



Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia
Comments
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Cutting Steel for HMCS *Harry DeWolf* by Colin Darlington

Dates that traditionally marked significant points in a warship's life include keel laying, christening and launching, commissioning, paying off, and disposal. Of late, traditions have been changing with developments in shipbuilding and in social perspectives. On 1 September 2015, Irving Shipbuilding will "cut steel" for the first of the Royal Canadian Navy's new Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS), Her Majesty's Canadian Ship (HMCS¹) *Harry DeWolf*. This date, this event, is not the same as that of the laying of the keel.

The structural keel of a ship is a strong piece of wood or metal from bow to stern around which the hull is built. The keel is generally the first piece to be built, so when it is put in place for the rest of the ship to be built, it is said that the keel is laid (the traditional expression is "well and truly laid"), and the date is taken as the formal start of construction. However, modern ships are often built in 'modules,' blocks which are individually constructed and then assembled together. For the AOPS, 62 smaller modules will be assembled into three large or mega modules, which will then be assembled to make each ship. The first cutting of steel for a block for *Harry DeWolf* will be marked with a small ceremony held by the shipbuilder. Whether and how the date will entered into official records to mark start of construction is uncertain, as the Department of National Defence (DND) will also hold a keel laying ceremony early in 2016 with the assembly of a mega-module. Thus there is a traditional "start of construction," the keel laying, and a modern "start of construction," the steel cutting. Really, they are dates of convenience anyways, as in both case preparatory work was done well before the ceremonies. A test cutting of steel was done by Irving in mid June 2015. As an aside, the tradition of keel laying has been applied by the RCN with the commencement of construction for a new building for HMCS² Carleton, a Naval Reserve Division in Ottawa.



Cutting of steel for test module 18 June 2015 "Halifax Shipyard cuts steel for first Arctic Patrol Ship" Global News <http://globalnews.ca/news/2061919/halifax-shipyard-cuts-steel-for-first-arctic-patrol-ship/>

The public aspect of the events is a factor, some could say a significant factor. The steel cutting is in the midst of an election. Defence and security is getting little coverage, debatably appropriate compared to the economy and governance. Defence is not an election issue. The keel laying in the new year will be an opportunity for the then-government and the Navy to be more public about shipbuilding, Arctic operations and other matters related to the new ships.

What is important about all this is that the steel cutting is occurring, and progress being made on the delivery of ships under the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy. Whilst there is history of ships being cancelled whilst “still on the stocks,” *Harry DeWolf* is now firmly taking shape, and her sister patrol ships will likely follow and soon. This is welcome news, and those involved in the DND project office and Irving Shipbuilding are complimented for their hard work into getting to this point, new as it is in the list of a warship’s significant dates.

Notes:

1. Actually the ship will not be “HMCS” until she is accepted into service with the RCN. That will happen after she is launched and undergoes acceptance trials.
2. Naval Reserve Divisions are currently the only shore establishments authorized to use “Her Majesty’s Canadian Ship” (HMCS) as part of their names. Prior to unification of the armed services into the Canadian Armed Forces, all RCN shore establishments used HMCS.

Colin Darlington is a retired naval officer of the Canadian Armed Forces. This work is the sole opinion of the author and does not necessarily represent the views of the Canadian Armed Forces, the Canadian Department of National Defence or the Royal United Services Institute of Nova Scotia.
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