

"Nothing Would Be Too Much Trouble:" Hometown Support for HMCS *Dunver*, 1943-1945

Serge Durflinger

*Au Canada, pendant la Deuxième Guerre mondiale, de nombreuses localités soutenaient un navire portant leur nom, et cela était officiellement encouragé. Les citoyens envoyaient à l'équipage des navires des cadeaux et des commodités et se chargeaient du bien-être des marins. Aidant à maintenir le moral à bord, et peut-être aussi l'équipage de leur navire «adoptif» à mener la guerre de façon plus efficace, les citoyens responsables et patriotes jouaient de la sorte un petit rôle dans la défaite de l'ennemi. Un bel exemple de cette relation du temps de guerre est le lien entre les habitants de la ville de Verdun, au Québec, et le navire qui porte à peu près le même nom, la frégate de classe River NCSM *Dunver*, entre 1943 et 1945. Le *Dunver* a joué un rôle utile sur le front intérieur comme symbole autour duquel tous les Verdunois pouvaient se rallier à une cause commune. Le fait que des dizaines d'autres localités canadiennes aient eu une expérience semblable donne au cas Verdun-*Dunver* une valeur d'exemplarité à l'échelle nationale.*

In February 2002, the Canadian Forces newspaper, *The Maple Leaf* published a photo of crew members from the frigate HMCS *Vancouver* holding a 10-metre banner proclaiming "Go Canucks Go" signed by members of Vancouver's professional hockey team. The photo caption noted that hockey team members pledged to wear HMCS *Vancouver* baseball caps while conducting media interviews as a symbol of support for the ship's company while the latter were deployed to Operation *Apollo*, Canada's military contribution to the war on terrorism.¹

That same month, *The Citizen* (Ottawa) published a brief article which stated that: "The officers and crew of Ottawa's namesake frigate issued their thanks to the people of Ottawa yesterday as the HMCS *Ottawa* heads for the Arabian Sea" as part of Operation *Apollo*. Commander Paul Hendry, the ship's commanding officer, said "the kind words of support and generosity that we have received from our home port and our namesake city...were...very much appreciated." Five months later, as the ship prepared to return from

¹ *The Maple Leaf*, 6 February 2002.

its deployment, Commander Hendry wrote a letter published in *The Citizen* on 7 July. In it, he invited the citizens of Ottawa to be "justifiably proud of their ship" then serving in the Gulf of Oman and reminded them that the frigate's passageways were named after streets located in the capital. Re-enforcing the wartime bonds between ship and city, Hendry assured readers that "your ship is out here, and your sailors will do you proud."²

The nature of these particular ships' contacts with the cities of Vancouver and Ottawa, facilitated through the navy's Patrol Frigate City Namesake Program, and this kind of local interest in the activities and welfare of a town's namesake warship are strongly reminiscent of earlier practices in Canadian naval history. These relationships were common and officially encouraged activities in Canada during the Second World War. Detailing the nature of such support and the extent to which it benefitted crew members offers insight into some aspects of the shipboard experiences of Canada's sailors at that time. Moreover, this bond enabled the namesake municipality to prosecute the war vicariously through the activities of "its" warship. Carrying a town's name into action established a concrete link between the home front and the battle front and, in supporting the namesake ship with comforts and morale boosts, the townspeople empowered themselves into having a small part to play in defeating the enemy.

A strong example of this wartime symbiosis is the relationship linking the inhabitants and municipal authorities of the City of Verdun, Quebec, with its namesake warship, the River-class frigate HMCS *Dunver* from 1943 to 1945. Because Halifax was the home base from which the sea-going representatives of many Canadian municipalities came to grips with the U-boats, one might say that this "east coast port" served as the front line, and the North Atlantic the main battleground, directly joining many of these towns with the prosecution of the war.

Verdun is a densely-populated, working-class municipality adjacent to the city of Montreal to the southwest. It lies along the shores of the St. Lawrence River and is bounded on the north by a municipal aqueduct, boxing in the city behind water lines. This gives Verdun a sense of isolation, but also a strong sense of community and local identity. Despite being less than three square miles in area, in 1941 Verdun boasted a population of more than 67,000, about fifty-eight percent of whom were English speakers, including a strong minority of British-born immigrants. In fact, the mayor of Verdun for the duration of the war, Edward Wilson, hailed from Burnley, Lancashire. Almost all the remaining population was of French ethnic origin. Verdun was an enormously patriotic city, with more than 7000 of its citizens seeing active service during the Second World War, including more than 1000 in the navy,³ a very high proportion of sailors from any city. In fact, one might even consider Verdun a "navy town," to the extent this is possible away from the nation's coasts. Accordingly, the naming of a ship in honour of that community seemed guaranteed to generate excitement and pride among Verdunites.

In 1940, Commander Eric S. Brand, RN, suggested in a staff meeting at Naval Service Headquarters (NSHQ) in Ottawa that, despite an apparent willingness on the part of

² *The Citizen* (Ottawa), 19 February and 7 July 2002.

³ Recipient file cards of the Mayor's Cigarette Fund, Box A-536, City of Verdun Archives (CVA).

the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to name its newly-built corvettes after flowers, as was the practice in the Royal Navy, it might be best to name new Canadian warships for towns and cities since "flowers do not knit socks." The obvious implication was that the naming of ships offered the opportunity to link Canadians directly to the naval war while at the same time improving shipboard conditions for sailors. And so, a purposeful and carefully-managed ship-naming policy was born. NSHQ ranked Canadian cities and towns with populations in excess of 2800 to create a list of potential names, although provision was made to allow the naming of ships for smaller communities having demonstrated particular enthusiasm for the war effort.⁵ A namesake ship could serve as a prize for the patriotic.

Some complications occasionally arose. For example, a number of important Canadian communities shared names with others in Britain, (e.g., London or Hull) which the Royal Navy had already employed in christening warships. To avoid communications confusion, no repeat names could be accepted among Commonwealth naval forces. Other municipalities had inordinately long or confusing names. For these and other reasons, the navy developed alternative strategies to ensure that as many Canadian towns as possible obtained recognition. With the understanding that the navy would exercise final approval of all names selected, the naval service solicited recommendations from the communities concerned, more than seventy of which were obliged to select alternative names.⁶ The selection process frequently resulted in intense interest and involvement at the municipal and popular levels. One recent historian of the naming of Canadian warships has noted that this alternative naming policy, begun in the spring of 1942, was "unique among the navies of the world."

In November 1941, Verdun's member of parliament, Paul-Emile Côté, wrote to the Minister of National Defence for naval Services, Angus L. Macdonald, to inquire about the possibility of naming a warship of the expanding RCN in honour of Verdun. Côté's initiative had been at the instigation of municipal officials. Macdonald responded that, as there was already a ship named *Verdun* in commission with the Royal Navy, it would be impossible to christen a Canadian ship "Verdun."⁸ There was strong support in the community for a namesake warship. In September 1942, one Verdun woman wrote the mayor that:

The news this week of the new Minesweeper "Westmount," with a Westmount Officer in command, has prompted me to suggest to you that a similar honour bestowed on Verdun would be a fitting tribute to the patriotism and gallantry of the many men and boys who have gone from our City to serve at sea.⁹

⁴ Quoted in David J. Freeman, *Canadian Warship Names*, (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell, 2000), 89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90 and 137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 90 and 292.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁸ Reference to Côté's letter of 13 November 1941 is made in a press release from the Directorate of Naval Information published in *Le Devoir* (Montreal), 11 May 1943. The destroyer HMS *Verdun* was named for the Great War battle, not the Canadian city.

⁹ Mrs. S. Pierce to Wilson, 20 September 1942, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.

The fact that smaller, but wealthier, nearby municipalities were making headlines in this manner encouraged Verdunites to seek equal publicity for their city's patriotic efforts and military exploits. The day before Pierce wrote her letter, news was released that a Verdun sailor, Able Seaman Michael Scullion, of the destroyer HMCS *Assiniboine*, had fired the shell which fatally crippled the German submarine *U-210* during a lengthy running battle in the North Atlantic the previous month. Scullion's name was on everyone's lips in Verdun and the city's huge contribution to the ranks of the RCN was highlighted as never before.¹⁰ Mrs. Pierce was to get her wish.

Co-incidentally, at about the same time as she wrote her letter, NSHQ informed Mayor Wilson that "in view of the importance of your City in the Dominion of Canada", the navy had decided to name for the City of Verdun one of its new class of frigates then under construction at Davie Shipbuilding in Quebec City. Reminded of the impossibility of using the name "Verdun," Wilson was asked to despatch three alternative names of "local significance" to NSHQ.¹¹

Wilson, a successful wartime consensus builder, was anxious to involve the entire community in every local patriotic undertaking. Consequently, he initiated a city-wide contest to select the three names requested by the navy. Organized by the city and administered by the local English-language weekly, *The Guardian*, the contest offered a first prize of five dollars and was open to all Verdunites "irrespective of national origin, religious belief, sex or age", wording which suggests Wilson's desire to unite Verdunites across linguistic lines in this particular effort.¹² But the mayor's attempt to involve both linguistic communities in choosing the warship's name failed. The vast majority of the more than 150 contest submissions came from English-speaking Verdunites, which is hardly surprising given *The Guardian's* management of the contest. Despite this, the contest had popular appeal. Nearly two-thirds of respondents were female, and only a handful were children. Many of the contest participants mentioned Verdun's patriotic zeal and their views that all Verdunites were united behind the war effort. The citizens selected as their first choice "Beurling", in honour of Pilot Officer George Beurling, the Verdun fighter ace who had gained international fame that summer for his remarkable combat record over Malta. The second choice was "Crawford," the surname of one of Verdun's founders, and the third suggestion was "Dunver," which was simply the interposition of the two syllables in the word "Verdun." The city forwarded these preferences to NSHQ in November 1942.¹³

Of the city's choices, "Dunver" was the only one found suitable by NSHQ, given

¹⁰ *The Guardian* (Verdun), 25 September and 9 October 1942.

¹¹ Paymaster Lieutenant Commander Robert Pennington, Secretary, Naval Board, to Wilson, 10 September, 1942, Box A-331, file 7, "*Guerre 1939-1948 et H.M.C.S. Dunver*" CVA. A similar situation occurred at almost exactly the same time in Edmonton, for which city a ship could not be named due to the similarity in names with Edmundston, the name of a ship already in service with the RCN. See Bruce Ibsen, "A Name if Necessary, But Not Necessarily a Name: Why there was no H.M.C.S. *Edmonton*," in Kenneth W. Tingley, ed., *For King and Country: Alberta in the Second World War*, (Edmonton, 1995), 139-141.

¹² *The Guardian*, 25 September 1942.

¹³ "Competition to name a Canadian Warship in Honor of Verdun" (list of contest results); Wilson to Pennington, 3 November 1942, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.

the navy's policy of not considering names of individuals.¹⁴ On 29 June 1943, Verdun municipal officials warmly received *Dunver's* first commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander William Woods, RCNR, a Verdunite, interestingly enough, in company with his Executive Officer, Lieutenant André Marcil, RCNVR.¹⁵

The frigate's crew at first appeared to pay scant attention to the ship's unusual name, the only one in the fleet mixing syllables in this way. One *Dunver* rating has recalled that while "most of the crew were aware of the origin of the name...at that time everyone was more interested in the ship itself and the job to be done."¹⁶ On the other hand, another crewman recalled: "officers and senior ratings made everyone aware of how [the] name came about [as a] morale booster" and the crew seemed "very proud" to represent Verdun. Another rating aboard *Dunver* has remembered "I don't think 'Dunver' inspired as much pride as 'Verdun' would have, or any other city with its proper name."¹⁷

The frigate was officially commissioned at Quebec City on 11 September 1943. Wilson had hoped to have the commissioning ceremony moved to Montreal and the event called 'Verdun Day,' "so that as many of our people as wish to attend may see 'their own frigate.'" Despite the desire of the ship's officers to proceed to Montreal for the commissioning, the Navy could not agree, citing the delay this would entail in sending the ship on operations, the expense involved in moving the ship, and the fact that this kind of precedent simply had to be avoided.¹⁸ It apparently did not matter to Verdunites; they had their own fighting ship and with it a new focus for their prodigious patriotic energies.

As early as April 1943, Macdonald had invited the City of Verdun, or local voluntary groups, to "adopt" *Dunver* by despatching comforts to the men serving aboard. He noted that adoption by a community "has been found to be very advantageous in keeping up the morale of ships' crews."¹⁹ In Verdun, the Women's Volunteer Reserve Corps (WVRC), a patriotic, uniformed, but unofficial auxiliary service, was the first group to respond to City Hall's solicitations for assistance in adopting the frigate and its crew. By June, its members had begun "knitting for the men."²⁰ In September, although denying the city a 'Verdun Day,' NSHQ still took pains to note "the excellent contribution of men Verdun has made to the Naval Service... [and] the fine spirit of co-operation that each of your citizens has shown

¹⁴ Macdonald to Wilson, 10 April 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.

¹⁵ Photograph with caption, Box A-242, file 35, CVA; "*Livre d'Or des Visiteurs, Ville de Verdun*". In addition to *Westmount*, mentioned above, the frigate *Beacon Hill*, named for Victoria, also had a citizen from its namesake community in command. Rick James, "The West Coast's Very Own Frigate", *Argonauta*, Volume XI, No. 1, January 1994, 18.

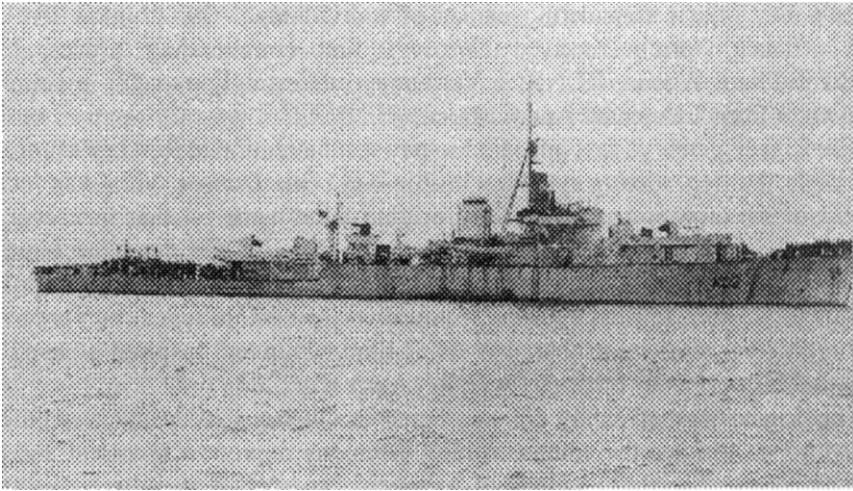
¹⁶ Robert Bruce to author, March 1994.

¹⁷ A. Keith Givens to author, June 1994; Clifford Biggar to author, June 1994.

¹⁸ Wilson to Captain J.E. Oland, Naval-Officer-in-Charge (NOIC), Montreal, 24 August 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA; Oland to Paymaster Commander Joseph Jeffrey, Secretary, Naval Board, 27 August 1943, RG 24, Volume 5836, file NS8000 - 381/12, National Archives of Canada (NAC). Lieutenant André Marcil, for Lieutenant Commander Woods, to Wilson, 13 September 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA. On the other hand, the City of Westmount was able to arrange for just such a day for the minesweeper named in its honour the year before.

¹⁹ Macdonald to Wilson, 10 April 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.

²⁰ Captain Helen Curwood, Acting Commandant, WVRC, to Burgess, 21 June 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.



HMCS *Dunver*, commissioned in 1943.

from time to time in improving the morale of our Officers and men."²¹ Already, the ties between community and namesake were close and increasing.

In developing such a relationship, Verdunites were joining a national trend of benefit to Canadian sailors and townsfolk alike. The experiences of various Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) chapters across Canada in adopting ships had demonstrated, in the words of the IODE, that "the interest created by this contact is very great and the civilian group becomes very concerned for the welfare of the men and learn[s] a great deal of the hardships which have to be endured to safeguard the life-lines of our Empire."²² Adopting a ship improved wartime community spirit and heightened a sense of civic participation in the war.

The first letter sent to Mayor Wilson from *Dunver* came from Marcil, the Executive Officer, two days after commissioning. It stated that "[t]he officers and men are unanimously proud to man this ship that carries Verdun's name to sea and wish to express their gratitude for the interest and kindness that you and your citizens have shown them." Marcil also invited Wilson to join the ship at Quebec, so that the mayor could tour the ship and take "a short sea trip lasting a few hours."²³

²¹ Jeffrey to Wilson, 9 September 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.

²² Mrs. H.S. Angus, IODE National War Service Convenor, Toronto, to Mrs. R.M. Buchanan, IODE Provincial War Service Convenor, Saskatoon, 15 March 1943, MG 28 117, Volume 23, file 1, "Adoption of Ships," NAC.

²³ Lieutenant André Marcil, for Lieutenant Commander Woods, to Wilson, 13 September 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA. No evidence has been found that Wilson accepted the invitation.

Less than two weeks later, Marcil and Woods, the commanding officer, were the guests of honour at a large public dance and reception held in Verdun in their honour. Local of the W.V.R.C. The event was held in a local community centre and was very well attended

MEET THE COMMANDER
OF THE
VERDUN FRIGATE!
Lt. Commander Wm. Woods, R.C.N.R.
(of Verdun)

AT THE
NAVY DANCE

SPONSORED BY THE
WOMEN'S VOLUNTEER RESERVE CORPS
(VERDUN UNIT)

WOOD HALL FRI. SEPTEMBER 24
AT 9.00 P.M.

To Provide Comforts for the Officers and Men of
Verdun's Own Frigate.

Under the Distinguished Patronage of
HIS WORSHIP THE MAYOR and COUNCIL
CAPT. J. E. W. OLAND, D.S.C., R.C.N.
Naval Officer in Charge of the Port of Montreal
COMMANDER F. DAVIS, R.N.
Harb. Control Officer and Other Staff Officers

Special Features :-

- Navy Band of H.M.C.S. "St. Hyacinthe"
- Star Artists
From the Royal Canadian Navy Musical Service.
- "Meet The Navy"
Now playing at His Majesty's Theatre.
- Frankie Modler and His Orchestra
- Presentation to Lt. Commander Wm. Woods
of gifts for the officers and men of the Frigate, donated by the City of Verdun and
the citizens of Verdun through the W.V.R.C.

ADMISSION 50¢

Advertisement appearing in *The Guardian* (Verdun) 17 September 1943.

politicians from all levels of government, municipal officials, prominent citizens, and the NOIC Montreal, Captain J.E. Oland, RCN, attended the dance, as did officers and members by Verdunites, who paid fifty cents each to be present. *The Guardian* referred to the

gathering as "one of the largest of its kind ever held in Verdun" and noted that with more than 100 sailors serving in the Montreal area in attendance, "the dance floor [was] literally covered to capacity during the entire evening". The WVRC was the principal organizer of the event and used the proceeds from the dance to purchase comforts for the crewmen of "Verdun's own frigate." Wilson provided Woods with a framed portrait of the King for the officers' wardroom and, more practically, the promise of immediate delivery of 40,000 cigarettes for distribution to the 130 crew members. The city also contributed \$100 for the purchase of other amenities, to be selected at the discretion of the ship's officers.²⁴ The evening was so well attended and such a success that, in his remarks expressing appreciation for the kindness of Verdunites, Lieutenant Commander Woods told the gathering: "this is one of the very great days of my life... [A]s a citizen of Verdun [I] feel proud to live in... such a truly loyal and patriotic community." He went on to say: "Just a few days ago, your own ship was actually commissioned and I was given the great honour to command her. We are all proud of the name of our new ship, 'Dunver', which, I can assure you, will give an excellent account of herself when she meets the foe. Verdun will always have reason to be proud of her own warcraft and of the gallant crew aboard the ship."²⁵

This was only the beginning of the city's role in channelling comforts to *Dunver* - a role in which the city delighted and which it took very seriously. The navy suggested that groups having adopted ships despatch playing cards, cribbage boards, magazine subscriptions, radios and batteries, electric toasters, and clothes irons. But Canadians most commonly sent cigarettes, clothing, razor blades and toiletries, sweets, gramophones, and sporting equipment.²⁶ Verdunites, too, sent many of these things and more, all paid for by local collections and donations. The city mailed a further shipment of 40,000 cigarettes just before Christmas 1943 and, as a reminder of its sponsorship, presented *Dunver* with an official crest of the City of Verdun for mounting aboard ship.²⁷ It was duly displayed for the duration and, in addition to reminding the crew of their benefactors, it served the purpose of allowing the official home front support structure symbolically to accompany the ship into the war zone. Not coincidentally, the ship's badge incorporated Verdun's crest.

In the fall of 1943, the city clerk, Arthur Burgess, also British born, attempted - without success - to find suppliers for such scarce consumer items as irons and a washing

Re: Verdun Frigate Reception at Wood Hall Friday 24th September 1943, Box A-331, file 7, CVA; *The Guardian*, 17 September and 1 October 1943; City of Verdun Executive Committee Minutes, 14 September 1943.

²⁴ Quoted in *The Guardian*, 1 October 1943. Born into a seafaring family in Liverpool in 1899, Woods was a Great War veteran and master of merchant vessels in the interwar period. He moved to Verdun in 1930. *The Guardian*, 15 June 1944. Woods was awarded an OBE in the King's New Year's Honour List in January 1944, an award which brought great pride to Verdun. *The Guardian*, 6 January and 13 January 1944; Burgess to Woods, 19 January 1944, Box A-242, file 35, CVA.

²⁵ Lieutenant Gordon K. Daley, Directorate of Special Services, NSHQ, to Mrs. H.S. Angus, IODE, 19 May 1943, MG 28 117, Volume 23, file 1, "Adoption of Ships", NAC.

²⁷ List of articles sent to the crew of H.M.C.S. *Dunver* since the adoption of this ship by the citizens of the City of Verdun," 17 March 1945, Box A-331, file 7, CVA; Wilson to Woods, 24 September 1943 and René Patenaude, Secretary, Mayor's Cigarette Fund, to Woods, 21 December 1943, Box A-348, CVA.



Dunver's crest incorporated that of the City of Verdun: a beaver superimposed on a maple leaf.

machine which the city sought to send to *Dunver*. The intervention of the Naval-Officer-in-Charge, Quebec was required to locate a washing machine in October, but irons proved simply impossible to procure. In April 1944, a second washing machine was ordered for the ship and Burgess wrote Woods "nothing would be too much trouble for us".²⁸ The Women's Volunteer Reserve Corps raised through subscriptions in the community the nearly \$300 necessary to pay for the washing machines. With the Verdun Salvage Committee, the WVRC also bought a piano and sent it to the ship in September 1944.²⁹ While the city did not directly pay for many of these goods, it organized or facilitated sponsorship activities and acted as the official clearing house for *Dunver*-related correspondence and information. For their part, *Dunver's* crew also viewed City Hall as the official point of contact

with the community.

In December 1944, the frigate's new commander, Lieutenant William Davenport, who had officially succeeded Woods in August 1944, wrote both Wilson and Burgess to inquire about the possibility of obtaining a 16mm film projector for *Dunver*, a very expensive item. Despite previous fund-raising by the WVRC, however, there were insufficient funds to purchase the projector for *Dunver*.³⁰ But, in response to Davenport's pre-Christmas appeal, the mayor approached several selected Verdun community groups, such as the local branches of the Canadian Legion and the Lion's Club, and some wealthier merchants and businesses, for patriotic donations of about twenty-five dollars each. By the end of January 1945, a new \$600 film projector had been ordered by the city for despatch to *Dunver*. Merchants remained one of Verdun's few sources of substantial and ready funding and civic-minded community leaders often responded with speedy wartime charity. It was difficult for them to refuse a public request for twenty-five dollars from the mayor.³¹

²⁸ Captain L.J.M. Gauvreau, RCN, NOIC Quebec, to Burgess, 8 October 1943; Burgess to Woods, 18 April 1944, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.

²⁹ Wilson to Lieutenant William Davenport, commanding officer, *Dunver*, 6 September 1944 and reply, 29 November 1944, Box A-331, file 7, CVA. Davenport visited Verdun in September 1944 and again in January 1945 while Lieutenant Marcell visited in November 1944 during a Victory Loan campaign. The City of Victoria also provided *Beacon Hill* with two washing machines and a piano and was even able to procure for its ship some toasters and irons. James, "The West Coast's Very Own Frigate," 18.

³⁰ *The Guardian*, 21 December 1944.

³¹ The projector was not actually received aboard ship until 5 April 1945, the first movie being shown two days later. Acting Commander St. Clair Balfour, RCNVR, to Wilson, 7 April 1945, Box A-331, file 7, CVA; *The Gazette* (Montreal), 23 January 1945; Burgess to Verdun city manager J.R. French, 6 February 1945, Box A-331, file 7, CVA. In 1945, the city established a Special Fund *for Dunver*. Following the ship's decommissioning, the remaining \$211 was turned over to the Mayor's Cigarette Fund. Council Minutes, 21 October 1946.

Verdun's bilingual weekly newspaper, *The Messenger*, proudly, and with some validity, asserted that *Dunver* was "under Verdun's very special protection."³² The sailors appreciated the gifts, as one former crewman recalled: "we knew the citizens were thinking of 'their ship' and trying to make the crew happy. [The] washing machine was a big thing and it had lots of 'washing time.'" He went on to state that "smokes, woolen goods, and candy bars were always nice to receive."³³

On one occasion, two Verdunites stationed in Halifax visited *Dunver* and experienced first-hand the crew's gratitude for the city's thoughtfulness. In July 1944, Wren Jean Nugent, wrote her mother that she had boarded the frigate several times, once with fellow Verdunite Wren Violet Drummond.

Lieutenant Pearce showed me about the ship a little and then I met a home boy who finished the tour with me. I chatted with a few of the boys and officers and had supper with them...

Verdun has contributed a rug to the officers' wardroom and a washing machine which is a godsend for everyone. The boys want irons, and the officers request a phonograph-radio...They also expressed the hope they might get a piano in due time.

I was requested to give this information to the "Guardian" so that citizens will know that the officers and ratings of their namesake ship really appreciate what is being done for them and that they like the ship very much.³⁴

The feelings between sailor and citizen were clearly reciprocal. Information for this study was obtained from fifteen former crewmen, none of whom was originally from Verdun. All were aware that their ship was named in honour of Verdun and ten recalled with appreciation gifts and comforts sent to the ship by the city. They were unanimous in describing *Dunver* as a "happy ship," one of which they were proud.³⁵ The generosity of Verdunites could only have enhanced this sense of camaraderie.

Dunver's involvement in naval operations not surprisingly elicited very strong interest in Verdun. Burgess, the city clerk, wrote NSHQ in 1944 seeking information on *Dunver* which might be suitable for local dissemination, only to be advised that no such

³² *The Messenger*, 21 December 1944.

³³ Walter Finlay to author, April 1994.

³⁴ Jean Nugent to Mrs. Bella Nugent, no date cited, quoted in *The Guardian*, 27 July 1944.

³⁵ The fifteen respondents who answered a questionnaire regarding their service in *Dunver* were St. Clair Balfour, Clifford Biggar, Robert Bruce, C.C. Chapman, John Croal, Frank Dion, Walter Finlay, A. Keith Givens, Albert Jackson, D.P. Keller, Walter Mitham, Clifford Quince, John Seale, Harry Speed, and D.C. Walsh. Three other men sent photos only: Douglas Earish, Gordon Hill, and E.L. Taylor. Keller wrote to the author on 12 June 1994 that "I was on board from September 11, 1943 to May 30, 1945 and as the manager of the ship's canteen I met most everyone and recall the crew as happy." Of the twelve correspondents who actually served under Woods, all had fond memories of his stint as commander and remember him as an able captain.

details could be released publicly.³⁶ In October 1944, *The Guardian* reported with obvious disappointment that "little has been heard about the frigate "Dunver" since the day she was commissioned... "³⁷ But the ship was hardly inactive, as Verdunites would soon learn.

That month, Ottawa released the news that *Dunver* had led the escort group which shepherded what would prove the largest convoy of the war, totalling 167 ships, to Britain in July 1944. "Verdun has been honoured by the choice of the "Dunver" as "flag ship" of the covering naval force," crowed *The Guardian*, even though the selection of *Dunver* for this task clearly had nothing whatever to do with the city of Verdun.³⁸ In February 1945, *Dunver* shared public credit with the frigate HMCS *Hespeler* and a Sunderland flying boat from the Royal Air Force's Coastal Command for the sinking of the German submarine U-484 in September 1944. "The City of Verdun has cause for rejoicing today," wrote *The Montreal Daily Star*, while *The Guardian* gushed out the news on the front page of its next edition.³⁹ Every favourable reference to *Dunver* in the press brought pride to Verdun. Copies of *The Guardian's* reports of these incidents found their way to the ship and were proudly posted on bulletin boards. The crew were well aware that their actions were keenly followed in Verdun.⁴⁰

Curiously, there existed a widespread misconception on the home front that Verdunites made up the majority of *Dunver's* crew and this fallacy was often repeated in the Verdun and Montreal press. As early as October 1943, *The Gazette* (Montreal) reported that "most" of the crew were Verdunites. "Many of the officers, non-commissioned officers and members of the crew serving under Lt. Comm. Woods are residents of Verdun", echoed *The Guardian* in early 1944. *The Guardian* reiterated this erroneous information throughout the war. *The Montreal Daily Star* claimed in 1945 that the crew of *Dunver* were "all Verdun and Montreal men." As late as March 1946, *The Messenger*, recalled that "a very large part of...Dunver's crew were men from this City."⁴¹

In reality, apart from Woods, there were rarely more than half a dozen ratings and petty officers from Verdun aboard, though there were also a number of Montrealers.⁴² The

³⁶ Lieutenant Commander Scott Fyfe, for Director of Naval Information, to Burgess, 10 February 1945, Box A-331, file 7, CVA.

³⁷ *The Guardian*, 19 October 1944.

³⁸ *The Guardian*, 26 October 1944.

³⁹ Royal Canadian Navy Press Release, 12 February 1945, Box A-331, file 7, CVA; *The Montreal Daily Star*, 13 February 1945; *The Guardian*, 15 February 1945. Unfortunately, a postwar re-assessment of U-boat kills has credited two British warships with the destruction of U-484. *Dunver* and *Hespeler* are now considered to have attacked a non-U-boat contact. See Axel Niestlé, *German U-Boat Losses During World War II: Details of Destruction*, (London: Greenhill Books, 1998), 69 and 229. The press and population of Red Deer, Alberta also keenly followed the service of their namesake ship, a Bangor-class minesweeper, even though no residents served aboard. It was doubtless similar for many other ships and communities. See Michael Dawe, "Community in Transition: Red Deer in the Second World War," in Tingley, ed., *For King and County: Alberta in the Second World War*, 126.

⁴⁰ Clifford Biggar to author, July 1994.

⁴¹ *The Gazette* (Montreal), 25 October 1943; *The Guardian*, 6 January 1944; *The Montreal Daily Star*, 13 February 1945; *The Messenger*, 7 March 1946.

⁴² Nine of fifteen former crewmen nevertheless were able to recall and name shipmates originally from Verdun. One crewman recalled that the reason life aboard *Dunver* was so pleasant was the "diversity of backgrounds and hometowns in Canada and Newfoundland" of the crew. Walter Mitham to author, May 1994.

belief that the frigate was crewed by Verdunites helps explain some of the pride felt in the city whenever *Dunver* was reported as having successfully taken part in operations. The generalized belief in the city was that fellow Verdunites were responsible for the ship's war record. Perhaps the fact so many Verdunites were in the navy facilitated this view.

On 23 January 1946 *Dunver* was paid off and sold for scrap. The ship's bell was presented to the city in an official ceremony in December 1946.⁴³ In addition to its role in helping win the Battle of the Atlantic, *Dunver* served a useful home-front role as a wartime symbol around which all Verdunites could rally in common cause. Heightening the visibility of *Dunver* and its exploits in the community brought the war home to many Verdunites and enabled a wide cross-section of the population to participate in some measure in the pursuit of victory.

Verdun's experiences with its namesake warship were not unique, except in the details. The overwhelming majority of Canada's more than 300 Second World War sea-going warships carried the names of Canadian communities and most of these were adopted by their namesakes in a mutually beneficial relationship.⁴⁴ But the very fact so many other Canadian communities had similar experiences imbues the *Verdun-Dunver* example with interpretive value on a national scale. Canadians were delighted to have warships named for their hometowns as attested to by their generous responses in assisting with crew comforts. And, in helping improve shipboard morale, they contributed, in some small way, towards winning the war at sea.

[Faint, illegible text, likely bleed-through from the reverse side of the page.]

⁴³ *The Messenger*, 12 December 1946; *The Gazette* (Montreal), 12 December 1946. As of this writing (September 2002) the bell was hanging in the Verdun branch (No. 4) of the Royal Canadian Legion.

⁴⁴ Freeman, *Canadian Warship Names*, 91.