

Commanding a Submarine in WWII

The Canadian Submarine Service of World War Two doesn't get much attention or remembrance because few Canadians know there was one – and because its list of members who served (in British subs) adds up to only 27.

LCdr (ret) Fred Sherwood



One of them is retired Lieutenant-Commander Fred Sherwood, DSC and Bar, RCNVR. Now 90, he and his wife Mary (Clarke), also a British naval veteran, live in a retirement complex in Ottawa. She was born and raised in Chile, her parents were English. He went into uniform in 1933, into the Royal Navy on loan in 1940, and passed the medical to join the British submarine service soon after.

"The doctor who examined me (for submarine service) looked as if he'd had a very bad night. He had a box with scraps of red and green wool. He told me to pick out the green ones, then congratulated me. I passed."

Late in the war, during 18 months as commander of *HMS Spiteful* in the far east, there was a paucity of targets. One day he decided to surface in the harbour

at Andaman Island in the Bay of Bengal, and spend 10 minutes shelling the governor's mansion, which had been turned into a Japanese officers' club. "Just to keep them on their toes."

But after only a few shots, the three-inch deck gun jammed. There was an aircraft on the island and he figured it would take 10 minutes for it to reach them, so he stayed on the surface trying, and failing, to clear the jam. "[The aircraft] was just coming into sight when we were diving."

They later determined that the ammunition was defective.

Ordered to return to England near the end of the war, one of the sub commander's worries was: What would happen if the war's end was announced on the way



This vivid depiction of *HMS Spiteful* at sea was painted by one of the workmen during construction of the sub, John S. Taylor.

back. *HMS Spiteful* had a compliment of 48 and if they got ashore someplace to party, he might lose bodies. It was amazing foresight, considering the damage done to Halifax by rioting servicemen.

He provisioned with as much Australian beer as possible, storing it in a ballast tank that wouldn't be needed. It was in 1 litre bottles, and the deal was that any crew member who stayed aboard for supper could have a giant bottle of beer. "I didn't lose a man to drunkenness ashore, or brawling, or VD."

The 100 slots designed to hold those defective three-inch shells were, on the return trip, filled up with bottles of gin. "I knew officers' clubs in the Mediterranean would be short of gin by then. We did all right."

After decades of interviewing war veterans, I'm never surprised at the way their memory storage systems work. Major actions often aren't mentioned, but vignettes are at the front of the memory. Often they involve boy-girl stories.

Early in the war, serving as second officer in *HMS Safari* under the legendary Ben Bryant, he recalled a clandestine people-recovery mission to the coast of France. "He was French, little more than a boy, and a good-looking young man. He had a shirt, canvas shorts and no shoes. His only luggage was a handkerchief tied into a bundle... I remained curious about him. Some time later I ran into the base intelligence officer, and asked what happened to the boy. He said they sent him to London. Turned out, that handkerchief contained everything he needed – four bottles of Chanel No. 5 – seems he wanted to meet women." The young man also turned out to be important in the spy business, and would later join the Royal Navy and achieve rank.

The trigger to another story was a couple of framed portraits of a handsome couple in naval uniform. Mary, a Wren, was a cipher clerk at Allied headquarters in Burma. Question: How does a guy driving a submarine pick up a girl? Mary answered that one. "Spoils of war. That's what I was." Fred rolled his eyes. He'd heard that more than once. He reached out to touch her hand, in a gesture that said – cool it. She didn't. "Booty," she added. He tried again. "Loot," she grinned.

Then he spoke: "She made me chase her half way around the world. We were married in 1947 in Santiago." His hand reaches out again, and this time he grins. "She was worth it." **FL**



Dave Brown retired in 2003 after a 38-year career as an Ottawa columnist. Many of his 10,000 columns were individual war memories. He won the Canadian Legion Media Award in 1997.