

Honourary Life Members

R.C.T. Stewart

CANS Honourary Life Member 2000



Working for one of the most colourful figures in the history of Nova Scotia's construction industry wasn't always easy, Robert (Bob) Stewart admits, but it was certainly never boring.

"I started with Cameron Contracting Ltd. as a construction engineer and eventually became Chair of the Board, which didn't stop me from being fired at least three times and resigning twice," Stewart says. "R.B. Cameron was the most complex man I have ever known; it's amazing we were able to work together as long as we did."

Stewart's sometimes rocky association with Cameron began in 1953 after he left his position as Manager for Rankin Maritime, a branch of a Montreal-based consulting engineering firm. He was on the short list for selection of a new City Manager in Oakville, Ontario when a mutual friend put him in touch with Cameron.

"I remember telling R.B. at the time that I was still waiting to hear back about the Oakville position," Stewart says. "He pointed out that I had to do something while I was waiting and that I might as well wait while working for him. So I joined Cameron Contracting and 'waited' for 23 years."

Spending 23 years in one place was a marked departure from Stewart's early life. His family moved around a lot due to his father's career, and he spent time growing up in Shediac, Moncton and Saint John, New Brunswick; Yarmouth, Nova Scotia; and Montreal, Quebec. Stewart attended McGill University upon graduating from high school in Montreal, but soon left when he joined the Air Force and went on active service in June 1943.

However, a military career wasn't in the cards for Stewart. "I received my pilot wings in March of 1945, and was immediately transferred to the reserves. I felt like I was all dressed up with no where to go." He returned to McGill after leaving the Air Force, and graduated with an engineering degree in 1949. He moved to Nova Scotia, where his parents were now living, and began his career with the Nova Scotia Department of Highways.

"When I first came to live and work in Halifax it was a much different city," Stewart recalls. "The Westmount subdivision was just beginning to take shape on the former airport site, and there were no stop signs anywhere in the city. I remember in 1950 when the traffic became so bad at the intersection of Sackville and Barrington that the city decided to put a police constable there at rush hour to keep things flowing smoothly. I believe that was the first intersection in the city to receive traffic lights."

It was while surveying the #7 Highway between Ship Harbour and Murphy's Cove on Nova Scotia's Eastern Shore that Stewart got the call from The Rankin Company to help them establish their east coast office.

"It was pretty much a one-man operation at that time. I actually did very little engineering design work; it was more coordinating projects, reviewing drawings, collecting information and identifying potential problems and how to overcome them," Stewart says. "Then again, fitting all the pieces together so they work right is what engineering is really all about anyway. I found it all extremely interesting, mainly because of the wide variety of work and the fact I wasn't restricted to any one specific field."

It was the same lure of project variety that Stewart found enticing at Cameron Contracting. He worked on projects ranging from installations on the Distant Early Warning System in Canada's far north, to a lighthouse on Burin Island, off of Newfoundland.

"I remember my first visit to the Burin Island project. The only way to get there was by dory, and when I stepped off the boat I had to climb up a cliff by rope before walking across the island to the site of the lighthouse," Stewart says.

Another Cameron project that sticks out in Stewart's mind is a joint venture with EGM Cape of Montreal on Baffin Island. The military installation at Cape Dyer involved working closely with the US Air Force and the Army Corps of Engineers and required a deft touch to balance all the competing interests.

"I've often said it should have been spelled D I R E instead of D Y E R," Stewart jokes. "The Air Force thought they should have their own engineering department so they were only too happy to find fault with the Corps of Engineers, the Army was trying to protect its position and the civilian operators were quick to criticize anything they thought would be hard to use once they were on their own."

Stewart got to experience much of this first hand when he flew in for an inspection one October. He ended up staying there for 10 weeks when the project manager came down with pneumonia and had to be flown out for medical attention.

It was during his years at Cameron Contracting that Stewart became involved with the Halifax-Dartmouth Construction Association, which later became the Construction Association of Nova Scotia (CANS). He served as president in 1964/65 and went on to become president of the Canadian Construction Association, only the second person from Nova Scotia's construction industry to hold that position.

"The CCA introduced me to a lot of new people, in large and small construction companies from St. John's to Victoria, together with representatives of the professional design associations and with people from all government departments doing business with the construction industry."

During his years with the CCA and CANS, Stewart says he worked a lot with the standard practices committees, working to overcome potential problem areas, advocating the use of standard forms and practices throughout the industry.

"While chairing an architects/contractors Joint Committee, I became frustrated when recommended changes in forms and routines failed to be implemented. The difficulty originated with the lack of senior people from member firms participating. I approached a past president of the Architects Association and we jointly resolved to ensure that this weakness would be overcome—which it was. Subsequently the Consulting Engineers were invited to join and on this foundation the Design and Construction Institute of Nova Scotia was formed."

In 1976 Stewart's involvement with Cameron Contracting finally came to an end. However, it was far from the end of his involvement in the construction industry. After leaving Cameron he joined developer John Fiske on the Quinpool Road development that includes the Quingate apartment towers and the Quinpool Place Mall. He then headed up Fairport Construction Ltd. for three years on behalf of the Sobeys Group, working on grocery store construction and related mall developments. He then worked with Frank Harrington and the firm now known as the WHW Group on the construction of the Veterans Memorial Hospital. That led to a number of years working with the Department of Health, as a construction consultant on various hospital projects including the new IWK Grace Hospital in Halifax, before Stewart decided it was time to retire.

Overall, Stewart says his construction and volunteer careers provided him with an opportunity and perspective not everyone gets to enjoy. "I'm a Maritimer who got to view this region from the outside and I know it isn't perfect—but it's pretty damn close."