

MEMORIES OF A WARTIME UNTD - 1996 - by Warren Forrester

During my recent brief involvement with the UNTD Association of Upper Canada, I have noticed that most of the rollicking tales of the other members about their adventures at sea and ashore as UNTD officer cadets, do not seem to jibe with my recollections. I have come to believe that this is because my experience was with the wartime UNTD, before it was reconstituted after World War II. Let me spin you a salty dip or two about the UNTD as I remember it during the last two years of the war.

In September of 1943, I entered Victoria College of the University of Toronto in the Honour Maths and Physics course. I was promptly advised, along with the other male freshmen, that I was required to enlist in one of the armed forces as a university trainee. Recruitment into the navy or air force units was voluntary and subject to quotas. Recruitment into the army unit could also be voluntary, but had no quota restriction and was the automatic default choice. I chose to join the navy unit and came in under its quota. At our first orientation meeting in the lecture hall of the old red brick Chemistry Building, I learned that the navy considered there to be only two classes of university student, the Science student and the Arts student. Science students were made Stokers second class and Arts students, Ordinary Seamen. I thus was made a Sto 2 and remained so until the end of the war, there being no promotions in the ranks of the wartime UNTD.

Our routine during the university year consisted of evening naval lectures in the Chemistry Building on Wednesdays and Fridays, and basic training at HMCS York (the CNE Automotive Building) on Saturday mornings. We did a lot of marching drills at the CNE, carrying wooden rifles, and I remember thinking that even in high school cadets, we had old WW1 Ross rifles to drill with. We did, however, develop some pride of unit and the UNTD was cited as the sharpest of the three services at the U. of T. November 11 Remembrance Service. Our only active service consisted of two weeks each summer in 1944 and 1945 "somewhere on the East Coast".

In 1944 "somewhere on the East Coast" turned out to be HMCS Stadacona in Halifax which we reached by CNR passenger train. We had tickets to exchange for meals in the diner, but had to sleep as best we could on the seats at night. Some of the boredom was relieved by calling out to Ray Corley, a railroad buff, the numbers of all the locomotives we met along the way. It was dark as the train approached Bedford Basin. Nobody believed Martin Shubik when he called out "K240" - a corvette. All the train windows were blacked out and suddenly the war seemed much closer, especially when we were allowed to turn off the lights and look out over the basin to see the dark forms of ships forming up for a convoy. The naval officer in charge told us in conspiratorial tones that the low hill visible on the other side of the basin was the location of the naval ammunition magazine.

We were transported from the railway station in the back of military transports and at Stadacona we were met by a gunner's mate and a stoker petty officer. The gunner formed up the OS platoon (Arts guys) and doubled them down to the barracks. The stoker just called out, "Stokers, follow me". The barracks room was large and filled with double bunks, most of which were already occupied. Since it was after "lights out" the room was lit only by dim red night-lights and I recall having difficulty finding my bunk again after a visit to the heads. We were roused in the morning by the banging of a steel pipe on the iron bunk frames, to the cry of, "Wakey wakey wakey. Rise and shine. Leggo your c---s and grab your socks. You've had your time, let me have mine."

The two weeks passed quickly, with introductory classes in propulsion, gunnery, radar and ASDIC. A tour of dockyard and a British submarine was followed with a day at sea on a Fairmile. Morning route marches through the streets of Halifax with the entire ship's company and the Stadacona Band, were frequent occurrences. I still feel like marching whenever I hear "Hearts of Oak".

The Second Year

During the second school year, 1944-45, we continued our naval classes and drills on the campus and at HMCS York. After Spring Exams we headed off for another two weeks of "active" service on the East Coast. By this time, the War in Europe had just ended and the Halifax V.E. Day riot was still in the news. We were sent this time, not to Halifax but to HMCS Cornwallis via CP Rail and the Dominion Atlantic Railroad under similar travelling conditions to those of the previous year. Upon arrival, we were signed on as temporary crew members of HMCS Quinte, a minesweeper converted for gunnery training duty. It was said that she had been sunk twice and raised each time. I can't recall what caused the original sinking, but the second sinking was said to have resulted from the salvage crew breaking into the rum locker after raising her.

We had all been issued hammocks and taught how to string them and lash them in rolls. These we slung fore and aft in the stokers' mess below decks, hoisting them tight to the deckhead during the day, and lowering them only for sleeping. This arrangement was very efficient since it occupied no deck space. The hammocks swung in unison with the rolling of the ship and the cocoon effect gave the illusion of security and privacy to its occupant. The galley was one deck up from the stoker's mess, so we had to carry our food along the deck and down a ladder to the mess before consuming it. I don't know whether this arrangement was necessitated by ship design or was intended to reduce food consumption; it certainly made one think twice about having a second helping.

We were assigned to watches as apprentices to the regular crew members, alternating periodically between the boiler room and the engine room. The Arts guys were likewise assigned to watches above deck doing ordinary seaman things. The stokers were a friendly and informal lot who treated us with candour and good humour. The Quinte had steam reciprocating engines and boilers fuelled with light bunker oil. Air pressure in the boiler room was kept higher than the outside pressure to prevent possible backdraft from the flame jets. A favourite prank was to call an apprentice in the engine room to take a message from the boiler room. When he stuck his head into the voice tube funnel, he would receive a facefull of black smoke from some smouldering oily waste held to the funnel in the boiler room. Since the air flowed only one way through the voice tube, there was no way to return the smoke signal. The only useful duty that I remember performing on the engine room watch was monitoring the temperature of the giant bearing where the connecting rods joined the crankshaft. This was done by letting the bottom of the bearing slap your hand as it came around (no rings on the fingers please). If it felt hot, we used large syringes to shoot jets of water and oil onto the bearing to form a lubricating lather. Another duty I remember, may or may not have been useful; mopping up the bilges after the bilge pumps had done their best. Several of us were sent down under the deck plates of the engine room with pails, tin cans, rags and an extension light to scoop up and wipe up any water and oil that had been left in the nooks and crannies of the bilges. Mostly we would lie in the restricted space between the deck plates and the bottom of the hull discussing some weighty problem in the glow of the naked light bulb. I still wonder whether this was a necessary chore or just a make-work project.

The ship went about its regular routine with us aboard; mostly taking gunnery teams out for practice shooting at targets towed by aircraft. One day we were required to steam from Cornwallis to Saint John. Midway across the Bay of Fundy we entered a thick fog. Some time later we ran aground on a mud flat, fortunately at slow speed so no damage was done, although we did have to be pulled free by a tug and escorted into port. We were told later that the watch officer was relying on the magnetic compass and ignored the radar officer's warning that there was land where there should not have been. The radar was right and the compass was wrong. We spent the next day steaming around on fixed courses to swing the compass. The radar scope was a simple cathode ray oscilloscope on which appeared a straight green line with a distance scale etched below it. A blip on the line at the zero of the scale marked the initiation of the radar pulse while blips of various shapes and sizes at various distances on the scale marked the reflection of parts of the pulse from objects at those distances. A trained operator could fairly well identify an object from the shape and character of the reflected blip. Land for example, gave a reflected pattern of many small spikes resembling grass. The radar antenna did not continually sweep the horizon, but could be aimed in any desired direction by the operator. Radar was still fairly new back then and perhaps the navigator could be excused for not trusting it.

The ship required bunkering in Saint John and my mess mate, Shubik, and I were detailed to place a pan under the hose connection on deck to catch any oil that leaked out, disposing of it overboard. It was a rainy, blustery day so we took the shortest path to the rail to make our dump. As we did so, a gust of wind caught the falling oil, spreading it out into a beautiful fan, plastering the side of the ship. Like a scene from John Winton's, "We Joined the Navy", the Captain was looking out his porthole when everything went black. The cause of this unexpected eclipse was uncovered and we were ordered over the side on a plank to clean off the oil. Shubik declared a vertigo condition and was assigned another punitive task while I was lowered over the side. Fortunately we were at anchor in the harbour so no great danger was involved, although I was at one point half submerged by the bow wave of a passing destroyer.

After returning to Cornwallis, Shubik and I requested to stay with the ship as she steamed around to Halifax on her next mission. This was approved by our supervising UNTD officer but denied at higher command, so when our two weeks were up we returned home for the rest of the summer.

By the time university re-opened in the Fall, the atomic bombs had been dropped and the war ended on V J Day. We handed in our uniforms and were formally discharged. It was my impression, at that time, that the UNTD had been disbanded. I heard no more of it until after my graduation in 1947 when it appeared to have been resurrected. I believe that my UNTD experience confirmed in me a fondness for the sea. Certainly it gave me confidence to find that I was not prone to sea-sickness and this contributed to my choosing a career in physical oceanography and hydrography with all the sea time inherent therein.

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