

How I Almost Won the George Medal, by Dr. Granville Nickerson

Our ships had been at sea for two weeks - an aircraft carrier and two accompanying destroyers. An uneasiness pervaded the crew as the warning of an impending gale spread throughout the carrier, twenty-two thousand tons of steel with a complement of two thousand men. Young men are anxious while awaiting a storm; older seamen become somewhat superstitious. When we encountered the gale, more like the bastard offspring of a tempest and hurricane, it struck like an exocet missile. As night descended, the carrier itself seemed to sense the anxiety as she nosed down into the deep and the naked propellers groaned with their labored and weird vibrations. A storm at sea in the night is an eerie experience, and among the two-thousand seamen aboard there was little noticeable activity. Like birds in a storm, the crew all seemed to disappear.



HMCS Magnificent, CVL 21. DND Photo

The following day was a spectacle of magnificent and tempestuous beauty. The sky was an ugly and menacing grey; yet an appropriate background for the blue-green frenzy of the sea, with waves as high as houses. Jets of blown white spray shot scornfully by as if spitting at the ship, striking its bulwarks like shrapnel, and the wind wailed desperately, not stopping to take a breath. Unexpectedly, we had lost sight of the destroyers in the storm. More unexpectedly still was a signal, "Seaman unconscious; crew unnerved; please send Medical Officer". The signal read like a joke. There was no way that a Medical Officer could be sent, and of course, I was the chosen M.O., a novice with absolutely no experience at sea. I recall vividly when I was first posted on the flight deck and asked what was expected of me should a plane crash. The answer, "No problem, they are either dead or they get up and walk away". After brief deliberations with our pompous and yeasty captain, it was agreed that I would "volunteer" to go when there was a reasonable chance for transfer. I hadn't the vaguest idea how a transfer

would be effected, and just assumed that the Lieutenant-of-the-deck, a man not unlike the late Lord Louis Mountbatten in appearance, should know, as he ran the ship.

Another stormy night, with relief of tensions in the Officers' Mess, where drinks were a nickel a glass. A peculiar relief of tension when the Flight Commander caught his head in the ceiling fan while a raucous group of the boys raised him affectionately aloft and marched about the mess. A frantic experience – a night of removing giant splinters and suturing a bleeding scalp at sea, a distressing trial for a novice seaman-surgeon. My great trials were yet to come.

A second distress signal arrived the following morning after the storm had somewhat abated, "Medical Officer urgently requested as seaman remains unconscious, undermining morale of ship". The meteorologist promised fair weather mid-afternoon, along with assurances that the seas might calm. Magically, word soon spread throughout the ship that "the Doc" would transfer to the destroyer in the early afternoon. This was pronounced upon by a tough Chief Petty Officer stating, "I'd like to live to see this little act".

I may have been a novice, but I was knowledgeable and enthusiastic, for I had only recently passed the Fellowship exams in the days when they flunked one out of two. My mental calculations instantly classified the unconscious seaman as a diabetic coma or a berry aneurysm. My immediate concern was the transfer, which would call for physical finesse. Admittedly, I had become somewhat flabby and soft studying for the Fellowships, yet I imagined myself sturdy and athletic enough for the task. I was called to the Captain's quarters and briefed by the Lieutenant-of-the-deck about the operation of the day. It was to be performed by going over the side of the carrier and gradually climbing down a rope ladder. A launch below would "attempt" to pick me up, provided that it was not swamped by the rolling ship. I was warned that there was a risk.

On looking back, it was one of the most magnificent moments of my life. At 1500 hours, I climbed over the side of the monstrous ship, dressed in Burberry, life jacket, and shoes, with a rope around my waist, the only security to save me from the sea, I felt somewhat like Jonah or maybe Moby Dick as I descended the side of the behemoth on the dangling elastic ladder. Two-thousand men observed my descent. As the great monster rolled over to starboard, I was rushed toward the churning sea with waves of murderous intent. A huge cheer went up from two-thousand throats like a great diapason, giving me an unexpected exhilaration. Suddenly, I was shocked into reality when my knees buckled, and I was borne swiftly upward with the roll of the great ship to port. Up—up—UP, and a voice yelled from aloft, "Jaysus Doc, you'll get the George Medal for this"!

As suddenly again, there was a swift descent like syncope. The huge ship rolled over toward the waiting launch below, which contained an officer and four young seamen, all cursing in their commotion. A megaphone bellowed from above, "Keep that bloody launch clear", to which the launch responded with a flurry of obscene epithets. I was seized by a sudden thought -- I could no longer hang on to the jumping-jack rope ladder; once again, the great ship rolled up—UP—UP, and as rhythmically down—down—DOWN, immersing me to my waist in the water. UP—UP upward again, and I screamed, "I Can't hang on!" The ship rolled down for the third time, and with "It's now or never", I miraculously fell in a heap into the launch, escaping for the moment the homicidal sea.

There was a most vicious pounding as the launch rocked and dived toward the destroyer, which I could not see over the height of the tempestuous waves. It seemed that I had gone from one hopeless position to another, and once again a great enthusiastic roar from the crew of the ship brought new resolve and strength. It all seemed like some great act of entertainment - exhilarating foolish, and rather funny.

The landing on the destroyer was another round of confusion and madness. Initially, the bow and aft were secured while two dozen husky seamen fought with the ropes and pulleys to bring the launch on board, but the stern security slipped, and the craft swayed in the air like a pendulum, or a condemned man hanging from a gallows. We swung first to port and then to starboard, crashing against the side of the destroyer. At this point, I had endured enough. Disobeying the Lieutenant's ludicrous order to "sit still", for at most I was hanging on desperately, with the next crash against the side of the destroyer I jumped, grasping the steel cable rail and pulled myself on board. I made it and was given an enthusiastic welcome by the anxious Captain who smiled when I stated, "Every man for himself in a storm."

I was taken to the wheelhouse forthwith. The scene of the assembled officers surrounding the patient and me was reminiscent of the painting, "The Anatomy Lesson". Actually, the atmosphere and the facial expressions of the bearded officers perhaps were best illustrated by Rembrandt's "Night Watch" - curious, surprised faces in an atmosphere of anxious expectation. I commenced my examination with the vital signs - Pulse 84, temperature normal, respirations 16, without any odor of acetone, blood pressure 120/60. The general examination otherwise was non-contributory, and in particular the central nervous system appeared intact, tendon and cutaneous reflexes present, plantar flexion and optic fundi normal. I looked up into the astonished faces, and in spite of the violent sea outside all seemed still as I announced, "He's faking!" The Captain severely retorted, "You're crazy!"

Instantly, one of my most dramatic moments at medical school returned as I clearly recalled a great teacher giving us insights into hysteria and how it was treated in the First World War. His subject that day was an imperious Nazi ober-lieutenant, feigning hemiparesis, on whom he proceeded to demonstrate the objective neurological signs. Treatment was with "the brushes" - galvanic shock. The paralyzed patient on this occasion violently jumped from the table and rushed through the corridors uttering threatening Teutonic oaths.

I proceeded with my lecture on hysteria to the assembled laymen and demonstrated, essentially to convince myself, why this seaman was "faking". When I punched needles into his thigh, without response, the Captain cautioned, "Don't you harm any of my crew". Whereupon I seized the initiative as I quoted some vague regulation, which I had once overheard, to the effect that in a medical emergency the M.O. takes precedence over the Captain at sea. The Captain backed down. I requested electrodes from the electrical engineer, and he gleefully obliged. Once again, I expounded further on hysteria and declared that Brown would be romping about the ship in another minute. The Captain once again sternly warned me, this time in a snarling whisper, not to injure his man. I assured him that I was responsible and proceeded to talk to the sailor. "Get up Brown", I said, "for in a few seconds you will get the most painful shock of your life". I broke out in a cold sweat as he did not budge. Smiling, I looked up at the officers, and with bravado added, "He will get up as I count to "3". ... "1" ... "2" ... and Brown sat up!

The amazement, without being blasphemous, must have been not unlike the occasion of raising Lazarus from the dead. My mental state was one of triumphant relief. This was suddenly disrupted by the Captain, "Well, I'll be god-damned! Arrest that son-of-a-bitch". Brown arose and was taken off for, safekeeping, and I felt rather sorry for him as his escorts were somewhat rough. I wondered then what his fate would be in those days when a prisoner was punished, unlike today with its emphasis on rehabilitation. In the following days, I had several interviews with Brown and found him to be relatively immature and frightened. Essentially his problem was that he had a story-book illusion about the sea and the services. When his illusion vanished with reality he wished to escape, and feigning illness was his route.

The Captain approached me saying, "Sir, will you spend the night aboard as my crew have been unnerved by this unusual experience". I replied that I was exceedingly flattered, and I had not the slightest intention of transferring back to the carrier until we had made port where I would receive my first George Medal.

The tossing and pitching of the ship suddenly made me seasick. You may believe it was nausea from relief, but it was genuine mal de mer. Unfortunately, I immediately became the most popular fellow on the ship, and the officers invited me to their mess for celebrations, drinks and a dinner. It was the dinner that was my undoing. The colorful plate of yellow cream corn, six strips of red-brown greasy bacon, a white potato and green peas was engraved upon my mind. The cream corn wouldn't pass my gullet, and I asked to be excused to be shown to my berth. It was night, and I was miserably ill. I knew, as my grandfather had told me, there was only one cure for seasickness, and that was to rub my nose in dry land.

The warmth was stifling, and opening a porthole for fresh air I beheld a most beautiful sight. The ocean was like a jeweler's display of sparkling gems on blue-black velvet, all bathed in golden moonlight. One realized then why some sailors fell in love with the sea. My enchantment was disturbed when touched by a hand in the dark containing a tablet and a glass of water. A voice spoke low, "A violation of King's Regulations and Orders Sir, but this may make you feel better". I swallowed the pill – Dramamine - and was rocked to sleep by the ship.

There is little scientific literature on coincidence. Chance is dealt with in cold calculations as mathematical probabilities. The superstitious take a romantic view about coincidence, whereas the psychiatrist may consider coincidence as somewhat irrational and smacking of the supernatural. In a sense, the psychiatrist and the superstitious share common ground. Nevertheless, coincidence and chance are real, and to the rational mind they present a certain fascination - like a Royal Flush in poker.

Five years went by. On the eve of the dramatic diagnosis, (I will never forget, March 10th), I was at a military social function. During the buffet supper, at the other end of the table stood the Lieutenant who transferred me from the carrier to the destroyer. I had not seen him over the past 5 years and knew him only casually. Nevertheless, we greeted each other enthusiastically like long separated friends, reminiscing as sailors do, and were astounded at the coincidence.

The following morning, I was to return to Montreal. I remained disturbingly preoccupied by the unusual encounter, the coincidence that I should have met a man, five years almost to the day, who had played a role in the most dramatic moment of my life. At the airport I stood in a long queue, and again a thousand thoughts turned over in my mind, memories of the storm at

sea and the great diagnosis. An attractive young man stood in front of me and announced to the receptionist that his name was "Brown". Compulsively, I said, "Hello Brown". The young man turned around and gave three quick gasps. 'You', he exclaimed, and was obviously frightened and alarmed. I told him to relax and that he could share a cab into town as my guest. During our ride, Brown told me that he had been dishonorably discharged and had sought out a new life in another part of the country. Currently he was a second-year medical student at McGill. He admitted that he was overwhelmed at the entirely unexpected meeting, adding, "I well remember, it was five years ago today".

As I told the story, my friend Stephens, the psychiatrist, gave a cynical smile, but I knew that it was all outside his easy chair experience. He asked me, "Did you get the George Medal?" And I cynically smiled and shook my head.

Dr. Nickerson (1922-2020) served in the RCNR at HMCS Donnacona from 1950 -1953. The aircraft carrier in his story was probably HMCS Magnificent. The story is published with the permission of his daughter, Marnie Marler, March, 2024.