

## **My Life as a Sailor in the Royal Canadian Navy!**

Able Seaman M. Sabourin 43865-E

Regina, Saskatchewan

March 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009

I joined the Navy in Vancouver, British Columbia, June 2, 1958 at the ripe old age of 17 years and 11 months.

I was assigned to H.M.C.S. Discovery, the Reserve Naval Base in Vancouver's Stanley Park, where I was introduced to some very important Naval Skills such as cleaning, washing, scrubbing and the very important duty of making brass objects shine!

This is where I quickly learned that the floor was the deck, the wall was the bulkhead, the ceiling the deckhead and sailors never ever leaned on anything nor did they ever put their hands in their pockets!

Very quickly learned that H.M.C.S. meant Her Majesties Canadian Ship, and that the lowest of all persons was an Ordinary Seaman under training, who was subservient to anyone above that rank.

After 10 days duty at H.M.C.S. Discovery, we were given train tickets, meal vouchers and randomly drawn for either upper or lower bunks in the sleeper car that was attached to a train leaving at 2100 (9:p.m.) that night. What a birthday present this was for me, it was my birthday June 11, 1958, I had turned 18 years old!

Had a lump in my throat saying goodbye to my parents, siblings and best friends and boarded the train with 6 fellow recruits, but I was vibrant and very happy, the day had finally come, I was on my way to Basic Training Camp (Boot Camp) at H.M.C.S. Cornwallis, which is on the Annapolis Basin of the Bay of Fundy, west coast of Nova Scotia.

We travelled across Canada from the West Coast to the East Coast in four nights and 5 remarkable days, adding recruits to our Sleeping Car right across Canada until we arrived in Montréal, Québec at 1100 (11:am) where we had 4 hours to ourselves before we had to board the 3pm train for St. Johns, New Brunswick, on the West side of the Bay of Fundy. Three of us took the opportunity to attend Mass at a near by Cathedral, then explored Sherbrooke street that seemed to come alive after church! I was never alone, as my new found friends knew that I could speak French.

Arrived about 0730 (7:30 a.m.) at St. Johns and were marched over to the docks where we boarded the C.P.R. Ferry, Princess Helene for a three hour sail across the Bay of Fundy, to Digby, Nova Scotia.

We were taken down to the ships cafeteria below decks for breakfast of greasy sausages and fried eggs, amazingly out of my group of over 50 recruits, only half a dozen of us were able to eat and enjoy our meal as the wind was blowing big waves and was tossing the ferry up down and sideways too! Good thing I had acquired "Sea Legs" and lots of time on the water as a young buck in Vancouver.

We were met at the Wharf by a big blue "Navy Bus" that completed our journey 20 miles away to the Naval Base. We got off the bus and this very serious sounding voice yelled at us and told us to grab our suitcases and line ourselves up in three rows. My most memorable Naval Command was his words telling us to pick up our suitcases in our left hand and Double Quick March (Jog) which we did from the Main Gate all the way down to our Barracks which was nearly a mile! Hey, we wanted to be Sailors!

We commenced 20 weeks of Basic Training that would qualify us to be a useful crewman on a Naval Ship. After 50 years, I have forgotten the order in which we received different instructions in Seamanship, Ship Handling, Navigation, Communications, Gunnery, Physical Training and lots and lots of Parade Square Drilling 6 days a week. Everywhere, we went as a training class, or on our own we had to “Double Quick March!” at all times!

During the 20 weeks of Basic Training, we were also crewing Sail Training ships and Destroyers out of Halifax to Bermuda. I thoroughly loved my days at sea, and can still feel the wind not only on my face but “in the rigging too!” I was very happy to be a Sailor!

We were given the opportunity to go ashore in Halifax when our ships were in port, but we always had to be back on board by 2359 (11.59 p.m.) because we were Ordinary Seamen! We quickly discovered the local dance halls, the local drinking places like the Seagull Club and Carpenters Hall, the bootleggers, and fell in love every night with beautiful young ladies. My favourite girl was Rita Sampson, and I spent almost all of my time ashore with her, she was Blonde with a Pony Tail, a fantastic dancer, full of life and was more than willing to teach me about life! I am very sure it was her letters and phone calls to me in Boot Camp that helped to make time move faster!

Having graduated from “Boot Camp” seventh in my division, I commenced my journey home from Halifax, Nova Scotia to my new posting, H.M.C.S. Naden, Fleet School, Esquimalt, Victoria, British Columbia, November 9<sup>th</sup>, 1958.

I was so very proud to be going home in my Sailors Uniform during a weeks train trip to Vancouver, taking leave at home with my family before reporting to my new Naval Base on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1958. A magnificent train ride and a most fabulous “dream like” visit with my family, friends and sweet heart, Anne Marie, oh, I never wanted it to end!

A new experience was taking the “Midnite Ferry” to Victoria from Vancouver arriving at the Navy Base at 0725 (7:25 a.m.) five minutes before my leave was up at 0730! I can still remember the taxi trip with another sailor and two lovely ladies who lived in Esquimalt.

Lived in Barracks in “Naden” while I attended Communications School to become a ships Radio Communicator. It was a very intensive course where we learned to type and transcribe Morse code from our head sets to paper. I really enjoyed learning these new skills. After we had progressed to 12 words per hour with the speed of the Morse Code, I had a catastrophe, I could not tell the dots from the dashes and was washed out of the class, but with a high personal standing and was recommended to become a ships Electricians’ Mate. (Remarkably, when the Navy gave me my last medical exam before leaving, they discovered during a hearing test, that I could not hear the Radio Frequency sound waves!)

### **My life on H.M.C.S. Fraser!**

March 15<sup>th</sup>, 1959, a day I will always remember, got up at the crack of dawn, packed my Kit Bags and was driven from H.M.C.S. Naden three miles to the Naval Dockyard to “B” Jetty where I first saw her, “H.M.C.S. Fraser”, the dream of my life! This brand new Destroyer Escort had visited New Westminster, on the Fraser River, in August of 1957 for a three day visit and was open for visitors. I was so impressed with my explorations on her that when I arrived home, I advised my mother of what I had done that day and that I was

going to be a Sailor on this ship! A very good friend of mine had joined the Navy in 1956 and was on board the Fraser and introduced me to the ship and his best friend, Ronald Sutcliffe.

At the foot of the ships Gangway (elevated ramp that connects the ship to the Jetty), I placed my large kit bag over my left shoulder, grabbed my small kit bag under my right arm and proceeded up to the ships Quarterdeck on an incline of about 40 degrees to the deck of the ship, and tripped and fell on the deck in a very "Un Seamanlike Manner!" Without cracking a smile, I was helped to my feet by the duty "Bosuns Mate" and asked for permission to come aboard stating my name, rank and serial Number. The Quartermaster (Person in charge of the ships upper deck security) said, o.k. "MO", store your kit bags over there and report to the Coxswains (Non commissioned boss of the ship or Crew Chief) office! My name has been "MO" ever since!

The Coxswains office was below deck (#three deck) on the main passageway that connects the interior ship from bow to stern (front to back), and was right next door to the Electrical Office.

As fate would have it, a very pleasant Electrician's Mate saw me leave the Coxswains office and called out to me, "Hey! Don't I know you? It was Ronald Sutcliffe who I had met onboard the year before! We became immediate "Wingers" (Navy Friends) not only on board but ashore too! We became almost inseparable as we were on the same Duty Watch, and lived in the same Mess Deck.

One night when the Ship was in Port in Esquimalt, Ron and I decided to go ashore and downtown to take in the local Victoria Spring Fair and Midway.

We had very little money between us, so we decided to walk the three miles to town from the Dockyard Main Gate so that we would have money to take in the Mid Way Carnival rides. The whole city must have been there because we sure had long line ups to endure before we could get on the rides. We had been standing a long time For the Tilt A Whirl, and were almost at the front when all of a sudden two good looking ladies stepped in front of us and one of them turned around and said, "You don't mind do you fellows?" It was a pretty girl Jeanette and her girlfriend from Esquimalt. We invited them to ride with us, and had a lot of fun with them at the midway. I asked Jeanette for her phone # and address and the I am very happy to say she has become the love of my life and my constant companion. I asked her to marry me that Christmas and we were married a year and a half later in June of 1961! I had my best friend and two sailors stand up with me at a very quaint wedding in Esquimalt.

Happy to say our Daughter Joanne was born to us the next year, but unfortunately, due to my ship being mostly at sea, I only saw her three times the first year of her birth! I quickly realised that I did not wish to re-engage for another hitch in the Navy because of separation from my family!

The mess decks were numbered from #1 at the bow to #11 on the stern. Our Mess Deck was #10 which was aft (at the rear of the ship) and directly under the Anti Submarine Mortar Well on #4 deck. In March of 1959 there were 60 Sailors living here composed of Stokers (Boiler Room and Engine Room personnel) and Electricians Mates from Ordinary Seaman to Leading Seaman.

The Mess was rigged with six bunks that were held three high on each side between two steel posts that were welded to the Deck and Deckhead. The outside of the middle and upper bunk were held flat by front and rear chains that were welded also to the deck and deckhead. The living space between the bottom bunk and the middle bunk and the top bunk was 24 inches and took a bit to get used to. There were two rows of ten bunk

fittings on both sides of the mess with a space for a card table and 4 chairs on the Port Side. At the foot of each set of bunks were upright metal lockers and a set of three metal foot lockers under each lower bunk. I had Bunk #230 in Ten Mess, which was a middle bunk!

The nearest “Heads” (Toilets) and “washrooms” to our Mess was up on 3 deck just forward of the Mortar Well on the Port side of Radio Room #2 to the left of the “Coke Machine” amidship (in the Centre of the Passageway) on three deck. There were six toilets, 12 sinks and 6 showers for the 60 men of our Mess.

My first lesson on the ship was the need to conserve water! Our Destroyer was powered by two steam boilers that fed 610 degree steam to the Engine room that turned the geared turbines that turned the shafts and screws. The Boiler room had four Saltwater-Freshwater Evaporators for making fresh water at sea and steam, and was limited in how much water it could distil per hour, therefore we could only wet ourselves down for a few seconds in the shower, soap and scrub, then rinse off very quickly. There were three “water fountains” for drinking water on three deck, forward, amidships (middle of the ship) and aft above 11 mess over the “Screws,”

The Lower Deck (Seamans) cafeteria, was amidships on three deck on the Port Side served by a large Galley (Kitchen) and was where we would spend a great deal of our off duty time playing cards, chess or listening to someone play the Piano which was bolted to the deck. When we were lucky, we would show movies at sea! In harbour we were able to watch TV which was on a raised platform welded to the deckhead in the after part of the very large space.

Our ships Store-Canteen, was on the Starboard (right) side of the passageway on three deck (This passage way was referred to as “Burma Road!”) from here we walked to the Cafeteria passageway to Port. The Chief and Petty Officers Cafeteria, the Engineering and Electrical Workshops were also on the Starboard side. The Boiler Room and Engine Rooms were on four and five deck below the workshops and Cafeterias.

From the main bulkhead (wall) of the electrical Workshop we walked forward to the Damage Control Centre, Ships Office, Coxswains and Electrical Office all on the Starboard side of the passageway. There was a “Hatch and stairway on the Port Side that lead down to four Deck and the Main Switchboard Room and Senior Chief and Petty Officers Messes. The forward Navigating Gyro was in a small room on the port side with a small passageway that lead to the port side Ladder of the Upper Deck and Officers Cabins and Heads. Just forward of the wall of the Officers Cabins on three deck, was a long Ladder that lead to #2 deck passageway and the ladder to the ships Bridge and Conning Position. Forward of this Ladder was a quite large “Sick Bay” (ships hospital).

From Sick Bay, the main passageway led to the Forward Gunnar (Room that controlled the deck mounted 3” Gun) Radar Control Room on the starboard side with the Petty Officer Second Class mess deck to port, with their “Heads and washrooms” on the Starboard side. At the end of this passageway was a ladder that led us up to Two Mess and One Mess where Leading Seamen and below of the supply and communications trades lived. Forward of One Mess was the Cable Deck and Forecastle (Bow) of the ship.

### **My Naval Trade and Work Stations aboard ship:**

I was drafted aboard ship on a “30 day Trial Period” of the ships Electrical Branch to see if I could be a good asset to the ship as an Electricians Mate.

Completing my trial period, I was welcomed as a full fledged member of the ships company and did not leave the ship until 4 years, 3 months 15 days later!

There was no regular school ashore for new Electricians Mates, our educational training in the trade was “hands on” under the supervision and tutelage of senior electrical personnel, complete with classroom (cafeteria) lectures on electricity, electronics, ships Electrical Generation Systems and maintenance manuals. There were about a dozen of us “on the job trainees” and after 8 months we had to write a written and practical exam to qualify for our first trade level certification. Happy to say that I had the highest mark of the class and was subsequently promoted to Able Seaman with a nice raise of pay!

My first employment as an electrician was to “Lamp up the Ship!” I had a large canvass bag sling over my shoulder that carried all the different size and type light bulbs all over the ship. I had to enter every compartment of the ship and change all the burned out light bulbs from the bottom of the Engine Room to the top of the Mast where the Red Aircraft Warning lights were. It was a great way to get to know my way around and get to meet many new friends in all of the mess decks. Every bunk had a 25 watt light fixture beside it for illumination or reading when in one’s bunk. I was very welcome everywhere.

As an Electricians Mate, I stood duty watch at sea in the Main Switchboard Room (Main Electrical Distribution of the ship) as a member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Starboard Division and only stood every fourth watch. There were two of us on watch at the same time, and one of us had to do “rounds” (inspections) of the ship every watch (shift), to all Major Electrical Generator and major electrical motors that provided major power all over the ship including the Turbo Steam and Diesel Electric Generators. We had to keep track of Sunset and Dawn as we had to put the upper deck and navigation lights on and shut them off at sunrise. There were many and varied circuits that we had to constantly monitor on our control panels that had their own small Indicating lights to show that they were operating properly.

When not on watch, during the day, we were assigned different responsibilities on the ship for telephone systems, emergency lighting, electrical battery charging systems, sound recorded entertainment systems, motor and pump maintenance.

My Action Station was in the Damage Control Office, with many other Maintenance Trade Personnel, from where we would be sent to parts of the ship that had experienced Battle Damage or flooding and it was our responsibility to make the area secure and ship shape. For exercise, we did a lot of Temporary Portable Wiring from different sections of the ship where our auxiliary power was generated to local switchboards that would power individual items like the Guns or other Weapons like Torpedo Launchers etc.

During my time at Sea, the Navy decided to change its Trades structures from either Operator or Maintainer, to the same Technical Person being not only being the Operator but the Maintainer too.

I was given the opportunity to transfer to the Fire Control Branch (Technicians who control the ships guns by radar) and join the ships Seaman’s Division and Stand upper deck and Wheelhouse Watches. I thoroughly enjoyed being either at the lookout positions on the Bridge, the Man Overboard Sentry on the Boffin Gun Deck or Helmsman in the Wheelhouse. During our Watches, we would alternate from position to position every hour with the exception of the wheelhouse. If you were assigned to the wheelhouse, that is where you spent your

complete watch, but would rotate an hour on the helm at a time with the second person at the discretion of the Quartermaster who was the boss.

After four months as a Seaman, I was given the responsibility of not only being the Senior Able Seaman (boss) of the Forecastle Crew but also Quartermaster of “Red Watch” in the Wheelhouse.

When standing a 1 in 3 watch rotation at sea, the ship company is divided into three watches - Red, White and Blue. The first moment the ship left the Jetty, Red watch would be on sea duty watch, and would be relieved on the next watch by White Watch who would be relieved by Blue Watch.

At sea 24 hours of the clock is designated into segments called Watches:

0001 to 0400 Hours is called the Middle Watch. 0400 to 0800 is called the Morning Watch. 0800 to 1200 (noon) is called the Fore Noon Watch. 1200 to 1600 (4 p.m.) is called the Afternoon Watch. 1600-1800 is called the 1<sup>st</sup> Dog Watch. 1800-2000 is called the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dog Watch. 2000-2359 (Midnight) is called the 1<sup>st</sup> Watch. We stood what is called One in Three watches, when you finished one, you would have two watches off, then go back on watch again.

For instance, If I stood the 1<sup>st</sup> watch, I would be relieved at midnight, get some time in my bunk until general wake up was announced at 0630. I would get up make my bunk, do my thing in the washroom and go for breakfast at 0700, then close up on watch at 0800 for the Fore noon watch. Would be relieved at 1200 and go to dinner, reporting to my work station at 1300, would work until 1530, then have time off to myself. Supper would be at 1700, then I would again have time off to myself until 1800 when I would report for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Dog Watch. I would be relieved at 2000 (8 p.m.) and then would have time to myself until 0400 when I would work the Morning watch until 0800, go to breakfast then report to my work station until 1200, have an hour off for lunch, back to work at 1300 until 1530 then do the Ist Dog Watch at 1600 until 1800. I would have free time until 0001 when I would do the Middle Watch until 0400, get some sleep until 0630, go to breakfast at 0700, report for work at 0800, eat at 1100 and do the Afternoon Watch from 1200 to 1600, have the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Dog Watches off and then start all over again with the 1<sup>st</sup> Watch at 2000 (8 p.m.) The two hour Dog watches are employed so that no one would stand the same watches all the time. This is a typical 24 hour period at sea, 7 days a week until the ship once more tied up to a Jetty! That is why the Navy advertises that “There is No Life Like it!”

It is the Quartermaster who trains and instructs all junior ratings in the skill of keeping the ship on course and controlling the ships speed telegraph signals to the Engine room, relaying orders from the bridge officer of the watch.

There were two Navigation Gyro Repeaters (Cloth tape with numbers that had back lighting and a middle marker, and moved by a continuous ribbon in a metal box) in the wheel house that was four levels below the Bridge on 4 deck. The Officer of the Watch advised the Helmsman what Gyro to steer by and how many Revolutions to crank onto the Revolution Telegraph that was repeated in the Engine Room. Our usual cruising speed was 18 knots, which would be about 90 revolutions depending on sea conditions.

The Helm or ships Steering wheel was on an elevated platform with many spokes coming out of its circle mounting. The middle spoke of the Helm had a brass ring on the top of it that was turned to the center when the

Helmsman did not want to steer either to Port or Starboard. This was called the amidships Spoke, and corresponded to the Indicator arm that showed where the wheel was, up to 45 degrees from centre, if the indicator was to the right of centre the ship would be turning to the right, and left of centre the ship would be turning left or to Port! To keep on course the Helmsman had to turn the wheel about 3 or 4 degrees from centre quite often and back and forth to keep the ship on course at sea. This was very challenging when the ship was in high rolling waves and dipping and rolling at the same time. If the Officer of the watch did not appreciate the effectiveness of the junior rating at the Helm, he would make the call, "Quartermaster to the Helm," and I would take the Wheel in my hands to try to steer the ship more effectively on course. If the Quartermaster could not keep the ship on course, the Petty Officer of the Watch was called to the Helm. I am very proud to say that I was never replaced at the Helm by the Petty Officer.

My particular Fire control Division had two senior Able Seamen so they would rotate our work stations every six months either to the Firecontrol Gunnery Radar Computer room or being assigned to the Foc'sle (Forecastle) Party which was responsible for everything that happened on the bow of the ship whether at sea or coming in to harbour or anchoring or securing to a buoy. I thoroughly enjoyed both assignments.

On the Foc'sle, I was assigned a crew of junior seamen just out of "Boot Camp", and it was my job to train them into becoming efficient and functioning sailors in all of the different skills and requirements required, on the bow of the ship both at sea and in harbour. Our ships were made of steel that rusted very quickly and the decks had to be chipped, scraped, sealed and painted constantly that took most of our time. Because the Bridge of the ship overlooked the bows of the ship, we were always under constant inspection!

We were proud that we all worked well together and always put our shoulder to the load and enjoyed the fellowship of our happy ship!

As a Fire Controlman, my Action Station was in the Forward Gunar Room as the "Bearing Operator" at the Radar Console that put the Gun on the target by moving the electrically driven gun left to right from my Radar Scope that kept the gun locked on to the target whether on the surface or in the air.

It was a deck mounted 3"50 Calibre Gun, weighing over 10 tons, double barrellled with an SPG 48 Radar Antenna between the barrels. Three manual sight operators rode the gun and controlled it in Manual Control when we were not controlling from below with our Radar Consoles. This gun could fire projectiles up to 10 nautical miles with a rapid rate of fire of about 30 rounds per minute, depending on the two Breach Loaders who also rode the gun and put the 45 Pound Shells into the automatic spiral magazines that fed the guns. Up to 10 ammunition handlers would feed the shells to the loaders from the forward ready use Magazine just under the Bridge.

There also was an after 3"50 Calibre Gun mounted aft on the Quarter deck with its own Fire control Gunnery Radar Crew two decks below it just forward of #8 Mess.

Aft of the quarterdeck gun there was a hole in the deck where the ship had two sets of three barrel Anti Submarine Mortars that could be fired from the Bridge Combat Control room 300 feet from the ship in a 360 degree arc. These looked almost like torpedoes, but were much shorter and weighed 600 pounds of gunpowder that would completely destroy any submarine that was bracketed by all of these mortars. They could also be fired one at a time.

About amidships or the middle of the ship on the upper deck was the Armourers Workshop that had Homing Torpedoes stored in it that were brought out on overhead railings to the Torpedo Launchers on both sides of the ship that were also fired from the Bridge on command.

At the end of my second year, the Fraser went home to Esquimalt and commenced a refit and repair period. I was still an Electricians Mate and elected to stay with the ship and was happily employed taking things apart and replacing parts and making them new again.

It was after the ship came out of Refit that I transferred to the Fire control Seaman's Branch.

Cannot remember all the foreign ports we sailed to in the Pacific Ocean, seemed as though we spent a great deal of time at sea training and exercising with allied fleets doing combat simulations and war games. We became very familiar with Pear Harbour, San Diego, San Francisco, Seattle, Portland, Juneau, Alaska, the Bearing Sea and South Pacific enchanting ports of call.

Some of my most pleasing memories was of my exploration trip on the big Island of Hawaii to the Capoho Volcano, and the wonderful family of Hal and Edith Fujimoto in their home in the city of Hilo.

The Yacht the Red Witch, had sent out a very faint distress signal that our ship received and we proceeded to go to their aid. The little Yacht had been at sea for two months but had been hit with a severe Typhoon that stripped it of all its sails. There was a man and his wife and two young children aboard who were in a very poor state of health by the time we found them and took their ship under tow to Honolulu. It seemed very strange to have a Lady and her two children aboard in our Sick Bay, they were wonderful people!

Left the ship April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1963, transferred to H.M.C.S. Naden Release Centre and became a Civilian again on June 2, 1963.

To this day, I very much miss this ship and its crew of fabulous friends! I would love to go back to sea again, but for not more than a month this time!