

## The Spy Who Loved Us

by  
Chris Aikman

Much ink has been poured into stories of how war challenges people, changes families. As one born at a time when the balance of World War II was just shifting in favour of the allies, I cannot personally attest to any of that. From the vicarious memories I later acquired from my mother and my four older siblings, I gradually came to believe that their experiences of war as emotional stress and material deprivation had only served to strengthen them in the long run. Their experience was far from the carnage of battle. That was not the case for Dad who had witnessed it personally in his travels across the sea in naval service. But what his actual experience was seemed always to be wrapped in the shadows of the unspoken. It has taken me a lifetime to slowly unwrap that enigma.

In my growing years, we five kids usually looked to my Mother first for almost everything. She was always there, willing to talk about anything and everything. Dad, on the other hand, was mostly away. For two decades after the war, he spent much of his time travelling to all the remote schools in northern Quebec as school inspector, a now forgotten profession. Those one-room schools that his colleagues in the Department of Education mostly didn't think about, that's where Dad went. He'd hop on a train, and be gone for a week to the hamlets strung out on rail sidings between Quebec and Noranda. Or he'd embark on a coastal freighter to Sept-Isles, carrying on to Schefferville by ore train, or perhaps by mission boat down to Blanc Sablon visiting the 20 teachers in the 17 little schools in the fishing harbours along the coast leading up to the Strait of Belle Isle. Of those 20 teachers, 3 were qualified to teach. The least qualified had completed grade 3; she was teaching grade 3. Where the mission boat didn't go, he went by float plane or dogsled. Sometimes he'd be gone for five weeks. He always did what was needed, where others shunned to go.

It was so great when he came home. From the office, he'd often bring us movies, big reels of celluloid film that we learned to splice together with a special mending kit if our home projector had torn the ribbon apart if we kids hadn't looped it properly through the machine. All those classic movies: Treasure Island, Kidnapped, Robinson Crusoe, A Tale of Two Cities, Great Expectations, were projected onto our basement screen. These versions from Hollywood's first blush of enthusiasm had been edited down to 60 minutes, so as to fit onto the largest reels for 16mm film, to fit into a one hour class, and into the minds of schoolchildren. Almost every week we were treated to something new. We got to see all these because my progressive Dad thought there was a future for audiovisual education. He ran the Department's educational film library for the province, and we were an eager audience for his choices.

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My family had moved to Ottawa because of a man called Hitler. My Mom used to say that years before the war started, he had kept my Dad awake in conversation with his closest friends, long into the nights, talking over the rotten state of the world. In 1939, my Dad tried to sign up with the RCN, but the navy only wanted younger men. Dad was already 36 with 4 kids; his role as school principal was more important. After Pearl Harbour, the navy was more desperate. On his second application, they accepted, him, and my family moved from Lennoxville to a newly-built half-duplex in a semi-industrial neighbourhood in the nation's capital. This would be our leased home for the next five years. I have no memory of that house where I spent my first three years, except for the smell of baked bread from the industrial bakery across the street from our place. But it seems a lot happened in the world during those three years.

Sis remembers Dad going off to work. A WREN would show up at the door in uniform to chauffeur Dad to a place southeast of the city, out in the boonies. It would have been foolishness had he driven himself to wherever in our beaten-up old Ford with rotten tires: much too identifiable. I guess Sis' account alone should have told me that Dad was no ordinary seaman.

Now, if you Google 'Women's Royal Canadian Naval Service', you'll see some wore naval caps with the words 'RCN Radio Station' written across the brow. You'd almost think the navy was into radio broadcasting. But, for a broadcaster, the RCN didn't say much. Indeed, there was a lot that wasn't talked about. There were things you couldn't say, like where you were, and what you were doing. Those in service beyond Canadian shores were under oath of secrecy: disclose nothing that would allow an enemy operative to discern troop or naval operations. This was a serious business: mail sent across the Atlantic to and from serving spouses was routinely opened and censored. 'Loose lips sink ships.'

So before Dad went overseas, he wrote a page of code phrases that he could use to communicate to Mom his comings & goings. An example that Sis remembers went something like: 'I went to pay for the Sunday School papers'. This might mean, for example, my Dad was using his leave from Greenock, Scotland to visit relatives in Cornwall. I really don't know any of their other code phrases, though this was one of the few things that Mom would allow herself to talk about. As for Dad, he felt bound by the Official Secrets Act until his death, and never talked about the war. What we learned of the war was found in the pages of the books of that era that had been published about naval ships and their weapons: depth charges, torpedoes, air raid guns and the like.

Before he went overseas, though, Dad travelled quite a lot for the navy, but how much no one seems to remember. Halifax, St. John's, and a lot of other places. St. John's? It wasn't even part of Canada then. I remember the Newfoundland connection because after the war, we kids still had Newfoundland coins in our pockets and for our collections. I know Newfies who were born around 1949 who say they never saw Newfoundland coins. We had them; they were the same as Canadian coins, only different.

Then there were the Corvettes. Mom mentioned once, much later, that Dad had been a communications officer on corvettes, to which Dad chuckled and replied "no I wasn't", with no further explanation forthcoming. He made it sound as if he just sailed on them to get to St. John's, and later, to Greenock. But why was he going there?

HMCS Niobe in Greenock – there's another mystery. Google those terms, and the mystery deepens. Long after my Dad had left this world, and after the rise of the internet, I can find pictures of him at that land base, down the Clyde from Glasgow. The name itself is an enigma. Originally, Niobe appears in Homer's Iliad. Her name was bestowed on a British naval ship in 1847, and again in 1897. The latter vessel was gifted as half of Canada's newly-formed navy in 1910. From this humble beginning, *Niobe Day* is celebrated by the RCN on the 21st day of October each year. This third naval use of the name Niobe began right after Pearl Harbour, and lasted until the war was unwound. Was the name used just for nostalgic value, or was it an acronym for 'Naval Intelligence and Operations Base in Europe'? Because, in fact, that's what it was. This is just my theory, and I have never read anywhere this explanation for the naming. As a land-based 'mother ship' for Canadian vessels and servicemen, HMCS Niobe was officially the Canadian Naval Mission Overseas. It was housed in building which had served as a former asylum for the poor, and which returned to service as a psychiatric hospital after the war.

So Dad spent the last 13 months of the war at HCMS Niobe in Scotland. When he returned, I was a toddler, and wondered who this strange man was.

On May 8, 1945 everyone knew the war was over, as the Germans had surrendered in Netherlands on May 5. Still, a German surrender to the Allies had not yet happened. Sis was in school when the school buzzer rang "dot-dot-dot-dash", Morse code for V! Then the principal announced the war was over, and that all students could go home. It was VE day.

On this historic day, Mom hadn't heard from Dad for a long time, and she didn't know where he was. Then, a few days later, Dad phoned from Halifax. He had just stepped off an RCN ship from Greenock. How he was able to leave Scotland for home so quickly after the war is a story I will never know.

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As children, we accept the world as we receive it: it's the only world we've known. In adolescence, the cracks start to appear. But for me, it took a long time for the mystery to dawn, and I missed the clues.

It wasn't as if the war was never talked about in the fifties. As my siblings fledged from home, their places at the Sunday dinner table were often filled by my parents' old colleagues, some of whom would talk for hours about their war experiences. During those times my Dad was especially reticent, though I barely took notice of it at the time.

In the 1980s, I came across 'A Man Called Intrepid', the book about the Enigma machine that encoded German naval radio transmissions. At that point in time, I suppose Dad's commitment to absolute secrecy under the wartime Official Secrets Act was probably nearing or past its expiry date. In any case, it was when I began marvel at myself for being so thick that I had never asked him even the simplest of all possible questions: "Dad, what did you do during the War?" So when I told him what had been publicly disclosed about the Enigma machine, I added the comment: 'wasn't it amazing that all those wartime codes had been broken?' Dad smiled.

By this time, the most that I had discerned was that the Gloucester base outside Ottawa was headquarters of a radio monitoring network, set up to intercept short-wave transmissions to and from German U-boats in the Atlantic. Dad acknowledged that there were about 20 listening stations, scattered across eastern Canada and Newfoundland. Depending on ionospheric conditions, some might pick up signals, others would not. All these messages had to be transcribed, collated, passed on to the British; that was the work of his group. The messages were, to all but a very few, totally unfathomable. By the time Dad reached HMCS Niobe in advance of the D-day landings, the RCN would have been on the inside of this secret. But in intelligence operations, information was shared strictly on a need-to-know basis. No one individual, no one group, had access to more information than the minimum needed to perform their function.

The 'Intrepid' book was among the first to describe how these totally unfathomable messages came a 5-letter groups in unbreakable code that the Axis created anew each day by means of the Enigma machine. Recent books and movies have since revealed the amazing story of how that daily code was eventually broken at Bletchley Park. Doubtless, this whole intelligence operation, British and Canadian, was absolutely decisive in the outcome of the war.

But in the 1980s, Dad could still not talk about it. I'm sure he had known that Allied forces were able to use the decoded messages, while still pretending they could not. In this one brief adult conversation I had with Dad about his role in the war, he revealed nothing new, yet there was something about his reaction that lead me to know I had come upon the real story. But by that time, Dad's Parkinson's was so advanced that it limited his speech to the simplest of sentences, and would close off further revelations in the few years left before his passing in 1989.

So my Dad was a spy! Why had it had taken me so long to come to the conscious recognition of this simple fact? Perhaps, I think, it was because my Dad was so far removed from common ontological concept of what a spy might be. Not a James Bond, but a quiet schoolmaster, powered by dedication to his family and to the land he loved.