

ASSOCIATION 2026 TRIP TO AJAX ONTARIO

30th May to 6th June 2026: To celebrate the 50th Anniversary of the Frigate's 1976 historic visit.

Finally, after eighteen months of planning, the long-awaited trip to Ajax was upon us. Fifty-two association members and family made this trip; forty-six from the UK, including nineteen frigate veterans, fifteen of whom were on the 1976 visit. Two Cunliffe's and four Cranswick family from across Canada made up that total of fifty-two, certainly the largest group the Association has ever taken to Canada.

So, the first flyers took off on **Thursday 28th May**, some reaching Ajax that evening. Friday was the travel day for the majority. Those already on Canadian soil had a great day spent in downtown Toronto. That said, it was only a great day until the return trip back to Ajax. Looking to catch the train back from Union Station, the group spotted a Go Train about to depart for Ajax. With no time to buy tickets, they jumped onboard, planning to pay on the train. That was until they were firmly told by the Go Transit Police onboard that this was not possible and it was an offence to board a train without a ticket. The Go Train cop was not moved by the story of the Battle of the River Plate and the small group, led by an unnamed Association Chairman, were ejected at the next stop, counting their lucky stars that there was no fine or incarceration. Cue a call to Debbie Steer's Rescue Centre for pick up.

Friday 29th May evening and Tommy Murray and Steve Cook arrived without luggage. This was to be Tommy's first disaster. Fortunately, some of the missing luggage did arrive overnight and was delivered to the hotel.

Saturday 30th May morning and Tommy pulled out his blazer from the late luggage and proceeded to steam iron the wrinkles out. He did such a good job, that he burnt a hole straight through the shoulder (disaster no 2). Determined to make the parade, he donned the holey jacket, hoping to hide somewhere in the middle of the ranks, but not before he put his foot through the trouser seam in his leg (disaster no 3).

Late Saturday morning, a Town regional bus collected the group and we headed off to Oshawa Lakewood Park beach, adjacent to the jetty and port that the Frigate had docked at in 1976. With a Colour Guard from Legion Branch 43 (Oshawa), and Harwood Sea Cadets and Band, we proudly marched behind our Standard Bearer from the end of the jetty, left wheeling onto a boardwalk, giving a salute to Mayor Collier on the dais before halting outside a marquee erected on the beach.



Dismissed, we entered the marquee reception to meet Invited VIP's, including former Mayor Steve Parish and MP Jennifer McKelvie, together with members of Ajax Council. A formal welcome from Mayor Shaun Collier was followed by lunch and refreshments and then a presentation of Freedom of the Town Commemorative Pins to all Ajax Frigate veterans.

The bus returned everyone back to the hotel for a quick change of clothing and then drinks at Magwyers. Shortly after arriving we discovered that the main room in the pub was booked out for an event. Plan B and Shaun rang the Legion to see if they could accommodate thirty plus for drinks and of course, we were welcomed with open arms. In the ten minutes it took us to walk to the Legion, they had printed welcome posters which were placed at the entrance and on each table! A relaxed and fun social night ensued with a takeaway delivery of wings and pizza.

Sunday 31st May and an easy start to the day with a relaxing morning before Ubers and Taxis were ordered for the short trip to Whitby Yacht Club. Organiser of this event, Ken Armes, was there on arrival and we were introduced to the club commodore, Chris Russell. The club had been scrambling

to get boats in the water for the start of the season, delayed by bad weather, but they had managed to get half a dozen boats ready for us. Unfortunately, the wind speed was creeping up and with a chop on the water, it was reluctantly decided that it would be unsafe to take guests onto open water. The boats that were ready were made available for us to explore and each one contained drinks and snacks, so we spent a pleasant few hours sitting on the boats in harbour. Although the wind was up on the lake, the sun was warm and the area around the club was calm and well protected. One of the motor boats took guests for trips around the harbour which delighted the Wright family children, age 10 and 12 years, who got to play Captain and steer the vessel.

A mountain of food; burgers, Italian sausage and potato salad had been provided by Ken Armes. What we didn't know was that this was a DIY BBQ. Anyone know of any ex-Navy Cooks?

Nigel and Mike Fox to the rescue. In some intense heat, they dived back into 1976 galley mode. The rule being; you brought them beer and they kept cooking. Unlike galley days, there was more than just one sausage for everyone. Ably assisted by Lori and Richard Cooke on serving duties, the food kept coming and no one went hungry. The day turned to evening with a very pleasant social on the outdoor terrace.



Nigel thanked the club for their continued hospitality and presented a framed photograph of the Ajax Frigate at Oshawa in 1976, along with some commemorative caps and pens to Ken and Chris, the club Commodore.

Mid evening the group dispersed back to the hotel.

Monday 1st June was essentially our only free day. Some used it to explore the Town and waterfront; a small group headed to Port Perry that inevitably included a brewery stop.

By evening, the group were collected by the Town bus and conveyed to Mill Street where a Pop-Up Exhibit event was launched. Curated by the Town Library and Archives team, many commemorative exhibits were on display, highlighting Ajax's history and its relationship with the Association. An address was made by both the Mayor and the Chief Librarian and Executive Officer before a blue ribbon was cut, signaling the official opening.



The group then had the chance to explore the many artefacts and material on view. The event space would be open to the public on advertised dates throughout the month of June. Exhibits included Admiral Harwood's uniform, the 7th HMS Ajax photos and illustrations, a Defence Industries Ltd display case and photos, 8th HMS Ajax material and photos and a map of the town of Ajax outlining streets dedicated in recent times.

Cocktails and refreshments followed in the lounge area to conclude the evening.

Tuesday 2nd June saw the first full day of street dedications and another hot sunny day. Two Durham Regional Transit buses ferried the group from street to street. The streets dedicated on this day were: Sharp Crescent (Trevor Sharp – accepted by Association), Williamson Drive (Gary Williams), Harper Hill Drive (Jim Harper), Tidmarsh Lane (Simon Tidmarsh) and Seagrave Lane (Glyn Seagrave). A Global TV news reporter (Toronto area) appeared at Tidmarsh Lane and interviewed the Mayor and myself.



Iles Street was also visited during the dedications. This street, previously dedicated in honour of Arthur Frederick Iles, HMS Ajax (River Plate), was being visited for the first time by Association member Steve Iles and his daughter Alice. A nice touch from the Town saw Steve presented with a street sign and a memorable photo opportunity.



The day was broken up by a visit to Ajax Fire Service HQ.

We certainly never expected the welcome that we received here. We were met on arrival by a pipe band, a Colour Guard of Honour and fire service personnel. A formal welcome was made by the Fire Chief and we were invited to tour the station and get close up to the fire tenders looking splendid in their new livery depicting the Battle of the River Plate cruisers, Ajax, Achilles and Exeter. A buffet lunch was provided in the Fire Hall before Dave Lear, an Association committee member and ex fire fighter, presented Ajax Fire HQ with a framed photograph commemorating our 50th anniversary visit. Dave also donated and presented the Fire service with a framed First Day Cover of the 40th anniversary of the Battle of the River Plate, signed by Admiral Sir Desmond Dreyer who was on Ajax at the Battle as a Lieutenant Gunnery Officer. Admiral Dreyer had officially opened Ajax Fire station number 2 during the Frigate's 1976 visit.



It was a remarkable couple of hours, many thanks to Ajax Fire and Emergency Services for pulling all the stops out!

A full day was concluded with a BBQ evening held at Debbie Steer's home. The house was packed to the rafters and those two Navy cooks were in action again. Nigel's recent BIG Birthday was celebrated with an Association cake and a fun time was had by all.

On **Wednesday 3rd June** a small but mighty group of fifteen veterans, supported by Kathy and Ann attended Southwood Park Public School in Ajax to speak to a group of around one-hundred and fifty students aged 12 to 14 years. We met the Principal Sarah Mitchell, also present was Mayor Shaun Collier, an ex-student of the school, along with council members.

I spoke about the history of the Town, it's lengthy and strong bond with the Association, the history of the Association and the 1976 visit bringing it up to date with the 50th anniversary visit.

We then had several speakers, Tommy (Seaman), Gary (Radio Operator), Steve (Stoker), Dave (Flight Crew) and Mike (Cook), talking about various aspects of Navy life as it was in the mid 1970's. After a brief recess, we took a Q and A session with the students. The Town had a slide show of photographs from the 1976 visit as a backdrop to the talks.



At the conclusion, we presented the Principal with a framed commemorative photo of the Frigate HMS Ajax and a bunch of Anniversary visit pens for the library.

The afternoon was a Free afternoon to unwind for a few hours before the next stop.

Wednesday evening and Peter Danks led a cohort of Association members to the Harwood Sea Cadets Unit for their ceremonial division's practice night. Peter performed the role of Reviewing Officer and the group witnessed the Cadet's parade and drills skills which were mightily impressive. Peter also presented the Tubby Squires award, an annual award first started by the Association in 2016 to the cadet who has contributed significantly to the success of the Corp by being a positive example, helpful and maintaining high standards. It is an award voted for by the cadets themselves. This year, the prize went to CPO Hibah Ahmed. This young lady also impressed our veterans who were all in agreement that she was destined for a great future in whatever career path she eventually embarked upon.



The Association presented a framed commemorative photo and an anniversary visit pennant to the cadets, who in turn gave the group a Harwood Cadets baseball cap each. Thanks to Commanding Officer Ross Mounsteven for inviting us to take part.

Thursday 4th June was day two of street dedications with everyone in attendance. Streets dedicated this day were Wright Crescent (Derek Wright), Stythinson Street (Alan Styth), Cook Lane (Steve Cook), Cranswick Lane (Mike Cranswick), Cunliffe Lane



(Ian Cunliffe), Danks Ridge Drive (Peter Danks) and Littlewood Lane (The late Paul Littlewood – accepted by Association).



Our lunchtime stop today was at Veterans Point Gardens at the Waterfront of Lake Ontario. The whole area was looking splendid in the sunshine, neatly mowed grass and verges, a food tent erected and picnic benches available. The town had certainly put some thought into making it look its best. They forgot however, that the sprinkler systems would burst into life as we casually strolled the lawned areas, giving everyone an unexpected cool down. Regional Councillor Marylin Crawford caught a jet stream resulting in a nice wet pair of trousers!

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We gathered at the Veterans Crosswalk spanning Lake Driveway West at the junction with Harwood Avenue South; a fairly new addition to the area, opened in October 2025, remembering those who served. The crosswalk features red and white stripes representing Canada's national colours, a painted outline of the Cruiser HMS Ajax and a soldier's helmet to honour all military. A nice photo opportunity and Councilor Nancy Henry presented a copy of the council motion that created the crosswalk to Nigel.



Then followed a street sign presentation in the gardens to Kevin Syder whose name was added to the town reserve name list for future developments. Mayor Shaun Collier made the presentation of Syder Street and to the delight of Kevin, one side of the sign had been amended to Scrumpy Street! Nice touch.



Due to Cranswick Lane not being accessible, the dedication of this street was carried out at Veterans Point. Thank you Town of Ajax.



We then observed a minute of silence at the Cruiser Memorial Wall for Association veteran Albert Robb who had recently passed at the age of 107 years. Albert's biography was read by the

Mayor and all WWII veterans were remembered as the Exhortation was read by Dave Lear and our standard was paraded and dipped. Wreaths were laid by Mayor Collier and representing the Association Cruiser veterans, Steve Iles.

We then moved to unveil the final amended version of the 1976 crew wall, with myself and Nigel unveiling the panel into view following an introduction from the Mayor.



The garden's sprinkler system had by now ended its display and we all tucked into lunch in the sunshine.

Street dedications resumed after lunch and we then took a brief stop at Pat Bayly Square where Mayor Collier gave some background to the Square and the magnificent memorial there to Defence Industries Ltd and the woman who worked there in munitions. A last group photo at the 41ft x 8ft AJAX sign in the square heralded the end of the formal day and the beginning of a social evening as we headed off on the buses to the Ajax Legion.



The first-floor function room was the space for this event and guests were treated on arrival to a performance by the Highland Creek Pipe Band and some clog dancing by the Kick up a Fuss Ladies Clog Dancers. The bar was open and cold drinks were most welcome after a long hot day outside.

A number of speeches and presentations were made, notably by the Association with Nigel presenting the Town with a large framed commemorative photograph, a special plaque presented by myself to Mayor Collier for his support of the Association during his term of office as Mayor. Gifts to both Shaun and Rose Collier from Mike Fox. Flowers and chocolates to Jennifer Larmand from the Town for all her hard work over eighteen months of planning. A framed commemorative photo to the Legion accepted by Chairman Bruce Sharpe along with a framed First Day Cover of the 50th anniversary of the D Day landings signed by Vice Admiral Peter Berger who was a Midshipman on HMS Ajax at Normandy (donated and presented by Dave Lear). Last of all, gift bags to the youngest guests there, the grandchildren of Derek Wright, Jackson age 10 and Aria age 12 years.

A special guest was present at the event: Louise Johnson of Ajax, one of the original 'Bomb Girls' was about to celebrate her 105th birthday. Everyone sang a rousing Happy Birthday to Louise before she had her photo taken with the HMS Ajax veterans.



Just prior to food service, everyone's attention was brought to a screen on stage for a photographic slide show of the 1976 visit beginning with a surprise video message from crew member and former Treasurer committee member and standard bearer Alf Larkin. The social shenanigans continued long into the night.

Friday 5th June was an early start and there were some fuzzy heads boarding the coach to Niagara. This day trip was generously paid for by the Royal Navy and Royal Marines Charity and Greenwich Hospital Remembrance and Comradeship Grant. With forty-seven on board, we set off for Niagara-on-the-Lake.

We had a one and a half hour stop here, which was just enough time for a marriage proposal! Martyn Styth, son of Alan, got down on one knee in the Queens Royal Park Gazebo on the shores of Lake Ontario to ask for the hand of his partner Katie. Many congratulations to the happy couple!



Next stop was Niagara Falls. Four hours of zip lining, helicopter rides and a traditional soaking on the Maid of the



Mist completed a memorable day. With the coach driver on a strict timeline and the return time known by all, it was an unnamed Chairman and a West Country Committee member who rocked up ten minutes late, giving me high blood pressure. They narrowly avoided a \$350 uber ride home.

A great day was had by all, back in Ajax 8.30pm; exhausted.

On Saturday 6th June we gathered at the Legion for their D Day service at 1pm, the only bit of rain we had all week fell that morning but the weather gods shone for us once more and it was a nice clear warm day, although a strong wind kept the colour party on their toes.

A wonderful poignant service was led by the Legion's President, Bruce Sharpe with a number of speakers, including our chairman Nigel, Peter Danks and somewhat unexpectedly, myself. The Association veterans began the service with a march from the rear of the car park, following the Highland Creek Pipe Band, with our standard bearer, out to a position close to the Ajax Frigate anchor. All our veterans were presented with a commemorative 100th year Canadian Legion Pin. It was standing room only, with the seating area full; good to see a substantial crowd remembering those at D Day.



At the conclusion of the parade, everyone adjourned to the Legion bar for some refreshment. Ours was a short stay as we had little time to prepare for the evening Gala. Between the end of the D Day service and the gala evening, Tommy, yes, him again, lost his beret (mishap number 4). Note - during the 2022 visit, he lost his phone. Everyone gathered in the hotel reception

around 5.45pm where Nigel said a few words about the week and his hope that our new members would continue to support the Association at future events such as this year's reunion and later in the year, the Cenotaph parade.

With the group looking at their finest, we made the short walk to the new Durham Convention Centre: registration took place at the door and then we entered into the grand foyer. A surprise for all was our rum bosun, Mike Fox with his own stand and rum barrel calling 'up spirits'. Dressed in his traditional bosun outfit, the three-hundred and fifty guests were treated to a bit of Naval history with

a placard alongside the stand detailing the story of the tot. Unaccustomed to being the centre of attention, Mike bravely smiled away for the many requests for photographs.



We were indeed honoured to be special guests and needless to say, the gala event was jaw dropping, with fine food, an open bar, entertainment and much, much more. The Association commandeered the dance floor and danced the night away. The scene transformed two of our members.

Steve Cook, with his dodgy hips, showed all his moves and barely left the dance floor and Jim Harper wearing a very fetching pair of tartan trousers became Clark Kent turning into Superman across the ballroom. It was a late finish and a wonderful end to a wonderful week in Ajax

There were some tired heads on **Sunday 7th June** morning and with the official week activities over, it was time to recover. A few departed for the airport later that day, others enjoyed another day of sunshine and got out and about, some as far as 1000 Islands at Kingston. We really did luck out with the glorious weather all week.

Monday 8th June and the majority were homeward bound. Amazingly, Tommy got home without any further mishaps I think!

Thanks must go to Debbie Steer and Richard Cooke who not only collected most of the group from the airport but returned them at the end of the week

It was lovely to see extended family groups making up our number, Derek Wright bringing half of Glasgow, with good numbers of the Styths, Cooks and Cranswicks. Together with our solo travelers, showing how important the Association is in bringing people together, combating isolation, mingling with couples and families.

There are many superlatives about our week in Ajax; it far exceeded everyone's expectations. Laughter, tears, and many memories that will last forever.

To the Town of Ajax, Mayor Shaun Collier, Rose Collier and all the hard-working staff behind the scenes that made this such a very special week, we cannot thank you enough. Until the next time

Mike Cranswick
Secretary HMS Ajax & River Plate Veterans Association