

One man's humiliation put right – telling the story

By Diane Walsh

It has been more than a few months since I returned from Scotland. Scotland – the land of my maternal grandfather John Myles Wilson, born July 24 1914, in Bonnyrigg. It had been on my bucket list for as long as I can remember to return to his homeland to reclaim it as part of my ancestral heritage.

He'd been in the the Second World War but like many families from *Across the Pond* we were never to speak of this war apparently. But as a child I'd noticed the scars on my granddad's personality.

He was withdrawn; someone who spoke very little in company; sadness and anger in his eyes. And yet, so obviously a decent and intelligent man, as well. Life had bitten him – bitten him hard. The family didn't admit what it was that had actually happened to him. I've now begun to understand that we may not have been even been told the full story.

As a researcher interested in family genealogies, I sought to solve the puzzle. It took my going to Scotland and being practically re-colonized by the last outpost of the British Empire, otherwise known as St. Andrews, to figure out part of the story. Irish on my father's side, and Scottish and French on my mother's side, I was well equipped to unravel the complexity of the effects of what we today call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) on my grandfather's personality.

On June 18, 1940, John Myles Wilson received his Certificate of Competency as Master of a Foreign-Going Steamship in the Merchant Service, Ministry of Shipping. The Ministry of Shipping was the ad-



Three of the four medals awarded to John Myles Wilson.



The UK Merchant Navy ship *Keila*, seen here being loaded ready to sail, and captained by John Myles Wilson, was attacked and thought to have sunk, but instead drifted helplessly at sea for months before being towed back to port.

ministration of foreign-going vessels for the British government. He became captain of his own ship at the age of 26. With the war on, he captained *The Keila* (pictured here) as part of convoys moving supplies and food across the oceans. Torpedoes were striking everywhere. As history recorded, many convoy ships were bombed (see diagram). Approximately 2/3 of the total allied tonnage was lost to these strikes by German U-boats.

My grandmother received a letter from the Royal Navy claiming he was lost at sea; "Presumed dead", they said, somewhere off the coast of Greenland. Nana believed he wasn't dead and held up hope. It turned out that she was right. He did survive, but didn't return home until many, many months later and in rough shape psychologically when he did.

A combination of speaking with living relatives and searching archives has helped confirm *The Keila* was ultimately towed back to shore. The full details of how the ship was rescued, is not known.

UK government files claim that "the *Kingston Hill* and the *Keila* were bombed, and that they were escorted back to the UK by the corvette *HMS Picotee* and Smit tug *Thames*. Captain Walter Niven, the

Master of the *Kingston Hill* was killed in this attack". It does not say that the *Keila* was lost and presumed sunk for a long while, before it was rescued. Nor does it confirm that the Master of the *Keila* actually survived.

The Royal Navy had a policy that, once bombed, that was the end of you; it did not perform convoy rescue-operations as that would endanger the strategies in-play to win the war. I do know that the torpedo hit at the stern of *The Keila* knocking out the rudder and the ability to steer; and thus leading the ship to drift endlessly. I do not know what the captain and his remaining crew did to survive. The information on file at National Archives UK supposedly includes the Seaman's Pouch, which I am currently in process of trying to retrieve.

Thankfully, it is accurately recorded today that the ship was bombed – not sunk, as initially presumed. The history doesn't say, after it was bombed, that in fact it drifted at sea for months unbeknownst to the authorities. I've added that in, now, through a website specializing in WWII ships. And that it was ultimately spotted, rescued and towed to shore by sheer chance. Indeed Captain Wilson's ship did not sink to the bottom of the ocean as did so many of the others.

The doubly devastating part of the story is of course the manner in which the Royal Navy treated war-time working Merchant Mariners known now as the Merchant Navy. When the war was won, the Royal Navy took all the credit. Granddad told us this, himself. Although my granddad did receive four medals (only three of which pictured here, as the fourth is not in my possession) he never received a Merchant Navy pension specifically.

It does appear he was not adequately compensated as a Merchant Navy man in the way the Royal Navy veterans were. He'd immigrated to Canada and shortly after the war Canada denied benefits to the Canadian Merchant Navy veterans.

Families fought for more than 30 years, and the Canadian government worked a compromise so late in the game (in 1989) that some Merchant Navy men who may well have been eligible, were already dead. My grandfather died in Montreal in 1987, as if "two years too early"? – I once heard someone say. He never successfully claimed a rightful Merchant Navy pension – stunning, considering what he'd gone through at sea, in "war-service". By 1990, his living wife was told she was not eligible. It seemed *the veteran* (as he was now finally considered) would have had to be alive to enable his family to claim and receive benefit.

More insult to injury for a family that had already endured the disgraceful attitude of the Royal Navy and British government toward those who had served on the convoys during the War. As if Merchant Navy seaman hadn't *equally* contributed to the War Effort! The supplies wouldn't have been delivered had it not been for people like my Granddad and his crew and we'd all be saying Heil Hitler.

So when I went to Scotland, and I came across the toffee superior attitude, I vowed



Wedding photo of the author's grandfather, John Myles Wilson, and his wife.

to tell our family war history. Many Scots, and Irish, many of whom were deck hands on the convoy-ships [also] made a significant contribution to Britain winning the war.

It is also unfortunate that the grudging way, in which medals due to Merchant Navy seaman, were unceremoniously distributed (in plain brown envelope via mail), typifies the shoddy recognition of the invaluable contribution the Merchant Navy provided to British and Allied victory in WWII.

Thank you for listening to the healing power of war and genealogy stories told out loud.

If you would like to inquire about the research websites mentioned in the article, or have anything you'd like to add, please do not hesitate to get in touch with author Diane Walsh at media-geode@yahoo.com.

Victoria Federal New Democrats

Stay in Touch

with your executive
To contact president James Coccola
email president@victoriandp.ca
Visit our website at www.victoriandp.ca

Saanich South New Democrats

YOU CAN CONTACT YOUR EXECUTIVE
BY WRITING TO US
AT PO BOX 30041
RPO REYNOLDS, VICTORIA, BC V8X 5E1
OR BY PHONING US AT 250-479-1100.

Billion dollar blunder at BC Hydro means families will pay the price

VICTORIA – Families will face massive hydro rate hikes after the Christy Clark government secretly added more than \$1 billion dollars to BC Hydro's debt last year.

"Just after the last election, Premier Christy Clark surprised families across BC with a staggering 28 percent hydro rate hike," said New Democrat Leader John Horgan. "By missing their debt reduction plan by more than \$1 billion dollars, BC Hydro and the Christy Clark government could saddle ratepayers with another \$500 hike each right after the next election."

According to BC Hydro's latest annual report, the crown corporation was \$1.1 billion off target for a major debt, primarily due to a huge overestimation of domestic revenue for power.

"The current rate hikes were based on a plan that didn't expect that extra billion

dollars in debt, which means that there is an inevitable day of reckoning to come," said New Democrat spokesperson on BC Hydro Adrian Dix. "That billion dollar blunder breaks down to an extra \$500 for every ratepayer in BC. Those are families and businesses across the province that will be on the hook.

"Even worse, Christy Clark and her energy minister seem completely unconcerned. They are pretending this \$1.1 billion mistake doesn't exist, when British Columbians know it exists, and it's going to show up as an increase in their hydro bill."