Report of Interview

with

Captain Russell Frederick Choat

Royal Canadian Navy (Retired)

in

Victoria, British Columbia

on

11 January 1989

Let's start with you telling me when you joined the Navy and why.

That goes back to the year 1933 or 1934 when a number of destroyers used to visit Maple Bay. I was playing on the beach, as a kid, and a sailor rowing a boat asked me if I'd like to go out and see a destroyer -- which I did -- and I spent about five hours in the Vancouver or Skeena. I can't remember which one of the two. From that day on I wanted nothing but to join the Navy. We went over to England in 1936 to visit the odd aunts, uncles and relations. I had been sponsored for the first year of Royal Roads by the then High Commissioner in London, Vincent Massey, but the ship we were coming back to Canada in, the City of Benares, was torpedoed. My father was lost but the rest of the family was picked up by HMS Hurrican and the treatment we received at the hands of the sailors and the staff in Hurricane totally convinced me that that what I wanted to do was to certainly join the Navy and make it my career. But at that stage any hope of going to Royal Roads had gone out the window.

Why was that?

Well when we were picked up we were taken back to England and mother said that's it for me for me, one war with Dad having been lost. So myself and brother and sister all decided to join the British forces so that if we did get a few days leave

go

we could ~~sneak~~ home and see mother. I was then thinking in terms of going into the Special Entry into Dartmouth for the seventeen or eighteen year-old entry. You will remember it was a very competitive type of exam. But a week before I was due to sit for the exam the Headmaster of the school I attended informed me that he had looked up the syllabus incorrectly and that I would have to write a physics exam. I had not been studying physics. So I gave that up and decided I would join the Navy as a young sailor which I did in July 1942.

How old were you then?

Just turned eighteen. So I did my initial training at HMS Raleigh outside Plymouth and was posted to HMS Raider, an R class destroyer that was building somewhere in the north of England. Unfortunately I got pneumonia, missed that particular draft and once I recovered I was drafted to HMS Guillemot, a Patrol-class sloop, I guess, built rather like a destroyer, but very much in miniature, twin engines and I would guess would run 200 to 220 feet. But exactly like a destroyer with a long fo'c's'le and break and a long after-deck. There were a number of them, the Sheldrake and the Wigeon .

The bird-class.

Yes, they were named after water-fowl.

Yes, Walker was in ...

No. He was in the Bird-class sloops.

What was it this you were in?

A Patrol-class sloop and they were all based on the east coat. We worked out of Harwich????~~or Harridge~~???? doing east-coast convoys. Funnily enough a gentleman by the name of Nicholas Monsarrat was the XO of this particular ship.

Was he?

We were chatting one morning on the bridge. I had the morning watch I guess, as Quartermaster and he asked if I was interested in getting a commission and I

said yes that I had always been interested in getting a commission and he said, "I'll talk to the Captain about starting CW papers on you. Then about three months of that and I was posted to Prince Alfred for the basic RNVR midshipman's training in the Royal Navy.

King Alfred, yes.

Near Brighton. I went there in about April 1943 and completed sometime in June 1943 and was immediately posted to HMS Stork??? which was a Bird-class sloop.

Just go back for a minute please. Because Monsarrat is a rather well-known naval officer, not necessarily for his sailoring but for his writing. Would you like to discuss him as an officer in those days?

Really hard to do. Remember I was a young Ordinary Seaman. He had very much a routine. He was obviously writing at that stage and we saw him on watch and occasionally around the ship but most of the time for very brief chats when he would come onto the quarterdeck before he turned in at night in harbour, or when he was standing morning watch on the bridge if you happened to have the morning watch and if things were quiet he would chat with us. Very much respected by the ship's company. Certainly we all thought very highly of him. None of us at that stage knew that he was a writer or appreciated that he was actually writing books. Looking back I can see some of the incidents in several of his books that were drawn from that time, not based on that particular ship. You could see the pattern in odd things happening.

Would you tell about those east-cost convoys please. You were going in line-ahead the length of the British Isles. The E-boats came over and they had a field day.

Yes, they did. I was there a little after they were at their height but we still had a number of E-boat attacks. Generally speaking, there were two or three of these little east-coast sloops as the escort. Frequently ahead and astern of the

convoy because the swept Channel was narrow and the convoy went in single file. If anything happened we'd move out on to either the beam ??????????ly particular action station in that ship was the lowly number on the gun on the fo'c's'le which I think was probably a 3-inch, a breech-loader and with the ready-use ammunition in lockers right on the gun deck. When action went we closed up there. Of course, again, we didn't have a great deal of knowledge of what was going on. The layer and the trainer of the gun were given the bearings and lookout angles and we were just stuffing rounds in the thing.

Did you have much action?

A fair amount. I can, that that probably at least every second convoy we had some, often very brief. We did actions stations and maybe a couple of rounds were fired and then we'd ~~close down~~ secure from actions stations???

It was the tactics of the E-boats that as soon as they'd fired their fish they wanted to get home.

Yes. They carried out a quick attack.

They weren't there to fight with the MTBs.

I can't remembe a great number of the ships being sunk. In fact, I can't remember any of our ships being sunk on that route; although in retrospect I'm sure they must have been at that stage. This was in late 1942 and early 1943. Things were quietening down by then on the whole.

Also our MTBs were getting up to strength then.

Yes, they were. And we were running from Harwich??~~or Harridge~~????? to Iminghan??? on the east coast up to Scotland. Certainly around Lowestoft and Folkstone??? there were a number or MTB basis.

They were across the coast in Ijmuiden.

Oh, that was later. 1942 and 1943, of course, the Dutch coast was still in German hands.

That's what I mean. That's were there basis were.

Oh, for the E-boats.

Yes.

Yes, but our HTBs were also giving cover to the convoys there and they were based on the east coast. Of course the convoy route was relatively close going up the coast. I think the officer-of-the-watch were more concerned with finding a swept channel and finding the correct buoys and checking them off as they went by as much as they were of the enemy action ~~<chuckle> at times.~~

I'm sure they were. The mines were just as dangerous, perhaps more so. As you know there were literally millions sown.

Yes, yes. That particular winter ~~was a winter of missile weather.~~

1942-43.

That's right, the North sea, and I'm sure from your time you remember the North Sea could develop a very steep, short nasty sea and we used to take a hell of a beating at times going up this in that particular. And we'd run up with the convoy and spend an overnight stop wherever we ended up, at Hull or Wherever. Then turn right round and come back down again and spend probably two days in ~~Harridge???~~ Harwich, maybe three and they turn right around and go back up with another one, four on and four off. We had normal watch-keeping procedures while we were at sea with rather a lack sort of routine afterwards because the middle watch had rather a rough time for breakfast and mash-up on the stove and we'd have pretty much of a stand-down before noon because we were going right back on watch at midday. ~~Messing~~ Broadside messing which was absolutely new to me, as a young fellow, having come from a public school and a private home and having somebody as cook of the mess for the week around, preparing the meals, while you prepared the vegetable and meals and you'd take them out to the galley and the galley would ~~could~~ cook them. Then at lunch time you'd pick them up and take them back to you mess.

Since this just entered the conversation - what was you school before you joined the Navy.

A private school, King's School Bruton.

By private school you mean public.

Yes.

You would have been a Public School Entry if you'd gone into Dartmouth at that time.

Yes. But once I had the Headmaster look up the syllabus for me I knew I couldn't and he appreciated it too. There was no way I could work up physics in a matter of a couple of weeks to write that competitive exam. Otherwise I was pretty good in the rest of the subjects.

Yes. You never had any trouble with the bookwork. I was the guy who always made fifty-one. <chuckles>

I was fairly good. I was lucky in having, what I call a short-term retentive memory, in that I could read something and it was there and I could cough it back up again, within a reasonable time frame. Maybe two or three years down the road it had gone but with in the next two weeks it was fine.

Walter Blandy was one of those.

Yes.

He has five telescopes and three sextants - prizes for everything.

We're coming into the spring of '43.

1943, I had finished my training ...

Oh yes, at King Alfred.

That's right. I finished that in about June of 1943 and then joined HMS Stork which was one of the Bird-class sloops, in fact her previous captain had been Captain Walker. If my memory serves me correctly he had rammed a U-boat in the Bay

of Biscay in the Stork and she was having a new bow fitted on her when I joined her. Of course, by this stage, she had a brand-new crew. None of her old officers or ship's company left. She had been totally paid off. We joined her and went into what I must say was a delightful wartime run; if it had to be a wartime run it was delightful. Liverpool to Gibraltar, Gibraltar to Freetown, Freetown back to Gibraltar, Gibraltar to Alexandria, Alexandria to Gibraltar and Gibraltar to Liverpool run and then a five-day boiler cleaning.

Tell me, how was the Bay of Biscay when you went south?

Well, usually busy and usually pretty rough.

Much enemy action?

No, not at that stage. Not in the middle of '43. Most of the action was coming deeper down in the Atlantic. On one of the trips we sank a submarine, just south of the Canary Island, on the way back. This would be in late '43 or very early '44.

Now we're moving into the south end of your patrol down to Freetown and that's where you sank the submarine?

On the way back one day, we were coming back with a convoy. We'd sailed from Freetown and picked up the ships off Freetown and for some reason we'd dropped well back, thirty or forty miles behind the convoy and were running to catch up when we got a radar contact (we had one of the brand-new radars in Stork) sitting about five miles astern of the convoy. We ran up further and actually spotted a U-boat on the surface following the convoy. We got to three or four miles before we opened fire with the guns and of course at that stage the U-boat immediately dived. We held constant contact, again I'm going to go back in memory, certainly in excess of twenty-four hours without any success of sinking this thing until the captain suddenly decided he would ?????. Then the submarine would have to come up. We

leave this in

presumed, at this stage, that the submarine had gone deep. Sure enough, we heard them blowing tanks and we reckoned it would suddenly come up and he ran in and made one last final attack with just about our last load of depth charges. The next thing we had oil and debris and such floating on the surface. No survivors at all, and we were credited with a confirmed kill.

Good! Did you get her number subsequently?

No.

In post-war analyses?

No. I never spotted which one she was in post-war analyses. But as a wartime run it was delightful once you got through the going north about Ireland and maybe eight days south, usually we had better weather.

Can you take me from Gib to Alexandria, please?

Yes. There again the really worst part of the Mediterranean War was over and this would be again late '43 and very early '44. There was a certain amount of air activity and the occasional submarine activity but nothing like the convoys on the early time in '41 an '42. We had our fair share of air attack but by this time we were getting some fighter support to the convoys and our Captain was of an age or seniority where he was the escort force commander and we had one of the first VHF radios in which we could use some form of fighter direction -- not from the radar control point of view but these fighters would check in and we could report that we had boogies north-east of us at five or six miles. So at least we could get the fighters out in the right direction.

Is this after Operation Torch?

Yes, this was after Operation Torch.

So we have some airfields in Africa?

That's where we were getting our fighter support from, Africa, Tunisia

mainly, I guess. The Med of course was, generally speaking, fairly nice. We'd do a run down to Alexandria and spend about a three or four-day turn around there and visit Messrs. Simon Artz, in Port Said, a well-known chandler of those days ~~in that time.~~ One ~~day, one~~ stay I found very interesting was when we had some sort of engine repair and we had five days in Port Said at this time and I managed to beg a trip down the Canal on board an American Liberty ship, at least down as far as Ismaillia. The Americans had laid on a car for me to come back and this was still as a Midshipman.

They were spacious days. <chuckle from Lawrence>

Yes, they were.

Send me a car back through Egypt, please.

Then back to the ship and back to our run. I stayed in Stork until April '44 when I was ...

Did you meet any Canadians in the Mediterranean?

No. ~~Not that I can remember.~~

Remember I was still a Midshipman. If we can hark back to that, the skipper we had was a very olde worlde, skipper who'd been passed over for promotion, I suppose about 1937, and had been brought back at the start of the war and promoted to commander. But he treated his midshipmen like the old days. He would not come into the wardroom if I was present. As far as he was concerned a snotty was in the gunroom and not in the wardroom and if he came down to the wardroom I was always banished to my cabin. He also would not allow me to go ashore in Alexandria or Port Said, or Gibraltar unless I was accompanied by one of the lieutenants who would look after the morals of his midshipman. <chuckles> It usually was the senior lieutenant who take this young snotty out and see if he couldn't get him bonbed pretty quickly so he could deliver him back to the ship. Then he could go

on his run ashore u. encumbered by a midshipman. But it was a very interesting period. At one stage I was watch-keeping (I had my own watch as a midshipman) because our navigator was taken sick, for one trip. I also was acting as navigator of the sloop for one trip, again as a midshipman RNVR and with the only formal training, at that stage, was my time in King Alfred, although I had been understudying the navigator. Interesting ship, with this ancient, died-in-the-wool RN Commander, the XO was a New Zealander by the name of [illegible] King and the Navigator was an RN [illegible] Officer but he had taken a little (n) course at one stage. The only other officer I can remember was the one RN Lieutenant we had by the name of Kaye, Lieutenant Kaye. He got a DSC as a result of this sinking of the submarine and I think the Captain got a DSC or a bar to his DSO, I can't remember which. His name was Commander Carstens.

The Captain.

Yes.

His DSO must have been from World War 1.

I would think. From there I was posted to (a very odd posting) I was on loan to a Royal Marine detachment that was manning Assault Landing Craft in preparation for the Invasion of northern France. I was posted to them as Boats' Officer and Navigational adviser, as a Flight Commander of one of the eighteen craft.

This is the Invasion of Normandy, as opposed to southern France.

Yes. I joined this flotilla in April '44. The whole flotilla was commanded by a Royal Marine captain. His three flights of six craft each was commanded by one lieutenant Royal Marines and the third flight by myself who acted as Boat's officer and Navigational adviser. The CLAs were carried at the davits in a peace time large vessel, the LLangibby Castle. We did a number of exercises around the southern coast of England with the troops. And for the actual Invasion, we were one of the, if not

LCA

the first flights down on Juno Beach. We landed on a beach in a little bit of a port called ~~?????? Ste Mere????~~ Bernieres sur Mer

Yes. You passed me. I was in Sioux.

Yes, interestingly enough, we landed Canadian troops.

Yes, you did.

I always thought it was the Royal Winnipeg Rifles but on recent reading I have distinct impression it was not the Winnipeg Rifles but a different Canadian Regiment we landed.

You landed (The Queen's Own Rifles, the North Shore (New Brunswick) Regiment, the Regina Rifles, the Royal Winnipeg Rifles. ~~from A BLOODY WAR~~ So there you are, will you tell us about your run in from the ship?

We were dropped five miles out, a rough run in, although we didn't lose any of our craft as a result of the state of the sea. I think it's fair to say that of the eighteen craft that all eighteen landed their troops but not necessarily on the beach. My own particular craft that I was in sank about fifty yards short of the beach and all the troops got ashore all right but up to their necks in water. ~~They were literally almost on the beach???~~

What sank you?

Some form of small shell just blew a small hole about 9-inches in diameter right where the ramp was attached to the hull. So not that we had any headway on it was quickly filling up with water.

A jet of water coming in.

Out of the eighteen craft we lost fourteen all told but the majority of them were lost coming away from the beach; in backing off and hitting a mine when they were backing up away from the beach after they had landed their troops. We had a very high loss-rate of the stokers. These little LCAs, if you remember, were twin V8

engines in the back end with a stoker sitting between them. Any mine that hit the back end of the vessels killed them. We lost one of the Marine lieutenants was killed in the eastern flight, he was the only officer to be killed. We'd all been briefed that we were not troops, that we were boat-riders because we weren't Marines and the feeling was that the Marines would leave their boats and take off up the beach at the high??? port. So we were all briefed very, very carefully that we were sailors and not soldiers. I can remember very clearly having got onto the beach myself (our craft having been sunk) seeing one of our main craft sitting about a hundred yards off the beach and demanding that the coxswain come and pick me up and he flatly refusing because it meant coming in through so many obstacles again. But I, at this stage, said I flatly refused to get wet. But as the coxswain pointed out to me that I had already been in the water up to my neck and already was wet, but if I would come halfway he would come halfway.

~~Isn't that funny?~~ How bloody funny

So he came in about fifty yards off the beach and I walked out and they hauled me on board. I evently went back to our parent ship ~~??????~~, dropping off two wounded Marines, non-commissioned ranks, on one of the destroyers on the way out, for immediatel first aid because they had been very badly wounded before we returned to our parent ship. But because our flotilla had been so badly decimated now that we had so many craft lost, although not so many personnel. My flotilla was withdrawn from the landing and we went back to England and were re-equipped with Landing Craft but at this stage, I was withdrawn and sent back to serve with the RNVRs supposedly on loan with the Marines. I left then from about middle to late June of '44 and then was posted to join a small coal-burning trawler in the Azores. The Americans were just starting to build their air strip at Santa Maria at Lajesand the Royal Navy had taken on the task of running a box-patrol off the bay; because

the supplies for this air strip were being unloaded over the beaches from various ships. We worked out of Horta??hon the Island of Tesura??. We were allowed the run of the town and the Brits, at that stage, had gotten the approval of the Portugese to use the island as a base and I was there running the box-patrols back and forth until December '44 when we were attached to escort a small convoy back to England. We were the soul escort, this small coal-burning trawler by the name of Cape Comorin and we got back to England I think just after Christmas. She went into refit and I was posted to an RN destroyer, HMS Riou on the east coast, again working out of Harwich??. By then I had been promoted Temporary Acting, unpaid, Sub-Lieutenant RNVR. I got that rank just before the Invasion, early June of '44. I went to Riou as one of the watch-keepers and was assigned additional duties as Correspondence Officer and Supply Officer, which was completely new field to me and learning how to pay and feed the ship's company and how to conduct correspondence. My action station was the short-range weapon control, of which we had considerable because we were doing ???? and anti U-boat controls. This was the stage when the ship was controlling our own MTBs. At the outset we were running off the Dutch and Belgium coasts and our boats were coming from the English side, I would think by March, certainly April of '45. Then the Dutch and Belgium coasts were being cleared of Germans. Boats were being based in Ijmuiden and several Belgium ports and we would meet them when we got there. They were also based in Ostend and we were running out of Harwich??? and doing a patrol off the Dutch, Belgium coasts. We'd go out and pick up, usually I think four MTBs, mostly Motor Torpedo boats and occasionally we had the old Delta-class, the larger Motor Gun Boats, not as fast but a bigger boat.

I've been calling those Dog-boats.

Yes, that's it, Dog-boats.

One hundred and ten feet, big buggers.

Yes. About the same size as the HL but more heavily armed than the HL.

Oh, my gosh, yes! And faster. They were made by the same company, the Fairmile Company. The Canadian 65th flotilla was Dog-boats with Kirkpatrick, RCNVR and Tony Law had the Shorts, the Vospers, in the 29th. So those are the two I'm focussing on, if you ran across them.

I'm not sure we actually ever worked with Tony Law's group or not. I'm almost sure that we did. We used to take a Controller with us. He was actually an ex-MTB officer and the two that I can remember. Funnily enough I don't remember why their names stick in my mine - one was Ronnie Barge and he was a well-known RN MTB officer.

He's in Peter Scott's book, <tapping The Battle of the Narrow Seas>.

The other was a chap by the name of Ollie Nabee.

Ollie, I was dealing with this morning. He was a Captain of one of our MTBs. Ollie Nabee was, in fact, the Captain of 745.

Was he? Well we took both of these people out as our Controllers.

Well, that is most interesting.

They would work in the Operations Room with the captain and once we were in our patrol area, our MTBs would either be most of the time, if my memory serves me correctly, would be taken out at a very silent speed and placed ahead of (once we had picked up on our radar) E-boats and would station, but at a quiet speed, ahead of the anticipated spot where we thought the E-boats were going. They could sit there dormant and silent. Our Controllers would be giving them the position of the E-boats relative to them. When they got down to a reasonable range our MTBs knew exactly what heading to take and where to look for them. They were just given the code word and they would start up, at just a crash start and off they'd go.

Was that the Executive??? "Start up"?

Signal

Yes. Then they got in a free-for-all of their own. We were not in the actual battle. The Controller was just getting them in the right spot. That was the much more common way of doing it. Occasionally, as soon as we got on the patrol before we were able to get our own MTBs in an ~~optical???~~ optimum position they would go at speed with our Controller giving them vectors and courses to steer to try and make an intercept rather like the later form of fighter intercept. But this was rare because they liked to do it quietly because the E-boats could hear them coming. So if they could go out quietly and get in position and this was sitting there lying dodo, so we could give them warning of the approaching enemy.

Was this about four in the afternoon?

If I remember correctly, we stayed off the coast for three or four days but we'd pick up on E-boats in the late afternoon or early evening. They would leave us again either on completion of the night's action for gassing up or, ~~??????? of~~ leave us at dawn.

While you stayed out?

We would stay out. It seems to me we would stay our for three or four days at a time. Again, four on and four off situation. As soon as we had E-boats on our radar we went to action stations, so we were four on and four off, around the action stations. A very, very, interesting period. I think I'm right in saying this, that we were one of the first ships who fought with the Captain in Operation's Room. Whereas, by the late fifties it was common practice it was the only place you fought your ship from.

That's right. Tell me, your captain would be down there too with Ollie Mabee and the rest, hmn?

Yes. Our Skipper's name was Lieutenant-Commander Ian Griffiths. A good Welsh name. And he had been himself an MTB officer before taking command of this

particular ship.

You mean in that war?

Yes.

For God sakes.

And this was what we called a Captain-class frigate, built in the United States.

Oh, I know her. I brought one over from the Hingham Navy Yards.

Did you?

Seymore, named after a captain.

Yes, they were all named after captains. Riou was one of Nelson's captains.

Was your captain RNVR?

RN.

The early MTB officers were RN then they filtered back to the fleet and then the RNVR took over, yes.

That's right. What his previous experience had been in destroyers I don't know. Certainly in his early days had been in MTBs. As a senior lieutenant, probably not, he would have moved into a staff position or something, but he was an excellent Captain for that type of work. He was a young man.

This is bloody marvellous! You know, you've got an MTB Captain of the Captain-class frigate and you've got an MTB Controller, controlling MTBs. People like Ollie Habee controlling MTBs.

Yes and so they worked beautifully hand in glove in doing this because our Skipper knew ~~what ??????????????????????the MTBs were,~~ just as much as Habee or Barge. And we must have taken other Controllers at times too, but those are the two I remember, possibly because they were both characters and of course, characters tend to stand out in your memory.

Talk about Ollie Nabee for awhile. He's dead now, poor fellow.

Yes.

I've never met him.

You say he's dead, poor fellow. We're now talking 1945, I was twenty-one and I'm now coming up sixty-five, so those people were all, at that time in their middle of later twenties and they'd be into their seventies by now. So I'm not surprised because certainly as MTB officers they were burning the candle at both ends. It must have had a terrific physical toll on those people.

Have you got any more about Ollie Nabee besides burning the candle at both ends?

No. I didn't know them that well personally, because again, I was a brand-new Sub-Lieutenant RNVR. I'd met them in the Wardroom when they came on board prior to sailing and I'd see them in the Wardroom again, after.

Were you ever in the Ops Room during the actions?

No, because my action station was the close range weapons and the XO did the visual fighting of the ship from the bridge. Although again, the Captain was giving the directions from the Ops Room that the E-boats were say, red-nine-zero closing with a range of three miles, whatever. So we didn't have all our guns armed other than the correct lookout bearing. We had a number of brushes with E-boats.

Did you do any firing with your guns?

Oh yes. Several occasions.

Will you tell me about some of those occasions?

Certainly I can't ever remember having sunk an E-boat, but I can certainly remember having claimed a number of hits. Usually we were in the case of where the E-boats were going past us to get home after having been hit by our own MTBs we were controlling. Or occasionally, when we were out on patrol and the weather was

too rough for our MTBs to be out, or to come across some harrying ~~sign???~~we'd get some E-boat activity without our own. Again, the benefits of having a radar. I guess all those ships were built in the years when they had reasonable radar and had a form of PPI presentation. Whereas all the RN radars I can remember at that stage only had an A scan???presentation. They didn't have a PPI presentation. I think the Yanks were ahead of us and ahead of the Brits in getting that presentation which of course, is the ideal form for any form of surface control, even air control.

See things as God sees them.

I found this an extremely interesting period. We were the first ship into Hamburg after the end of the war and I keep telling people we went in there on May 9th but probably more like May 10th; because we happened to be just on patrol off the Dutch coast when the war ended on May 8th and we were immediately told off to go up to Hamburg and make our presence known in the Port of Hamburg. We did that and I guess we were in Hamburg for four or five days and then came back down the river and picked up at least half-a-dozen surrendered U-boats in Cuxhaben to escort them back to Loch Ewe, I would think, certainly on the north-west coast of Scotland where we escorted them in. Then we remained doing general patrols.

Where did you go up to? <Hal, looking at map>

We went up the Elbe River to Hamburg.

Yes, when you go up north of Holland you go past the Frisian Islands and down into Wilhelmshaven, which was a U-boat base, of course!

I guess we picked them up from Wilhelmshaven rather than Cuxhaben.

Did you get up to Hamburg?

Yes, right up to Hamburg. We were in Hamburg for four or five days and we came down river and went through the Kiel Canal into Kiel, did a short run up through the Baltic and took a convoy up to an Island called Bornholn. Then turned

around, came back through the Kiel Canal down to Wilhelmshaven where we picked up five or six surrendered U-boats and took them back to northern Scotland for surrender. It was a rather eerie feeling of having two columns of submarines either side of you and we steamed ahead of the group with one of these columns on either quarter with the lead boat about abeam of us about 800 or 1,000 yards off -- having spent a few years fighting these things to suddenly see them coming along either side of us.

It's an eerie feeling.

I stayed in Riou until September 1945, doing general patrols in the English Channel. What for I'm not quite sure. We did a lot of mine destruction. If we found a mine we would sink it with gunfire using our oerlikons and aircraft who were reporting mines that we were constantly going after and sinking. At that stage, we were fitted with a little navigational set called a GEE Set. ~~It was hydraulic????~~, short range, accurate nav.?? aid, the forerunner of DECCA???? and aircraft would report mines on the surface just giving the GEE co-ordinates and we would dash over and pick up the reading on our machine and hope to find a mine and try to sink it rather than hit it. We did that until September 1945. We can back track on this. I had first of all applied to transfer to the Canadian Navy as early as 1943 and had been told quietly that they weren't accepting any transfers for the Canadian Navy in non-commission rank and I should apply again when I was commissioned. I applied again when I was a Midshipman and was told that they meant ~~?????~~? commission and so I waited until I was a Sub-Lieutenant and applied and the RN wouldn't release me because I had special experience in the Western Approaches and I was going to stay with the Royal Navy until the end of the war. And of VE-Day a British captain phoned me from Admiralty and said that they were know prepared to release me to transfer to the RCNVR if the RCNVR still wished me and I stayed in HMS Riou until

September '45. I suddenly got a phone call from Canada House when we were sitting in Portsmouth Harbour one night, telling me to report as soon as possible to HMCS Niobe which was then outside Glasgow to effect medical and tranfer documentation to the RCNVR. Which I did in September '45 and was promoted to Lieutenant RCNVR and appointed to HMCS Crusader and stand by for her commissioning. I joined her then, still building, we commissioned something like November and I was given a job of the Torpedo and Anti-Submarine Control Officer, really the ASCO because Ian Butters was our Torpedo Officer, Ted Shaw was the Gunnery Officer, Bill Hodgkins??? was the Gunner (G), Sam Ridge as the Gunner (T), Phil Booth was our XO, Hickey Stirling was our Captain, as an Acting Lieutenant-Commander, Dan Hanington was our Navigator and I went over to Osprey??? and did a six-week course there in anti-submarine. ~~Not to become a qualified TAB??? but as an A/S Control Officer.~~ In fact I did part of the course with one Clem Pettit and Jay Coulter who were there doing their long course, at that stage. I then went back to Crusader and by then had this six-week course as Anti-Submarine Control Officer under my belt, but really as a watch-keeper, because there wasn't any anti-submarine work then. Then Danny Hanington was lifted off the ship in Jamaica on the way back to Canada on the way to take his Long N. Stirling asked me if I would like to take on the job as Navigator and to which I said I would but with great trepidation, not having done any deep-sea work since about a week of navigating a sloop in the Atlantic. But I had been understudy again, with Dan Hanington on the way around, so I said I'd take it on and I ended up as Navigator of the Crusader. We came out here in early January '46 and of course, the ship immediately paid-off. Crescent remained in commission. She'd come around a little earlier than we had but Crusader paid-off and I stayed back in Crusader with another Lieutenant RCNVR by the name of Roger Oakley and so we ~~????? and pay-off party,~~ to destore and pay-off the ship completely. From there I

went to the Reserve Fleet for a year-and-a-half in Uganda on the west coast and then transferred into the RCN in 1948.

Who was Captain of the Uganda?

Ken Adams with Finch-Noyes (later Admiral) as the XO.

Everyone speaks highly of Ken Adams as a Captain.

Oh, he was excellent. He was just a classic ship-handler. He had a rapport with his sailors, unbelievable and very easy person to warm up to. He knew the sea and ships and he built up confidence. One thing I specifically remember is I was doing a middle-watch coming down from Prince Rupert or the Queen Charlottes and ended up in the middle of a fleet of fishing vessels: and in those days (this was in 1946) not many fishing boats, fishing, had lights on. But if something caused one of them to switch on then they would all switch on. Well, I was coming down the coast as officer-of-the-watch, I was suddenly surrounded by what seemed like hundreds of lights and I just stopped the ship, took the way off her and called the Captain. The Captain manages to normally sleep aft in his after-cabin, and I called him and said, "I think we're in a real box up here" ...

There are very few captains have the courage to do that, you know. <chuckle>

That's typical of Captain Adams.

He's a couple of hundred feet away.

Yes, but he gave you great confidence. His response to me was, "Who got the ship into this mess?" I said, "I did, sir." "You get her out of it." And he did not even come to the bridge.

He was my Captain in the aircraft carrier. We got into New York and the tug boats were on strike and he said, "That's all right," and he put her alongside. He had two destroyer engines and he was used to destroyer engines.

He was a very interesting man. He used to run in Uganda a town hall meeting, maybe once every two or three months, in the hanger. He'd have all his heads of departments with him and he would sit at the table and all the ship's company would come in and they could ask whatever questions they wanted. Of course, Adams himself, was never frightened of the questions. I think somebody said ???????they got rather leery at times at what questions would be asked. In most case, if I remember correctly, Captain Adams would respond to the question himself. He knew that amount about the running of the ship and what was going on in the ship. Generally speaking he could respond to most of the questions and knew what had happened or why it happened and what remedial action had been taken or what was being planned. It wasn't often that he was caught not knowing about something. A very fascinating individual.

One night in Maggie a sailor said to him, "Sir, why is it you've got a boat to go anywhere you want, for any reason you want, lunches, cocktail parties, anything and I can't get one to go fishing? Ken Adams said, "You can have my boat anytime I'm not using it." And that finished that one. But at the same time, you know, Freddy, his coxswain didn't bloody--well give it to him. <laughter from both>

A very interesting man! Late one night I went back to the Quebec, funnily enough with Captain Finch-Noyes then, as Captain. A very different ship. Although Captain Finch-Noyes in his own right was a very fine Captain but a totally different person, a different personality altogether.

Finchie was a bit like Timbrell. He had no physical stamina. Any time the pressure was on poor old Finchie would ...

He broke, if this is privileged information?

It doesn't matter. It's all in the past.

He broke while he was in Quebec. We had sailed one January to go around

Africa on a cruise and we stepped out of Halifax into a real off-season hurricane. The ship was taking an awful beating. We were starting to have real problems with machinery and everything else. We got down to only a few hours left of boiler-feed water. Finchie broke at that stage. Commander MacDermid took over the ship.

Who "Shakey"? <chuckle>

Shakey McDermid took over as Captain then. He always used to wear his uniform up from the inside~~????~~He'd taken over as Commander and Benny Benoit was the Navigator and in effect, Benny took over the ship. He ran it and we got the repairs done in Bermuda, eventually. In fact they'd sailed the Atlantic Fleet to go and pick us up and the Americans had sailed a number of destroyers from Norfolk. She was in that sort of stage. They weren't very sure she would make it through the rest of this gale or not. We got repairs done and sailed off for the rest of the trip and Finchie did not appear back on the bridge again until we got to Capetown about three weeks later. He'd been kept quietly in his cabin. ~~Again <this is off the record>~~ the Commader had decided that his sole purpose in life was to protect the cabin and so he'd set up a desk in the key-board flat outside the Captain's cabin and prevented anybody from getting in to see the Captain, and that's the role that Captain MacDermid set for himself. Whereas Benny Benoit and Ian Morrow was the First Lieutenant and between them they ran the ship.

That's very interesting.

It was a very interesting career because while I was in Quebec I had qualified as a Direction Officer (this was just after the JOTLC) remember I was pulled off the JOLTC after having done the Gunnery and Engineering and something else to go and do the D course. When I went back I went over ~~??????~~two years training with them and was posted to the Quebec as the Direction Officer. Her ~~Office~~ Ops Room? Was archaic even for Quebec days and her radar was an old 281, I think, it hadn't

been switched on and most of the time if you switched it on all you could smell was burning and a dead rat would fall out of it. It took us about nine months and we got the thing essentially working but my only air control in the whole of my time in Quebec was about half-an-hour and a Walrus would come out of Capetown and worked with us for half-an-hour one night. That was my only air direction while I was in Quebec.

They were not going too fast, you'd be able to handle them.

Then I came back out to the west coast to the Navigational Direction Training Centre then to the Second Escort Squadron as the Chief Staff Officer, Staff Operations, under Captain Stirling for the first year, in the Crescent. Then we took Crescent and switched her over to Assiniboine and spent the second year in Assiniboine with Captain Pratt.

I went to sea with both those Captains.

Yes, you would have because you were Staff C then. And Peter Birch-Jones was our Squadron C, followed by ....

Dick ~~????cress.~~ Okris

Yes. Who eventually took over as Squadron D and Sylvester.

Dreadful man.

I've forgotten his first name.

Roy.

Roy, was our XO, in both ships. That was a fascinating period, Korea. Stirling was an extremely demanding taskmaster but extremely fair but did a great deal of his own staff work and as Chief Staff Officer I didn't get to do a great deal of staff work. I would get the files with the Captain's comments on them, saying, "This must be replied. This must be replied. This must be replied. Ignore that." Partly done for us. Captain Pratt's approach was totally different.

He was the Ken Adams type.

Yes. He handed everything to his staff and we produced the finished work for him.

Did you go to Korea?

No, I did not. I wanted to and I was pulled out of the ship. I was on the west coast in late 1950 to go to Cornwallis and I was told by Headquarters that because of my previous experience ~~I guess~~ training ~~??????? it~~ was more important than actually go out there. Although, just before I went on the JOLTC, Dick Chenoveth asked if I would go as his Navigator in Huron to which I said I would like to very much. He got hold of me a couple of days later and said "No, Headquarter said 'No, I was going to stay in Cornwallis until I finished my tour down there and then I would go on the JOLTC.'" I often wonder if by any chance I had gone to Huron with Dick Chenoweth, whether that would have been a different outcome.

Tell me, what year did Fran enter this naval saga?

Oh, Fran and I met in Cornwallis in early '51. Fran was a Nurse and this again goes back to the days when commanding officers felt responsible for the morals of the junior officers. I was going out with a young daughter of a dentist in Digby and Captain Musgrave, who was then the Commanding Officer of Cornwallis, sent for me one day and said, "No, sir. That young lady is not for you. Not suitable for my officers to be associating with and you will cease that association." And being a beautifully well-trained young officer, I said, "Aye, aye, sir." And I did.

What was the matter with her?

Oh, she had a bad reputation in town, which I suppose was one of the reasons that Cornwallis took up with her quickly.

Sounds as though Budge had a hand in that too.

Oh, yes. Budge was the Commander then. And just after that I met Fran, in

effect, a sort of blind date, although she was one of the Nursing Sisters at Cornwallis. And had been going out with her for about a year I guess and again Cappy Musgrave sent for me and said, "Are your intentions entirely honourable?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Because I for one, don't intend seeing Miss Mitchell hurt and you are either to bring this to its normal conclusion or drop it." I said, "Oh no, we intend getting married." He said, "When?" I said, "Next June." He said, "Well, you don't have any leave coming. I won't give you leave in June." He said, "I'll give you leave in March. You'll get married on the 8th of March." Again, like a good service officer I said, "Aye, aye, sir." And the 8th of March we were married. <chuckles from Freddy> And the now Admiral Murdoch was in charge of the guard and many of the old timers, because neither Fran's or my family could get down to Cornwallis. So, George and Nellie Grey, Izzie and Bobby Murdoch, Ken Graham and his good wife, ~~and several others had in ifacso????~~ taken on themselves to be Fran's and my absent parents and look after us, even to Musgrave giving the bride away. I've kept up close friendships with all those people.

You had lunch with Bobby Murdoch last month.

I played golf with him a week ago.

Well, I've covered the period the Historian is interested in. Thank you very much. You had a very interesting war, Freddy.

Yes, I did.

You had a good war.

Oh, yes. And I can remember being absolutely scared out of my tree, on occasions and I can remember periods of being bitterly cold and wet. But I've talked with other people and you tend to remember the good times. I can remember wonderful times in Gibraltar and going in there with all the lights on and playing sports and having a run ashore in the town where things were fairly free and easy.

Alexandria and Port Said, all those interesting places to go to. Again things were wide open there. You loved the good times and tend to forget the bad ones. I didn't have any bad ones other than the torpedoing of the City of Banaras as a younster before I joined the Navy. I think I was numb. I wrote a book review for Starshell a few months ago because there had been a book just brought out on the sinking of the City of Banaras and Dick Donaldson asked me if I'd do a book review on it, which I did. But I added a few personal reminiscences. He put me into the book. One of which that I boarded, in fact my entire family boarded a rope ladder over the ship's side. By the time we got on deck all the boats had been lowered and gone. There was a boat about thirty yards away from the ship. My father made sure that all three of us kids had lifebelts on and got us over the side onto the ladder. But by the time I got down the ladder the lifeboat must have been back, close alongside, I got caught between the lifeboat and the ship's side, with a life-jacket on and somebody tried to fend the lifeboat off the ship. I was very badly squeezed as opposed to being possibley crushed because those were old big and heavy lifeboats. In a good North Atlantic rising gale, we sailed from Liverpool on the 13th of September, Friday the 13th of September, 1940 and we were torpedoed on 17th about 600-miles out. We were eventually picked up by HMS Hurricane and the Captain said if we had been about 400-miles further west he would have taken us to St. John's instead of taking us back to the UK. He, the Captain of the ship, was later killed in another destroyer. But on the Banaras I think they picked up 118 and there were some 456. It was the last evacuation line they ran, ~~the casualty??????????????????????????~~Although we were travelling as private citizens as opposed to children relief??? rehab??? program. Colin Shaw, funnily enough, was in a boat that sailed in a former evacuation about a week later. I think they sailed independently at high speed. He spent the early part of the war with a family in Montreal and later went to Royal Roads. But dad couldn't swim. I think

my sister must have been the first off. She said she could remember me coming down the ladder. I have no recollection of my brother at all, until we got to Glasgow, although he must have been in the lifeboat as well. I can remember my mother coming down the ladder. So, I think probably dad got the three kids off first, I was sixteen and my brother was eighteen and sister twenty. My mother must have been the fourth. I don't think dad ever tried. One of the ship's officers told us later, "Your dad was helping children get their life-jackets on.

He was helping other people afte he got you over the side because he couldn't swim.

Yes, he couldn't swim and there were no lifeboats.

We had been well-briefed to go to muster-stations if the alarm bells rang. When the alarm bell went we rang to the muster-station. Some ten or fifteen minutes after that the ship's officers stuck his head in the lounge, "What the hell are you doing here?" "Oh, the boats are gone." Well, they had. The Indian boat's crew had just let the boats go. Most of them just drifted away. I think eventually when the Hurricane did arrive in the area there were probably only two lifeboats. The rest of the people saved were on rafts. We were happily one of the families who happened to be in a lifeboat. It was a kind of miserable night. The crew was Lascar. ~~She had been one of the ????????Liners,~~ running normally from the UK to India prior to the war. So we spent the whole night in the lifeboat with all these guys and their incantations, moaning and preying in a sort of loud wail.

This was the Lascar crew.

I guess in the lifeboat we were in there must have been about twenty Lascars.

They didn't believe in women and children first.

No. A very interesting anecdote of this was that I went to a wedding and I

think it was Peter Birch-Jones second marriage in Naden. This would have been sometime in the early eighties and just as Fran and I were leaving we met Roger Sweeney coming in and he had two ladies with him. We stopped and introduced and chatted. I was introduced as Freddie Choat and Fran and I were halfway down the steps, leaving Naden and this lady came rushing back to the top of the stairs and said, "What did Roger say you name was?" I said, "Freddy Choat." She said, "Any relation to Russell Choat?" And I said, "The same person." She said, "City of Benares 1940." She'd been one of the other people rescued. For the life of me now I can't remember her name; but she'd remembered the name. My sister had kept up, as did my mother when she was alive, with a number of the other people who had been rescued at the same time, exchanged Christmas cards, etc. Probably one was numb, I can't remember being scared. I think I was just numb. I think after I landed on the beach of Normandy, France, I was probably numb, in demanding that this guy come and pick me off the beach instead of walking out to his boat. Of course it brought to me the realization of the absolute value of the training we had. You do a thing often enough, often enough, you'll still do it correctly even when you aren't thinking rationally.

That's right. Well, this is doubly interesting to the Historian, because the people who are researching this, some of them, won't have known war.

No.

So to hear the voices of the men who made the history is interesting and to get a feeling of what it was like to be there is what you just given the Naval Historian.

I think the thing I dreaded more than anything else was the four on and four off watch system. That you just slowly over a period days you got tireder and tireder because we never did catch up on sleep. Particularly when it was interspersed with action stations.

You don't remember only the good times. I can remember many a morning when I was called for watch, I don't know how much money I would have had in the world but I would have given everything that I possessed for another hour in my cart.

Just for sleep. Well, one of the things I can remember too, which takes a toll of people. This is peacetime too. It takes a toll of a naval officer. I can remember going up on watch in the Uganda, I can't remember it with Quebec, I can with Uganda but I was a few years older than, being called by the quartermaster, say at 3:30 a.m. and it's colder than anything out, it's blowing and the bridge is washing down, so you get all dressed up in oilskins and a duffel coat and heavy clothing and with eight or ten or twelve sets of ladders to walk up to the bridge and stopping and being physically sick on the way up. Just from sheer exhaustion of trying to carry all this clothing up to the bridge before your system is really warm through and your blood is circulating properly.

Well, we have our good memories and our bad but on behalf of Doctor Douglas, thank you.

A great pleasure! A great pleasure!

We both enjoyed it, thank you.

Captain Russell Frederick Choat
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H. Lawrence