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# Reader's Digest

May 1991

\$2.49

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**A** GALE-FORCE November wind is throwing up rough seas as the black prow of HMCS *Okanagan* breaks to the surface. Its slick 90-metre hull bucking, the submarine smashes two-metre waves into white spray.

Lieutenant Bill Woodburn, 34, the executive officer, emerges from the conning tower. A reserved man with a warm smile, he seals the hatch behind him to begin a three-hour watch. Across the grey waves to the south and below the storm clouds, he can see a rim of light on the horizon — and land, the skyline of Rochester, N.Y.

It is the first time a Canadian submarine has navigated the St. Lawrence River and entered Lake Ontario for a freshwater dive. The Navy decided it was time Canadians inland got to see one of their Halifax-based submarines.

The 70-man crew is in good humour. They are a tough band whose job is to keep this aging sub in working order and to sharpen their skills as underwater hunters. Other sailors call them sewer rats.

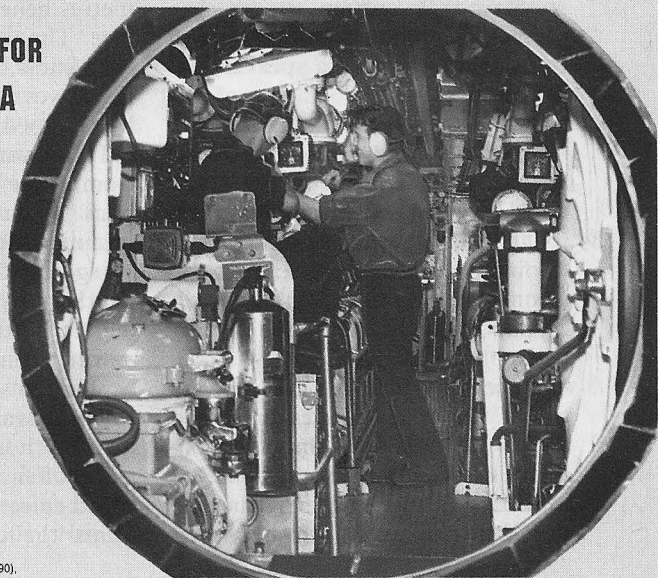
FOR weeks at a time, submariners work underwater in what amounts to a steel tube filled with wires,

## SEWER RATS ON PATROL

**LIVING UNDERWATER FOR LONG STRETCHES IN A STEEL TUBE FILLED WITH PIPES AND ELECTRONIC GEAR, SUBMARINERS ARE A TOUGH BREED**

*Condensed from*  
THE WHIG-STANDARD  
MAGAZINE

SHAWN THOMPSON



pipes and electronics gear. In tropical seas the engine-room temperature can reach 57°, leaving the stokers drenched in sweat. But when the sub runs on the surface and the diesel-electric engines suck a windstorm down the conning tower, the control room can be icy cold.

Below the hatch the cramped dimensions of the *Okanagan* seem to be a formula for a nightmare. There is little space or privacy to soothe a troubled soul. The sailors live along one corridor with the tangle of pipes and tubing and electronics. Some sleep with elbows touching the curtains that sway with the movement of those passing. Others sleep on racks over the torpedoes.

Since nothing is built for tall submariners, the men learn to walk bent over. Even the captain's quarters are minuscule, a closet-sized space with a curtain for privacy. Over his bunk are a depth gauge, a course indicator and a speaker that transmits what the officers of the watch are saying.

The medic, Petty Officer Dwayne Patmore, recalls the time one crewman became claustrophobic. "He toughed it out for three weeks before he finally cracked. He was having a convulsion on the deck." The sailor had to be lifted off the sub by helicopter.

As soon as the hatch pops open in a port, the stench of diesel oil, food and sweat wafts out. (Only the medic, the cooks and the steward are allowed showers.) The men clamber out, their skin pale or flushed, their

hair stiff and twisted. They blink at an unfamiliar sun — and they don't breathe too deeply. "Fresh air has a kind of sweet sickly smell to it after you open the lid for the first time," says Chief Petty Officer Robert Evans.

For most Canadians the submariners are a mystery — a few good men in an obscure, secretive corner of the armed forces. Yet these sewer rats see themselves as an elite, not simply because there are so few of them, but because of their specialized abilities. Patmore, for instance, also serves as a helmsman and the ship's librarian, plots surface contacts, and monitors air quality. The submariner's proof of making the grade is the black and gold dolphin patch, his version of a pilot's wings.

THE *Okanagan* has descended 55 metres beneath Lake Ontario's surface. Though the sub is cruising at four knots, the rough motion from the waves is gone. It's as if the ship has stopped.

In the wardroom rock music plays from a tape deck. Lieutenant Woodburn is on his hands and knees scraping dirt and grit from cracks along the floor. It's the "Friday" routine, even though it's Tuesday — a time to scrub the submarine from stem to stern for the captain's inspection.

The steward is cleaning pipes along his stretch of the corridor, scraping paint off metal parts with a steel-edged ruler. One crew member vacuums the corridor, while others

scattered along the way polish and probe with towels.

Later, Lt.-Cmdr. Les Mosher, the 32-year-old captain, makes his way along the trembling catwalk between the two diesel engines that would be generating power if the ship were running on the surface. Now the batteries are in operation. Mosher drops down hatchways under the engines and checks the galley and the coxswain's stores below it. Anywhere a finger can go, he checks for dust and loose connections.

A depth-gauge valve is found leaking. And a noisy valve will have to be replaced to protect the submarine from detection during silent running.

After 45 minutes, the captain announces that the 16-man engineering department has won the prize for "the best turned-out space" — a case of beer.

THE best way to catch an enemy submarine is with another submarine, says Mosher, and stealth is the submarine's greatest weapon. As long as a submarine can run undetected, it has a chance of firing its torpedoes. That means cruising slowly, silently, like a shark looking for a victim.

To find a victim, the *Okanagan* depends on its nine sonar operators to interpret noises in the underwater soundscape. From the noises made by an ordinary freighter, Master Seaman Alain Burns can tell the size and number of propellers and how fast the engine is revving. He can

sense the length of the vessel by its rise and fall out of the waves.

But he hears more than ships. "There's a lot of times you can tell there's shrimp in the water. Shrimp will make a sound like a deep-fry pan when you throw a wet potato in it. That's exactly the sound they will make — crisp."

Another submarine would probably give itself away by human noise, Burns says, a rattle in the casing — the name for the outer hull and deck — or a door slammed in a moment of forgetfulness. Sometimes it's a rhythmic noise that clearly isn't fish. "The first guy to give noise is the guy that's going to get caught," he says.

If the sonar detected another submarine in wartime, the *Okanagan* would project its course and speed to fire some of her 19 torpedoes. "He who shoots first, wins," the captain observes.

After the shot, he says, the opposing commander has a real problem. "He doesn't know I'm not a nuclear-powered submarine. He doesn't know what I am. All he knows is that another submarine has fired at him." And he has to react. "He has a weapon chasing him that he now has to get rid of. He's got to break contact from it. Then, to shoot back at me, he has to reacquire me." It sounds like a game of blindman's buff among the fish.

ON A submarine, rank doesn't pose the barriers it does on a surface ship. The men live closer together and

mix more because of the cramped space.

"You get to know the crew by name and face, each one of them," says the navigating officer, Lieut. Matt Plaschka, who has also served aboard a destroyer.

Mosher agrees. "It's a bit more relaxed down here." The captain notes that living only an arm's length away requires people who "mesh well together." Privacy is a state of mind in a submarine.

"You get the feel of when a guy wants to be by himself, to sit in a corner, read a book, not talk to anybody. It's nothing you can explain. Guys are able to turn on and turn off with no hard feelings."

Petty Officer Pete Heppleston, 36, spent almost nine years aboard subs. He tells of rapid pressure changes within the sub as it descends. When the sub is at the surface, running the diesel generators to recharge its batteries, a high wave may cause the generator's intake snorkel to close automatically, momentarily creating a vacuum. "You're actually getting pressure sucked out of your ears; it sounds like a balloon inside your head slowly deflating. Sometimes you'll be asleep in your bunk and you wake up with your head feeling as though it's in a vise. If you've got a cold, you're in serious pain."

Heppleston recalls a time in the North Atlantic. "We'd just gone across the Arctic Circle and the water temperature was below freezing. Every time I got into my bunk, the

frost on the bulkhead beside me melted and soaked my mattress and sleeping bag. When I got up to go on watch, the moisture froze again. It was like going to sleep in an ice-cream sandwich."

Yet Heppleston, now on staff at HMCS *Cataraqui*, a naval reserve unit in Kingston, Ont., cherishes his memories of the "good times" aboard the sub. Lieutenant Woodburn understands. "There are moments every time you go to sea that make it worthwhile," he says. Warm Caribbean nights, for example. "We'll have a barbecue up on the casing or go for a swim in the middle of the ocean."

IN THE darkened wardroom, another officer is arguing with Woodburn. The officer's wife, seven months pregnant, is in hospital in Halifax. He wants to be ordered what to do. His wife needs him, but his attachment to duty and his comrades leaves him torn. The executive officer wants him to make his own decision. Woodburn's reserved, slightly frustrated tone — he has a wife and two young children himself — says he wants the officer to go to his wife without being ordered. The officer wrestles with the dilemma overnight. In the morning he's packing his bags, his flushed face betraying inner discomfort.

A married submariner has a painful ambivalence in his life. It's tough to make the transition from sewer rat to family man. "The toll it takes on your family is the biggest con-

cern," says Woodburn. A five-year veteran of the submarine fleet, he's away from his family at least 150 days of the year. "You become a transient in your own family. There are times you feel, *I don't belong here*. Everyone is very happy to see you, but you can see changes, massive changes, especially when the children are very young. You think, *My God, I've really missed something*."

Lieutenant Plaschka, who also has a wife and two children, says his wife has her own routine at home, and he has his aboard the sub. When he comes home the two different routines clash a bit for the first few days. "And we have to sort out how we're all going to live together again. We have to co-ordinate what the kids are and are not allowed to do, so they don't get confused."

IN AN era of bigger, faster, nuclear-powered submarines, are Canada's

three O-class subs, built in the 1960s, obsolete?

"I don't believe so," says Mosher. "You don't buy a Ferrari to round up beef in the back forty. You buy a pickup truck.

"If you have a very large area of ocean that you claim sovereignty over, you have to convince people you can control that area." An enemy can plot the position of surface ships. "He'll know where they are. He can see where your aircraft fly. But if you say you have submarines, he doesn't know where. He could stumble into one of them, and that is a big deterrent."

The men of the *Okanagan* are proud of their submarine and of their role, and the professional and technical requirements of becoming a submariner are drawing a new generation of recruits. But for the men who work in grease-smudged overalls and who don't shower for weeks, the name "sewer rats" sticks.

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### Gender Bender

MY HUSBAND drives a little two-seater sports car and I drive a larger family car. One day my daughter Janet returned from her best friend's house, breathless, with a piece of news. "Stephanie's father has a back seat in his car, Daddy," she announced.

Puzzled, my husband said, "So?"

As if he were a total idiot, Janet replied, "He bought a girl's car!"

— Libby Lucas

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A TARP, full of holes, was up for bids at the auction my husband and I attended. The auctioneer asked his assistant, "Is this eight by ten or eight by twelve?"

Someone in the crowd yelled, "Ate by mice."

— S. Morrell