



THE TRAGIC LAUNCHING OF THE *TADOUSSAC*

By H. David Vuckson

May 29, 1969 was a black day in Collingwood when what should have been the routine launching of yet another St. Lawrence Seaway-size ship at the Collingwood Shipyard went terribly wrong.

The *Tadoussac*, Hull No. 192, a self-unloader of the then-maximum dimensions of 730 ft. long x 75 ft. wide launched itself fifteen minutes ahead of time while at least two hundred men were still working under it, catching everyone off guard and causing death, injury and general panic. Two shipyard workers were killed, dozens injured, and in the ensuing chaos, it was some time before everyone was accounted for.

I missed that tragic event for it turned out that May 29th was the day I had to go down to York University to be

fitted for my graduation gown. My friend Donald Kelly drove me down to Toronto in my parents' car. We were on our way back to Collingwood just east of Minesing on Highway 26 when I turned on the car radio to CKBB in Barrie for the 12:00 Noon news. The announcer said, "An accident at the Collingwood Shipyard has trapped about 150 men" and little else beyond that since the report had just been received and precise information was not yet available.

At that moment I knew the true meaning of stress wondering if my father was O.K. I asked Donald to "step on it" to get us home and when we arrived at my house during the noon hour my mother was beside herself with worry because she had not heard from my father. When he walked through the door around 1:00 p.m. there were tears of relief. My dad who worked in the Sheet Metal Shop near the base of the shipyard water tower was not part of the launch crew and was at work in the tin shop. When he stepped outside to see how the launch preparations were coming along (he had taken photos of every launch for about 20 years), suddenly the water came swirling around his feet. The ship had just entered

the water and, at that moment, he could not have known of the disaster that was taking place.

The aftermath of this premature launch involved dealing with a frightened and confused crowd of spectators who had come from near and far to witness a side launching, the use of divers, the recovery of the bodies of the dead, tending to the injured and transporting them to hospital, and in the midst of all this chaos, attempting to account for all the workers who had punched in their time cards that morning. Some fled in shock and it was many hours before all were accounted for. Traditionally, electric power and compressed air in the Yard was cut prior to the launch for safety reasons and what was normally a noisy place became very quiet, interrupted only by the cacophony of the men under the ship with their sledge hammers driving in the wedges to lift the hull off of the keel blocks—and this sound could be heard all over town. The time card clocks at the two gates would not have worked even if the men had thought of punching out as they left in panic.

I attended the June Inquest held in the Courtroom on the second floor of the Town Hall where every aspect of

launching a ship was scrutinized. Because many of the older shipyard workers had lost much of their hearing due to the incredible noise associated with shipbuilding and the absence of hearing protection, the questions to them frequently had to be repeated. It was concluded that one of the many wooden trigger levers had cracked and this caused the hull to break loose prematurely.

Despite this unlucky beginning, the *Tadoussac* joined the Canada Steamship Lines fleet in October 1969 and served its owners well until 2001 when it underwent a 20 million dollar rebuild to extend its operational life and was renamed *CSL Tadoussac*. Forty-seven years have passed since that fateful day in 1969; most of the shipyard workers who were there at that time have passed on, and the “Yard” itself has been gone for 30 years.

According to the CSL website, this ship is still active in 2016, primarily transporting bulk cargoes of cement clinker and iron ore between ports on the Great Lakes/St. Lawrence River waterway.

A detailed account of this incident is given in a 2015 book, *Hull #192 Side Launch Accident, Collingwood*

Shipyard May 29, 1969 by Jeffery and Susan Potts of Orillia.

David Vuckson is a great-grandson of pioneer Collingwood merchant R. W. O'Brien. His roots in town go back to 1875. He and his wife Pamela live in Victoria, B.C .where he works as a piano tuner while maintaining a keen interest in the history of his hometown.