

## HARRY STEELE

BUSINESSMAN, 92

## NEWFOUNDLAND ENTREPRENEUR KEPT HIS COMPANIES SHIPSHAPE

He embarked on his business career after serving more than 20 years as an officer in the Royal Canadian Navy and ran his enterprises the same way he would run a ship or a military base

FRED LANGAN

Harry Steele, who used the discipline and tactics of a military commander to become one of Newfoundland's most prolific entrepreneurs, died in St. John's on Jan. 28 at the age of 92.

Mr. Steele began his business career after serving more than 20 years as an officer in the Royal Canadian Navy. He retired in 1974 as a lieutenant-commander, and his business colleagues always referred to him as the Commander.

While he was away at sea, his wife, Catherine (née Thornhill), worked on small real estate transactions and managed the Albatross Hotel they owned in Gander, N.L. It was a true partnership.

After his retirement from the navy, Mr. Steele used the small nest egg they had from real estate and stock market profits, to buy the floundering Eastern Provincial Airways from the Crosbie family in 1978.

"Mum was willing to let him put all his chips on the table when he had to," their son, John Steele, said, referring to the money used to buy the airline. He added his mother kept his father focused during a high-flying business career.

"Even when he had the wind in his sails, she could keep him tethered to reality."

Eastern Provincial's advertising campaign called it "The Little Airline That Could." Mr. Steele expanded its routes from Atlantic Canada to Toronto despite opposition from the existing big carriers, Air Canada and Canadian Airlines. Eventually, he sold EPA to Canadian Airlines for \$20-million and joined its board.

That deal provided the basis for the growth of Newfoundland Capital Corp. It held Clarke Transport; Halterm, a company with container operations in the port of Halifax; a trucking company; a firm providing ferry service on the St. Lawrence River; and Oceanex, a shipping company serving ports from Montreal to St. John's and Halifax. NCC had operations on land, at sea and in the air.

On top of all that, Mr. Steele personally owned Universal Helicopters, hotels in Newfoundland and fishing camps in Newfoundland and Labrador. Friend and business associate Seymour Schulich said Mr. Steele fished for business as much as he did for salmon.

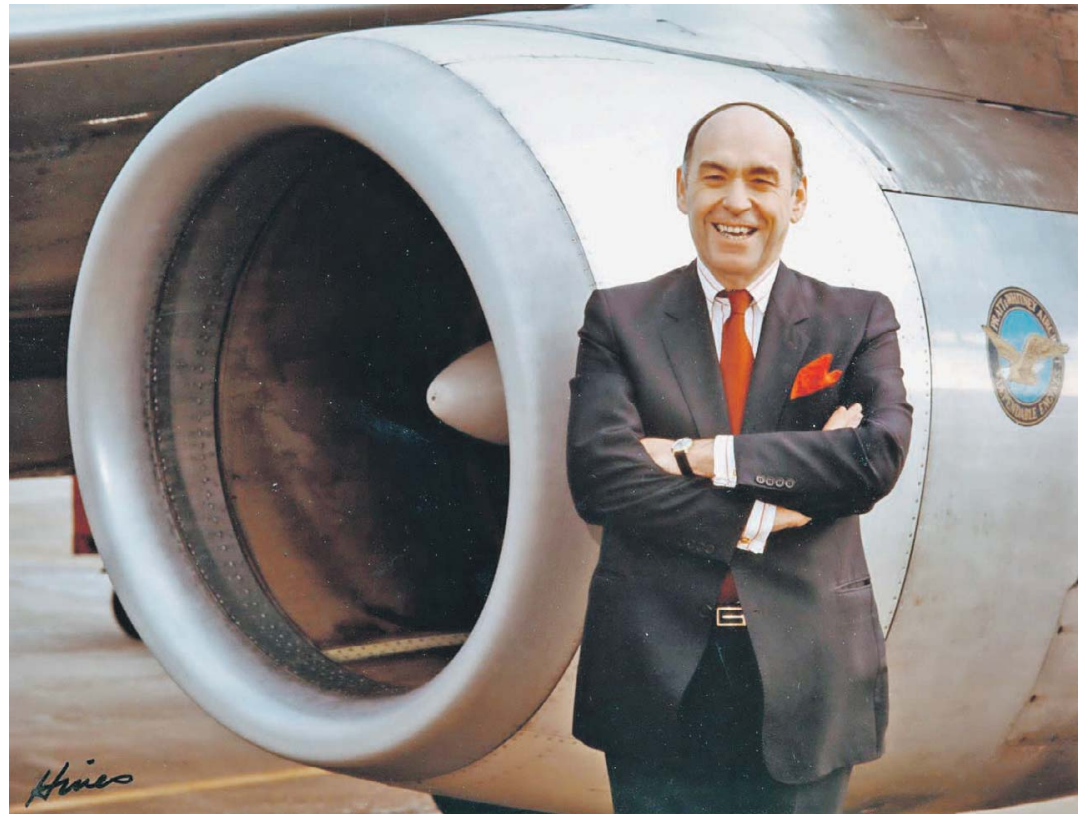
Mr. Steele served on the boards of many Canadian companies, including the Southam newspaper chain, Dundee Bancorp and many others. His family says Mr. Steele's business success was based on his character, which was the same in business as it was at home.

"He always did what he said he was going to do, whether that was closing a business deal or if he promised to pick you up at the airport," John said.

Although he started in business relatively late in life, once he started on his quest, he succeeded in a hurry. In fact, Joey Smallwood, the first premier of Newfoundland and Labrador, once said of Mr. Steele, "I never knew anyone to come so far so fast."

His start was as modest as they get. Harry Remington Steele was born on June 9, 1929, in Musgrave Harbour, an outpost on Newfoundland's Atlantic coast with one of the province's most beautiful beaches. This out-of-the-way spot is sought after by tourists today, but when Harry was a child, the village's remoteness meant that the only way in was by boat. Times were rough in the 1930s, and the community lived on fishing and work in the woods. The school there had two rooms, one upstairs and one downstairs, and taught everything from the first grade to the last year of high school.

When Harry left his hometown, he walked out through the bush that sur-



Known for keeping business operations tight, Harry Steele found a way to reduce the fuel burn of Eastern Provincial Airways' Boeing 737s by 10 per cent, saving \$1.5-million a year. COURTESY OF THE FAMILY

rounded the village to the railway tracks, which he picked up in the nearby town of Lewisporte. Not only was there no road into his village, there was no direct rail line into Musgrave Harbour either.

His first job outside Musgrave Harbour was digging ditches on the roads in Deer Lake in western Newfoundland. Then Mr. Smallwood came to the rescue. The premier created a scholarship program for aspiring teachers. Mr. Steele seized the opportunity and enrolled in Memorial University. He also joined the University Naval Training Division (a program set up to develop officers for the Royal Canadian Navy). He needed both scholarships to survive. Although he did graduate from the teacher training program, Mr. Steele never did teach school. Instead, he joined the Royal Canadian Navy full time as a junior officer.

He and his wife went to England, where Mr. Steele trained as a communications specialist at a Royal Navy school. He learned about codes and radio frequencies, the foundations of military intelligence. He also learned about secrecy: He never gave details, even to his family, of exactly what he did, except to say: "I read other people's mail."

He spent time at sea on a variety of warships: a large cruiser, an aircraft carrier, frigates and other types of vessels. He travelled the world, taking in many sights and different cultures. He saw poverty in West Africa and the opulence of diplomatic life in Washington, D.C., where he worked in naval intelligence.

Mr. Steele's last posting with the Royal Canadian Navy was as commander of the base at Gander, where he served for 4½ years. Gander was a key NATO base during the Cold War. Among other things, the base there kept an eye on submarine traffic

in the North Atlantic and intercepted and deciphered radio messages from the Russian vessels in the nearby ocean.

Around this time, Mr. Steele became fascinated with the stock market, and he began to make investments, pooling knowledge and money with his brother-in-law Roland Thornhill. Mr. Steele was an astute student of markets, a natural. And his wife, Catherine, had a sharp eye for real estate. She discovered the Albatross Hotel in Gander and, together with Mr. Steele, bought it and made a success of it.

Mr. Steele left the navy in 1974, riled by the amalgamation of Canada's armed forces, an action that led to the loss of many military traditions. The end of Harry's military career led to a new chapter in his life.

Mr. Steele began his civilian career working for Eastern Provincial Airways, whose head office was in Gander. However, he worked only briefly at the airline, leaving after a year. His decision to depart seemed a good one since EPA was on the ropes. Shortly after that he had a change of heart about the airline. He learned that the Crosbie family, who owned the company, was looking for a way out. The airline's stock price was in the basement and the Crosbies wanted to cut their losses. Mr. Steele had been picking up a sizable number of shares since he joined the company, and at this point, he decided that he could turn the airline around. Mr. Steele mortgaged everything he and Catherine had and bought the airline. He was 49 years old.

"EPA Changes Hands ... But It's Still a Newfoundland" screamed the St. John's Daily News headline on Nov. 22, 1978, when Harry bought the company.

He ran the airline the same way the former naval commander would run a ship or a military base: keeping operations tight.

He found a way to reduce the fuel burn of EPA's Boeing 737s by 10 per cent, saving \$1.5-million a year.

The company's other cost-cutting measures were less obvious. One example: Eastern Provincial Airways was the first airline in Canada to become non-smoking. It was healthier, but it also meant that the ashtrays didn't need to be cleaned after short hops.

Mr. Steele didn't like smoking. "There were a few smokers in the office, but they knew not to smoke at work," said Veronica Brown, Mr. Steele's executive assistant for 42 years. "He was always at work before anyone else in the morning. He loved work. Work to him was more like a hobby. He enjoyed salmon fishing, but his mind was always on work."

Along the way, Mr. Steele invested in newspapers, magazines, and radio stations. In the 1990s, however, there was a total rethink and reorganization of NCC. Clarke Transport, Halterm, Oceanex and all the related transportation businesses were sold. The newspapers and magazines went too. That left a pure media play, 101 radio stations across Canada. Newcap Radio was sold in 2018.

On April 29, 1992, then governor-general Ray Hnatyshyn invested Harry Steele as an officer of the Order of Canada. In his comments during the ceremony, Mr. Hnatyshyn remarked: "Although he remains modest about his career achievements, this Newfoundlander had a distinguished naval career before becoming one of the leading entrepreneurs in the Maritimes. He is a generous employer and community-minded citizen whose support of various local causes in the areas of education, health care and the arts is well-known."

Mr. Steele's many other honours include Memorial University of Newfoundland's Alumni of the Year Award.

He leaves his wife, Catherine; sons, Peter, Rob and John; seven grandchildren; and two great-children.

Special to The Globe and Mail

## I REMEMBER

RICHARD LEAKEY

In 1987 while Richard Leakey was still director of the National Museums of Kenya, he was very supportive of the fundraising activities of the Kenya Museum Society, of which I was a board member. All funds raised went to the museum.

Among the activities we planned was a trip up to Koobi Fora with Mr. Leakey and Alan Walker, a renowned authority on paleoanthropological anatomy.

We flew up in an old Cessna turboprop and landed on a dried lugga airstrip near Lake Turkana and the paleoanthropology camp buildings.

A battered Land Rover collected us and drove us to our quar-

ters, built for students and visiting professors.

A simple supper was served by Richard and Alan in a breezy screened structure comprising kitchen, offices and some bedrooms.

We sat around a long oilcloth-covered table drinking Kenya beer and chatting with the two scientists as they prepared our meal, doing a serious tasting of the salad dressing.

Richard interrupted proceedings at one point to deliver a stern lecture on drinking copious amounts of water in this desert area. We all knew he had had a kidney transplant. The delicious supper was served by Richard,

Alan and the Turkana cook, after which we followed them to a classroom for instruction on the dig, the terrain and anatomical primate developments.

Next morning, we all trooped into the desert to watch Richard excavate a previously discovered proto-baboon skull embedded in the desert sandstone. It was for Meave Leakey, Richard's wife, an eminent expert on early primates.

Down on his knees, sweeping away the sand, Richard revealed the half-buried baboon skull and chipping away carefully, soon exposed it.

From his rucksack he pulled out a plaster mix, a bottle of wa-

ter, and two rolls of coarse pink Kenyan toilet paper. Soon the skull was wound in gluey pink toilet paper.

While it dried, we were lectured on the desert terrain, the Turkana who inhabited the region, excavation techniques and discoveries.

Richard Leakey was a born storyteller, a savage wit, with a formidable store of knowledge to be shared. The trip was pricey, but what a bargain.

Jean Palmer, Ottawa  
Jean Palmer's late husband, Dr. Monte Palmer, was the medical attaché to the Canadian High Commission in Nairobi, 1985-1989



Richard Leakey at the National Museum in Nairobi in 1972. KEYSTONE FEATURES/GETTY IMAGES