

An excerpt from "Cape Bretoner at Large – From New Waterford to Tokyo and Beyond" by Roger Chiasson, Captain RCN (Ret'd), Venture Class of 1962

(The entire publication is available at [Friesenpress - Cape Bretoner At Large](#))

CHAPTER 3 - I JOINED THE NAVY

Why the Navy?

The decision to write my life story prompted me to examine why I had chosen a Naval career all those years ago, when I was only 16 years old. In the late 1950s and early 1960s the world was our oyster for those of us finishing high school and contemplating what to do with our lives. Our parents, who had suffered through the depression of the 1930s and a second world war, had raised us in relative affluence and comfort during the post-war era. Unlike those early days, for us the question was not "Will I find a job?", but "What do I want to do?"

By the time I was 16 years old my behavior patterns were established. I was a joiner. I had a natural desire for structure, discipline and camaraderie, and I had a yearning for adventure. Leadership seemed to be in my blood. I had joined a new sea cadet corps and had been selected as the senior cadet from the start, and I had risen through scouting to the rank of troop leader and Queen's Scout. When I started thinking about a career I naturally gravitated to the military.

My interest in flying was also a significant factor in my career choice. I'm not sure when my interest in flying started. Although my father worked on an Air Force base, it was a manning depot, which focused on personnel training. The only aircraft on the base belonged to the flying club. I recall that I was also intrigued by the emerging space program spurred on by the U.S. and Russian race to put a man in space after the first Russian Sputnik launch in 1957. I was glued to the television when Walter Cronkite hosted a program in which he and young kids visited the Kennedy Space Center.

The logical career choice, given my keen interest in aeronautical subjects, was the Royal Canadian Air Force. However, I learned that the Royal Canadian Navy also had aircraft which flew off an aircraft carrier. That seemed far more exciting to me than what the Air Force had to offer, so I turned my attention to joining the Navy. I joined Venture with the intention of becoming a pilot (Naval aviator), but, as will be explained later, that was not to be.

In those days, Naval recruiting was done by Naval Reserve Divisions. These were home bases for Naval reservists in land-locked towns and cities. The closest Naval reserve division to St. Johns was HMCS Donnacona in downtown Montreal, the oldest reserve division in the country. I made some inquiries, and after several months of interviews, tests and administrative procedures, I made the grade and was accepted into the Royal Canadian Navy.

HMCS Venture

Her Majesty's Canadian Ship (HMCS) Venture was located in Esquimalt, BC, on the outskirts of Victoria. In those days air travel was relatively new and expensive, so the mode of travel of choice was by rail. In late August I boarded a train in Montreal for the long (four days and nights) ride to Vancouver. As the train wound its way across Canada, it picked up more Venture candidates, so some of us got to know each other before we arrived at Venture.

I have few recollections of the trip across Canada, but I do recall the vast expanses of forests, lakes, rivers and bogs in Northern Ontario, and the prairies, where, as the natives say, "You can watch your dog run away from home for three days." When we arrived at the Rockies, I was in total awe. I was so enthralled by the scenery that I decided I had to get a better view than even the one available from the dome car. I decided to step on to the platform at the end of one of the cars, and to open the top half of the door. These doors were never opened except when the train approached a station, so I felt that I was violating some sort of rule, but the urge to get a better view of the scenery trumped any feeling of guilt I might have had. After a few minutes of straining my neck to look at the canyons below and the mountains above the conductor, on his rounds of the train, caught me and told me I was not allowed to gawk from the platform. He must have seen the downtrodden look on my 16-year old face, because he said "If you promise not to jump, I'll leave you alone." Having traveled from Cape Breton to St. Johns, Quebec by bus only five years earlier, this cross-country train ride at the tender age of 16 completed my geography lesson on the size and beauty of our great country.

When we arrived in Vancouver we transferred to one of the Canadian Pacific Railway ferries that served as a link between the railways on the mainland and Vancouver Island. When we arrived in Victoria we were met by a Naval Petty Officer who ordered us to board a bus. About 30 minutes later we reached HMCS Venture, an institution located in the very centre of the Naval dockyard in Esquimalt. A large expanse of pavement was surrounded by buildings on three sides. The fourth side was open to the main roadway which ran through the dockyard. Although we were only a few steps from the daily hustle and bustle of a major Naval base, we might as well have been on another planet. Our lives were about to be totally consumed with the business of Naval indoctrination.

We were greeted as we disembarked from the bus by a tall, barking Naval Lieutenant. We soon nick-named him "Stovepipe" Anderson because of the black gaiters he wore, which were the trademark of the gunnery branch. If Lt. Anderson had any sense of humour, he certainly didn't expose it to us. He and his staff gave us the rude awakening that jolted us from the cushy life of a civilian to that of a Naval cadet. As junior cadets, the parade square was sacred ground, and we soon learned that as long as we were "the lowest form of marine life", we would have to "double" everywhere we went. Doubling is a Naval expression for running, but a very unique form of running, with arms tucked in at the side and elbows bent at about 30 degrees.

The first year of the Venture program was centred on the British Columbia Grade 13 curriculum, superimposed with strict discipline, sports and military training. Second year senior cadets underwent more advanced professional training, such as navigation. For about three months after Christmas the seniors went on an extended cruise for hands-on professional training prior to graduating as Sub-Lieutenants and joining the fleet or proceeding to flight training.

The Navy, like any military organization, is very hierarchal in nature. At Venture the senior (second year) cadets ruled the roost and it seemed to us, the junior cadets, that their sole

purpose in life was to make our lives miserable, under the guise of instilling discipline and building character. Seniors could punish juniors for the slightest infraction, such as having wrinkles in our uniforms during morning inspections, or having our bed improperly made up during evening cabin (room) inspections. Punishment was usually meted out in the form of demerits. Academic and military instructors could also issue punishment, although the majority of the responsibility for disciplining the junior cadets was vested in the senior cadets who, of course, had been “nurtured” by their seniors the previous year. Although the academic staff generally refrained from meddling in cadet discipline I recall one officer, our chemistry teacher, who would issue demerits for trivial reasons, such as failing to underline our name on our laboratory reports.

When the requisite number of demerits was accumulated, or when a particularly serious infraction had been committed, such as returning late from ‘shore’ leave, the guilty junior cadet would be sentenced to “A” punishment. “A” punishment consisted of early-morning inspection and drill on the parade square. The punishment was physically very demanding, and consisted of doubling with a rifle held out at arms’ length, or “frog hopping” (hopping while down on our haunches with a rifle held out). Another form of punishment which any senior could issue at will was to require a junior cadet to clean his cabin.

After dinner junior cadets were required to clean their cabins and washrooms for evening “rounds” by the Officer of the Day (OOD) and the duty Cadet Captain (one Cadet Captain was appointed for each of four divisions). These rounds rapidly became part of the daily routine. After evening rounds, junior cadets were required to do their homework in classrooms, under supervision of senior cadets. It was the Navy’s way of ensuring that academic failure would not be for the lack of work.

Occasionally the seniors thought that the juniors were getting a little too cocky or too slack in general discipline, so they would embark on un-announced mass punishment. Typically, the seniors would rouse us out of bed late at night and order us on the parade square within minutes for a surprise inspection. After the inspection, we would be marched around the parade square a few times, and then dismissed. No sooner had we returned to our cabins than the seniors would then spring a surprise cabin inspection, during which we would get barked at for having our beds unmade or our “kit” improperly stowed.

With compulsory meals (preceded by “musters” and inspections on the parade square), classroom instruction during the day, evening rounds and compulsory homework, the routine was hectic and left little time for extracurricular activities.

Saturday mornings were also taken up with either parade drill or boat work. Although I didn’t mind drill, my favourite was boat work, when we would take small boats (whalers) and either pull (row) or sail them around Esquimalt harbour. Part of boat training was the “crash whaler” routine, in which the whaler crew would start rowing, and when the appropriate signal was given the mode of propulsion was switched from oars to sails. This was conducted as a race between boats, and was excellent for emphasizing the value of teamwork and practice.

With most of the week taken up with academic and professional training, the only extended time available for rest and relaxation was from noon on Saturday to Sunday evening. With the exception of social functions organized by the Venture staff, about the only extra-curricular activity I recall, other than “going ashore” in downtown Victoria is the use of a dark room where we could develop our own film and print our own pictures. Our spare time was

encroached upon by duty watches, when we were required to stay “on board” and perform routine chores such as cleaning and presiding over “colours” and “sunset”, when the Canadian and Naval ensigns were hoisted and lowered.

Although our salary as cadets was meager, about \$2 per day as I recall, the staff withheld some of it as compulsory savings. I’m sure that practice would not survive in today’s focus on individual freedom and political correctness, but the purpose of the enforced savings was to allow us to fly home for the Christmas holidays. In fact, the Venture staff went as far as booking flights with our money! Since I had travelled by train to join the Navy, the flight home was my first time in a commercial aircraft. I had a window seat, and marveled at the scenery below as we crossed our vast country. My parents picked me up at Dorval airport in Montreal, as they did several more times in those early years. My Dad would always get lost getting out of the airport, and “the scenic route” excuse became part of the ritual of coming home. Although I had little time at Venture to get homesick, spending Christmas at home was very special, especially for a 17-year old. My mother’s meat pie never tasted so good!

Because of the year that I had “wasted” at Loyola College, I did quite well in the pre-Christmas exams at Venture. I was familiar with the material taught, and we were forced to spend our evenings in classrooms doing homework, under supervision of senior cadets and the academic staff. When I returned to Venture in January my divisional officer, Lieutenant Jeff Craven, called me into his office. He told me that since I had done so well in the Christmas exams he wanted to recommend me for a transfer to Royal Roads Military College, a sister college of the College Militaire Royale de St Jean, in my home town.

I politely asked that he not take any action on that idea, for reasons that I largely kept to myself. I was being asked to choose between two options. The first was finishing the Venture program, which included a Naval cruise to South America or some other exotic place during the second year, followed by a gold stripe on my Naval uniform as a newly commissioned Sub-lieutenant and a hefty (I thought) pay cheque. The other option was another four years of academics at military college. For a 17-year old, the decision was a no-brainer. I wanted to stay at Venture!

No doubt Lt. Craven knew the options I was weighing only too well, and knowing that I was leaning towards the short-sighted option, he decided to wage a quiet war on my emotions over the next several months. Every Friday morning during ceremonial divisions (parades), he would stop during the inspection and ask me if I had changed my mind. For weeks, my answer was clear and unwavering. I did not want to go to Royal Roads. Finally, a few days before the deadline I went to his office and told him I would take him up on his offer to send me to military college. All along, I knew it was the right decision, but I didn’t want to admit it until the very end.

I have often reflected since on the merits of what we in the Navy called “the divisional system.” The term is used to describe the manner in which officers look after their non-commissioned subordinates. It is similar in concept to the Army adage that if an officer looks after his troops, they will look after him. In other words, an important part of leadership is to ensure the welfare (including discipline) of subordinates. Lt. Craven was being a conscientious divisional officer when he persisted in trying to get me to choose what was best for me. In the end it was my decision, but his gentle persuasion was instrumental in my making the right career choice. Several weeks later an opportunity to practice my leadership skills was given to

me when I was appointed Junior Cadet Captain for my Division. The impetus for the promotion was that the senior cadets spent three months on an extended spring cruise, like the one I wanted to participate in during my second year, and which was clouding my judgment of the options that Lt. Craven had given me.

The cadet body at Venture was organized into four divisions, each with a Cadet Captain, who was normally (except for the spring term) a senior cadet. There was also a Senior Cadet Captain, who presided over the entire cadet body. The idea behind these cadet officer appointments was to make the cadet body self-governing as much as possible. Under the watchful eye of the commissioned officer staff the cadet officers were expected to look after discipline and the daily routine. As described earlier in this Chapter, we junior cadets were often subjected to exhibitions of power hunger on the part of senior cadets, on the premise that we needed character-building.

The challenge as a Junior Cadet Captain was to assume the leadership duties while trying to strike a fine balance between enforcing discipline on one's buddies, while at the same time being "one of the boys."

Although we had to keep our noses to the grindstone, not all of our junior year was hard work. The staff was interested in our social development, so they held occasional dances for which they had recruited a number of young Victoria women. The women were bused in and lined up at one end of a long corridor. We cadets were lined up at the other end. On cue, one girl and one cadet would be called and would proceed to the gunroom (cadet lounge) for the dance. At the appointed hour the young women were mustered and returned by bus. Although we were in uniform and wearing parade boots instead of dancing shoes, the events were a lot of fun and provided us with valuable introductions to young eligible women in the area.

Another social event that I recall with fond memories was the Padre's Mystery Tour, which was held from 1600 (4PM) to 2320 (11:30PM) on Friday, 17 March, 1961. The itinerary for the tour was a mystery up to the moment we boarded buses that afternoon and proceeded out of the dockyard. The tour included a walking race (in our blazer and flannels), bowling, ballet lessons, dinner at "King Arthur's Round Table", a local restaurant, target shooting at the nearby army barracks, a tour of a Yacht Brokerage, a movie and, to end the night, a late night "breakfast" of eggs, toast and coffee at a curling rink. Padre Nichols concluded his written itinerary with the following comment:

"The purpose of this mystery outing is to extend fellowship among us at HMCS Venture. As the following words would suggest:

All men are brothers;
No man walks alone;
All that we put into the lives of others comes back into our own."

A good time was indeed had by all!

Another pleasant daily routine was evening "kai". Just after sunset when the Canadian flag and Naval ensign were ceremoniously lowered, the kitchen staff rolled out a batch of hot chocolate nicknamed "kai". It was a practical way of making sure we had a break in our studies, and it allowed for social chit-chat.

Sports were also an important part of our routine. There were no representative sports played at Venture. All sports were intra-mural. In retrospect, I think ignoring the extramural sports scene was a good idea, as my experiences at Royal Roads and especially RMC were to reveal. The purpose of a sports program was to maintain physical fitness and, although we were never conscious of it, teaching us the importance of team work was no doubt part of the rationale as well. I was introduced to the barbaric game of rugby and hated it. I have described rugby as a game developed in prehistoric times when someone made a ball out of a pig's bladder, picked two teams of 15 people each, and, without giving them any rules, told them to "have fun." Getting my ears rubbed off in scrums was not my idea of fun.

Another sport that did not strike my fancy was boxing. I was not good at it, which meant that at least I was eliminated in the first round when I had to face my Cadet Captain, who was the previous year's champion. We also played football, which I found somewhat more enjoyable, since I had played a bit of it in scrimmage games before joining the Navy. The one activity that I had never experienced but which I enjoyed was gymnastics and, in particular, low and high box jumping. It required timing and coordination, and although I didn't make the high box team for the graduation display, I got a lot of satisfaction out of jumping on springboards and hurling myself over obstacles.

Soccer and swimming were also part of the sports program, and I enjoyed both of these activities. I had always been a strong swimmer, so I did well in swim meets. There is one pool-related event that evokes strong memories. Victoria at the time had a beautiful indoor pool called the Crystal Gardens. It was a magnificent old building with a glass and steel roof over a large pool and with mezzanines overlooking the pool. It was built as a recreational facility rather than as a sports venue. In our first week at Venture we were bused down town to the Crystal Gardens.

When we arrived I was surprised that we were being treated to what seemed like a frivolous outing for what in the short time we had been there was a serious, no-nonsense Naval institution. When we emerged from the locker room we were shown trapezes hanging from the glass and steel roof and tied back clear of the pool surface. The Petty Officer in charge picked me and another cadet to shinny up one of the steel supporting pillars and to untie the trapezes. I was afraid of heights, and under normal circumstances I would have begged off the task and asked him to pick someone else. I didn't dare object, and although I was quite queasy about playing the monkey, I braced myself and carried on. The saving grace was that if I fell I would land in the water. In fact, for the next couple of hours we were introduced to trapeze acts, swinging back and forth, jumping from one trapeze to another and trying other daring feats which, if we failed to execute, would mean that we merely made a watery landing rather than falling into a net like the flying Wallendas.

These events were all part of the Navy's way of "force-feeding" us in the social graces. It is hard to imagine such coddling in this day and age, but from the moment we arrived at Venture we were made to feel that we were part of a close family. Admittedly the military and academic routines were demanding, but they and the social activities were clearly designed to build character and to prepare us for the profession of "officers and gentlemen".

As mentioned earlier I had decided, at the coaxing of my Divisional Officer, to transfer to Royal Roads Military College, just a few kilometres from Venture along the coast of the Juan de Fuca Strait. I was about to deviate from a purely Naval career path to an academic one in a tri-

service military institution. It proved to be the right choice, but it would have its challenges, as well as its rewards.

My Naval career was about to take a substantial detour!

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