

A Coincidental Salute To Our Naval Heritage

By Robert Williamson CD, RCNR, Ret'd.

As I stood on the portico of Dundurn Castle in the warm sunshine of Sunday, September 17, 2017, I looked across the bay. On the lawn were assembled naval veterans, their guests and a color party with flags fluttering. It was 11:00 a.m., the traditional hour of remembrance. As a retired naval commander, I was the master of ceremonies for the **annual USS Hamilton and Scourge Memorial Service**. Suddenly the pulsating roar of powerful aircraft engines overwhelmed the scene as Hamilton's Warplane Heritage Lancaster made a low pass directly overhead providing a coincidental memorial salute to the navy's role in the preservation of our country on this, the year of our 150th Anniversary of Confederation.

The city's Naval Memorial Garden in Confederation Park honours the 53 American sailors lost in the sinking of the two schooners and is a symbol of the shared respect between Canada and the United States. But this year the memorial service was held at Dundurn Castle to recognize the outstanding display of Hamilton & Scourge artifacts in the site's Military Museum and to disclose the part played by Sir Allan Napier MacNab, the laird of Dundurn, in the Hamilton and Scourge story.

MacNab's name is honoured in the naming of a west Mountain secondary school but his involvement in this story began on April 17, 1813, when a powerful American amphibious force attacked York. Fifteen-year old Allan Napier MacNab joined his father with the defending British troops at the landing beach in the vicinity of today's CNE Dufferin Gate. The defenders were subjected to suppressing grapeshot fired from the bombardment ships *Hamilton* and *Scourge*. The British forces, overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers and naval fire power, withdrew, blowing up Fort York's powder magazine and burning the frigate *Isaac Brock* under construction. Exhilarated by this military adventure, teenager MacNab retired with the York garrison to Kingston.

He arrived there by the middle of May 1813, just as the new flag ship *HMS Wolfe* was being commissioned. Following in the footsteps of his maternal grandfather, naval captain Peter Napier, Allan signed up as a midshipman. Thus began an eventful summer in which MacNab

served his country during the British naval attack on Sackett's Harbour; the bombardment of the



Ship's commander instructing a midshipman 1813
Painting by G.A. Embleton

American forces at Grimsby; the sinking of the *USS Hamilton* and *Scourge* and the capture of *USS Julia* and *Growler*, leaving the British squadron in command of Lake Ontario.

In late August 1813, MacNab transferred to the British army on the Niagara Peninsula. Promoted for his exploits during the rest of the war he was recognized as a boy hero. In the fullness of time he became a politician; built Dundurn Castle; rose to government leadership and with his colleague, John A. Macdonald, prepared the way for Canadian Confederation.

The 53 American sailors lost in the sinking of the *Hamilton* and *Scourge* would not have realized it but they left us with a naval archaeological treasure preserved at the bottom of Lake Ontario and were participants in a conflict that set Canada on the road to Confederation.

Hamilton Mountain Heritage Society's "Mountain Memories" by Robert Williamson appears monthly in the Mountain News.