



Oral History Interview Transcript

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Interviewee: Captain (N) Don Wilson

Interviewer: Gordon Smith

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Don Wilson

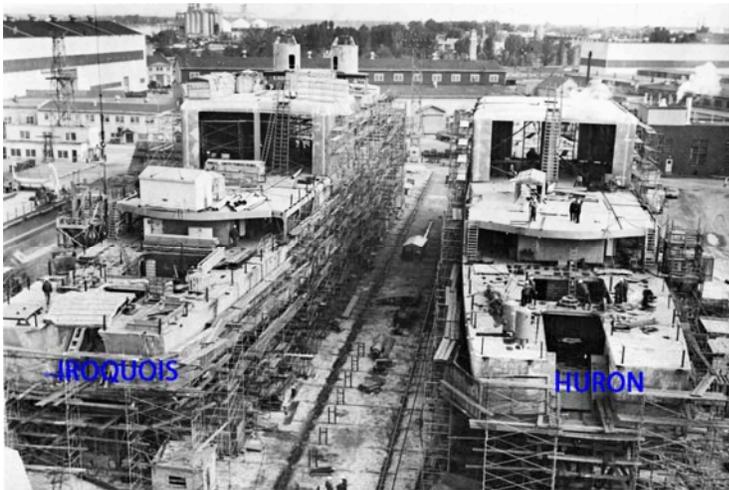
Interviewed 20 May 2010

By Gordon Smith

Interview starts

INTERVIEWER: This is a CANDIB Oral History Project that presents an interview with Captain Don Wilson. It was recorded on May 20th 2010. Don Wilson was involved in the DDH 280 Shipbuilding Program. He was the first engineering officer of HMCS HURON. Both the interviewer and the interviewee have signed the copyright release form. This interview relates to the DDH 280 Program which spans a period from 1964 to 1972 Don was involved with the Technical Services Detachment when the HURON was being built, set to work and trials program. He took over from Gordon Smith who was the chief engineer under contract with MIL Sorel. HURON then went to Halifax. Don left in 1974 and went to the Ship Repair Unit in HMC Dockyard, Halifax. Don when did you first get involved in the DDH 280 Program?

WILSON: Well my first involvement with the DDH 280 Program was in the summer of 1968 when I was posted from [the staff of the] PNO Montreal Area to PNO Sorel - as it was then. Later in the summer it became 202 CFTSD under the new modified Materiel Command and I found myself first of all learning about the shipyard and getting to know the people there. I was involved in the refit of HMCS NIPIGON that summer and fall and that brought me in to a better focus in terms of how the shipyard operates as a building yard and as a repair yard. While that was going on, [pre-construction] work was proceeding for the eventual commencement of the building of HMCS IROQUOIS and HMCS HURON. We had a small staff, but a growing one, as work actually got underway on the 280s. It obviously took a little while. The first steel was laid in a shed which was a little bit different because the way Marine Industries [Limited] built ships, they built them in sheds, assembled them in a field, slid them over on to a marine railway and



launched them from there. A lot of us that were involved as overseers had to get to know this technique and the building of the ships is a whole other discussion. [We learned] how units are assembled, preassembled, how equipment is installed, cabling is run to some extent and how all of this can come together in what amounts to a big field. [It was] something that a lot of us found different but very effective. The shipyard had done this for many years, knew what to do. The 280s were a new beast of course. The IROQUOIS was the first of Class [and]

the follow shipyard in [Lauzon] was building ATHABASKAN and ALGONQUIN and there was a fair amount of to and fro between the Program Office, the Program Systems Engineering [PSE] Group in Ottawa and, and those of us in Sorel.

INTERVIEWER: Don, I realize that MIL now is out of the shipbuilding [business], but do you think that in the future with the Navy thinking of building a number of ships that MIL could get up to speed to be able to do this work again?

WILSON: I would say that the potential has to be there. What's happened to the work force of course over the years is something that would have to be investigated. The facility itself having built a new outfitting (yard) facility as part of the 280 Program; presumably if those buildings are still there they could be re-inhabited and, and work could be restored to the yard. The marine railway - well it's unique and different - [did] the job. We were able to put a quite large warship in to the water, pull it out, do the work we needed and put it back again. That could continue. I don't believe you'd be able to build a JSS in Sorel. I think that the only place you likely can build them, and this might be a political answer but would be in Davie Shipbuilding in,

in Levis [Lauzon]. I would say that the capability in Sorel very likely could be restored if there was a need for it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember any of the men involved with the program that was with the shipyard?

WILSON: I do have some recollections of names although names are not my strong suit I must admit, but I do recall Bill White was in charge of the overall yard that did a fantastic job, had a very good rapport with Alec Arnett our Detachment Commander, Bob McNeilly our Senior Staff Officer and myself, and he was very supportive of the Navy program and I think was personally responsible for keeping everything pretty well on track. Leon Tougas was also there, I believe he was a very senior person also in the shipyard. I can't recall his position. André Rochon worked with him, then, but the real key person in my view in the shipyard both for the repair of



J. Allan, L. Tougas, W. White, G. Smith



A. Rochon, D. Wilkie, M. Gendron, D. Wilson, G. Smith

NIPIGON I mentioned earlier and for the building of the 280s was Maurice Gendron who was the day-to-day person that we [dealt with]. He was the “go to” guy in the shipyard whenever things came up that needed some kind of resolution and we relied very heavily [on him]. I know that you, Gord, found Maurice very helpful as well for the set to work and trialing of the 280s.



INTERVIEWER: Don here's a number of pictures that were taken in the machinery control room and also in the wardroom with the Captain, Michel Goulet and I'm going to give them to you and you can put them in to your interview. [To the left, a photo of G. Smith and Captain M. Goulet]

WILSON: Okay, thank you Gord. I should maybe mention that the CNTHA website has attached to it a photo gallery which has at least one of these photos in it already and it's quite possible that visitors to the website reading the transcript might find some interest in going

to the photo Gallery because in there will be a series of photographs taken during the building of IROQUOIS and HURON that demonstrate a number of things as the ships evolved. I believe there's a photograph showing the original group of Navy and government people witnessing the setting of the first keel plate in the building shed and then of course we go from there to a complete ship which you then were dealing with as the contractor's chief engineer.

INTERVIEWER: You left the Technical Service Detachment [TSD] in Sorel and then you came onboard for setting to work and sea trials of the HURON. When the ship was accepted by the Navy you then became the engineering officer. Could you tell us some information from your eighteen months on board.

WILSON: Actually the period was fourteen months from December of 1972 until February of 1974 (but it was a very full period of time). The ship was in good shape when we left Sorel but just getting out of Sorel was a challenge for us which I will tell you about, but first of all there was the sea trials in November and you of course as the chief engineer with my senior engineer designate Doug Wilkie and myself and the ship's crew basically on board to witness the sea trials, to get a good feel for the machinery plant and to get some sense for the challenges that we might face once the ship commissioned and we found ourselves headed for Halifax. We did

get through sea trials very well. We had the team from Ottawa with Ed Healey and the others did a fantastic job as you did as the chief engineer in putting the ship through its paces.

The shipyard responded very well to any needs as we progressed our way through the sea trials back to Sorel getting the last little bit of compartment painting and sign off from the shipyard was accomplished with a fair amount of success. *[This photo of HURON was taken in the lower St. Lawrence River during contractor sea trials].* We did have a CF 1148 conference as part of the process of getting ready for commissioning. It was a fairly lengthy 1148 as all of the 280s were. If our readers don't know an 1148 is basically a list of the deficiencies minor and major



that may have been, that were in fact recorded at the time of acceptance of the ship. None of them prevented the ship obviously from being accepted and sailing but there were items that were going to require work once we found ourselves in Halifax in the capable hands of the Ship Repair Unit.



G. Smith handing the HURON keys to D. Wilson

Just getting out of Sorel in the middle of December is not an easy thing. Winter was approaching. I had personal experience with this a couple of years previously when HMCS NIPIGON arrived in the yard for a refit and we had to get her up on the marine railway while everything was in the process of freezing. It was accomplished, but it was tricky. Getting through on to Halifax was a challenge as well because we discovered a fair amount of ice had formed in the, in

the St. Lawrence River and as we made our way down river from Sorel we found our firemain pressure was dropping alarmingly on a repeated basis and it turned out that this was because the sea water intakes for the fire pumps were getting clogged by ice and so we had to set up roving crews to go around, clear the ice out of the intakes and one of the crew very smartly said well we'll send this ice up to the wardroom so we'll be in good shape if we need it. Being fresh water I suppose that was acceptable. So we had these crews constantly on the move until we got down to the open Gulf but the whole thing kind of came to a focus because at the Quebec bridge, HURON actually broke its way through fourteen feet of ice, broken ice, but still a bit of a challenge as we made our way it had some bearing on the steering of the ship but we made our way past the bridge got down in to the lower St. Lawrence into the gulf and then everything cleared up. From there it was a relatively straight forward passage to Halifax though we did encounter some very heavy weather off Cape Breton.

IROQUOIS had come out to meet us because I guess they were getting lonely in Halifax and they wanted another Tribal so there we were and it was kind of interesting when we got alongside in Halifax to share stories with our IROQUOIS friends and we found that they were taking 30 to 35 degree rolls in some of this weather. We had never gone past 25 and we were kind of curious to know what might have been. It looks like they, and this was later confirmed when we started adding ballast to the 280s, it was confirmed that even with a full fuel load the 280s were a little bit tender and if you didn't make sure you kept your tanks either empty or full you did encounter what people often referred to as a slack tank problem and with the free surface in the tanks any rolling you do is going to be accentuated. That seems to have been IROQUOIS' problem and something that we were obviously in better shape to handle and something we all learned from that particular experience.

Getting into Halifax alongside, Christmas with families was great. Then in the beginning of 1973 we found ourselves determining exactly what needed to be done to get HURON into good shape, listing the various 1148 items, getting requests for work in to the dockyard. Al Brewer as I recall was our SRU point of contact. I guess he's what you might call the Maurice Gendron from the Ship Repair Unit and Al was of course, having to split the workload between IROQUOIS, HURON and ATHABASKAN. ATHA – B had arrived in September and so three ships were vying for some of the same resources in the Ship Repair Unit. I recall spending some time with Commander Ron Mace, who was the production officer, LCdr John Thomas who was the Production Operations Officer, and the planning staff in trying to figure out how we could make all of this happen. But there was a gate keeper; his name was Mike Lambert, LCdr Mike Lambert, in the PSE 280 Project Systems Engineering 280 Halifax office with Commander Bill Broughton. It was very interesting because in point of fact we were not supposed to be talking to the shipyard, [the Ship Repair Unit]. Our point of contact was Mike Lambert, and, bless his heart, he did a good job of stick handling these job requests through the hierarchy and the bureaucracy that any facility is going to have and SRU was no exception. I learned to live with that and in fact to deal with it when I found myself on the staff of the SRU [fourteen] months later.

But one of the things that I found particularly interesting and helpful in HURON was very close liaison with Larry Liebrock [HURON's] Combat Systems Engineer. Larry and I had teamed up in Sorel for the last six months or so prior to commissioning and I had learned a lot about combat systems from this gentleman who did an extremely good job. Frankly I think he was learning something about the machinery plant at the same time but he recognized that if we went in to the shipyard, in to the Ship Repair Unit [correction] as a coordinated effort that we would probably get more out of PSE 280 and indeed the Ship Repair Unit so we developed a strategy where the two of us would team up and we would say okay what needs doing. Is it a combat job that really needs the SRU's attention or is it something that the ship, the machinery plant and the household services needs and so we found that was a very effective way to work. Mike



and Bill Broughton were very good but they had of course to deal with two other clients besides us and that took time.

Another thing that was of particular interest was the fact that most of the First of Class trials were carried out in IROQUOIS of course as the first ship but for the helicopter trials it was decided that since Commander Dick Hitesman, our CO in HURON, had been previously the CO of

MARGAREE that it would be more appropriate for him in HURON to conduct the first of Class sea trials for the helicopter. As most people will know the 280s carried two helicopters or at least they had the capability to carry two helicopters. There was a hauldown system that would manage the retrieval of helicopters and move them then into the hangar and the ships had been built with extra heavy T1 steel flight decks which of course added to the top weight problem I mentioned earlier and, as a result, we found ourselves with the trials. We were down somewhere around St Margaret's Bay and we retrieved the first helicopter successfully, moved it into the hangar. Another helicopter came along and we retrieved that one, moved it into the hangar and then, to prove the concept of an emergency flight deck, a third helicopter appeared and we retrieved it, pulled it out of the sky with the hauldown and trapped it on the flight deck. At this point Commander Hitesman couldn't resist sending off a message to MARCOM telling everybody in the world that was prepared to read this message that his cup was running over. There we were with three helos in HURON in St. Margaret's Bay. Thankfully the weather was relatively calm because, with that much top weight, we could have been in trouble in terms of stability. It was a very, very successful trial that proved the systems very well and the engineering department was able to provide the support needed and the air detachment were delighted with the way it all went.

INTERVIEWER: Don't thank you for as much as you've given us so far. Now I have a couple of small questions that I'd like to ask regarding our problems we had when we were on trials. Did you have approved operating manuals for the propulsion system?

WILSON: It's a bit of a gap in my recollection, Gord. I honestly don't remember. I do know from some conversations that we had been working primarily with drafts during the final stages of the building and the set to work. I couldn't tell you for sure what the situation was in the commissioned ship.

INTERVIEWER: The other question I have is about the alternators. Did you have any trouble with number two and number three shutting each other down when they were changing over?

WILSON: I know that was a particular problem in the early days. I don't recall it happening during my tenure in HURON. I do know we played around with splitting the load and doing a number of other things that may have been designed to avoid that difficulty but we certainly did have some real challenges with the Solar gas turbines because they kept failing on us. It wasn't the number two and number three although I believe we did lose one of them. I think we kept losing the one up forward, the number one, possibly because it was subjected to more gyroscopic effects as the result of the rising and falling of its platform in the forward part of the ship at sea. We went through a significant number of those generators over the period of time that I was in HURON. It didn't become a joke but it certainly was a challenge.

INTERVIEWER: Another question is the FT 12 gas turbines. We had to change out one of your turbines on trials because of the copper build up in the combustion chambers. Did you have any more problems with your FT 12s?

WILSON: We didn't have any more problems of that sort and I believe as a result of the problems that you had we were able to deal with that. I suspect that United Aircraft of Canada and possibly having a look at our fuels we were able to resolve that issue appropriately. We did have an interesting thing happen though with the FT 12s operationally when we were out in the North Atlantic one time, still in the winter. I happened to go out on to the upper deck as was my habit before breakfast in the morning and I made rounds, upper deck down to the MCR and then up to the wardroom.

That particular day I looked up and saw the FT 12 intakes were totally clogged with snow and when I looked out I could see that we were going through this low cloud which I think some people call sea smoke. I immediately went to the MCR and said to tell the bridge you have to go to the big engines and also dispatch somebody to open up the bypass doors for the air intakes. Indeed what had happened was that the drop in pressure across the air intake had caused the sea smoke to freeze and we had basically clogged up our intakes. By going to the FT 4s, because we were using a lot less air for the slow speeds on the big engines, the problem was not significant but it was an operational experience that was useful experience for the other ships of Class as they operated, if they were operating in that circumstance.

INTERVIEWER: The other question I have is the ship's company itself, the engineering ship's company. When they came onboard they had no experience before of gas turbine operation, did you experience any problems with the ship's crew?

WILSON: Actually it might be as an operating engineer I must admit that I was a little surprised, but I can honestly say that the pre-commissioning training that a bunch of us went to Solar for a gas turbine course, we all went to Hartford for an engine strip down and rebuild course and so it was officers and the senior NCOs as well, I didn't encounter any problems. I would like to think, in retrospect, that it was as a result of a training system but the people that we had in those ships on commissioning were exceptional. They had all of them, myself included, experience only in steam driven ships but we all seemed to take that in our stride and I cannot recall anyone saying, "boss, I don't know how to do this can you help me?" They all seemed to be able to rally and rely on their own intuition whatever material they could find to look at whether it was approved or draft and all of the other things that came together to allow it to work and I never once had a problem.

INTERVIEWER: Don, this is all the questions I have at the time, would you mind giving me your comments as the engineering officer of HMCS HURON.

WILSON: Okay Gord. I've actually got two stories. I just thought of another one and I'll try and be very brief, but they are interesting.

When I was standing by IROQUOIS and HURON and with the intention of taking HURON to sea, as the acting Senior Staff Officer in the TSD I found myself being a tour guide for a series of visiting dignitaries from various locations, primarily from the U.S. One day I was taking a gang of U.S. senior naval officers around in IROQUOIS and we had gone through the three deck Burma Road from one, pretty well one end of it to the other, then we climbed the ladder to the deck two where the wardroom and other things are. One of the admirals said "Well, if I recall correctly the deck we were just on was the Burma Road, what do you call this deck?" I really don't know why I said it but I said "Sesame Street". To my chagrin that has really cottoned on and if you go to, I'm pretty sure if you go to ALGONQUIN you'll find the sign on their two deck. In HURON of course after this word got around I became known as Big Bird, not surprising being a fairly tall person. Our CO, Dick Hitesman, was the Cookie Monster and various other senior officers, various other ship's officers had names as well.

The other story I wanted to mention briefly was close to the end of my time in HURON we were getting ready to go to sea and I had gone up to the bridge to report to the Captain that all was ready for sea. I sort of felt around to my trousers and I said "My God, I forgot I left the keys at home". The Captain thought I was serious for a moment, and I couldn't help it, I had to say I'm not serious, it's certainly not so. He got back at me because immediately he said "Well, Wilson, I think you should take the ship to sea". I said, "You're not serious". He said, "Yes, the XO is right here; he won't let you do anything wrong." Believe it or not I basically took the ship through the motions with two submarines berthed ahead of us, backing out of the berth turning the ship and heading her off down the harbour.

The rest of that story is that in giving me this responsibility, with good back up of course, the CO went down to the MCR which is normally my post and proceeded to see how the other side of things worked for a ship going to sea. I will always remember that experience as I went off in to the Ship Repair Unit it was probably a very good send off and I have tremendous respect for the CO who had the courage to give me a chance to do something that was certainly not part of my job description.

INTERVIEWER: Now when you left HMCS HURON you went in to the Ship Repair Unit. Could you tell us some of your experiences with the 280 program?

WILSON: Yes, I, for a very brief period, was the Engineering Officer in the Ship Repair Unit until May or June having come in February at which time I moved in to the planning office behind then Commander D.H. Benn who had gone in to the MARCOM staff. As the Planning Officer, I found myself responsible for the planning function for the whole of the Ship Repair Unit activities whether it was submarine refits on the synchrolift and in the shed or whether it was a number of other things for various other ships of the fleet. The primary focus for me at that time, with the significant workload being added to the shipyard, [Ship Repair Unit] by the arrival of the 280s, was in fact dealing with the issues of running repairs and some of the leftover

items from commissioning that the project systems engineering office PSE 280 was sending up to the yard. We had our hands full.

The production operations staff in the SRU did a magnificent job but I have to say the planning staff too found their hands full with limited resources and a burgeoning workload. It was not an easy task. It required a lot of adjustments and the recognition that we had to prioritize work so the Planning Officer, the Production Officer in particular had to work closely together and so Ron Mace and I found ourselves frequently looking at how we were going to cope with things. Jack Chisholm came in, as I recall, part way through the process and between us we had to spend a lot of time thinking about how we were going to keep everybody operationally capable. Because there were trials still going on that was a little bit of a complication for the ships' companies but I have to say that the SRU did very well in responding to the needs of the ships.

INTERVIEWER: I wish to thank you Don for sharing your experiences with us. This will be recorded and put in the CANDIB archives and we appreciate your interview. This interview with Don Wilson on the 20th of May 2010 ends.

Unfortunately the HURON was used as a target ship. It was sunk about 100 kilometres off the West Coast in May, 2009.

Interview ends

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

CFTSD	Canadian Forces Technical Services Detachment
CO	Commanding Officer
CPF	Canadian Patrol Frigate
MARCOM	Maritime Command
MCR	Machinery Control Room
MIL	Marine Industries Limited
NCO	Non-Commissioned Officer
PSE	Project Systems Engineering [Office]
SRU	Ship Repair Unit
XO	Executive Officer