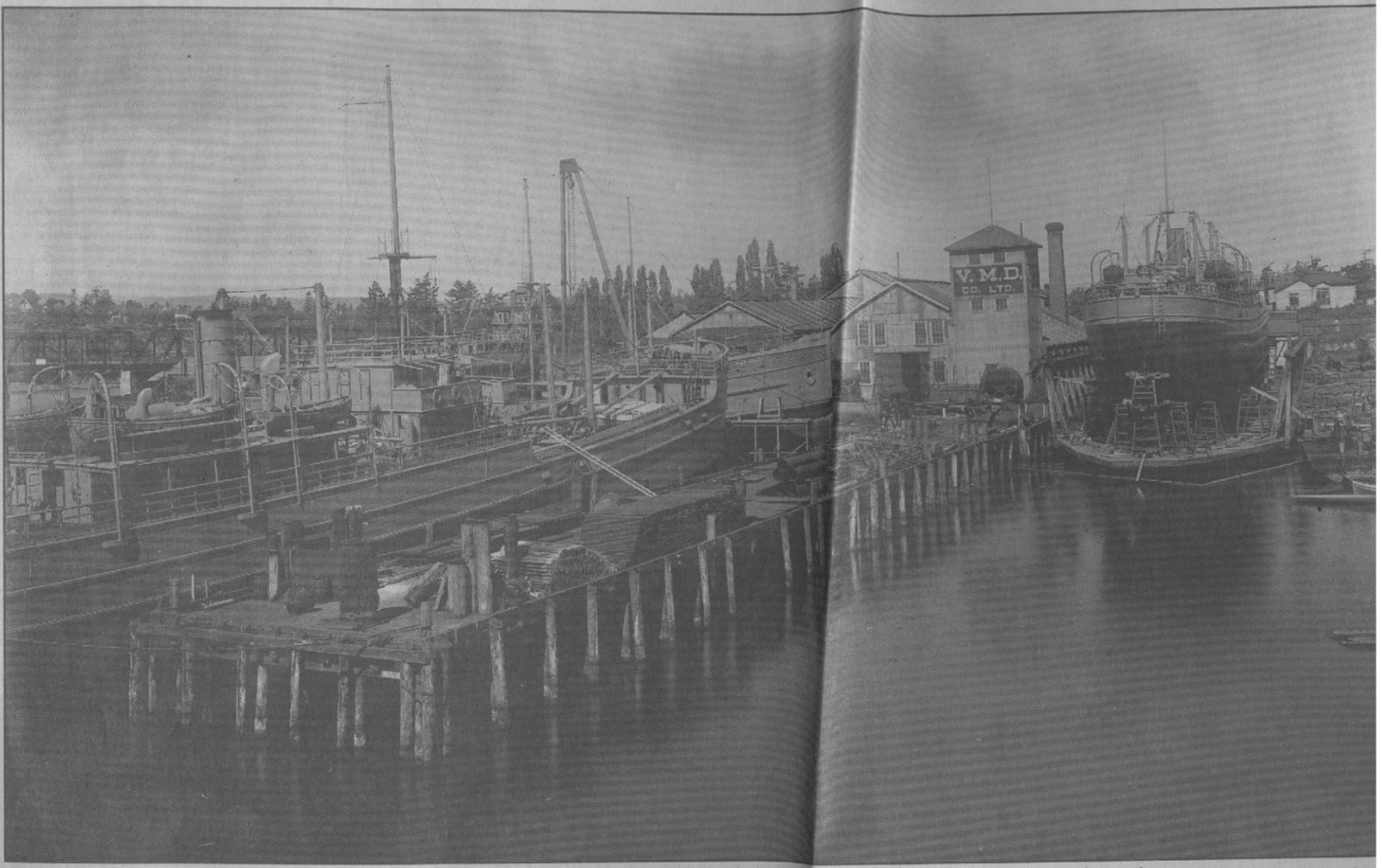


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VMD had no shortage of work in the '40s and '50s when Victoria was an important west coast port.

Pride of VMD got a shock

By Ken Stofer

KEN RICHMOND of Surrey, B.C., who worked at the Victoria Machine Depot Co. Ltd. at the time, told me an interesting story about the first cargo ship launched there (on Feb. 21, 1942) during the Second World War. It was the 10,000 tonne S.S. Fort Camosun.

"The crew for the Camosun were brought over from the U.K., to man the ship... During this time while the new crew waited for the finishing touches to be made on the Camosun, my wife and I became well acquainted with three of their officers who occasionally visited our home. When the ship was completed our friends said goodbye, telling us they were going to Vancouver for a cargo. They assured us we would hear from them when the war ended. Imagine our surprise when after only a week or so they were back in Victoria, but could not tell us why."

The S.S. Camosun, with a crew of 50, was torpedoed by the Japanese submarine I-25 just off Cape Flattery. Word was received by the Commanding Officer, Pacific Coast at 7 a.m. and HMCS Edmunston and HMCS Quesnel were dispatched to the scene, the latter picking up the entire crew of Fort Camosun. As soon as it became apparent the vessel was still afloat, the tugs Dauntless, Henry Foss, Tatnuk and later, the Salvage Queen were sent to assist. By 3 p.m. of June 22, Fort Camosun was anchored in Neah Bay, Washington, where a diving party from RCN Barracks, Pacific Coast patched the shell hole. By 11:15 a.m. on June 25, S.S. Fort Camosun was docked in Esquimalt.

"I was anxious to see the ship," recalls Richmond. "It was Navy Day, and when I drove up to the dock gate, I had a Navy Day tag on my lapel and was promptly allowed in. I approached the gangway of the stricken ship and was again permitted to proceed (so much for security)."

"I was amazed at the damage. The hole in her side was big enough to accommodate a bus. An 8-foot shell had also gone completely through the engine room. The Camosun was towed to Seattle, for repairs as we, at the VMD, were far too busy to work on her."

S.S. Fort Camosun was torpedoed again in the Gulf of Aden on Dec. 3, 1943. Richmond began his career at VMD as an assistant purchasing agent, but after a couple of weeks he took over the stores department.

The catalyst for the VMD was the Albion Iron Works — built on a site next to Chatham and Discovery Streets by Joseph Spratt when Victoria was in its infancy.

By the mid-1870s, Albion had a weekly payroll of \$1,000 and employed 60 men. Newspapers reported the plant as being "the most expensive works north of San Francisco, and there is nothing to compare with them even at Portland."

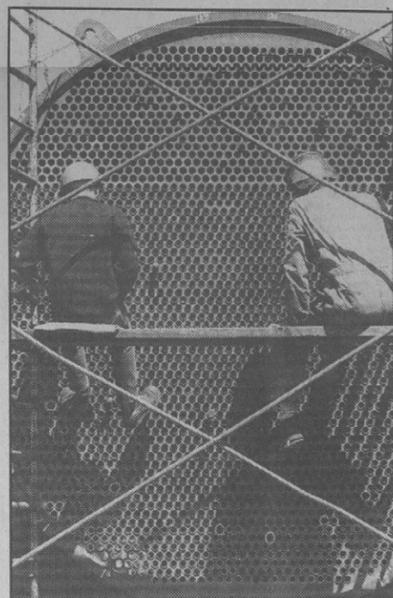
In 1882, Joseph Spratt met with some of the city's prominent businessmen and formed a partnership. They opened a



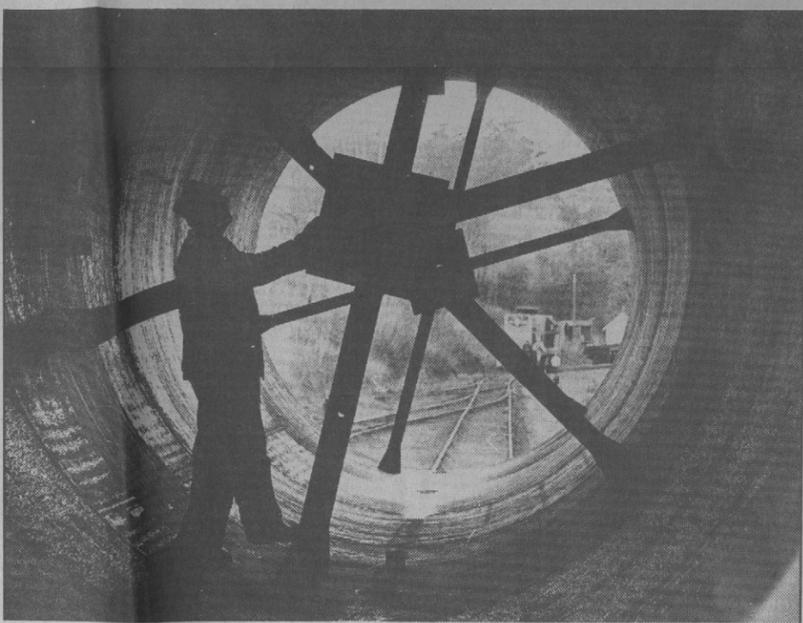
VMD supervisors: Richmond is sixth from top on right.



'The Yard' churned out cargo vessels during WWII.



Busy bees: building an oil condenser in '76.



Container tubes were a specialty.

shipyard on Bay Street, by the Point Ellice Bridge, and VMD was born.

Through two world wars, VMD built many ships, the S.S. Fort Camosun being the first of 30 cargo vessels, tankers and merchant ships built during the Second World War.

In May 1942, a company paper called *The Convoy* was created. The aim was to unite staff and worker as one big happy family. It reported in-house activities and became a vent for the feelings of nearly 3,000 VMD employees.

Just before each ship was launched the men's yard numbers were pooled and a draw was made. The wife of the winner had the honor of christening the ship. One issue of *The Convoy* reported: "Good news reached VMD workers last month. Our own S.S. Fort Hudson's Hope has successfully weathered the perils of her first Atlantic crossing and is ready headed into the thick of the battle zones with a shipload of war supplies for the Allied nations. Those of us who worked on the Hope are proud to hear of her success."

The Convoy also reported a visit to "the Yard," by film star Barbara Stanwyck in support of Canada's fourth

Victory Loan Campaign. Apparently a chargehand pipefitter received a Victory Loan kiss from Miss Stanwyck when he purchased the first bond.

VMD shipyard workers made the Canadian record in the Fourth Victory Loan drive with a total of \$264,000 pledged.

Richmond remembered, "Besides building new ships we repaired the occasional Russian ship and again we entertained some of the crew at the Victoria Golf Club. As there were a lot of vodka available, someone spiked the punch. The results are hilarious, as many of the good folk were not used to hard liquor. The amount of liquor one could buy was limited, but the Russians were well supplied."

After the war Ken Richmond left VMD and he and his wife decided to build a motel in Campbell River which they named Richmond Court. Richmond told me he remembers the U.K. minelayer Agamemnon was in VMD to be rebuilt as an R 'n' R ship for Allied forces stationed in the Far East.

"A large part of the remodelling was done when the war ended, but the job was never completed. My wife and I

bought furniture, battleship line and a ton of plywood which had been used as walls in this ship, plus about three dozen dining room chairs, all of which we used in remodelling of Richmond Court.

"There's quite a story to our 'opening,' because we opened and closed the same day. We opened the day of the earthquake (June 23, 1946) and we were sitting right on the top of it. So we closed right then and there."

Fate plays a strange hand sometimes. Richmond decided to go into real estate with a friend.

"I had 500 business cards printed and went down Fort Street to pick them up. On leaving the store, I ran into Mr. Hammill, the general manager of VMD. He asked me if I'd come back to work. They were just starting to build the destroyer, the HMCS Terra Nova, first and largest destroyer escort vessel (launched June 21, 1955). Eight or 10 ships were being built, all designed at Vickers in Montreal. My job was to take care of all the material for this ship. It was a very complex system, but it felt good to be back with the VMD again."

Ken Stofer is a Victoria freelance writer and longtime Islander contributor.