

CHAPTER FOURTEEN -- PERISHER AND COMMAND

It was good to be back at DOLPHIN, with its tastefully appointed Wardroom, overlooking the approaches to Portsmouth Harbour. It also overlooked two of Old Portsmouths's most well-known pubs -- the Still and West, and the Coal Exchange. It was very hard for me to believe that I was now on this course, which was recognized throughout the submarine world as the toughest and most prestigious of all submarine courses.

Everybody who takes this course is fully aware that there is a high failure rate, and for those that fail, their submarine career is at an end. There is no second chance. You don't go back to a submarine to get more experience. It's over. If you fail, you will have to return to the surface navy. However, it's interesting to note that despite the terrible disappointment of failing Perisher, those that failed usually went on to an excellent career in the surface navy.

Perishers, as we were called, were treated with a certain reverence by other submariners, mainly because of the mystique of being part of the Perisher. Occasionally, when I was by myself I would often wonder how I got here. Here I was -- a former Merchant Navy officer, nearly thirty-seven years of age -- hopefully about to become qualified to command a submarine. My fellow Perishers were at least five years younger than I was, and all of them had over nine years experience in submarines, compared to my less than five. It was as though I had a ticket for an economy class seat, only to find myself being given a seat in first class, and wondering how I got there, -- then hoping that nobody would notice. Of course, that wasn't the case, but sometimes before the course started I felt that way.

There were five other officers on my Perisher. Four from the Royal Navy and one other colonial -- from Australia. The Commanding Officer of the Perisher, who is traditionally called "Teacher," is always an experienced submarine commanding officer, of Commander's rank, who is very carefully selected for that position. As well as having had at least two submarine commands, he must be scrupulously fair-minded. Whether a student passes or fails is his decision, and only his decision, based on his observations of how a student performs.

There are no examinations, either written or oral. Should there be a personality conflict between Teacher and a student, as there sometimes is, he must cast aside his personal views. He is required to judge the student solely on his performance, and whether he would make a competent and safe commanding officer.

If we thought there was a certain amount of reverence shown to the Perishers, it paled significantly compared to the way Teacher was treated. His was a highly prestigious position. Our Teacher was a Commander Dick Husk, Royal Navy. He was everything Teacher should be.

The first part of our course, until Christmas, was the easy part.

It was spent reviewing tactical doctrine and the classroom aspects of attacking and special operations. After Christmas, we would travel to the Attack Teacher in Rothesay, on the Isle of Bute, in the Clyde.

Having enjoyed our Christmas with Shirley's parents, we travelled up from Liverpool to Glasgow in a very cold railway carriage. Our fellow passengers couldn't understand why we didn't suffer in silence as they did, whereas I was running round chasing people to get some heat on. Perhaps we had become used to different standards of acceptance since living in North America -- but we managed to get some heat.

The Perishers stayed in the Glenburn Hotel, a lovely old grand hotel.

While we were at the Attack Teacher, Shirley would go for long walks on the hills behind the Glenburn. We stayed there for a week before returning to Gosport, at which time Shirley went back to Liverpool.

The Attack Teacher was a place where you could afford to make mistakes.

It was the only place where mistakes were allowed -- but not too many ! It was housed in a two-storey building, with the lower part laid out the same as a submarine control room, with a periscope extending through the floor to the upper part. The upper part was where Wrens (lady sailors) would control the movement of scale wooden models of ships, which represented our targets. This is where you learnt the art of attacking, with the safety of your submarine being paramount at all times.

As I said, this is where you could make mistakes, and get run down by ships you had either missed seeing, forgotten about, or had miscalculated their range. Being run down by a ship was signified by the Wrens above us all jumping up and down. The noise left you in no doubt what had happened. I think the Wrens enjoyed that part best of all. We all took our turn at being duty attacker or Captain.

Before you got involved with tactics you had to have complete confidence in your capability to keep the surface picture in your head at all times. Much of this involved what we called, "mental gymnastics." The aim was quite basic. It was to make sure that the submarine was on its way down to a safe depth, before any of the surface ships could run you down. At the same time, you also had to refrain from firing until the target was as close as he was going to come -- but still ensuring your submarine's safety.

As periscope exposure is one way to get caught, the aim is also to

reduce the number of "looks," as they are called, to a safe minimum. In spite of the John Wayne movies, a periscope should not be up for more than ten seconds at a time. Five is better-- and in that time you have to observe and remember everything you see.

While I don't want to bore the reader with many unnecessary details, I feel that I should explain how there is more to raising and lowering a periscope than the movies would suggest. Firstly, you must either assume the target's masthead height, or obtain it from previous intelligence. When you raise your periscope, you line up the cross-hairs on the target and announce, "Bearing is - that," simultaneously turning the range handle to measure the angular distance between masthead and waterline, barking out, "Range is - that." The periscope assistant calls out the figure, and you calculate the range as the periscope is going down.

For simplicity sake I won't go into the mathematics of the range calculation, but will assume a calculated range of 2000 yards. Having already assumed that the target's maximum speed is 30 knots, and knowing that our speed is six knots, the worst condition (most dangerous) could be a closing rate speed of 36 knots, or 1200 yards every minute, or 100 yards every five seconds.

That means that our target, which is now at 2000 yards, could be right overhead in 100 seconds. We always allow 60 seconds for our submarine to get from periscope depth to a safe depth, where even if the target came over top, you would be safe. That means that we know we are safe for another 40 seconds before we have to have another look at the target. You don't raise your periscope after 20 seconds just out of curiosity. However, you must look before the 40 seconds are up.

While I have just shown a simplified situation, it can become a lot more difficult when you have three escorts approaching you. Then you are calculating ranges and "go-deep" times for all the escorts, each time the periscope goes up. It's in the heat of battle that it is easy to forget, or lose one of your targets -- which could be fatal for the submarine.

It's not like a surface ship, where there are other people on the bridge to help you look for other ships. Here, there is only one pair of eyes, and the owner of those eyes is responsible for the safety of about seventy people, as well trying to sink his enemy. That's why it is essential that the Captain must have the total surface picture in his head at all times.

You must use those few seconds that the periscope is above the surface to absorb as much information as you can. Besides taking a range and bearing, you must make a complete mental picture of everything you see concerning the target. Is he zig-zagging, or weaving? You can see if he is weaving by looking at his wake. Does the speed

we are using for the target in the fire control calculation look about right? You can get a good indication by looking at the height and length of the target's bow wave. When we went to sea, Teacher would occasionally tell a ship to fly a flag hoist -- then, after you had lowered the periscope, ask you what he was flying. This was to see if you remembered everything you saw.

During the subsequent sea time, all the Perishers ended up with scars on the bridge of their noses, through trying to ride the periscope on its way down, by keeping their eyes glued to the periscope, until it was below the surface. This was to ensure that you saw everything that you were looking at, in the limited time the periscope was up.

The Panel watchkeeper, who was responsible for raising and lowering the periscope under the orders of the duty Captain, would keep a score on how many noses he could get during his watch. It became a bit of a competition between the Panel watchkeepers!

Even in the Attack Teacher, by the time the duty Captain had finished his attack, he was physically and mentally drained and exhausted -- and we hadn't even been to sea yet. That was to come after about six weeks in the Attack Teacher in DOLPHIN. I found it interesting in this phase of the course to watch one's fellow Perishers. You could see some were struggling already, and not improving. Others got better every time they did an attack. I think I was in-between.

In mid-February the Perishers flew to Gibraltar to start our sea phase. We were booked in at the Montarik Hotel, just off the main street. Having passed Gibraltar many times in a merchant ship it was interesting that I was finally there, on the Rock. We were going to be there for five weeks for the most intense part of the course.

It was a regular routine. Up at five in the morning. Transport to our submarine, HMS/M OSIRIS at five-thirty. Breakfast on board and underway at six, with the duty Perisher Captain taking the submarine out of the harbour. By seven, we were in the exercise area, having made a rendezvous with our target, normally a Leander Class frigate.

Shortly after seven we would dive and start our attacks for the day.

Normally the frigate would open from the submarine to about 10,000 yards before starting its approach. Each attack would take about 30 to 40 minutes. The Perishers would take it in turn to be the duty Captain, but when they weren't doing that they would rotate through the various positions in the attack team, such as running plots or the fire control calculator. We were all employed, but it was the duty Captain's attack. After each attack the duty Captain would sit in the Captain's cabin with Teacher, where he would critique the attack, while the target was opening for the next run.

We would continue attacking until we ran out of daylight, usually returning to the hotel at about eight in the evening. Despite being dead tired, we would invariably end up in the bar for a couple of

beers with Teacher just to relax, before going to bed about ten, to start the routine all over again next morning. We did this for six days a week. On Sundays we didn't go to sea. That was because Sunday was reserved for analysis of our attacks and torpedo firings, ie, would you have hit your target with your torpedoes?

While the timing of the daily routine did not change for the five weeks we were there, the routine at sea changed each week. For the first week we had one surface ship target. For week two, we had two ships -- so that by the time we started week five, we were up against five ships. This is where all the mental gymnastics that we did in the Attack Teacher really bore fruit. This was "for real." They were real ships up there, which could ruin your whole day if you did the wrong thing. When you see a ship boring down on you at full speed it certainly attracted your attention. This is where Teacher came into his own.

There are two periscopes in a submarine. The Attack periscope was the duty Captain's, and the Search periscope was Teacher's. That's how he kept you out of trouble. If he thought that you had lost the picture and things were becoming dangerous, he would assess the situation, and if necessary, order the submarine to descend to a safe depth. This was not uncommon during the first two weeks, but it should not be happening to any of us during week three and beyond. If it did, there was a clear message for that individual.

Sometimes, just to prove a point, when a ship was coming right at you at high speed, and was at a range of, say, 1900 yards at your last look, Teacher would send the duty Captain to the galley to find out what was on the menu for lunch. When this first happened, I thought Teacher had gone mad. Here we had a situation where a ship was last seen racing towards us, and we weren't looking at it -- and he was sending the duty Captain to talk to the cook! What he was really doing was proving that you didn't need to look at the ship for another 35 seconds -- which gave you time to get to the galley and back.

Week five was normally the week where Teacher had made up his mind about his Perishers for this phase. I believe that each of us knew in his heart how he was doing -- and who was having problems. Unfortunately, we lost two of our team during that week. It wasn't really a surprise, because you could see them struggling, while the rest of us were improving.

The normal procedure is that once Teacher makes his decision to remove someone from the Perisher, he arranges for a boat to come alongside from one of the surface ships. He then takes the student into the Captain's cabin to tell him the bad news. Within minutes, the failed student is off the submarine on his way ashore. He will have checked out of the hotel before the remaining Perishers return that evening.

The thinking behind this rather dramatic departure is to prevent the remaining Perishers from becoming upset by attempting to console their former Perisher-mates, if they remained on board, or seeing them when they got back to the hotel that evening. While that may seem hardhearted, it was necessary, to make sure that none of the remainder lost sight of the aim. Nevertheless, we knew what our two friends must be going through.

At the end of the five weeks in Gibraltar, the remaining four Perishers were given a free weekend to play tourist. All we really wanted to do was to get home for a weeks leave, and some rest. Those five weeks were, without doubt, the most intense in my life. Of course, one of Teacher's aims was to get you so tired, both mentally and physically, to see if you would crack, or make bad decisions under those extreme conditions.

We flew back to London, and I took the train up to Liverpool to see Shirley and the girls. Although I was tired, I had a tremendous sense of exhilaration. While there was still a long way to go on this course, I knew that the hardest part was over. If I didn't make any stupid mistakes, I felt confident that I was going to make it. However, people had been failed on the last day of the course, so there was no cause for complacency.

The next phase of the course involved visits to various Royal Navy establishments. This was more of value to the Royal Navy officers on the course. We were now down to two RN officers and two Colonials!

One visit particularly intrigued me. It was to the RN Detention Quarters in Portsmouth. It was really spartan. The prisoners' routine was a daily round of rifle drill, physical exercise and cleaning everything that you could see. At 7pm the prisoners were allowed to stand outside their cells at attention, to watch the BBC news on television. When the news was over it was "one pace step back, march," into their cells for the night. Very few prisoners wanted to return, once their sentences were served.

After the visits it was back to the classroom again. Here we learnt the tactics and considerations when carrying out such things as Special Operations with the Special Boat Section of the Royal Marines.

We also learned how to conduct an underwater look at a ship's bottom through the periscope, how to conduct a minelay, how to make a submerged rendezvous, and some of the considerations when tracking and trailing other submarines. Then it was back to the Attack Teacher for two weeks to hone up on our periscope skills again.

The final phase of the Perisher was a concentrated two-week period at sea, where everything we had learned would be thrown at us. We were supposed to do this phase in the Clyde, but luckily for us they couldn't find enough ships for us to operate with in that area, so it was back to Gibraltar again.

This time we were in HMS/M OTUS, which was commanded by a Lieutenant Commander Geoffrey Biggs, one of the scruffiest looking officers I had ever seen -- but he was a warm, helpful person, with a great sense of humour. I only mention this event because he is now Admiral Sir Geoffrey Biggs, KBE. I believe he is still scruffy -- but he's now called "Sir Scruffy!"

That last two weeks were most interesting. We did everything from attacking surface ships, to sliding underneath a ship, with the top of our periscope about eight feet from its keel or propellers, to take photos of its sonar dome. Whenever we were doing something covert, and just when it looked as though we were about to achieve our aim, a frigate would appear on the scene as if by magic. It was really Teacher magic. He would always be talking to the surface ships on the radio, giving them directions, and telling them when and where he wanted them to appear on the scene. This often meant aborting the evolution and rescheduling it, without getting caught. It was very much a game of cat and mouse.

At the end of the two weeks at sea, we were individually debriefed on our performance by Teacher. In my case, I was delighted to hear that I had passed. Our remaining team of four had all passed. If someone asked me, either then or now, whether I would like to do the Perisher again, the answer would have to be no. It was a fantastic event in my life that only a few manage to experience, but it's something that once you've done it, you would never want to repeat it. It's too draining.

That afternoon when we arrived back alongside, there was one almighty champagne party in the wardroom of OTUS. Later that evening we poured Terry Roach, our Australian, on to a plane for London, and onward to Australia. We never found out if he ever got there!

Next day the rest of us flew back to London and went our separate ways. Since Perisher, I have run into Terry a few times. I have also stayed at his home in Sydney when I visited Australia. Of the other two RN officers, I have only met one of them since -- Barry Carr, who eventually became Teacher himself. The other left the Navy, and now runs an Outward Bound school in North Wales. I have run into Teacher many times since Perisher, most recently in January 1994, when we had dinner at his Club in London.

Shirley and I had planned a holiday for the whole family on completion of Perisher. We were going to the west of Ireland, where we intended to rent a car and tour Ireland. When I reported in to Canada House in London, on my return from Gibraltar, I was told that they had been trying to get in touch with me, because they wanted me to get back to Victoria as soon as possible, where I was to join RAINBOW as Commanding Officer.

I didn't mind going back to Victoria and RAINBOW, but I thought that I deserved some leave. They (the Navy) were adamant that I had to be out on the west coast right away, so there was little to be done. Shirley and I were very disappointed, because it was something we had always wanted to do. Now it will never happen.

I flew back to Halifax, where I had to pick up my car for the drive west. We'd left our car with a friend, and of course our furniture was in storage in Halifax. That meant that our furniture would be making a round trip of eight thousand miles back to Victoria, before it came out from under its covers.

This time I was crossing the country by myself. As they needed me in a hurry I decided to take a route across the northern states. I was snowed in for one day in South Dakota, but arrived in Victoria in about nine days from Halifax.

When I reported on board I was informed that there really was no need for me to be there so soon, as the submarine was in refit. It would be another three months before it was ready to go to sea! I was very upset that somehow, when I was in London, I had been told that my presence was required in Victoria right away. Yet when I arrived, I was told there was no such urgency. Nobody seemed to know where the misinformation had come from. There was nothing I could do. I couldn't go back to the UK. All I could do was seethe.

The only thing that tempered my annoyance was that I was now about to go in command. On 20th April 1970, I sent the traditional message to my Admiral, which at one time I felt that I would never send -- "I have this day assumed command." It was time to have another look at the letter I had received from my Career Manager four years earlier.