



Survival as an Ordinary Seaman (Officer Candidate)

By Robert Darlington

Having been a Sea Cadet from 1941 to 1947 in *John Travers Cornwell* VC Corps in HMCS *Chippawa*, Winnipeg, it was no great leap when I joined the University Naval Training Plan (UNTD) as I began my 1945 college year at the University of Manitoba. Lieutenant-Commander Liston B. McIlhaga was Staff Officer at HMCS *Chippawa* and my joining procedure was unusual to say the least. I was a Cadet Midshipman and 'Mac' had earlier chosen me to command the 100 strong Cadet Guard for His Excellency, our Governor General the Earl of Athlone. So my joining routine in the Wardroom in *Chippawa* consisted of 'Mac' getting two beers and I signed the papers.

I am not aware of any formal history of the UNTD. It had been initiated pretty much under the guidance of Commander Herbert Little, but I do not have a clear date for its inception. My very good friend Vern Margetts (another Winnipeg Sea Cadet) joined with me and for some obscure reason, Commander Little referred to the two of us as the 'Gold Dust Twins.' His son Robert Little was the Assistant Adjutant at the Canadian Forces School of Administration and Logistics when I served there as Chief Instructor in 1968. He went on to be a Major General. We were given wartime RCNVR numbers; mine was V-95591. (Later the 'V' numbers were cancelled and I got R-471. On commissioning, I was given the officer number 0-17974.)

If this was to be a formal history of the UNTD plan, I would have obtained and studied Naval Board minutes to see what was done, what was intended and how the wheels of administration were driven. Perhaps the naval leaders saw that the Army through its ROTC was attracting the best of undergraduates for officer selection. Was Commander Little given any specific direction? The inception of the plan was probably in 1943, but the ships were fighting a sea war at that time so it wasn't until late 1945 and 1946 that the students could be shipped to one or other coast to meet the ships and have on board experience. But the post war navy was shutting down much of its infrastructure so the staff remaining were not in the best condition to prepare and execute formal training plans.

There were two different eras for those who became members of the UNTD. From roughly 1943 to 1949, members held the rank of

Ordinary Seaman (Officer Candidate). In 1947, some of us were reclassified as Probationary Writer (Officer Candidate). Both wore the uniform of an Ordinary Seaman and all lived in the mess decks and slung hammocks. They were clearly identified by white cap tallies. After 1949, the members were all entered as Cadets and had battle dress type jackets and peaked caps. They also had separate messing facilities. Vern and I usually took off the white tally and put on the ship's tally in which we served. No one seemed to care!

At *Chippawa* during the winter of 1945-46, we paraded once a week under the sharp eyes of Chief Petty Officer John Pegg (ex-Royal Navy). Because I was concurrently the Sea Cadet gunnery officer, I had been elevated to the rank of Acting Leading Seaman. Once when CPO Pegg saw a flaw in the platoon's marching, he ordered it to double around the parade ground. He roared at me to fall out because, "Leading Seamen are exempt from such penalties." So we began to absorb the many mysteries of the culture and traditions of life in the Navy.

If the following autobiographical report leaves readers with the impression that training programs in the early days were scarce, that was certainly my judgment. I spent more time painting and chipping paint than I spent in a classroom. Most notable exception was a two week course for twelve of the first class of Probationary Writers in the Supply School in 1947. Too often we were seen as 'gash hands.'

The normal practice was for UNTDs to spend two weeks in summer training at the coast nearest their home Division. So in April 1946, our Winnipeg contingent headed west by train when our college exams were finished. Quite a number from Winnipeg had wartime service. Rex Vyner had been a Leading Seaman in HMCS *Restigouche*. Bob Strain was a Signaller in HMCS *Galt*. Bob Sunderland was a Coder and survivor when HMCS *Chebogue* was torpedoed. One of our group was an army sergeant who had survived a tank strike in the Italian campaign. We even had an ex-RCAF tail gunner wearing the ribbon of a Distinguished Flying Medal.

On arrival at HMCS *Naden*, the West Coast barracks, we were taken across the harbour to the Dockyard. In HMCS *Givenchy*, where

we were issued hammock parts and were then taught how to put all the pieces together so that it could be slung on a hammock bar whether in barracks or on board a ship. Our first ship was the cruiser HMCS *Ontario*. The ship had recently returned from the Pacific war and although still in commission, she was in bad maintenance and reduced personnel. It was disconcerting to hear the pipe "Duty rat catcher, close up." We were billeted in C-Mess, a large forward open mess. After 'Lights Out' was piped, we lay awake listening to the rats scurrying along the deckhead cabling. We often took boots into our hammocks. At a signal, someone switched on lights and we threw boots in the direction of the rats. It was totally ineffective but lots of fun and required some sorting out of boots in the morning. Our Divisional Officer was Lieutenant Mark Mayo.

Our two weeks in the cruiser were simply to take Damage Control training. One evolution required each of us to go into a smoke filled compartment wearing respirator equipment. I don't recall much else that filled out the two weeks on board. There was obviously no training plan for we 'Untidies.'

As Ordinary Seaman (OC) we were entitled to leave which expired at midnight, so our trips into Victoria usually finished with a mad dash for the old Number Four 'Toonerville Trolley' which served the dockyard. The ship's Master-at-Arms was himself under punishment so he was always at the brow to remove any Station Card that was still on the board at midnight. A sailor's station card contained his duty watch (port or starboard if in two watches or red white or blue if in three watches). It also said if he was entitled to grog.

A number of us were planning to stay on the coast longer than two weeks so we were transferred to the frigate HMCS *Charlottetown* (LCdr Jack Wolfenden). Because I had asked to stay all summer, I was assigned to the Gunner's Party. By June of 1946, most of the wartime RCNVR ratings had been released. The remaining hands were a combination of those who had signed on for a

seven year RCN hitch during the war and a few old prewar men. One of the latter was Leading Seaman Dave Martin. He had been disrated numerous times and was still walking a fine line of potential misconduct. He kept a bottle of gin in his locker. He and I spent most days stripping the twin four-inch gun forward of the bridge where he could sneak a drink and waste time without being observed. Today's navy would not put up with the likes of Davey Martin. I first saw him serving beer in the wet canteen in HMCS *Stadacona* in Halifax in 1948.

The ship was assigned to two-week training cruises with UNTDs and I was allowed to stand bridge watches as Second Officer, which I loved. The Captain required a loaded rifle on the bridge and used it to shoot at anything that came near the ship. I never saw him hit anything. He never seemed to realize that I needed glasses and once looked at me strangely when he asked if the stern line was in and I used binoculars to check, a matter of perhaps 100 feet. One day our quarterdeck was loaded with boxes of ammunition of numerous varieties. We were told that it was all "time expired." We took it out a few miles then dumped it into the Straits. Presumably it eventually broke free from the cases and was eaten up by rust. The Captain kept a few cases for his use on the bridge, popping off at any stray bird that got within range.

I can't recall all the west coast ports we visited. One was Powell River where that company town arranged for a dance and busses to get us to the hall. We also went into Port Alberni where another dance was provided in a small hall with one light bulb. We desperately tried to dance our partners into the bleak light to see what they looked like. The next day we toured the plywood factory where many of the same girls worked and were covered with sawdust. I also recall that we visited Prince Rupert where we who were underage were able to get beer served at the local Legion. I think it was at Alert Bay where we played basketball against a First Nation's team. Colin Shaw was the scorekeeper and I remember him calling, "At bat, Mountain Mark One, on

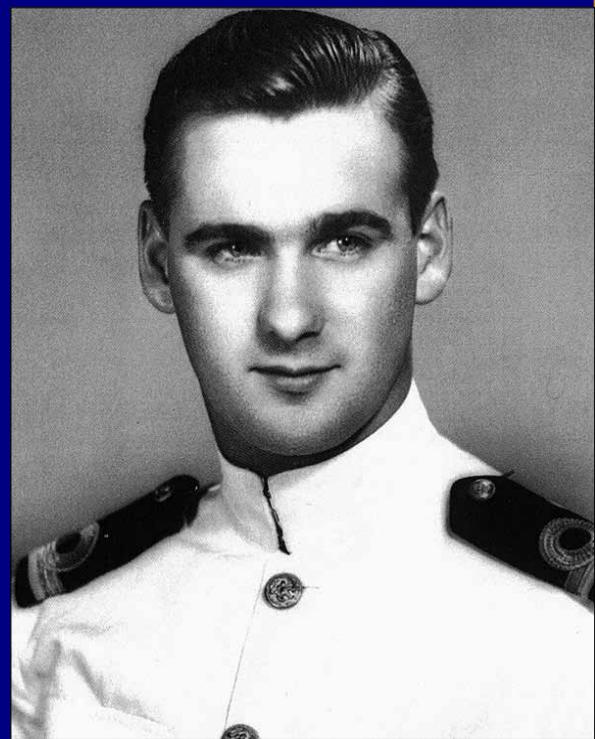
deck Mountain Mark Two, and in the hole Mountain Mark Three." The ship got as far north as Ketchikan in the Alaskan panhandle. At that time it was strictly a fisherman's port, much unlike the tourist choice of the many cruise liners that now have it on their schedule. Most of the UNTD were either from Winnipeg or Edmonton and some friendships developed. Two that I recall were Ernie Pallister, who became well known in the Alberta oil business and Tevie Miller who became a Judge of the Supreme Court of Alberta.

As an Officer Candidate I stood bridge watches as Second Officer, usually with Lieutenant 'Tiny' Hyman. On one occasion in Hecate Strait we took over the Morning Watch at 0400 and were told that the island in view was on the chart, fine on the starboard bow. At that time there were virtually no lights or useful aids to pilotage in the Queen Charlotte Islands. Hyman and I soon determined that the island had been wrongly identified and we were standing into shoal water. A course adjustment was quickly made. I can't remember ever using our very basic radar for use in pilotage waters.

Prior to 1958, Ripple Rock was a major danger to ships at Seymore Narrows in the Inside Passage. It was at the entrance to Johnson Straits and had to be passed with extreme caution. In the two months I spent in *Charlottetown*, I believe we did so at least twice. Floating logs were also dangerous. We hit one in Johnson Strait that became attached to the prow and was splashing vigorously on both sides of the ship.

For some reason that now escapes me, a few of us were transferred to HMCS *Crescent*, a relatively new destroyer. Canada had intended to get all eight of the "CR" class destroyers for service in the Pacific, but the war ended and we settled for just *Crescent* and *Crusader*. *Crispin* and *Creole* went to the Pakistan Navy under new names. *Cromwell*, *Crown*, *Crozier* and *Crystal* went to the Royal Norwegian Navy, again under new names.

Once again I managed to be put into the Gunner's Party where I was to be sweeper



Top Row L to R: Shore leave from HMCS *Crescent*, July 1948. • Darlington on *Ontario's* six-inch barrels. • The mad crew of the Executive Officer's barge. **Middle Row L to R:** Sunbathing on *Ontario's* six-inch turret until a signal from the Admiral ended it. • Miller and Palister (Edmonton) with Darlington. • The author as a brand new Sub-Lieutenant. **Bottom:** Winnipeg's Kovnats and Darlington.

All photos, author's collection.



of the director above the bridge and the Haize Myer pom-pom mounting. I was to return the mounting to peacetime glory by removing all the paint from the brass labels and fittings. In the director, no one could see me from the bridge and I could laze away part of the working day in the sun. The gunnery Leading Seaman was one of the Paul brothers. He had left the navy as a Chief Petty Officer but rejoined as a Killick. He always carried a stick and we could expect a gentle touch across the bottom if he was displeased. Please do not suggest a formal complaint! That was 1946, not 2015!

The Captain was Pat Nixon who I got to know well in later years. We went up the west side of the island and had on board the Governor General, the Earl Alexander and some of his family including a teenage daughter with a friend. On the bridge, the GG asked the captain to show how fast the ship would go. So the ship increased speed to about 33 knots. I was on the quarterdeck aft of the two 4.5 inch gun turrets and the ship's diesel cutter. When stowed, the cutter's canopy was not securely fitted. When the wind from the ship's speed got under the very heavy diesel cutter's canopy, it took flight, landed on the deck just in front of me, bounced once and with one mighty leap, went over my head and was consigned to the Pacific Ocean. This was my first near death on board experience. Many years later I told Pat Nixon of this incident. He said he was not told about the loss of naval equipment.

The XO had me confused with a seaman with a Ukrainian name. As I was walking aft he called out the wrong name and I decided to ignore him. He finally shouted, "OK Darlington, I get the message." Somewhere off Comox as we were returning to Esquimalt in company with *Uganda*, we found a fishing boat with flames pouring out of the engine. The cruiser (senior ship) ordered us to go to the rescue. We went alongside and from our foc's'le we smothered the engine with foamite. Just as we got the flames to die down, another fishing boat, assuming we were not winning the battle, rushed up and poured sea water on the fire. Naturally

it washed all our foamite away. With the fire now returning and the boat full of water, the boat disappeared under the sea. While the great fire fight was happening, we learned that *Uganda* was negotiating with another fishing boat for fresh fish! We had used all our foamite supply in any case.

In one of the inlets, possibly Uclulet, we joined the cruiser HMCS *Uganda* for a fleet competition. In the Winnipeg Sea Cadets, I had pulled a whaler oar many times so I volunteered as second stroke on the ship's whaler racing crew. We had already beaten the Vancouver Reserve Division team in the one mile pull off the Vancouver waterfront. The XO was pleased and gave us each a bottle of beer. When *Uganda* and *Crescent* anchored in Alberni Inlet, the two ships had a whaler pulling contest. Seamen crews were matched against each other as were stokers, communicators and officers. The larger ship [the cruiser *Uganda*] was able to man more than one entry in each category so we raced against four other boats. One of the senior officers ran a pari-mutuel betting system and once again we were the XO's heroes as we made him a little profit.

One day in Esquimalt I was assigned as guard over a sailor who was to be given severe punishment by the reading of a warrant. I cannot imagine what I was intended to do if the prisoner attempted to escape. He did ask to go to the heads and I felt compelled to take him there. As we passed through the various messes he was given a quick shot of rum by his sympathetic mates. At noon when I took him to the quarterdeck for the warrant reading, he was slightly inebriated and giggled when the coxswain removed his cap. I thought that I was the next for punishment but our prisoner was led away to incarceration.

I returned to Winnipeg via a Labour Day stop in Edmonton at the home of Tevie Miller. We had a date with local friends of Tevie and Ernie Pallister. The night club owner was not pleased with our jitter bug dancing but had trouble getting his ethnic tongue around the word "jitter."

By the spring of 1947, Margetts and I had transferred from the Seaman Branch to the

Supply and Secretariat Branch and were now Probationary Writers (Officer Candidates). A number of other UNTDs across Canada had done the same, so when we went to *Naden* on the west coast we joined the Supply School for a two week training course. I still have a photo of the twelve of us who were on that course. That was followed by two weeks in the cruiser *Uganda* for a 4-inch gun firing exercise. I was eliminated from the final gun's crew for some comment I made within hearing range of the Petty Officer in charge.

With no more formal training planned for us, I was assigned to the Discharge Transit Centre. This was a unit of one Lieutenant-Commander (LCdr Grubb) and one Petty Officer Writer (Al Haley). Numerous men, both RCN and RCNVR were reaching the end of their period of service and the DTC administered the process up to their day of release. I had an office next to the boss where I answered his phone and arranged the final meeting with the men. He was usually gruff and impatient when his wife called, but sweetness and friendly when it was a colleague calling to arrange a noon-time drink.

Each man discharged had to visit a number of authorities to be checked off. These ranged from the pay office to the library and some that made no sense. Once we in the office had all the documents in order, the last step was a final interview with LCdr Grubb. From my office I could hear that event. The officer always asked if the man had any final comments. One old Stoker Petty Officer then launched into a litany of negatives covering the full period of his service. When he finished the boss said, "*When you entered my office you sat down without my permission. Stand up!*" [Shuffling noises] *Now, do you have any complaints?* The quiet reply was, "*No Sir.*" The Petty Officer left as a civilian without any further good feelings.

Over the winter of 1947-48, I remained a junior officer in the Sea Cadets so was often in *Chippawa's* wardroom where Commander 'Rocky' Main was the Commanding Officer. Vern and I were waiting our formal transfer from the Seaman's Branch to the

Supply and Secretariat Branch as the Logistics Branch was known at that time. Rocky was teasing me about my eyesight and took me to Sick Bay for an ad hoc test. There was a calendar on the wall and he asked me what the cowboy on the calendar was doing. After a squint or two I reckoned there was too much bare skin for a cowboy and said, "It's a cowgirl." Earlier, I had passed the lettered chart because I had long before memorized the letters in the appropriate line.

But Vern Margetts and I decided we had seen the west coast for two years and would try for the east coast. We became the only two from the west that went to Halifax. On arrival we checked in at HMCS *Stadacona* and were told to sling our hammocks in 'A' Block. That block was a weekend disaster so we went into town and rented a room on Spring Garden Road for \$1.00. On Monday morning we reported on board HMCS *Iroquois* for duty as writers; Vern in the ship's office and me in the pay office. How the 'system' found the two of us and why they thought we were qualified writers remains a mystery.

Iroquois was in commission but with a much reduced complement. The captain was LCdr Breen P. Young. There were two Supply Branch officers on staff, LCdr Martin Doyle and Lt Jack Forbes. For the four months that I was on board, the only movement the ship made was to turn bow to stern at the jetty. The ship was in command of the Reserve Fleet which consisted of out of commission ships with some personnel, and including some very small wooden minesweepers.

The ship's company were a unique bunch of characters. One bright soul regularly climbed the foremast naked in the hopes that he would be released as medically (mentally) unfit, i.e., slightly bonkers. Another was getting daily visits from the RC Chaplain because his wife wanted him to leave the Catholic Church. The XO had a cat which was twice thrown into the harbour and twice rescued by a sailor in the ship's rowboat. One sailor named Holmes, who came from a well to do family was called 'Better Holmes.' Vern and I together with three *Iroquois* sailors crewed a harbor craft to St. Margaret's Bay for two officers. While they were on social duties ashore, we loaded their camera with some photos of us. The owner was amused.

I had my 21st birthday on board accompanied by numerous tots. When the XO made evening rounds I was fast asleep on the lockers. Everyone in the mess lined up tightly so the XO could not see me. He had probably already determined that his men were somewhat weird so just ignored their antics. The ship's wardroom was not in use as such and was where the captain's and pay offices were located. A Petty Officer Writer (Norm Boot) was reviewing wartime reports of ship's officers to assess their combat readiness. At one stage I assisted the Petty Officer although there were no standards against which to retain or destroy each report. Some were extremely critical. One I recall said that the only officer capable of standing a bridge watch was the Captain. I believe that most of the reports went to the storage depot in Sydney, but I have never heard of their use by a naval historian.

Vern and I stood no watches and were free to go ashore and enjoy the delights of 1948 Halifax. Entertainment consisted of the movie house, a dance hall called "The Bucket of Blood" or the *Stadacona* pusser's wets. I believe it was Olands who had the beer contract with the 'wets.' Whoever, it was the strongest of any I have ever tasted. A USN cruiser came in for a port visit. As the sailors arrived for drinks, we warned them off the beer. They scoffed! Soon they were going out the door horizontally. For ten cents a glass it was a short trip. Leading Seaman Davie Martin had found his nirvana in the wets as a server.

My job was keeping the pay records. With no formal training it was a case of learning while doing. The RCN had adopted a modified system based on the USN method. I was supervised by a Leading Pay Writer who left me pretty much on my own. One morning Jack Forbes told me to come with him to pay the troops on another ship. I said I needed a pencil and ducked into my mess deck to get one. While at my locker a Petty Officer shouted that I was now on report for "Skulking in the mess during working hours." When I told Forbes why I was late joining him, he blew his stack. For some reason the PO was never very friendly to me after that.

At a date in June, two messages came on board from NDHQ. One said that Margetts and Darlington were fully qualified for promotion to Acting Sub-Lieutenant (S) RCNR, and did we wish to be so promoted? The second said that the RCN was seeking electrical and supply officers for transfer or acceptance. Vern and I immediately said yes to the RCNR commission and yes please to the application. Very shortly thereafter, mid-July, we were directed to attend a selection board in *Stadacona*. The members were Haddon, Paddon and Laws. I vaguely remember some of the questions that were very general in nature. When the Board learned that I had been the Gunnery Officer in my sea cadet corps, the atmosphere changed from formal to benevolent. I had recently danced with a girl at the 'Bucket of Blood' who was a secretary at the HQ building. She mailed me a copy of the Board's findings with a note demanding secrecy. The electrical candidate was deemed to be "suitable." Margetts and I were found to be "eminently suitable" for transfer to the RCN.

One Saturday morning in July, Vern and I were enjoying a cigarette on the quarterdeck when Jack Steel came up the brow to have a drink with our captain. Jack was the Staff Officer at *Chippawa*, our home unit. He said, "What the hell are you doing here?" On Monday morning our Master-at-Arms piped me and told me to get my kit and hammock and join the aircraft carrier HMCS *Magnificent* at Jetty Five. Since we were at Jetty Two and the carrier was about to sail, it was a tight race. I literally went on board with the last brow as it was being hoisted.

Somehow in the rush of people during their routines for sailing, I found the Regulating Office where I was told that I was to work in the Pay Office and was berthed in H8 Mess with the other Writers. The pay records were administered in four sections: two for Leading Seamen and below, and I got the one for Petty Officers. Our boss was a crusty old petty officer who handled the officer records.

The captain was Harry DeWolf who was about to be promoted to Commodore. The Commander was Debbie Piers.

The ship had recently arrived in Canada after its predecessor, HMCS *Warrior*, had been transferred to another navy. The squadron had not had any decks for practice landings so their's was to be their inaugural exercise. We took twenty-one aircraft to sea, some of which were Seafires. I don't recall the anti-submarine type, but I do know that we did not have twenty-one aircraft when we returned to Halifax.

Other than a short R&R visit to Gaspé and a Banyan at some deserted spot, we were at sea for most of August and two weeks into September. After the banyan some drunken idiot threw Cdr. Piers' telescope over the side. During flying, one aircraft went into the batsman's net and one simply dropped into the sea while on final. From that event it was discovered that the avgas was contaminated with sea water. And one tried to decapitate me. I was 'goofing off' on a lovely sunny Sunday in the starboard after saluting gun sponson. I was sitting on an ammunition locker which brought me up to flight deck level. The next aircraft was starting to line up for its run in for landing. To me it did not look right so I started to ease off the locker. Soon I realized that it was not at all properly lined up. So I dropped into the sponson and ducked inboard. I was quickly followed by the aircraft which struck the saluting gun and then went over the side. Midshipman (L) 'Buzz' Nixon was on the island and had seen me in the sponson. We had served together at a Sea Cadet camp. He was convinced that I had 'had it.' The aircraft had hit and spun the gun's barrel as it went over the side. It would have cut me in half had I not moved quickly. My selection of 'goofing' stations after that episode was more carefully chosen. The pilot, I believe, was Dick Bartlett. He was rescued by the plane guard but I don't think he ever flew again. I heard later that the aircraft had suffered a torque stall.

Not long after I was piped to the quarterdeck. Sitting on the bollard was the Captain's Secretary, Lt(S) 'Bud' Smith, another old member of my cadet corps. Bud said I was not RCN and was to immediately moved to the 'Arab's Quarters,' a large space for six of the most junior Midshipmen. It was right aft and over the screws. I told Bud that I had only clothing for a sailor. He said the Wardroom was dining that night and to wait until the next morning, a Sunday, and he would check with the Commander(S). But the Commander confirmed that I was to join the Wardroom. When I went there at noon, one officer welcomed me and asked if I would like a drink. When I accepted he looked at me with a questioning pause. No one had told me that West Coast rules were used. That meant giving the buyer your mess number, in effect buying your own drink. But I didn't have a number anyway.

My first uniform was quite a collection. A shirt from Mid(S) Bill Davis, a cap from Trevor Roberts, a battle dress jacket from ship's store and a uniform jacket and pants from the Captain (\$10.00). It had four half stripes and a chest full of medals. The Nuns in Halifax corrected that and I was soon wearing a somewhat reasonably fitting

outfit with one stripe complete with white distinguishing cloth.

But this tale is about the UNTD and I was no longer a member. I recognized that my service in that organization was far from the norm. But hopefully it shows some of the early growing pains. It started in wartime but soon came to represent a much more controlled program in which many young Canadian university members got a close up introduction to their Royal Canadian Navy. I have no data on numbers who joined, were commissioned and went on to a more senior rank in their home Division. I don't believe it was intended to obtain career officers in the RCN. In addition to Margetts and myself, I only know of Buck Buchanan and RAdm Jack Allan. Those who did choose the RCN were primary Supply Branch. But regardless of numbers, I am sure that the naval culture was planted in many young Canadians. Bob Williamson has maintained a newsletter which is [was?] primarily aimed at those who were cadets. I noted quite informally the careers of some of my shipmates from the 1946 bunch, notably those from Edmonton: John Huckle, a well known doctor; Ernie Pallister an oil man; Tevie Miller a Judge of the Supreme Court of Alberta. Most took their commissions but [civilian] careers replaced leadership in Naval Reserve affairs.

So without an in depth study of the aims and results of the UNTD program from inception to conclusion, this brief article must stand alone as simply the experience of one participant during a period when it was for the most part, without leadership and purpose. Except for a brief course at the Supply School in 1947, there was no apparent training program designed for future officers. I painted ship, chipped paint, stood underway bridge and quarterdeck lookout, was in sea boats' crews, and four-inch gun's crews like any ordinary seaman. I believe we were seen simply looked upon as 'gash hands' in the ships and not future officers.

Bob Darlington is a member of NOA Vancouver Island Branch and co-author with Fraser McKee of "The Canadian Naval Chronicle 1939-1945", Vanwell Publishing Limited (1996).

We are always looking for material for *Starshell* from our readers. Don't fancy yourself a writer? Not to worry ... I like to think I've become somewhat of an 'expert' in remedial English over the years. Just send it to me, your editor, and I'll do the rest. Many thanks!

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