

HMCS STAR

Hamilton's naval recruiting reserve celebrates 100 years

Base accounted for 10% of Canadian navy personnel in Second World War

SEBASTIAN BRON
THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

The year is 1943. War rages in North Africa, the Allies prepare for an invasion of Sicily and, on the home front, the Canadian government purchases a large parcel of Hamilton land to accommodate a growing unit of naval reservists.

Every day, hundreds of fresh-faced men and women from across the country arrived at HMCS Star's wartime home near Eastwood Park to receive specialized training for service abroad.

The base — Hamilton's first building built solely for naval purposes — quickly became a major recruiting depot for the Royal Canadian Navy, ultimately enlisting and training more than 7,000 personnel for service during the Second World War.

Decades later, it marks one in a long list of milestones in the Star's rich history, which come next month will reach centennial status. "100 years, it's pretty amazing and means a great deal to me," said Lt.-Cmdr. Michael Di Berardo, who was named Star's 37th commander in 2022.

The second oldest of two dozen naval reserve divisions in Canada, the local unit was established as the Hamilton Half Company on March 15, 1923.

It had humble beginnings, operating with a complement of about 50 men who wore hand-me-downs

old Imperial Building at Main and Hughson streets downtown.

A tiny office far from the city's shores, the company's first commander — who doubled as a lawyer in civilian life — took the liberty a few months later of exercising an option and moving the division to a three-storey property ideally located along the harbour.

By the end of 1923, the former site of Grant's Sail Loft had been flipped into a bustling naval reserve replete with office and training space, a weapons range, band room, drill hall and gymnasium. Reservists had a football and baseball team, played indoor soccer with other local regiments, and took boxing lessons.

But it wasn't all fun and games.

The Department of National Defence — which was also created in 1923 — had a vision when it created a national reserve with a dozen companies across the country that year: to eventually support a permanent, fully functioning navy in case of need. It was a policy that proved beneficial two decades later when Canada was thrust into the Second World War.

In the fall of 1941, the Hamilton Half Company was recommissioned as HMCS Star — named after HMS Lord Melville, a brig that was pivotal in local defences in the 1800s — which prepped thousands of sailors for combat in the Battle of the Atlantic.

The rapid completion of a new



Lt.-Cmdr. Michael Di Berardo was named the HMCS Star's 37th commander in 2022. The Hamilton-based unit of naval reservists is celebrating its 100th anniversary next month.

BARRY GRAY
THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

the Star become a major presence in the city, accounting for about 10 per cent of all Canadian navy personnel who served between 1939 and 1945.

"If you think about our history back then, it was all during conflict," said Di Berardo, pointing to the Second World War as well as the Cold War, when the Star again enjoyed a prominent role as a national headquarters for the naval reserve. "We were either in war or training for war."

These days, things look different at the Star, Di Berardo added.

While the division still sits on the Catharine Street North land where its wartime barracks were located — those were demolished in favour of a new base built in 1997 — its some 200 reservists face no

by countless memorabilia adorning the Star's base as an ode to its rich legacy. That includes HMCS Haida, a destroyer known as "Canada's most fightingest ship," which Parks Canada considers a National Historic Site.

"We're training to excite now," Di Berardo said, "to keep our sailors engaged, to train people for the regular force and to always be ready to respond."

Indeed, the Star of today takes on a familiar role of its past as the Hamilton Half Company: to be ready in case of great need.

"Our country is surrounded by water; we've the largest body of fresh water in the world, with two coasts and then the Arctic," said Di Berardo.

"But what are we doing in the cen-