with by Dolly ringing the garden perimeter with donated barbed wire to keep sex workers and naval ratings at a distance from each other.<sup>7</sup>

The war was bringing numerous changes and challenges to Halifax. The tension between the ever-growing naval presence filling the downtown streets and local authorities was becoming serious, and the Ajax Club became a lightning rod for this unrest. Other changes were to play a significant role in the future of the club. Angus L. Macdonald, an original patron of the club, resigned as Nova Scotia premier and went to Ottawa to join the federal cabinet as Minister of the Naval Service. Changes to the North Atlantic naval deployments were also taking place beginning in July 1941 resulting in a very reduced Royal Navy presence in Halifax by October of that year. As part of this realignment the RN's Third Battle Squadron capital ships (and Rear Admiral Bonham-Carter) departed Halifax and the RCN assumed the lead role in the organization of convoys departing Halifax.

The new senior RCN officer was Rear Admiral George Jones, a native Haligonian with connections to the political elite of the city. After some initial cooperation he saw no advantage to divert resources to what had been a largely Royal Navy club with a perceived reputational risk. Dolly responded to Jones' decision to end the support by closing the Ajax Club outright and began leveraging her substantial influence through various channels. From Ottawa Admiral Percy Nelles overruled Jones and the Ajax Club went back into operation with his grudging support. As part of this new arrangement Dolly offered to purchase the club's property and donate it to the navy – an offer that was gratefully accepted by Angus Macdonald in his ministerial role.

Macdonald's successor as premier, Stirling MacMillan, was a staunch supporter of the temperance movement, and coincidentally a prominent member of the Fort Massey church. His wife was reputedly offended by a sailor attending the church which increased his motivation to close the club. The suggestion that the club would reopen and resume the sale of beer was not well received by MacMillan and other like-minded temperance leaders. As a result the deal to donate the club to the RCN came to a sudden halt when Dolly was advised that the province had decided to revoke the club's beer licence and thus eliminate the major source of club revenue.<sup>8</sup> Undaunted, Dolly announced

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Dr. Isabel Macneill, Halifax, 29 March 1982, cited in White, "The Ajax affair," 33.

<sup>8</sup> Ninety-two percent of the Ajax Club's operating revenue was generated by beer sales from 1940-41: "Treasurer's Report," Ajax Club [Annual report] 1940-41, RG 2, container 205,

her fighting intent by climbing on top of the Ajax bar and announcing to the sailors in attendance that she intended to continue the battle.<sup>9</sup> That battle soon reached all the way to the floor of the Canadian Parliament - "Halifax Harbour is full of Navy boats doing nothing but dancing and drinking" claimed one constituent writing to their member of Parliament and duly forwarded to Angus Macdonald.<sup>10</sup> However, hundreds of letters of support were sent including some from very prominent individuals such as novelist and Halifax native Hugh McLennan who wryly considered it a tempest in a beer mug that could be resolved. Canadian newspapers and *Time* magazine published numerous stories on both the work of the club and the struggle to keep it open. A petition which garnered 36,000 signatures of naval personnel was circulated. Dolly suggested a number of solutions including building a fence and changing the club entrance to the rear of the building, facing away from the Fort Massey church. Angus MacDonald, aware that Nova Scotia was known to "drink wet but vote dry," now found he needed to politically distance himself from the thorny issue and bring it to an end, and sided with the factions endeavouring to close the club.

Despite a valiant fight it was too much for even Dolly McEuen to overcome and as a result of the lost beer revenue closed the Ajax Club permanently in April 1942. The RCN still expected they would acquire the Ajax building but Dolly, a pugilist to the end, instead sold the property to the Norwegian government.<sup>11</sup> The closure was a blow to the sailors on leave who had become accustomed to frequenting the Ajax Club since its inception a mere eighteen months earlier.

### **The Ajax Hospitality Headquarters 1942-45**

Never one to fully surrender, Dolly turned to lobbying the National War Services department to grant a new charter. The result was a purposeful compromise. The "Ajax Hospitality Headquarters" was a new and distinctly different operation opened in August 1942. This endeavour was not a service club but a storefront operation to find places of rest and recreation for sailors in communities outside of Halifax. Under the new agreement the Ajax Hospitality was restricted to Royal Navy ratings alone. However, Dolly, not unexpectedly,

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<sup>9</sup> "Minister ends Halifax beer for Navy men in from sea patrol," *Montreal Gazette*, 3 February 1942, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Memorandum for the Chief of Naval Staff, 8 July 1942, MG 2, F883/15, Nova Scotia Archives.

<sup>11</sup> When the building reopened later that year Norwegian sailors were served beer and schnaps without raising a protest from Dolly's foes.



expanded this definition to include the crews of the Defensively Equipped Merchant Ships (DEMS), Merchant Aircraft Carriers (MAC), Fleet Air Arm, foreign navies, and Maritime Royal Artillery service members as well.

Needing to replace the substantial beer revenue lost due to the Ajax Club closure, Dolly created Ajax Financial Campaign Committees in Halifax, Montreal, Toronto and Windsor to solicit donations from corporations and individuals. These committees were composed of leading businesspeople in each city and they were successful in providing the necessary funding. She also undertook national tours to promote the welfare of sailors and the role that Ajax Hospitality was playing in Halifax. Overall she led efforts which raised an equivalent of \$6 million in current dollars from private citizens, and small and large businesses primarily from the banking, transportation, manufacturing and insurance sectors<sup>12</sup>.

Between the opening of the Ajax Club in November 1940 and the closing of the Ajax Hospitality Headquarters in 1945, over 30,000 sailors benefitted from the two Halifax operations headed up by Dolly McEuen.<sup>13</sup> In appreciation, ships companies presented the club with keepsakes over the years, the most numerous being ship badges. A small number were official ship's crests, issued by the Royal Navy, but most were homemade – essentially maritime trench art – crafted by grateful crew of both navy and merchant marine vessels. There were also plaques, testimonials, and ship models added to the collection kept in the small storefront location.



HMS Ajax naval badge being installed on Ajax Hospitality wall 1943(Ajax Hospitality annual report 1943-44)

The badge collection had begun in 1941 with a single wooden hand carved example from HMS *Royal Sovereign*, part of the Third Battle Squadron, and would grow to a total of over fifty badges by war's end.

### The Ajax Club: Postwar

By August 1945, with the end of the war and Halifax returning to a more normal existence, it was time to bring the Ajax Hospitality Headquarters to a close. A financial surplus of \$60,000 and the contents of the storefront location were assets that needed to be liquidated as part of the winding up of

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<sup>12</sup> An important ally was the newspaper publisher J.W. McConnell of the *Montreal Star* who helped generate national press coverage for the financial campaigns.

<sup>13</sup> Visitor books, Ajax Club, MG28 I409, volumes 15-17, LAC (author's estimate).



HMCS Haida

HMCS Stadacona



HMS Renown

HMS Repulse

the organization. For many it was expected that all the assets – particularly the financial surplus - would remain in Halifax. However, as always Dolly had other plans.

She had already begun negotiations with McGill University and shortly after the last sailor had signed the visitor's log on 11 September 1945, the naval badge collection along with other items were shipped to the Montreal university where they were held in storage. Since her husband was a McGill graduate, and the family had a long relationship with the institution it was a natural choice for her. Ignoring the wishes of the Ajax board members to maintain the collection and surplus funds in Halifax, Dolly maintained that

McGill naval badge display in Sir Arthur Currie Memorial Armoury and Gymnasium, 1954. (McGill University Archives, PR009585)

All photos of the naval badges in this paper are courtesy of the McGill University Archives.



*HMS Royal Sovereign*



*RS Pinto*

since eighty per cent of the fundraising originated in Montreal during the war, the surplus and other material belonged there. Finally, Dolly had no great affection for Halifax and in some quarters the feeling was likely mutual.

The McEuens returned to Quebec and Dolly continued to try to find an acceptable vocation for the surplus funds before a deadline set for the summer of 1946 by the federal Department of National War Services. From her home in Mont Tremblant she considered several initiatives with the most notable being a "Layette Service" to provide Royal Navy sailors with a basic kit for expectant wives. When this proved to be unworkable, she began negotiations to approve the transfer of the financial surplus to McGill for the purposes of setting up a scholarship scheme. This last approach was agreed to after

much debate, which went all the way to the prime minister, and the funds were entrusted to McGill for the provision of scholarships for Royal Navy officers studying at McGill in July 1946.<sup>14</sup> As a result a unique Fleet Order was issued by the Admiralty in 1946<sup>15</sup> resulting in seventy-five applications with twelve RN officers accepted. In the meantime Dolly's continued expectation was that the ship badge collection would soon find a permanent and prominent place on the Montreal campus. The university had considered displaying the collection in a planned War Memorial hall and auditorium to commemorate the Battle of the Atlantic. However, the auditorium was never built for financial reasons and the Ajax collection remained in storage. While the university was contemplating an alternative location for collection, Dolly – true to her nature – independently arranged for a further twenty-two Royal Navy badges to be sent directly from the Admiralty in 1948 and an additional twenty from the Royal Canadian Navy in 1950, bringing the total to eighty-eight badges that had arrived at McGill and were duly added to the storage area.

Anxious to have the collection on public view, Dolly maintained constant pressure on university officials. As a compromise forty-seven of the badges were selected for mounting on a wall in the Sir Arthur Currie Armoury and Gymnasium in November 1950. Alan Beddoe, who had designed the official RCN ship badges, was asked to review the selection and arrangement of the new display. An identifying plaque was affixed below the mounted collection which read "In tribute to the memory of the officers and men of the Royal Navy, the Royal Canadian Navy and the Maritime Royal Artillery." The examples selected were largely from the official naval badges received in 1948 and 1950 (from the RN and RCN respectively) and few were from the original Ajax Club collection. Dolly was quite displeased that the complete collection of eighty-eight badges was not displayed and especially that so few of the badges from the Ajax Club itself were included.<sup>16</sup> She continued her effort to have the remainder of the badges mounted, a campaign that continued for several years. The university repeatedly declined to modify the display on the basis that the

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<sup>14</sup> Letter from McGill Principal Cyril James to Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, November 1945, in response to concerns from the High Commissioner to the United Kingdom, Vincent Massey, who objected to Mrs. McEuen's direct dealings with the British Admiralty on the topic, RG74, container 10, MUA.

<sup>15</sup> Admiralty Fleet Order 6186/46, "Ajax" Hospitality Scholarships, 9 October 1946, RG74, container 10, MUA.

<sup>16</sup> Dolly first saw the selected badges at an official ceremony for the opening of Memorial Hall held in the Currie Gymnasium in November 1950. She had not been involved in the design or selection process which in the end saw only three of the forty-six Ajax Club badges included.

uninstalled ones were of less importance, less attractive, or in poor condition.<sup>17</sup>

In 1968, 23 years after they arrived at McGill, she requested the unmounted badges be returned to her. An intensive search undertaken by the University in response led to the conclusion they had likely been discarded. McGill replied that they could only locate three of the badges and returned them to her.<sup>18</sup> Dolly then filed a formal request for an investigation by the RCMP into the missing items and into McGill itself. The RCMP politely declined to pursue the matter.<sup>19</sup>

The naval badge collection remained on view in the Sir Arthur Currie Gymnasium wall for the next forty years until they were removed to storage in



HMS *Ajax* badge

1990, when the wall they were mounted on was demolished to allow for the expansion of the athletics complex. Without a plan to relocate the collection, the badges lay crated and stored below a swimming pool and were, over time, forgotten. In 2007 the existence of the now dusty crates was discovered by a staff member who was emptying the pool storage area and wondered what they were. The query was directed to the McGill Remembers project who arranged for the badges to be moved to the McGill University Archives for safekeeping – but the origin of the items remained a mystery.

In 2018 the possibility of adapting the elements of the 1950 extension of the gymnasium and Memorial Hall was undertaken by the university. Given the memorial genesis of the original structure, the advisory group identified a need to establish and preserve the original intention of the space. The author was engaged to examine the original design and planning process. This led to the discovery of the origins of the naval badge collection housed in the university's archive. The research also revealed that the decision to include

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<sup>17</sup> Memorandum from R. G. Defries, Superintendent, Buildings and Grounds to Cyril James, Principal, 29 November 1957, RG10, container 28, MUA.

<sup>18</sup> The three returned badges were consequently included as part of a group given to the Canadian War Museum in 1981, along with three additional badges that were not part of the 1945 transfer to McGill University. One of those additional badges, from HMS *Ajax*, is now in the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic.

<sup>19</sup> Letter from RCMP Assistant Commissioner J.R.R. Carrière to Mrs. Charles Stuart McEuen, 7 May 1968, MG28 I409, volume 8, file 2, LAC.

the naval badges as part of the memorial structure was made after construction had begun and the possible locations posited for the collection shifted from the memorial arena (not built), the Memorial Swimming Pool and Memorial Hall (built but deemed too small) before the gymnasium wall was selected. A list of the badges compiled by the Archives in 2007 was compared to the original correspondence and reports showed that of the original eighty-eight known badges in the McGill Ajax collection in 1950, only fifty-four were still held by the university fifty-seven years later. The majority of the missing badges are those from armed merchant ships (AMS) and merchant aircraft carriers (MAC). This is perhaps a reflection of both the poorer, homemade, quality of these items and the lower importance assigned to merchant vessels after the war. An additional factor in the selection process was a preference for metal badges as being more durable than wood for display in a gymnasium, a less than ideal environment for the preservation of historical artifacts.

The 2018 initiative to re-develop the memorial portion of the Athletics Complex was derailed by the COVID pandemic and funding issues. The badge collection remains in the McGill Archives, now accurately described in terms of provenance, and digital images were created. The physical size and weight of the badges has precluded a physical exhibition but the possibility of a virtual exhibition has been considered.

While many among the fifty-four surviving badges have an interesting story to tell, one of the most dramatic is that from HMS *Ajax*. Presented to Dolly in May 1943, it was positioned in a place of honour above all of the other ships, mounted on the wall of the Ajax Hospitality Headquarters. Since then, it has been painted with the wrong colours and stolen as a college prank.<sup>20</sup> An important part of its story was initially unknown: how did it sustain visible surface damage? This was finally resolved when Albert Robb, a gunnery officer from HMS *Ajax*, provided invaluable background on the artifact. He recalled a number of decorative brass badges affixed to the main gun tampions in July 1940 for press photographers (much to the annoyance of the gun crew) and never used again once the ship was operational. The damage was the result of being kept in a ship storage locker that was hit by a shell during a later battle off Crete.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The badge was stolen from the gymnasium as part of a 1951 scavenger hunt. It was returned by a McGill student after a public appeal from the McGill Principal.

<sup>21</sup> Author's correspondence with Albert Robb in 2021. There are two other HMS *Ajax* badges in Canada held by the Canadian War Museum and the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic. Albert is now 105 years old and is delighted by the discovery that a small part of his ship's gunnery equipment still exists in Canada.





Dolly McEuen with HMS *Jervis Bay* crew survivors August 1940 (Ajax Club annual report 1940-41)

### The Ajax Club Legacy

What the fate of the Ajax Club ultimately showed was the unwillingness of the Canadian navy and other federal, provincial, and municipal authorities in Halifax properly to address the needs of the tens of thousands of sailors crowded into that desperately overburdened and under-serviced city. The troubled existence of the club and its early demise were harbingers of the revolt of the sailors on 8-9 May 1945, the infamous Halifax riots. This connection has been well explored in other research<sup>22</sup> and in fact was a staple in Dolly McEuen's postwar statements about the club. The schism between the military, ecclesiastical and political camps was evident in the earliest days of the war and the friction only grew over time. A similar environment led to a riot in Sydney, Nova Scotia as well. No other Allied population centres experienced riots in May 1945.

Many of the Second World War wartime home front initiatives were created and managed by women. The Ajax Club was certainly no exception.

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<sup>22</sup> See especially Robert C. Caldwell, *The Northern Mariner/Le marin du nord*, X, no. 1 (January 2000): 3-20.



HMS Warspite

Maritime Royal Artillery

The club was organized and operated by female volunteers (only two cooks received a salary). As many as sixty volunteers were on the club roster at any given time. One of the senior members of the Ajax Club's executive board was Isabel MacNeill who oversaw the day-to-day operations. After the club was closed, she enlisted with the Women's Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Service when they were formed in 1942 and went on to become the first and only British empire female commander of a ship in the Second World War when she was appointed to head HMCS *Conestoga* – a “stone frigate” shore training establishment for the WRCNS in Galt, Ontario (now Cambridge).

The Ajax Club collection itself stands as example of the vagaries of the Canadian experience of remembrance. The fate of the large collection gathered in the Ajax Club and Ajax Hospitality Headquarters paralleled that of many artifacts gathered for commemoration, and then stored away to slip into neglect and obscurity. Although the collection remained intact while under Dolly's authority – including her decision to quickly move forty-six badges from Halifax to Quebec in a single shipment – at McGill University, how they might be preserved and displayed was distinctly uncertain. Part of this uncertainty can be attributed to the substantial downsizing of the original 1944 plans for a memorial structure on the campus grounds which would have provided the potential to display the entire Ajax collection. As detailed above, the memorial initiative was scaled down dramatically by 1947 and the largest component, a planned auditorium/rink (intended to also house the Ajax collection), was not built. Without the new space to mount the badges less than half of the collection was mounted in the gymnasium as a compromise. Of the final selection of forty-seven for the display, more than half were from Royal Navy ships – none



were selected from the twenty-two merchant marine examples on hand – with the balance from the 1950 RCN supplied badges. The decisions reflected the lingering attachment to British links, the pride in the Royal Canadian Navy and the comparative disregard for the merchant ships. Among the “Battle of the Atlantic Memorial” badges selected included HMCS *Naden*, a Pacific RCN shore base, reflecting a casual regard for accuracy or a concern to not offend the badge designer, Alan Beddoe, who served as an advisor to the university.<sup>23</sup> Some of the Royal Navy examples also have a weak or no connection to the Battle of the Atlantic. More tellingly the subsequent loss of so many of the badges that were not chosen for display can be seen as emblematic of post war malaise evident in other quarters. The unused examples were stored in a student residence building and most disappeared without notice by the time of the 1968 search. At the time of the 2007 recovery of the remainder of the mounted display there was uncertainty as to the provenance and purpose of these naval artifacts which had become intermingled with athletic plaques in a storage area since their removal from the gymnasium wall in 1990.<sup>24</sup>

Dolly and Stuart McEuen continued to live at Mont Tremblant with frequent trips to Montreal and McGill. Dr McEuen passed away in 1956. For two decades thereafter, Dolly continued to receive letters from many of the wartime Ajax Club sailors, who she referred to as “her boys.” When Janet Evelyn (Dolly) McEuen passed away in Montreal in 1987 at the age of ninety-six, the *Halifax Chronicle-Herald* described her as “a Halifax wartime figure who battled temperance forces, bootleggers and provincial and federal politicians from her Halifax club.”<sup>25</sup> An indication of her dedication to her role in wartime Halifax was evident in her lifelong preference for being referred to as “Mrs. Ajax.”

The story of the Ajax Club and Ajax Hospitality initiatives led by Dolly McEuen in Halifax between 1940 and 1945 provided a clear example of the complex relationships and friction between local society and wartime military requirements. The postwar fate of the Ajax collection also provides a distinct window into the societal elements of what Tim Cook has described as “the fight for history.”

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<sup>23</sup> Alan Beddoe designed the official crests for 180 RCN ships during his career in addition to other major undertakings such as designing the Canadian Coat of Arms and supervising the designs for the Books of Remembrance in the Peace Tower.

<sup>24</sup> Between 1990 and 2007 a further three badges disappeared from the swimming pool storage area.

<sup>25</sup> “Halifax’s Mrs. Ajax, 96, dies in Quebec,” *Chronicle-Herald* (Halifax), 4 March 1987.

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