

The horror of Hull #192

Kate Grigg, Special to the Packet & Times
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KATE GRIGG/SPECIAL TO THE PACKET &TIMES Jeffery and Susan Potts have written an account of the side-launch accident of Hull #192 at the Collingwood shipyard in 1969.

The men knew, the rally gangs and leaders, the ram gang, the telltale men, the axe men, the jack and dog cleat men, men of every trade, shipwrights and joiners, riggers and tinsmiths. They knew every inch of her, her skin and bone and muscle, how a ship feels and smells and sounds. Knew what it was like to be dwarfed every day by something made with their own hands, that they knew better than their way home, but which would never know them, would become a massive, mysterious vessel belonging to the wind and the waves, the lonely, deep waters of the Great Lakes. Like one of Ishmael's (Moby Dick) great whales, the hump-backed, the sulphur bottom, the narwhal, categorized and named but never fully knowable. Something coming alive along the spine of the keel, within the plated steel, beyond a man's reach. Though they had built her, spoke her language.

A language the children of the shipbuilders heard at home, Jeffery Potts on Oak Street and Susan (then Rentner) on the farm. Their fathers talked shipbuilding all the time. Jeffery hardly listened, he'd heard so much of it. It was everyday life growing up in Collingwood, unremarkable, nothing to get excited about. Whatever interest he may have had discouraged perhaps by a mother with a fear of drowning. A mother who grew alarmed when, as a small child, Jeffery wandered to the neighbour's, afraid he'd gone down to the nearby docks, her little boy, her only child.

Susan, too, heard all the shipyard news, shop talk around the dinner table every night, despite the fact her father also had a farm to run. Shipbuilding crowded out crops and weather, though her father was out seeding the day it happened, forced to take advantage of a break in the rain that wet spring. Riding his tractor May 29, 1969, the day Hull #192, soon to be christened the Tadoussac, was scheduled to launch. Thinking, perhaps, about the 200 men working underneath her, underneath 9,300 tons of steel, 730 feet of lake freighter like a bunch of furiously busy ants, like the Lilliputians prodding a roped Gulliver. Trying to raise the massive ship with sledgehammers and jacks, levers and wedges, with the sweat of their labour, a fraction of an inch. (Rally gangs of sledgehammer-wielding men would raise a ship from the wooden blocks or cribbing on which the keel was laid and the hull built, onto a system of launch ways and butter boards allowing the vessel to slip into the water.)

Perhaps Susan's father was mulling over the talk he'd heard, what each man would do if something went wrong, throw themselves down, run this way or that, dive into the water. Because the men were worried about the launch of Hull #192, the biggest ship they had built to date, weighed down by a reported 150 tons of self-unloading equipment, a 370-ton diesel engine. Because knowing ships the way they did had sharpened their instinct.

Or perhaps Susan's father got lost in the rhythm of his tractor, was lulled by the repetitious pattern he made in the field, the patient sowing of row after row. Perhaps the smell of damp earth, the solitude of the empty landscape made him forget the crowd gathered at the shipyard, the schoolchildren and housewives, the visitors, some Canadian, some foreign, the naval architect, the photographers and reporters come to witness the launch of Hull #192. Perhaps he'd forgotten the men's apprehension until Susan's mother came running toward him waving a tea towel, the signal it was time to come in for a meal. Only there was something urgent about the way she beckoned, something riveting in her manner that must have brought the shipyard flooding back to his mind, told him something was wrong.

That the men he worked with shoulder to shoulder, the men (including Jeffery's father) had felt the eerie terror of a 9,300-ton ship stirring above them when she should have been steady, shifting 15 minutes early, before they were out from underneath, heard her groan and known the great thing they had made, the ship they likely admitted to no one, including themselves, that they loved, and likely still loved in that terrible moment, was about to crush them indifferently beneath her.

Some who fled unscathed from beneath Hull #192 ran from the shipyard maddened with fear. Couldn't stop, kept running all the way home or, in at least one case, dived into a bar and lifted a drink to trembling lips.

All of them, the physically unharmed, those inflicted with minor and major injuries, those only inches from the men who died, destined to live the rest of their lives with that ship in their heads, the looming bulk, the blackness of impending obliteration, with sounds they could never describe, shouts and cries, some coming from their own lips. Destined to relive what, like men coming home from war, few if any could fully describe.

Jeffery and Susan Potts have tried, compiled an account of the side-launch accident, personal recollections, photographs, reports from the inquest. School-aged at the time, too young to fully comprehend the impact of the tragedy, though it must have shaken Jeffery to hear his father crying behind the bathroom door. Compiled an account four-and-a-half decades later, after they met on a tennis court, after Susan left her job as a desk clerk at the Highwayman Inn to work in the shipyard office. After they married and moved to Toronto, after Jeffery's job (payroll and benefits specialist) brought them to Orillia. After both of their fathers died, and time crept by, and the risk of the stories of Hull #192 being lost grew real.

Haunted perhaps by their fathers' lives, the lives of the shipbuilders, by ships seen on Sunday-afternoon drives, ships looming at the bottom of the main street, dominating their little town. And on a cool, grey day in May 1969, looming like death over the heads of 200 men.

For a copy of Hull #192, Side Launch Accident, Collingwood Shipyard May 29, 1969, contact Jeffery and Susan Potts at 705-326-5813 or s_potts14@hotmail.com.