

HOMELAND MINUTES



Nstr. Agnes Wightman Wilkie, RCN
Seaports and The Shipping World

Cold Comfort: Navy Nursing Sisters: Sub-Lieutenant Margaret Brooke, M.B.E. and Sub-Lieutenant Agnes Wilkie

“When the torpedo hit it stunned me. Agnes got up quickly however and we rushed to our lifeboat on the port side. It had been shot away. Agnes didn’t know how to put her lifebelt on so I did it for her. They helped us onto a capsized lifeboat. There were about a dozen of us. We clung to ropes. The waves kept washing us off, one by one. And eventually Agnes said she was getting cramped. She let go, but I managed to catch hold of her with one hand. I held to her as best I could until day-break. Finally, a wave took her When I called to her, she didn’t answer.”

These recollections from a hospital interview of Margaret Brooke describe the night of October 14, 1942, when she clung to a capsized lifeboat in the frigid waters of Cabot Strait struggling for hours to keep her friend Agnes Wilkie alive. The torpedoed ferry *Caribou* on which they had been passengers had sunk in five minutes.

The immediate sounds of the boilers exploding, steel being rent, human screeches and the terrified lowing of 50 cows drowningⁱⁱⁱ turned to the sounds of prayer as the night wore on. One survivor reported they sang “Nearer my God to Thee”. For hours Brooke and her friend held on to ropes as the waves crashed over them. As hypothermia set in, however, the slight Wilkie weighing only around 62 kilograms, had no more strength. In spite of Brooke’s heroic efforts to hang on to her with one arm, when a minesweeper appeared at daybreak to rescue survivors only Margaret Brooke and a few men still clung to the overturned lifeboat.

Agnes Wilkie, the daughter of John and Helen Wilkie of Carman, Manitoba was 39 years old when she died. She had worked as an Operating Room Nurse at Misericordia Hospital before enlisting and held the position of Assistant Matron of the naval hospital, RCNH *Avalon* at her death. Lieutenant Agnes Wilkie was put to rest with full military honours at Mount Pleasant Cemetery in Newfoundland.

A photograph of Wilkie was hung in all Canadian Naval Hospitals, her name was given to a nurses' residence in Halifax and in 1957 Wilkie Lake in Manitoba was named for her. Lieutenant Margaret Brooke, a naval dietician, went on to become a geology instructor at the University of Saskatchewan. She was named a Member of the Order of the British Empire for her heroic actions.



"... if there were any Canadians who did not realize that we were up against a ruthless and remorseless enemy, there can be no such Canadian now. If anything were needed to prove the hideousness of Nazi warfare, surely this is it. Canada can never forget the SS Caribou" Naval

Minister Macdonald, House of Commons October 17, 1942.

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