

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN -- PRESERVER

On the fourth of September 1981 I assumed command of HMCS PRESERVER. I was now forty-eight years old. The average age for promotion to Captain was about forty-two.

PRESERVER was a 22,000-ton Fleet replenishment ship -- or to use its NATO designator, an AOR. In many ways it was like being back on a merchant ship again, because in effect, it carried fuel, stores, ammunition and food for the fleet. It was not a warship in the strict sense of the word, although it had a gun and a sonar, and was also fitted for missiles. Our other role was as a floating air maintenance base for the fleet's helicopters. We carried a large air detachment, including three helicopters and their air crews.

Not having served in a surface ship for seventeen years, it was a new experience. Firstly, there was the space. After years in submarines, where one lived in very primitive, cramped conditions, my new cabin (suite) was seventy-six feet wide. I had two washplaces (bathrooms), two sleeping cabins (bedrooms), two day cabins (sitting rooms) -- but only one dining room!

There was a reason for the duplication. The additional space was in case I carried a senior officer. I could then shut the folding bulkhead between the two halves of the suite, thereby giving both of us some privacy. Luckily for me, I rarely carried a senior officer -- and if I did, it was usually only for a day or two. On the other hand, it was very handy to have that extra space, when I carried my own guests.

There is no doubt I was a bit overwhelmed by all the space, not usually found in a warship. On my first day in command I realized that I couldn't remember my way to the flight deck to attend morning Divisions (at school we called it Assembly). Luckily for me, the senior Chief Petty Officer on board, the Coxswain, must have realized that the new CO was a bit of a dummy, so when I left my cabin, he was standing right outside. We made our way together through a maze of doors and hatches, until eventually, on opening one last door, we were on the flight deck -- and there were three hundred people fallen in waiting for their Captain to arrive. He nearly didn't!

When the Coxswain and I had been making our way to the flight deck we carried out a normal conversation, while I was desperately trying to remember the route for next time. The amusing part of all this was that I knew I didn't know the way -- the Coxswain knew I didn't know the way, but neither of us ever mentioned it the whole time I was in that ship. That's why the Navy could never exist without their Chief Petty Officers. After a short while I managed to find my way around without embarrassing myself, or anyone else. The next problem was my

totally dedicated steward.

In a British or Canadian surface ship the Captain does not live or eat in the wardroom with the other officers. He is not a member of the Wardroom Mess, and would never dream of entering the wardroom without the invitation of one of his officers, normally the XO. He lives in splendid isolation all by himself -- so of course, he has to have his own steward. I don't believe that he needs one, but the system says he has to have a steward -- because Nelson had one.

After I had been on board for a while, I suggested to the XO that I was perfectly happy to use one of the wardroom stewards, when I needed one at meal times, etc. That was not the thing to say. The XO looked at me as though I was a Philistine. He was probably asking himself what terrible sin he had committed that his Career Manager had sent him to this ship, with that submariner and his radical ideas. However, all he said was, "I don't think that's a good idea, sir." I never raised the subject again.

The problem really didn't go away. My steward, Leading Seaman Trudel, was determined to look after his Captain. If I would be sitting in my cabin reading, it wouldn't be very long before a cup of coffee or tea would appear, as if by magic. He would hover in his pantry, just waiting to see what next he could do for me.

At first, I decided that I would fool him, by escaping up to the bridge. This didn't last for very long, because I'd barely sat down in my chair, when there he was, standing just behind me, ready to put another cup in front of me. I realized after a couple of weeks of this, that I would have to go along with the old adage of, "if you can't beat 'em -- join 'em." He was a pleasant young man, who was so keen to please. I never let him know of my frustration.

Shirley had been used to submarine wardrooms, where if you wanted a gin and tonic it meant that you had to stand up, so that somebody could retrieve a can of tonic from the inside the bench-like stool that you were sitting on. The first time Shirley came on board for a drink, after looking round at the spacious cabin, she jokingly asked the steward if she had to stand up if she wanted a gin and tonic. As it was an "in" submarine joke, the steward didn't understand it.

My first couple of weeks in PRESERVER were spent alongside in Halifax. Then it was off to sea to take part in an exercise. I had never been involved in a Replenishment-at-Sea, or RAS, as it was called.

When I had last been in a surface ship our destroyers didn't have that capability. I had been reading every publication I could get my hands on, about RAS-ing. It didn't take long to get the hang of it, and of course, I was surrounded by experts, who had been doing it for years.

That was their job -- and I didn't want to get in their way. Besides, I had my own job to do. I would do what had to be done if I was not happy with the evolution.

Our first port of call was Quebec City. The first evening, after the usual round of official calls and receptions, I went to my cabin to turn-in. When I put my head on the pillow all I could hear were the bass notes of the wardroom stereo, which was mounted on the bulkhead below me. When I lifted my head, the sound disappeared. It only happened when I put my head on my pillow. Obviously there was a sound short between the stereo and my bunk frame.

Next morning, when my XO came up to my cabin for his normal after-breakfast cup of coffee, I told him I wanted to show him something. I asked him to call the wardroom to get them to turn on their stereo. I then invited him into my sleeping cabin, and in all innocence asked him to put his head on my pillow. All I wanted to do was to show him what had happened last night. He looked very surprised and said, "I'd rather not sir -- I've heard about you submariners!" Another story for my XO to tell about his strange Captain.

Jim Barlow, my XO, was an excellent officer and a fine person with a great sense of humour, who ran the ship very efficiently. I had nothing but admiration for him. I think he got a kick out of trying to educate his submariner Captain! Unfortunately, during our time together, his son, who was a cadet at the naval college, was killed in a car accident as he drove across the country to attend his sister's wedding. Many of the wedding guests had already arrived in Halifax, having come from various parts of the country. Therefore, the Barlows made the decision to continue with the wedding. They had to go through the torment of having a wedding one day, followed by a funeral the next.

I thoroughly enjoyed driving PRESERVER. It was a very comfortable ship, even in bad weather. When we were refuelling destroyers on either side of us, they would be bouncing around all over the place, while we remained steady. It was a pleasant way to go to sea.

Although most of my officers were very good, they did not have the total dedication to the job that submarine officers did. They did their jobs well, but they just didn't have that esprit de corps that submariners had. Perhaps I am being too critical.

During a RAS in the tropics I liked nothing better than to sit in my chair on the upper bridge and watch what was going on around me. The chair was raised so that I had a good view of everything, in case some emergency action was required, as sometimes happened.

It took about forty minutes to top-up a destroyer with fuel. We would often rendezvous with a task group in the middle of the night and carry out a RAS with them for four or five hours. However, this didn't mean that we didn't try to maintain as normal a routine as possible.

In a surface ship the officers always changed into either Mess Dress or Red Sea Rig in the evenings, which must be one of the remaining bastions of civilized dining. After dinner I would normally be invited

down to the Wardroom to watch their evening movie. If the time for a RAS coincided with the wardroom movie, the movie was delayed until the RAS was over.

In the Caribbean, I would spend many hours in my upper bridge chair in the evening, looking up at the jet black sky and a million stars.

My passion for stargazing had never diminished, from the time I first became interested in it, to help pass the watch when I was a cadet.

I would normally go up to the upper bridge after the Wardroom movie. For me, it was an ideal form of relaxation, before turning in.

The nearest I ever came to being involved in what could have been a disaster was one early morning at the start of a RAS. We were to carry out a simultaneous RAS (one destroyer on each side). The exercise was to be carried out without navigation lights, which we practised regularly. It just required a little more care.

At the start of the RAS, one ship was coming into station up my port side from astern, which is the normal approach. The other, ATHABASKAN, made her approach from ahead on the starboard bow. That type of approach is very impressive, as the destroyer swings towards the AOR from ahead. If they get it right, they should end up right alongside the AOR. But if they don't . . . !

In this case, ATHABASKAN miscalculated, and started the swing too close and too early. Through the darkness, I could see that if nothing was done she would go right under my bows, and that I would probably cut her in two. I also had the other destroyer on the port side to think about, which was now almost level with my stern -- and would shortly be alongside me. I went full astern and ordered hard-a-starboard -- while telling the destroyer on my port quarter what I was doing, and ordered him to break away.

From my position on the upper bridge I could actually see the faces of some of ATHABASKAN's sailors at their RAS position as they started to pass under my bow. They were lit up by their deck lights, which all ships had now switched on. They disappeared below my bow as we swung to starboard and ATHABASKAN increased speed. Their fate now depended on how fast my bows swung to starboard and how fast ATHABASKAN could move ahead. As my bow continued to pay off to starboard, my stern was now getting closer to the destroyer who was breaking away on my port side. Both our sterns were closing, but luckily she was at full speed ahead now and I was hardly moving through the water. We missed ATHABASKAN by about fifty to sixty feet. Within minutes everything was back to normal again -- just the same as a close call on the highway.

You feel shaken, but you continue to drive, because nothing actually happened.

There was a subsequent investigation, because it would have been a horrendous accident if all of us hadn't taken some avoiding action.

The investigation was carried out, not so much as to point a finger at someone. It was really done to find out what lessons we could all learn from the incident, and how to try to avoid similar incidents

happening in the future. I had been through my career so far without any major mishap, but that time I was very close to disaster.

We took part in many multinational exercises. I enjoyed them, because it gave us an appreciation of how well, or how badly different ships were handled during a RAS. In retrospect, but not in order of priority, I felt that the most professional evolutions were conducted by the Dutch, German, Canadian and Royal navies.

After one of our exercises we visited Mobile, Alabama. As usual I called on the Mayor, and conducted the standard inane conversation. I expressed surprise when he told me he had been Mayor of Mobile for twenty years. I asked him what he was doing right that got him re-elected each time. Without batting an eyelid, he said, "The people of Mobile don't like niggers -- and nor do I." His answer completely floored me. Later during our visit, I noticed that the only blacks I saw at the numerous receptions and dinners were waiters and barmen. Segregation was still alive and well in Alabama.

At the start of the Falklands War we were on our way across the Atlantic with ships of the Standing Naval Force Atlantic, or STANAVFORLANT (another marvellous acronym). We received orders from Halifax to detach, and rendezvous with a Royal Navy task group that was now heading south after coming out of the Mediterranean, en route to the Falklands. Although they had their own AORs with them, we were asked to top up their ships from our tanks, so that they could keep as much of their own fuel intact until it was needed. My floating gas station stayed with them for three days -- then gave them a final drink of fuel and wished them luck, as we turned round and headed north. There were many of us on board who wished we could have continued south.

There were many instances where help was provided on a navy-to-navy basis during the Falklands War. It would have been too difficult and too time consuming, to try to arrange assistance through political channels. And of course, the Falklands was a politically sensitive issue, because Canada and the United States were part of the Organization of American States.

It was so much easier for an Admiral in the UK to pick up the phone to old friends in Canada or the States, who were also Admirals, to see what assistance they could give. The radars in my three Sea King helicopters disappeared over a weekend. By the following Monday they were in Ascension Island, in the South Atlantic, waiting to be transported south. Many things like that happened during the Falklands War.

There were some joyous times and some sad times in PRESERVER. I have already mentioned the death of Jim Barlow's son. Another tragic incident happened when we were alongside in San Juan, Puerto Rico, during our winter operations in that part of the world.

I had just finished my breakfast one Sunday morning when the XO

came into my cabin, as white as a sheet. He said that our doctor was dead, and that it looked as though he had committed suicide. I went down to the Sick Bay, and saw the doctor sprawled out in his office chair, with a syringe lying on the floor. On his desk was a small, empty bottle. It was labelled Cocaine Hydrochloride.

Our Medical Assistant had found the doctor when he went into the Sick Bay to open up for his normal Sick Parade. We decided that we should tell the other officers, to see if we could get some idea how this had come about.

Apparently, the doctor had been ashore with some of the other officers the night before. They had been at one of the Casinos. He decided to stay ashore longer than the other officers, but eventually returned on board at about two o'clock. The Quartermaster, who had been on the gangway, said that he seemed to have had a reasonable amount to drink, but that he wasn't drunk. That was the last time anybody saw him. The officers that he'd been ashore with said that he was in high spirits, as he'd just been offered a job in Atlanta, Georgia.

We checked his cabin to look for a suicide note. All we found was a partly completed article that he was writing for some medical journal. His pen was lying across the page, as though he intended to complete it later. It dawned on us that he had not committed suicide. He must have died from an accidental overdose.

We then had our Dentist and Medical Assistant carry out a muster of all the controlled drugs in the Sick Bay. They found that a considerable amount of Cocaine Hydrochloride was missing. The amount remaining was a lot less than there should have been, according to the drug register. A small amount of the drug had been used on someone with a bad nose bleed, but that was all. It is often used as a coagulant in throat and nose operations, where there is always a large amount of blood. I became an expert in the uses and abuses of Cocaine Hydrochloride over the next few days.

We told the ship's company what had happened, but also told them that we could not confirm any of the information until an autopsy had been carried out. I then managed to contact the Chief of Staff in Halifax to let him know what we thought had happened. It was up to the Halifax chaplains and social workers to let his next-of-kin know now.

An incident like this puts a pall over the whole ship, with everybody trying to figure out what had happened. I didn't know the doctor well, but I knew that he was highly regarded in the military medical profession. He was only twenty-six, with a marvellous future ahead of him. What had gone wrong?

Next morning I received a call from the Chief of Staff in Halifax. He informed me that the local papers had headlines, such as, "Naval Doctor Kills Himself." Apparently the article was written with the

strong hint that he had committed suicide. I felt so sorry for his father, who must have been wondering what the true story was. I decided that as the ship was going to be in San Juan for a few more days I would fly home to Halifax and see his father.

The morning after I arrived home I went with a naval padre to visit Mr. Larsen, my doctor's father. He was much older than I had anticipated. He seemed to be a very gentle person. His other son, who lived in Norway, had just arrived -- and his fourteen year old daughter was also there.

I told him everything -- and I specifically wanted to assure him that his son had not committed suicide. The padre had told me that the thought of his son committing suicide had shattered the old man. He was obviously relieved somewhat when I told him what had happened.

The most telling comment came from his brother, who said, "I thought he'd kicked that habit before he qualified." Later, the autopsy report showed that he had damaged scar tissue on the inside of his elbow, caused by the over-use of needles. The official result was that he'd died through a self-inflicted overdose of Cocaine Hydrochloride. We believe that he simply made a mistake.

As I said, we had some joyous occasions as well. Without doubt the best for me was being able to bring PRESERVER into Liverpool, to coincide with our Silver Wedding Anniversary.

We were scheduled to take part in a large NATO exercise off the Western Approaches, and at the end of the exercise we were allowed to select two port visits in the UK. I asked for Liverpool and Southampton -- and both were approved.

This meant a busy period of sending invitations to receptions and dinners to our personal friends in both places, before the ship left Halifax. In Liverpool, we asked all the people who had been to our wedding, plus a few more friends that hadn't. In Southampton, we invited many of our friends and relatives that lived in the south of England.

One morning after the exercise had completed, we were in approximately the same position that I had been in, about seven years before -- entering Gladstone Lock, into the port of Liverpool. It felt marvellous to be back home.

Although I had asked for Liverpool for personal reasons, I also knew that it was very popular with the sailors. The people of Liverpool have always opened their hearts to sailors. After all, that had been its *raison d'etre* -- one of the world's greatest ports in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early part of the twentieth centuries. In the Second World War of course, it had been the home port to thousands of sailors on the convoy escorts. So I had no qualms about how the sailors would

like Liverpool.

On our first day, I gave a lunch for some of our friends, including Jean and Michael Jones, and some of the local dignitaries. I had also invited my brother Geoff, who had been in London on business. He said he could make it, but had not arrived with the other guests. Eventually, my steward took a call from him to say that he was very ill and had to return to Lima immediately. That was very sad and unfortunate, as I hadn't seen him since 1964 in Connecticut -- so I was to miss another chance to see him.

We had decided to have our official reception on the second night in Liverpool. The flight deck of an AOR was a marvellous place to have a reception. It was so spacious, after the cramped space of a submarine, but it wasn't as "chummy."

One of our guests was my old captain in the Governor, Herbert Jones. Although he was now in his late eighties he was as sprightly as ever. Because he had to come from North Wales and didn't want to drive back at night, I invited him to stay the night in my spare cabin, with the promise of a detailed tour next day. He was in his element.

As we sat and talked (or he talked) into the night and early morning, with a bottle of Scotch nearby, sometimes my mind would wander. I would see him going down the gangway to start his wife's car for her, because obviously only he could do it when he was home. And I would think about that supreme ego of, "Now you should ask yourself -- what would Herbert Jones have done?" It was a case of the Scotch and nostalgia taking over.

Next morning I had the XO organized to take Herbert on the grand tour, including discussions with the helicopter pilots. I didn't want to miss that one -- and he was true to form.

One of our pilots put Herbert into the pilot's seat, and then explained how to fly a helicopter. Herbert had his hands on all the controls, and was continuously asking questions about how to fly the bird. After spending about half an hour in the pilot's seat we walked back to my cabin. In true Herbert Jones fashion, he turned to me and said, "You know Ray, it shouldn't really take me long to learn to fly that thing." Classic Herbert Jones!

The following evening we were to have our Silver Wedding party in my cabin. We were expecting about thirty guests. That morning the XO came to see me with a problem. He had been listening to the local radio station as he was having breakfast, to hear that there was an open invitation to the young women of Liverpool for a party to be held on board that night on the flight deck. Apparently, one of our sailors had used what he saw was initiative to find himself a girlfriend, by inviting all the women in Liverpool!

The XO told me that he had phoned the radio station to ask them

to cancel the invitation. However, how were we to know if anybody had heard the cancellation being announced? The XO and I had horrible visions of standing at the gangway, trying to separate my guests from the ladies of Liverpool. Luckily, only our guests arrived in my cabin. I have no idea what happened on the flight deck. I didn't want to know.

Our Anniversary dinner went well. Shirley's mother and father thoroughly enjoyed it. They only had the one child, and I think they were very happy for her. Freda, Shirley's bridesmaid, and her husband, had driven up from Southampton. It was a long drive after being at school all day. Olaf, my best man, and Janet his wife were also there.

It was lovely to see all those people again. But not only that, it was just so delightful that we had managed to get the ship to Liverpool at that specific time.

My friends, the press, had been down during our visit. There were the usual photos and short articles in the local newspapers. However, we had one reporter who came on board looking for the "big" story. He asked the Officer-of-the-Day if it was true that the Captain had broken off from a large-scale NATO exercise, just so that he could bring his ship into Liverpool for his Silver Wedding dinner party. The Officer-of-the-Day gave him the real story -- so he wasn't interested anymore. It's not very difficult to see why I have no love for the media.

In Southampton, we also enjoyed ourselves again, seeing some more old friends. It was here that Lady Miers drove her husband, the Admiral, up to the gangway, and after dropping him off went to find a place to park. What a man! Thelma and her children were also there. It was sad that Ernie was no longer with us to enjoy himself, as he had done in the submarine a few years ago -- in spite of his difficulties in getting aboard.

After one exercise we were to go into New York with the rest of the participants. PRESERVER's allocated berth was to be Pier 92. When I heard that news, it took me back thirty-three years, to 1950, when, as a cadet, I had stood at the head of that pier watching the Queen Mary docking in the same berth. A lot had happened in those intervening years.

I knew that I could only manage to stay in PRESERVER for about two years, because there were many officers of Captain's rank who were hoping to get a "drive". Some of them would never get the chance, because of a shortage of Captain's billets at sea. There were only seven Captains' sea billets in the entire Canadian Navy.

The term Captain can be confusing for a layman, because it is really used as a generic term. In a merchant ship the Captain is actually the Master. The Commanding Officer in a warship, regardless of his actual rank is called the Captain. For example, I was a Commanding Officer in the rank of Lieutenant, Lieutenant-Commander, Commander,

and Captain -- but in all cases I was "the Captain." As I said, it can be a bit confusing.

Having managed to get PRESERVER into Liverpool, there was one final port that I wanted to visit as my swan song. I wanted to get my ship into New London, Connecticut -- the area that we had come to love, ever since we had lived there nineteen years before.

For me, it was a great thrill to be passing Race Rock Lighthouse, and New London Ledge Light, on our way into New London. This was the area where I had fished those many years ago with Bill Ingalls. More correctly, it's the place where we didn't catch fish, while Shirley and Betty Ingalls were catching them in Mumford Cove.

One of my old Submarine School classmates, was now an Admiral in the Base, so it was nice to see him again. Of course, Shirley came down. Kerry came with her, but unfortunately for her, her mouth was wired shut, because of some orthodontic work that she was having done.

We felt particularly sorry for her at the receptions and dinners, of which there were many. The poor girl (she was sixteen) had to have all her food put in a blender, which she then took with a straw. However, there was one advantage for everybody. Things were a lot quieter!

It gave me great pleasure to have Bill Ingalls as my guest from New London to Norfolk, Virginia, our next port. On the way down there we had a chance to show Bill what we did at sea. To me, it was marvellous to have him as my guest, on my last trip to sea.

I knew that my time in command was coming to an end, as I had been there for nearly two years now. When we arrived back in Halifax, after our trip to New London, I received a phone call from my Admiral. He said that he knew that I had been looking for a foreign posting for some time, and that he had a couple of options for me. The first option was on SACLANT's staff in Norfolk, Virginia. The other was as the Defence Attache to Norway, Sweden and Denmark, residing in Oslo. He gave me a day to decide. There was no doubt in my mind which one I preferred, but I wanted to make sure that Shirley felt the same way.

Next day I told the Admiral that we would like to go to Norway.

Had I been posted to Ottawa in a staff job, my last days in PRESERVER would have been depressing. However, because we were going to Norway, Shirley and I were very busy getting ready to take up our new appointment.

I say "our," because many tasks associated with an Attache's job are done jointly by husband and wife. We spent quite a bit of time in Ottawa, particularly with the intelligence people. We learnt how to check if you were being "bugged," or followed. I also had to take a course in covert photography. All these preparations for our next posting kept me so busy that I didn't have time to feel depressed about my imminent departure from command.

When the day came for my successor to come on board to start our change of command, I told him the story of not being able to find the

flight deck on my first day. We made a point of covering that route many times during the next few days. I noticed that he paid a great deal of attention to it. Although I had been busy getting ready for my next job, now that my successor was on board to start the turnover, reality set in. These really were my last few days in command.

It took about four days for the turnover. On the last day, the new Captain, out of courtesy, remains ashore until the departing Captain has left the ship for the last time.

I came on board that day at my usual time. And again, as usual, I was given a cup of coffee by my ever faithful, ever watchful steward (now a Leading Seaman Matthews). I found my way, without difficulty this time, to the flight deck for my last Divisions. Then back to my cabin, and another coffee with Jim Barlow, my XO -- as we had done almost every day over the last two years.

This time there really wasn't any business to discuss, so we just talked in generalities. We confirmed a time for my departure by boat, and I was then left to myself -- even Matthews disappeared at the XO's direction. It was just a time to sit and remember.