

By CPO1 (ret'd) D.H. 'Buster' Brown, Outside Wrecker, HMCS Okanagan, July 28, 1973

The 1973 underwater collision of HMCS/m Okanagan with RFA Grey Rover in the Clyde Estuary was a significant event in Canadian submarine history. From the 60s to the 90s, there had been near misses and bottomings as well as Argus/Aurora weapon hits, Julie bomb scares, and ships' sonar domes banging into fins, that drew moments of anxiety in the minds of all submariners. Loud echoes of "Sonavabitch, that was close!" when witness to the superficial scars in black paintwork became the sporadic norm.

But there was nothing quite like the day that a tanker ran over a submarine that had the boat been a few feet shallower and the same distance forward, the result could have been fatal. The present day former crew often look back to the time it happened, but not in a way as most would expect as a bad memory. Instead, they reflect on the event as a bonding experience, a fraternal relationship, and an expression of confidence in how efficiently they reacted in such a serious situation. Some may have felt indifferent, but all of them gratefully realized how lucky they were.

Fate came during the very last serial of WUPs at 0743(Z), July 28, 1973 with just 17 minutes left before surfacing and heading back to the Clyde Submarine Base at Faslane, Scotland. It required that Okanagan conduct an Underwater Look (UWL) with the gathering of intelligence and periscope photography of underwater fittings, propellers, ancillaries, etc., upon and in this case, the Royal Navy's 7,600 ton Auxiliary Oiler RFA Grey Rover, the assigned (target). A play on words, indeed.

In order to obtain photography without breaching the surface, the boat maintained a depth some 10 - 15 feet below standard periscope depth of 59 - 60 ft. As Grey Rover closed, a combination of depth, course, range, and speed became factors that with a slight error in calculation, the risks were inherent. Such was to be the case.

To evade the situation the submarine was hastily ordered to go deep by flooding D and Q tanks as compensation for quick change of safe depth to 180 feet, but it was too late. A sudden underwater pressure surge caused the boat to heel nearly 15 degrees to starboard and then as the boat rolled back into the tanker's churning propeller, the numbers of shaft revolutions had undulated into the fin that was to resemble the teeth of a giant hacksaw. The noise and clamour of rattling periscope rams with venting air and seawater from D & Q tanks gave fear of flooding as all compartments quickly shut down watertight bulkheads. Expecting then that Grey Rover was now safely clear, the boat was ordered to surface in emergency by blowing all main ballast and auxiliary tanks from the ordered safe depth. That required much greater volumes of H.P. Air than when doing so from periscope depth as was the norm. Okanagan went bows up and rose rapidly to the surface of the belief that when she arrived on the roof, did so ahead of the emergency red grenade, the signal that all surface vessels steer clear at the rush.

After the boat eventually achieved full buoyancy, it was impossible to exit via the conning tower hatch so a forward hatch was finally opened, giving witness and shuddering at the extensive damage. Muddled minds resulted from both, emotions and the physical

irregularities of structural damage and confusion could frequently abound. Exasperated, demoralized, and with an element of embarrassment, it was now the painstaking task to head into Faslane. The crew would have to exhibit its demise to submarine crews alongside and staffs ashore, they, no longer acknowledging that HMCS/m Okanagan was nearing the end of one of the most successful work - ups a submarine had ever accomplished. Just two hours had gone by since the collision and every man aboard felt uncertainty.

What went wrong? Why did it happen? What did a submarine and her crew that performed so well in WUPS do to have to suffer this? How close did they come to sinking? Messages were flying back and forth, people on the casing and bridge were surrounded in disarray as were some minds, and for the rest of them below, tried to find strength with the horns of dilemma, however disguised with apathy or insensibility. And with having to live with a memory that shall never go away, each man in the crew inherited some form of influence or constant reminder of that bittersweet day in the Clyde approaches. While enduring remorse, an inquiry began immediately in order to review the proceedings that led to this near disaster.

Earlier this year, crew member long retired submarine CPO (Electrician) Brian Lapierre took it upon himself to rally the group of special shipmates who were then aboard the boat. The intention was to re - unite for a 40th anniversary and commemorate the event. His efforts extended across Canada and as far away as Mozambique in Africa. After much computer research into their whereabouts and in chasing guys down, he was successful to the extent that with a complement of 65 officers and men, 15 were to attend a private and exclusive get - together which took place July 28, 2013, a sunny Sunday morning at RCNA Peregrine on Agricola St. in Halifax.

It was an opportunity to recall of the moment when their teamwork, precision and reactions saved a submarine and themselves from near fate. With the symbolic Jolly Roger flag in attendance, the event kicked off with faces that hadn't been seen in years while the increasing crowd rejoiced in bear-hugs, rigorous handshakes and very noisy "Well, I'll be's!" among greying and balding guys from B.C., Quebec, Ontario and indeed Halifax. There would be a (submarine) Grace of Thanks in preceding a Crunch Brunch of eggs, hash browns, bacon, bangers, french toast and shirtlifters. Duff would follow instead sharply substituted with a 40 oz. bottle of (wait for it) the original RCN's Pusser's Neats supplied by Brian, who acquired it in 1976.

Toasts would ensue: First to "Okanagan at Minute 43", followed by a Silent Toast in recalling the names of 13 messmates who through those 40 years, have since Gone Deep. With words in hand they all then joined in unity in reciting The Submariners' Prayer. It was amazing as to how everyone could account of their experience and how it accurately aligned with the events as they were to unfold.