

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN -- CANCOMRAY

The military thrive on acronyms. It doesn't matter which country it is, they love them. They couldn't live without them. The countries within NATO established some classic acronyms, so that every body within NATO could easily understand them. For instance, everyone should recognize CANCOMSUBCARRIBSEAFRON and COMCARRIBAIRFRON as the Canadian Commander Submarine Caribbean Sea Frontier and the Commander Caribbean Air Frontier!

I believe there must be little men in the bowels of the Pentagon, MOD (UK), NDHQ and the other NATO capitals, who do nothing but produce acronyms. They are probably the same people who do the same for newspapers.

The reason I mention acronyms is because I finally made it -- I became an acronym. I was CANCOMSUBRONONE -- the Canadian Commander of the First Canadian Submarine Squadron. It was a very impressive title. However, I was quickly brought down to earth by Shirley who called it CANCOMRAY. In naval circles it was further shortened to SM1.

As SM1, I had three submarine CO's reporting to me, while I in turn reported to the Chief of Staff to the Admiral. However, I was also double-hatted, which meant that I was the Senior Staff Officer Submarines (SSO Subs) on the Admirals staff. This had several advantages, because it meant that as SM1 I could write a letter to the Admiral recommending a certain course of action -- then as SSO(Subs) I would draft a reply for the Admirals signature approving my request. It certainly avoided the bureaucracy of going through the system. Of course, it was also much faster and more efficient. It was amazing some of the things that I managed to do by playing that game.

From the first day I arrived in the Submarine Squadron it was apparent that personnel shortages were going to be my biggest challenge. I wasn't worried about operations, because I knew that the people in the submarines were very professional and very competent -- and as good, if not better, than their NATO colleagues. It was just that I didn't have enough of them in certain technical trades at the Chief and Petty Officer level.

Because service in submarines was voluntary, it was sometimes difficult to keep certain senior people. This was not necessarily because they didn't like submarines, but was mainly due to outside pressures. By the time a rating had spent twenty years in the navy he was probably a Chief Petty Officer, or at least a senior Petty Officer. If he were serving in a destroyer, because of the larger

numbers, he would probably be the duty Senior Rate every thirty or forty days. In a submarine, with perhaps ten senior rates available for duty, he would probably be duty every ten days. This meant that he was away from home, in his home port, for thirty-two hours (ie, from eight o'clock one morning until four o'clock the next afternoon) every ten days. This did not compare very favourably with the surface navy -- a point that did not go unnoticed by the wives of men serving in submarines. As a result, many senior rates returned to the surface navy.

The same problem existed to a lesser extent with the junior rates. However, because they were still relatively junior, they mainly accepted that they were still paying their dues. I doubt that their wives necessarily felt that way.

If I was to keep the submarines operating safely, I would have to obtain some senior rates from somewhere. If I had any doubts about the safety of the submarines, due to a shortage of senior qualified personnel, I would have had no hesitation in recommending to the Admiral that we tie up a submarine alongside, rather than send it to sea with an inadequately qualified crew. Therefore, I knew I had to solve this problem as soon as possible.

After giving my Admiral a briefing on the subject, I asked for his approval to approach the Royal Navy and Royal Australian Navy in an effort to alleviate our problem. He gave me carte blanche to negotiate any deal I could arrange with them, which gave me the freedom I needed for some innovative ideas. I decided to try the Royal Navy first.

Our Attache in London arranged for me to meet the senior personnel and operational staff at the Ministry of Defence (MOD) in London. I will never forget those negotiations. We met at the London Playboy Club in Mayfair for lunch with our British guests.

Our Attache, Captain Jim Wood, now a retired Vice Admiral, was our host, so he chose the Playboy Club to impress our guests. By the end of a long lunch hour (or two, or three) we had traded one Canadian submarine to go on loan to the Royal Navy for three months (they were short of diesel submarines), for four Chief Petty Officers, Engine Room Artificers, for a year. It was a good deal for us, but I still needed more senior rates, so my next stop was Australia.

I spent the first weekend in Sydney with my old Perisher colleague, Terry Roach, who was now a Captain. After that, it was to HMAS PLATYPUS, the home of my opposite number -- COMAUSSUBRONONE!

After a couple of days we negotiated a deal. They had a large backlog of young sailors waiting for submarine training, without enough hulls to train them. They also had more senior rates than they had bunks for in their submarines, so I agreed to train their young trainees in Canada, in return for the loan of half a dozen senior rates. We also agreed to an exchange of submarine commanding officers --

an arrangement which still exists today. The sight and sounds of Australian submariners in Halifax Dockyard for the next year caused many a raised eyebrow. Only those involved in the deal knew the story.

With the assistance of the Royal Navy and Australian personnel, this allowed us to get our own people ashore for training -- subsequently returning them to sea on completion of their courses.

To achieve this I had to restrict OKANAGAN's operations for a short period to carry out the changeover of some senior Canadians for some senior Brits and Aussies. I didn't want to prolong this changeover, so I came up with an idea to keep up morale, which is so important in any ship, and particularly a submarine. I had been asked if we could provide a submarine for the interior shots of a movie that was to be shot by a joint US/Japanese film company. They also wanted some of the crew as extras. As submariners were a bunch of hams anyway, I offered up OKANAGAN.

The film company spent a week on board. The movie was called "Virus." I saw it some time later, and I can honestly say it would not have won an Oscar. I took Shirley and Kerry down to the submarine to watch some of the filming, because watching the techniques was interesting. The star, Chuck Connors, had a TV series in the sixties called "The Rifleman." As a cowboy, he did not give the ideal image of a Royal Navy submarine captain, so Shirley ended up as his dialogue coach, teaching him to sound "English." As hard as she tried, it didn't work. However, we became good friends with Chuck, and I've stayed with him in his Beverly Hills apartment, and also at his ranch at Tehachapi in the Mojave Desert. The last time I saw him was when I had dinner with him in Los Angeles sometime in 1990. He died shortly thereafter, but I did enjoy our friendship.

I didn't realize how interested OKANAGAN's ship's company were in being part of the movie. Some were dressed as dying Russian sailors and others as dying British sailors. We had sailors dying all over the place -- but the morale of the dying sailors was very high! Once the movie was over and the transition of the crews complete, we never had any further personnel problems for the remainder of my time as SM1.

The submarine that I had lent to the Royal Navy was OKANAGAN, my old submarine. It was arranged for OKANAGAN to visit London during her deployment. This gave the British sailors serving in her a chance to bring their relatives down to visit "their" submarine. It also gave me an opportunity to fly to London to meet the submarine when she came alongside HMS BELFAST, just below Tower Bridge.

As usual, the submarine hosted a reception for friends and dignitaries. I invited Thelma and Ernie, along with their children -- who weren't children anymore -- Valda, Wendy and Michael. There were two highlights of that evening. One, I was delighted to see.

The other was showstopping and interesting.

Firstly, it was marvellous that Ernie could make it. He had problems breathing, and the long haul up the gangway on to BELFAST, then the steep gangway on to OKANAGAN was a challenge for many people, but for someone with Ernie's problems the situation was a lot worse.

Anyway, by taking it very slowly, he made it. I can still see him sitting in the corner of the wardroom with a drink in his hand talking away to people who had no idea of his problems. If only Ernie's eldest daughter could have shown such courage and reserve. In fact, what she showed were long legs and knickers!

As I mentioned, the gangway on to OKANAGAN was very steep, causing some people to have problems getting on board. Valda decided to climb down the gangway frontwards, although it would have been easier to come down backwards. She was having problems, so she eventually came down on her bottom, with her skirt nearly up to her waist. In all my years in submarines I had never seen such an arrival!

Other guests arriving on board, and officers greeting them, must have been very impressed with this display. I pretended I didn't know her. Unfortunately her arrival was only part of it. There was more to come.

A party or a reception in a submarine is a chummy affair. That's the term we use, because you are cheek and jowl -- or another part of your body, with everybody else. Valda found herself in the very narrow passageway outside the wardroom, where for some unknown reason to her, one of the sailors kept squeezing by her regularly. He was the duty roundsman, responsible for doing rounds of the submarine every hour -- not every ten minutes! Squeezing past Valda every ten minutes was a much better proposition for him than sitting in his mess watching television!

I have subsequently changed Valda's name to "Submarine Sal."

If I thought she would have been offended by this story I would not have included it, but I know she has a marvellous sense of humour.

I think we all enjoyed ourselves that evening. I know of one sailor who certainly did! Unfortunately, it was to be the last time I was to see Ernie.

Thelma phoned us one day to tell us that Ernie had died on the 15th of August 1980. We had known about his bad heart of course, but because of the handicaps that he had already overcome with his brain damage, we thought, mistakenly, that he was invincible. He was only forty-nine years old. Again, Thelma was to lose another loved one at an early age. She was just 50.

The First Canadian Submarine Squadron was formed in 1966, transferring the responsibility from the Royal Navy's Sixth Submarine Squadron, which had been based in Halifax for many years. In all that time there had never been a submarine reunion, so I decided

to organize one.

A ship or a submarine is always sponsored by a lady, often the wife of a senior politician or military officer. HMCS OJIBWA was sponsored by Lady Miers, the wife of Admiral Sir Anthony Miers, VC - the officer whose exploits I had read about in "One of our Submarines", so many years ago. Having first found out that I could get them over to Halifax on military flights, at no cost to them, I asked Admiral Miers to be our guest-of-honour. He was delighted to accept, so we now started to work out the details of the reunion.

Part of the program included briefings for those people that had retired, or had left submarines, to update them on submarine matters. We had an all-ranks reception for serving and former submariners and their wives. On the last night we organized a Mess Dinner with Admiral Miers as our guest speaker. And what a speaker he was. He had us enthralled with his wartime submarine stories.

It was interesting to watch our young officers, with their eyes transfixed on that small maroon piece of material above a bronze coloured cross, that Admiral Miers had on his dinner jacket.

Before we had invited Admiral Miers, I had been warned about him. He was now 78, but looked as tough as nails. He was known for his tough reputation. It was common knowledge that when he had a defaulter up in front of him when he was a submarine CO -- if the unfortunate sailor was found guilty, which he invariably was with Tony Miers, he would give him the choice of a week's stoppage of leave, or three rounds with him on the jetty!

Another story that I had heard about him was when he was the Commandant at the Royal Naval College, Greenwich. He was a keen sportsman and went to every sporting event held at the College. Once, during a rugby game the opposition scored a try, and as the dejected college team was waiting for their opposition to convert the try, Tony Miers ran to his team behind the posts and punched one of his players in the eye, with the words, "Don't you ever miss another tackle."

In naval circles he was a legend and an eccentric, ever since he refused to accept his Victoria Cross from King George the Sixth, until he could bring his entire ships company with him to Buckingham Palace.

I had managed to get an extension to the bar hours at the Base where we were having our Mess Dinner. I asked the Admiral if he would like to have another drink, explaining that the bar was about to close. His answer to that, was to say that if he was in DOLPHIN he would go down to a submarine for a drink, and suggested we do the same here. He was the Admiral and our guest of honour, so it was off to the Dockyard to find a drink in a submarine -- which of course, is not very hard to do -- even at two in the morning. The

Admiral and Lady Miers, by this time Pat, returned to the UK next day. He wanted me to contact him on my next visit to the UK, which I promised I would.

Some months later I arrived in London after an all night flight. I was barely in the hotel when he phoned to say that our Attache had told him where I was, and that the following were the plans he had made for my visit. He totally took over my visit, although my mother, and Thelma and her family, lived in London. That was just his style.

I was told, not asked -- to meet him and Pat outside Wimbledon tube station at a certain time, because we were going to the movies.

He and Pat were there when I arrived, and we drove to the movie theatre. The strange part of all this was that we sat in the back of the car with Pat driving. He asked me whether I thought this was strange. Not being sure how to answer that, he immediately continued by saying that Pat had been his Wren driver in Australia during the war, and that he hadn't sat up front with her then, so this was no time to start!

Some years later when I invited them to a reception on board HMCS Preserver ( which I shall talk about later), they drove up to the gangway -- she got out and opened the door for him, and he strode up the gangway. Lady Miers then went away to find somewhere to park the car, and then came on board. There was no doubt he was a character.

Admiral Miers died when he was about eighty-two. There were many stories about Tony Miers during his life, but another one surfaced after his death that was damaging to him, and embarrassing to the Navy. It was fairly well documented that while he was in command of one submarine, that he surfaced after sinking a ship and ordered his crew to machine gun the survivors in the water. A couple of his old shipmates came forward and confirmed the incident. The Navy was embarrassed because it would hardly have been fitting to charge one of their heroes with war crimes. The whole thing faded away after a few weeks of media sensationalism.

As SM1, I could choose when I wanted to go to sea in a submarine. Unfortunately, my duties ashore kept me quite busy, so I didn't manage to get to sea as often as I wanted to. I had an excellent staff, but other than my secretary, there had been little thought about finding a place for women in this very male-dominated service.

One of our officer's wives was an extremely bright Wren officer. So over a drink one lunchtime at the Base, I asked her if she was interested in a job in the Submarine Squadron. She told me that she didn't want to be the token woman officer in the squadron, and that she only wanted a job that would be meaningful. That was exactly what I had wanted to hear, because I needed an Assistant Squadron

Operations Officer, or A/SOO.

I realized that there was a certain amount of quiet opposition to my idea, but because she was very bright, nobody could fault her. Within a short time, even the most chauvinistic people in the Squadron became impressed with her ability. If she had been a man she wouldn't have to have worked half as hard as she did to get recognition. There is still a long way to go -- even over a decade since I first brought a woman into the operational side of a submarine staff.

During my time as SM1 I had many interesting visitors -- but none more so than Admiral Sir John Fieldhouse. At the time he was Flag Officer Submarines (FOSM), which meant that he was in the senior submarine billet in the Royal Navy. When he visited me he signed my Guest Book, and wrote, "It's nice to meet my opposite number."

Of course, technically he was correct -- I was in the senior submarine billet in the Canadian Navy, but I thought it was a nice touch that he wrote what he did.

The position of SM1 was, in my mind, the best Commander's billet in the Navy. My surface colleagues would probably not agree with me, because as they saw it, a Commander's rank gave them the licence to command. In the case of a submariner, we had already been in command as Lieutenant Commanders, and in my own case, as a Lieutenant as well. The actual billet of SM1 was really a Captain's position, not a Commander's -- but it had never been filled by a Captain.

One day my Career Manager called me to ask me what was my preference for my next job. Shirley and I had always wanted to go on an exchange posting, and I knew that there was a position for a submarine command qualified Commander becoming available in Norfolk, Virginia, in the summer of 1981. I therefore asked for that billet, and kept my fingers crossed.

In April 1981 I received a call from my Admiral, congratulating me on being promoted to Captain. That was the furthest thought from my mind. I had been quite resigned to finishing off my days in the navy as a Commander, which I felt wasn't too bad at all, considering that at one time I thought I would be very lucky to progress beyond Lieutenant Commander. Not only was I being promoted to Captain, but I was also going in command of the largest ship in our navy. I couldn't have been happier. I even thought of the letter I received from my Career Manger many years earlier !

I had spent three and a half years as SM1. It had been a very satisfying, but challenging job. I left in the knowledge that the submarines were running well, and that we had resolved our personnel problems.