

CHAPTER NINETEEN -- TIME TO GO

I'd better not keep the XO waiting. It was time to go. It was a strange feeling, as I had one last look around the huge cabin that had been my home at sea for the past two years. I thought about the many other cabins and "spaces" that I had lived in during my career in three different navies. I also thought about the changes that had taken place in my life since I first went to sea in 1949 -- just four years after the end of World War Two. From my time as a cadet in merchant ships with the most basic of navigation instruments, to the present, in command of the largest ship in the Canadian Navy, with highly sophisticated electronic and navigation aids, which could tell you where you were within a few yards, at the touch of a button. All those changes -- some for the better, some for the worse. But what a full, satisfying career I had been privileged to enjoy over those years.

There must be many other people who have enjoyed their chosen profession. I just felt extremely thankful that the path I had decided to take, with a certain amount of apprehension so many years ago, had been so enjoyable and reasonably successful.

Leaving my cabin, I went down the three sets of ladders taking me to the main deck and into the bright July sunshine, where I was met by the Officer-of-the-Day. A sea of faces awaited me, with the ship's company lined up along the guard rails to bid farewell to their Commanding Officer. With such a large ship's company it had always been very difficult to remember all their faces. Those that I recognised were the ones that had spent most of their time working on, or around the bridge and Operations Room -- or the ones who regularly appeared at Captain's defaulters!

It was only natural that most of the ship's company should recognise their Captain -- but I was always conscious of the fact that I might have caused unintended offence or embarrassment to one of my ship's company, by not recognising and acknowledging him, if we were both ashore in civilian clothes. This had always caused me concern. It was strange that this should enter my mind at this time.

The Officer-of-the-Day commenced the time-honoured ritual of piping the Captain over the side when I was one pace from the top of the accommodation ladder, leading down to the ship's whaler. "Stand by to pipe," followed by the order, "Pipe the side," when my foot touched the top grating of the ladder.

I descended the ladder, looking down at the faces of my officers, who, in the long tradition of the Navy, were manning the whaler ready

to pull their Captain ashore for the last time. I thought of that day thirty-four years ago when a skinny, apprehensive, redheaded cadet, in his brand new cadet's uniform, climbed, unnoticed, up the gangway of the ss."Ramore Head," to begin his seagoing career.

When the whaler left the ship's side, I stood up and saluted in acknowledgment, one last pipe from the piping party at the top of the accommodation ladder. I looked up at this big grey ship, with its rails lined by the ship's company that was no longer under my command. I was witnessing, and truly appreciating, this fine example of pomp and ceremony staged, not for Ray Hunt, but for a Commanding Officer's departure. What a fulfilling life at sea I had experienced -- but it was now time to go.