

## DEBBY'S DOGGY

**A PERSONAL RECOLLECTION OF R. ADM. DESMOND W. PIERS, RCN**

**BY GEORGE PLAWSKI**

In the fall of 1955, after an eternity in the rank of Cadet, our world underwent a profound transformation.

That's when those black cadet patches, puny symbols of nonentity which had garnished our lapels for the last three years, were finally supplanted by Midshipmen's insignia, achromatic emblems of achievement, whose eye-catching whiteness leapt proudly off our blues to proclaim our lofty new status.

We felt substantially justified to embrace this opinion since this seemingly modest change of gilding endowed us with a commission which now entitled us to a salute, but to the fleet we had merely become *Snotties*.

My first appointment in the new rank was aboard the cruiser, HMCS *Quebec*.

I'd been hoping to be assigned to the aircraft carrier *Magnificent* because I'd just finished a long stretch in our other cruiser, *Ontario*, where I acquired an irredeemable dread of the ear-splitting roar of six-inch guns

. This fear was a mnemonic hangover inherited from six years of the Nazi's and Soviet's noisy occupation of Poland which left me with a profound distaste for plosive sounds and caused me to hide in the most sequestered innards of the ship whenever we had a shoot.

Unfortunately, the *Maggie* was already booked by our fellow Mids Charlie Poirier, Jake Freill, Dave Cheek and Peter Drage, which left Larry Washbrook, Hugh MacNeil, Scott Moncrieff, Jacques Petit and me to embark in a cruiser again.

A considerable advantage of our appointment lay in the fact that *Quebec* was commanded by the redoubtable Captain Desmond Piers, a decorated veteran of WW2, an officer whose reputation as an elegant swashbuckler amply preceded him, and whose debonair character was reflected in his nickname, Debby.

We knew of his distinguished career during the war as the CO of HMC ships *Restigouche* and *Algonquin* which were tirelessly employed in anti-submarine warfare in defence of North Atlantic and Arctic convoys.

His ships participated in the bombardment of shore installations, and on numerous occasions engaged in fire-fights with German warships.

It was calculated that of the 68 months of war, our Captain had spent 63 of them at sea.

After reporting on board and moving into our quarters in the gunroom, we reported to Lcdr. Stewart, whose primary job was to navigate the ship, but whose secondary mission was to act as training officer of the embarked midshipmen, a position known as *Snotties' Nurse*.

I strongly suspected that this taciturn, bewhiskered Brit was chosen for this job for his ability to sniff out insubordination through armoured bulkheads.

Having evidently pegged me as the principal potential offender, his face would contort into a Gorgonian mask of wrath whenever I happened to come into his field of vision.

I lived in constant fear of this man who became known to us as *The Bearded Kipper*.

Captain Piers, on the other hand, interviewed us individually to welcome us on board, a gesture accompanied with that disarming smile which earned our instant respect.

During my brief talk in his cabin he asked me about my father whom he knew by his reputation as a fellow wartime destroyer and cruiser captain in the Polish Navy, and asked me about my favourite sport which by that time was golf.

We were all looking forward to our first cruise, slated to take us on flag-showing visits to Curacao, Montego Bay, New Orleans and Nassau.

A few days before sailing, I was piped to the navigator's chart room.

As I stood nervously to attention, without looking up from his charts Lcdr. Stewart informed me acidly that the Captain appointed me to serve as his Doggy.

My duty was to assist him on the bridge for leaving and entering harbour and to make myself available any time he required my services.

I left the cabin with my brains on fire.

What a unique privilege.

I soon learned that my responsibilities included being the guardian of his binoculars, the fetcher of his cocoa, and to be always ready to perform tasks for which an ordinary seaman could not be spared.

I would also be able to observe firsthand how the Captain ran his ship, and I solemnly vowed not to screw up.

We enjoyed a pleasant sail through the Caribbean, engaging in training evolutions and drills such as lowering the sea boats or extinguishing imaginary fires, all of which had to be done on the double.

Debby was particularly fussy about fitness; the officers reported on the quarterdeck each morning before breakfast for some brisk callisthenics, and the men participated in energetic sports on deck, which included stopping the ship to allow the crew to go swimming.

I soon discovered that the captain was a keen and accomplished golfer; he could be seen in his shorts swinging daily at a makeshift practise area on deck, where those so inclined could bring a club and join the Captain in his sport.

As a recent convert to the game, I occasionally took some swings and apparently caught Debby's eye with my enthusiastic if still inept flailings at a ball.

After stopovers in Willemstad and Montego Bay, we headed for New Orleans. I remember spending a magical morning-watch on the bridge as we wended at dawn toward the town feeling our way through an endless fleet of shrimp boats heading out for their fishing grounds, their mast lights making them look like a swarm of fireflies.

Debby's wife Janet was waiting to join us in this storied city, where no one could show off the Canadian flag with more consummate panache than our rock star of the quarterdeck, Debby Piers.

On the third day of our stay, I was called to the ship's PE instructor's cabin.

The Captain is going golfing; be ready, appropriately attired, on the jetty at one o'clock, he announced, leaving my mind in disarray.

Was the title "Caddy" to be appended to my appointment as Doggy?

Just in case, I brought my clubs.

I don't recall who paid my green fee at the prestigious Pontchartrain Lake Golf and Country Club, but this proved to be the start of a sequence of invitations to golf with Debby whenever he chose to play.

This would include Bermuda, Trinidad, Quebec, PEI, as well as his home course at Ashburn, culminating with the Country Club of Estoril in Lisbon which will play a prominent role later in this memoir.

After leaving *The Big Easy*, we headed for the Bahamas where on the first of December, 1955, *Quebec* anchored half a mile offshore of the city of Nassau.

Midshipmen's duties in harbour were chiefly ceremonial, but at anchor, our job was to drive the pinnaces which were the taxis of the fleet.

Sturdy, seaworthy, and spacious, their distinctness resided in their idiosyncratic method of propulsion. This was something called *Kitchen Gear*, whose unique feature was that the engine could not be switched into reverse. The direction was controlled by a tiller; however, the mechanism which determined the boat's velocity consisted of a pair of clam-shell doors bracketing the propeller, which were operated by a crank.

To go astern, the operator needed to crank the doors closed behind the prop, thus directing the water stream forward which provided reverse thrust.

The chief drawback of this system was that full reverse was not achieved till the doors were completely closed, and the engine set at max throttle.

Since it took a great deal of energetic cranking to feel some effect of deceleration, it was possible for the driver, at a critical moment, to convince himself that he may be cranking the wrong way; deciding to reverse the direction of rotation at such a time had the potential of achieving catastrophic results.

A conventionally rigged craft of this size should easily be operated by one person, but this diabolic contraption required two: a sailor to run the engine, and a very busy skipper who, while standing with one hand on the tiller and the other on the crank, controlled the boat by shouting appropriate commands to the engine operator.

Only a group of disgruntled discards from Rube Goldberg's workshops working with malicious intent could possibly configure something so effectively counter-intuitive that it practically guaranteed failure even in ideal conditions, as my friend Larry Washbrook was to discover to his chagrin on a subsequent cruise to Trinidad.

On that occasion, *Quebec* was moored alongside a jetty in Port of Spain, when unexpectedly the SS *Mauritania* made an imposing horizon-occluding entrance, and ceremoniously anchored in the harbour.

As a gesture of friendship, the Cunarder issued an invitation to our Commanding Officer and heads of departments to attend a reception on board.

Decked out in immaculate whites, in company with six of his senior subordinates, Captain Piers boarded the pinnace which Larry resolutely steered toward the majestic leviathan whose curious passengers lined the railings while her Captain and officers respectfully waited at the top of the ladder.

Something went horribly wrong when Larry tried to reduce speed.

Frantic cranking in an attempt to slow down combined with the command for full power somehow achieved an effect diametrically contrary to Larry's intent, and the recalcitrant craft, like a deranged Narwhal, charged the side of the Colossus at a substantial pace, scoring a resounding bullseye with its bow.

The boat immediately sprang leaks, and as the officers rose clumsily from the oily floorboards, the motorman fished three sopping brass hats out of the sea with the boat hook.

Larry was obliged to forgo a considerable amount of shore leave while attempting to master the whimsical habits of the remaining pinnace, while his recent command, pronounced a write off, became the first victim of a variety of motorised conveyances, hulled, wheeled, winged, and rotored, credited to Larry during his checkered career.

But let me backtrack to Nassau, to our last day ashore, Sunday the 4th of December, 1955.

Hugh MacNeil and I had the day off; accompanied by Sub. Lt. [P] Rowan, a reservist embarked for some sea-time, we disembarked from the liberty boat onto the jetty from which we were bussed into town.

This city was like most Caribbean towns, cluttered with dives and teeming with hawkers who insisted that our visit would be senseless without an introduction to their eager sisters.

From the pre-debarkation briefing, we knew that the most respectable watering holes and the best beaches were situated well out of town, to reach which we would need a car.

Accordingly, we rented a red two-seater *Morgan* convertible which fitted the bill admirably, and the fact that one person had to perch on the trunk did not bother us at all, nor apparently the local constabulary.

The ship was under sailing orders for an early morning departure, with the last boat leaving the jetty for the ship at ten pm; however, the last bus from the town to the jetty, just ten minutes away, was inconsiderately scheduled to depart at eight.

To remedy this absurd itinerary, we proposed to the renter to deposit his car on the jetty, to which he agreed for a charge of two dollars which thus gained us two precious hours of shore leave.

Pleased with this arrangement, we lolled on sunny sands, befriended agreeable company, and sampled an impressive variety of local concoctions till we realised it was time to bid au revoir to this increasingly congenial island.

It was dark when we piled reluctantly into the car and proceeded in what we perceived to be the direction of the ship.

The minute we left the well-lit peripheries, we found ourselves on roads eerily bereft of lighting or of road signs; nevertheless, we continued ahead confident that any minute we would find ourselves flooded by the welcome lights of our destination.

After driving for some time, we began to get that jittery feeling; a time check revealed that we still had minutes in hand, but surely we should be there by now.

No need to panic yet, we decided; this is a small island, and the sea must be just around the next bend.

When the only thing which continued to materialise was more palm trees, we knew we were in deep kaka.

Zig-zags, backtracks and bootleg turns betrayed the level of our mounting desperation.

When lost, the usual instinct is to speed up; accordingly, Rowan floored the accelerator which made my lofty locus on the trunk decidedly precarious.

Whatever the red line of this vehicle was we clearly challenged it, which soon proved unfortunate because by the time we saw the water it was much too late.

The road ended abruptly in a series of steps which led to a stunning example of the acclaimed sandy oceanfront of which the Bahamians are so rightly proud.

We didn't feel the steps which the car overflew with ease; the next sensation which greeted the seated occupants of the vehicle would be best understood by those who can boast the experience of a barrier-prang.

My position on the trunk, however, obliged me to obey one of Newton's most compelling laws, which marginally extended my trip both by time and distance.

When I finally expelled the sand from my sensory apparatus, I perceived my companions to be only slightly worse for wear as they extricated themselves from the half-buried vehicle.

After ascertaining that we all survived un-maimed, we turned to a contemplation of our situation.

It was already well after ten which rendered a hurried return to the jetty somewhat moot, allowing me to address my immediate concern which was to locate my missing wallet.

Like three eager terriers we dug in the vicinity of my recent interment which soon returned the lost item to my possession.

As we surveyed our surroundings, we discovered that there were several houses set back from the road, but in spite of persistent knocking, none showed a trace of life.

What the hell do Bahamians do in winter, hibernate?

Suddenly, from a house further up the road, a light came on from an upstairs window, only to dim again as we raced toward it.

Breathlessly we banged on the door.

Silence.

We pounded some more.

Well, whoever betrayed their presence was not going to play possum with this determined trio.

With handfuls of pebbles, we started peppering the glass.

A few tosses had the desired effect.

The light came back on, and shortly a man in pyjamas bravely opened the window and leaned out into the night.

"We're sailors from a Canadian ship! We crashed our car! We're lost!" We hollered over one another in a cacophony of consternation.

"Wait where you are," the man instructed and disappeared.

A few minutes later, a gentleman sporting formal yachting attire topped off with a jaunty cravat opened the door.

He listened with sympathy to the more coherent version we were now able to muster and then informed us that, as the Manager of the Royal Bank in Nassau, he had attended the cocktail party on board a few days earlier and was overwhelmed by our ship and its hospitality.

Regrettably, he did not have access to his boat, but he would nevertheless be pleased to drive us to the jetty.

Gratefully we piled into his *Morris*; the firmly embedded *Morgan* would have to remain a fixture of the beach.

"I imagine you boys are in for a bit of a flogging," mused our driver out loud.

That would be getting off easy. Bankers could hardly be expected to grasp the gravity of missing a ship under sailing orders.

It was close to eleven when we arrived at the abandoned pier where we were greeted by the impressive sight of our ship, tauntingly illuminated from stem to stern as if posing for a recruiting poster and as attainable as a mirage.

As we silently digested the hopelessness of our situation, a white light abruptly appeared from behind the *Quebec*'s stern.

I rushed up to our benefactor, and after getting him to point his car at the ship, leaned in to grab the headlight knob and prayerfully signalled in Morse code: -- . . . -... .-- . . . -... [PSB, which is the signalman's acronym meaning: Please Send Boat!]

The light nudged up to a boom and stopped.

PSB! PSB! The beams stabbed imploringly into the darkness when to my horror I suddenly remembered....the duty Mid running the boat today was Jacques Petit!

Not only was he the last person on earth to risk an unauthorised initiative; much worse! He was my Morse code reading partner for whom this mode of communication was just a pidgin jumble of blinking flashes.

I should know because Jacques and I had long ago perfected a scheme whereby, during signalling exercises, I would surreptitiously copy his Morse lesson, for which he reciprocated by recording my Semaphore, which I, in turn, found equally unfathomable.

In spite of our lambent pleading, the light went out, and our hopes extinguished with it.

There goes my promotion to Sub Lieutenant, sighed Hugh, his career in tatters.

Though I knew that my punishment would be deservedly severe, what preyed most painfully on my mind was that I had betrayed the faith of my Captain.

I felt genuinely repentant of having let my leader down.

As we stood impotently on the starlit jetty, we became aware of a distant sound which gradually infiltrated the silence from the direction of the ship.

Wordlessly, we listened as the throb began coalescing into what appeared to resemble the repetitive putt-putt of a motor.

Mesmerised, we strained our eyes in the direction of the progressively growing cadence which was now quite unmistakeable.

And suddenly, there it was!

Materialising from the darkness with occasional bursts of phosphorescence flashing from its wake appeared a pelagic *Deus-ex-Machina* in the shape of a stealthily blacked out silhouette of a pinnace.

Standing resolutely at the helm, our improbable saviour Jacques Petit seemed to us nothing less than a reincarnation of Shackleton himself arriving to rescue his doomed crew off the frozen rocks of Elephant Island.

We bid a hasty farewell to our obliging banker and climbed on board.

After hugging our redeemer and exchanging knowing looks with the motorman, we assumed an inconspicuous air as we breathlessly neared the ship.

Jacques tied up to a boom, while like thieving monkeys we swiftly climbed the Jacob's ladder and vanished on board.

Though elated with our good fortune, we knew that only the morrow would reveal if we'd actually got away with it.

The morning's activities betrayed nothing other than the customary routine of a ship preparing to leave harbour.

Special sea dutymen were piped to close up, damage control state Charlie assumed, X and Y hatches closed, and the anchor party reported to their stations.

No one interrupted my passage to assume my post on the bridge.

With exaggerated care, I cleaned the binoculars and triple checked that the lenses were adjusted to Debby's specific settings.

We all stood to attention and saluted when the Captain strode onto the bridge, then everyone turned to their respective duties.

Up clattered the anchor, the deck throbbed familiarly in sympathy with the engines, and the wake, like swans' wings, gracefully embraced the bow.

Soon the ship created its own tropical breeze as we steamed insolently close to the shore showing off our stately silhouette.

Debby, always the centre of attention, was at his gregarious best, his charismatic presence even managing to bring a smile to the lips of our *Snotties' Nurse*.

I exchanged nervous looks with Hugh, both of us suspecting that the omniscient Red Bearded Kipper might already know everything, and was fiendishly extending our torment by making us wait to meet our fate.

As the ship steamed along a seemingly endless beach, I took advantage of Debby holding court on the other side of the bridge to sneak a quick scan of the shore.

I steadied the binoculars and froze as my eye was caught by a foreboding shape

Wordlessly, I passed the glasses to Hugh and watched him stiffen as he recognised the meaning of the sight.

Sticking out of the water like a bad omen was a windshield, while the car from which it sprouted flashed reddishly beneath it, entirely covered by the tide.

As the distance from the crime-scene increased, we knew that even if our AWOL escapade should remain undetected, when that car owner's report reaches Halifax.....

To suggest that we were excreting discomfitingly sharp-edged cruciform building blocks for the next few months is no hyperbole.

Each day we expected that dreaded pipe: "Midshipmen Plawski and MacNeil, seven two ring two!" - That never to be forgotten phone number summoning culprits to the navigator's torture chamber, the chart room.

Time plodded on, however, and like a politician's promise, the episode eventually faded into oblivion.

The secret continued undiscovered throughout the extensive winter cruise which took us to Trinidad, Tobago, Guadeloupe, St Lucia, and Cuidad Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, where, in company with Iroquois, Algonquin, Athabaskan and Haida [I believe], we unwittingly legitimised the Dictator Trujillo's regime by appearing as the naval centrepiece of his extravagantly expensive Caribbean Fair.

One of the highlights of this excess was a soccer match, billed as Canada versus the Dominican Republic, to be held at night in the purpose-built auditorium before a paying audience.

The Dominican team, for the duration of the fair, was buttressed by a selection of South American professionals who accounted themselves well against such opposition as Argentina, Mexico and Brazil.

They would need all the help they could get, because facing them in the Canadian end, rooted between the goal posts, stood the daunting pillar of impenetrability, the daring defender, George, *The Wall*, Plawski.

Thousands of spectators filled the stands as the ship's band played the national anthems; our team captain won the toss, and as the stadium hushed, we kicked off the ball.

That was pretty well the last time our team touched the ball that half, except for me at those times when I failed to get out of the way of the screaming white missile.

Within the first minute the opposition had our measure, from which time on they played against us like the Harlem Globetrotters.

The score was nine to zero at halftime, though had they wished, the number could have been astronomically higher.

Something unusual had happened when we struggled out for the second half; the knowledgeable crowd deserted the Dominican end of the field and formed a solid ring around my goal.

Moreover, their allegiance to the home team inexplicably shifted, and they began to cheer for Canada.

My saves were greeted with robust applause, and on the single occasion when we managed to manoeuvre the ball into the opponent's end and their goalkeeper graciously allowed it to roll past him into the net, the crowd went wild.

The game ended amicably with the score thirteen to one, and someone counted that I managed to get in the way of some sixty shots, a fact I could easily confirm by counting the bruises on my body.

It was, without a shadow of a doubt, my finest hour.

Our cruise continued to the American Naval base of Guantanamo Bay, followed by visits to Colon, Vera Cruz, St. Thomas, San Juan, Kingston, and before returning to Halifax, a golfing stop-over in Bermuda where I 'assisted' Debby at Belmont and Mid Ocean.

Soon after our return to Halifax, to the ship's collective sorrow, Captain Piers transferred his flag to the recently renovated HMCS *Algonquin* as the Captain of the ship and Commanding Officer of the First Destroyer Squadron.

Our group of Midshipmen was also slated for a change to continue our training.

My orders arrived early in May.

I could scarcely believe it; I was to follow Debby to the *Algonquin*.

My joy knew no bounds, but was I entitled to feel flattered by this appointment? Could it possibly have been a coincidence?

I'll never know.

Our first cruise was refreshingly removed from the incessant badgering by barefoot native boys as few of these had yet arrived on the shores of the St Lawrence.

We paid a four-day visit to Quebec City, after which, during passage to Montreal, I witnessed the unusual event of a Captain relieving the Pilot on the bridge.

To avoid what appeared to be a certain grounding, Debby decisively took command, and after steering away from danger, he reluctantly turned the ship back to the shame-faced Pilot who completed the journey under close supervision.

On the way back we visited Sorel, and in Baie Comeau I was privileged to assist Debby at a City Hall banquet where he was the guest of honour.

In Dalhousie, Debby arranged a date for me with the daughter of a friend of his, and in our final port of call, Summerside, I was included in Debby's foursome for a round of golf at Green Gables.

In August, while returning from Newport, RI, on a bright but squally afternoon off the Nova Scotia coast, the ship abruptly rolled with sufficient violence to snap off the main radar mast and antenna.

There must have been many a raised eyebrow observing our entry into Halifax with the array hanging inelegantly from the superstructure.

The *Algonquin's* most exciting cruise began in October; after crossing the Atlantic, we put in at Londonderry and then proceeded to Belfast where Bonaventure was undergoing final preparations.

I sauntered on her cluttered flight deck blissfully unaware of the pivotal role she was later to play in my life.

Following a visit to Brest, on the 6th of November, we tied up in Lisbon.

Our arrival was temporarily marred by our jeep driver's over-eager attempt to park too close to the ship, which resulted in his spirited evacuation of the vehicle just before it plunged into the harbour aft of the brow.

Debby, who witnessed the event as he stood waiting to greet local dignitaries who were beginning to convene for a cocktail party on board, took personal charge; with commanding authority he directed the divers who soon located the jeep, and a crane presently hoisted the dripping but otherwise undamaged car onto the jetty.

It was a masterful demonstration of efficiency performed with inimitable brio, admired not only by the ship's company but also by the gathered guests who, judging by their applause, might have been excused for assuming that it was staged for their benefit.

The capital of Portugal, as we soon discovered, turned out to be a repository of the crowned heads of Europe.

From the sumptuous sanctuary of their refuge, the Monarchs spent their time plotting the overthrow of their usurper governments while dreaming of their eventual rightful return to power.

Not all were refugees, however, and one of these was presently on board; judging from the relaxed friendliness between him and our Captain, their camaraderie was of long standing.

He was Juan de Borbon, the corpulent but dashing courtly father of Juan Carlos, the reigning King of Spain.

Though built like Jackie Gleason, he shared with the actor a highly serviceable two handicap in golf, a fact I was to discover the following day when Debby appointed me to complete a foursome representing the Squadron in a friendly match at the exclusive Clube de Golf de Hotel Palacio Estoril.

The round was preceded by a banquet in a luxurious private dining room overlooking the course.

Don Juan and Debby presided in effervescent form, the feast eventually crowned with endless toasts to our respective heads of government, national luminaries, Portuguese Navigators, each one of us at the table, and probably every member of the Montreal Canadiens and the Portuguese National soccer team.

Though my memory of the provenance of the remaining three hosts is vague, these gentlemen clearly fitted the image of a highly cultured elite, a status which I determinedly aspired to match through the only means at my disposal; an exorbitant excess of alcohol.

On the last day of our visit, a formal ball was to be held in honour of the Canadian Navy.

Sometime that afternoon I was summoned to the Captain's cabin.

As I stood at attention, Debby informed me that I was being delegated as the escort of a young lady of exalted social standing.

"Her name is Maria Gabriella," he explained, "and her title, *Princess of Savoy*, stems from being the daughter of King Umberto II, the deposed Monarch of Italy. You will call him 'Your Majesty', and his daughter 'Princess Maria.' I needn't tell you that you are going to be closely watched, Plawski, and I expect you to be on your best behaviour," admonished Debby with paternal severity; I departed his presence terrified yet thrilled to the core, and more determined than ever not to screw up.

As the youngest in age and the lowest in rank of all of the ships' officers, this was for me a singular honour, and I spent the rest of the day in a turmoil of pride mixed with apprehension.

My only previous experience with proximity to Royalty was limited to the distance of the Royal Yacht HMS *Surprise* to the railing of HMCS *Swansea*, from where, along with the rest of the ship's company, I enthusiastically hailed Her Majesty following her Coronation during the Spithead review.

Clearly, all this was about to change, and I began to fantasise of a future surrounded by Royals and the cream of the aristocracy. I could imagine myself, though a mere commoner, becoming the toast of this esoteric milieu solely on the basis of my charm, suavité, and of course the binding love of a beautiful Princess.

After all, history, notably as recorded by Andersen and Disney, is replete with such happenings.

Though I briefly wondered whether my lapsed Catholicism might stand in the way of profiting from this opportunity, I remained comforted by the example set by Henri Quatre of France, who, when confronted with a similar dilemma in 1593, famously accepted his conversion with the pronouncement: *Paris vaut bien une messe*; Paris is well worth a Mass.

When evening came, we were collected by a fleet of taxis which delivered us to a majestic, collonaded neoclassical palace where, after being respectfully ushered inside, a glass of champagne magically found asylum in my hand.

Momentarily, we all paused to absorb the lavishly appointed interior; from an impossibly high frescoed ceiling hung an array of crystalline chandeliers whose reflections dappled the uniforms of gold-braided, bemedalled glitterati.

Accompanied by glamorously coiffed and gowned consorts, the dignitaries created an atmosphere like an extravagant resurrection of the final night of the Congress of Vienna.

Presently, the orchestra sounded a meaningful arpeggio and all eyes turned to the entrance.

A group of distinguished personages had just entered and were being greeted by Debby and the ships' officers.

They were accompanied by a small entourage of young ladies, one of whom was a stunner in a blue, floor-length gown.

Debby quickly caught my eye and nodded sharply in my direction.

Nervously, I trotted over and bowed deeply with each introduction in accordance with how I imagined Royalty should be addressed.

Their reception of me was formal but distant, entirely unlike the welcome conjured in my imagination which was to have more closely resembled the return of the prodigal son.

Never mind, I mused, there's always the beautiful daughter, the traditional vehicle which catalyses the inevitable happy end.

It was now the turn of the Princess, but as my gaze expectantly shifted to the dazzler in blue, I became aware that a different girl was being ushered toward me.

She was a startlingly tall, willowy creature, in her early teens, positively radiating discomfort; with a brace on her teeth, eyes of a frightened gazelle, and a handshake like cold cooked spaghetti, she reluctantly identified herself as Maria Gabriella.

“.....what a pleasure to meet you, Princess Maria,” I lied when I finally found my breath.

Our mismatch could not be more graphic.

Apart from our vexing difference in height and in age, we discovered that neither her English nor my French permitted refuge in banter and that spending the evening in each other's company under the penetrating scrutiny of both assembled camps would be a source of mutually crippling embarrassment.

An introduction to the bevy of ladies in waiting provided a brief and welcoming respite, along with the impress of one azure name: Marina.

Presently, a swarm of liveried footmen presented each of our group with an elaborately garnished crystal goblet of perfectly chilled Perrier, which left me in uncharted waters about the propriety of proposing a toast with a glass topped by a straw, an orange slice, and a miniature umbrella.

Just as I began to compose some tension-relieving banality, the crowd hushed and parted revealing the conductor, his baton raised high, looking expectantly over his shoulder in our direction.

The cue was chillingly unmistakeable.

Since no life-saving sinker-hole had formed within running distance, I had no choice but to proffer my arm to the Princess and to lead her out to the centre of the corrida.

The orchestra burst into a waltz; with the Princess towering over me like a gilded giraffe, we stumbled stiffly in the spotlight, our self-consciousness bordering on panic, and it was impossible to discern which one of us felt more thoroughly out of place.

Mercifully, we soon became surrounded by a crowd of dancers which fractionally served to diminish our unease.

Nothing in the lore of fairy-tale mythology prepared me for this turn of events, because this Princess, trapped in that awkward age when a girl's voice changes from no to yes - somewhere between puberty and adultery - did not exhibit any of the traditional characteristics.

An eternity dragged by as I stood surrounded by a group of girls resembling aspirants for Holy Communion. While I vainly attempted to appear enthralled for the sake of satisfying Debby's critically appraising looks, my discomfort could only occasionally be relieved by brief exchanges with the divine Marina.

Unexpectedly, the King approached, and with excessive old-world charm requested my permission to dance with his daughter.

As I watched them disappear in the swirl of dancers, I suddenly felt a hand slithering into mine. Its owner wore a blue dress.

“Meet me outside!” she whispered and vanished into the crowd.

I stood immobilised with shock.

Careful scrutiny of the area revealed that everybody's attention was focused on the dance floor, so I crept to the door and stepped out into the moonlit palace grounds.

Apart from a group of chauffeurs smoking next to their limousines, I was alone.

Presently, the door clicked shut behind me revealing Marina, who with an impish grin handed me a bottle of champagne and two glasses which she had commandeered from the bar, and bid me follow.

That was something I'd be willing to do even to my own beheading, a fate not too farfetched to imagine.

Marina approached one of the drivers; after a brief exchange, he bowed respectfully, opened the car door, handed her the keys, and as I hopped in from the other side, she drove briskly away.

This unfolding tale was decidedly outside of the parameters of the Brothers Grimm, and I was still tongue-tied when she meaningfully pointed to the champagne.

The pop of the cork shooting out through the window into the night punctuated the start of this improbable adventure.

She drove purposefully up a steep hill to an apparently familiar trysting ground and parked on a high promontory which offered a stellar view of the illuminated city below.

Marina was nineteen; precocious, rebellious, and brazenly self-confident, she was raven-haired, ravishing to look at, and altogether mortally infatuating.

Thoroughly amused by my entrapment with the Princess, she forced me to recognise its grotesque absurdity.

Steeped in the giddy audacity of this affair, we drank, laughed, and indulged in some inconsequential necking till we knew that this Technicolor interlude must end.

When we returned, she released the car to the chauffeur and let me slip back into the hall a few respectable minutes before her.

Awakened by Marina to the farcical aspect of the situation and moderately buoyed by champagne, I returned to the Princess like a captive reprieved, my

relaxed state serving to melt some of the frost, and when the time came, led her confidently in the home waltz.

The parting formalities with the Royal family dragged on like a cortège. Though the situation prevented me from yielding to the agonising desire to fly to Marina, as my eyes desperately searched for her in the crowd, did I really, in that distracted state, catch a glimpse of her at the door?

Was it she who waved? Who flashed that knowing smile?

Did I actually see her stop and blow a farewell kiss?

I'll never be sure; she vanished from my impressionable youth an iridescent chimaera never to materialise again.

Merciless ribbing from my fellow shipmates accompanied me on the drive home, but I was too engrossed to care.

The following day, as I took up my station on the bridge in the capacity of *Aide de Camp*, as I preferred to think of myself, Keith Lewis and Jack Manore, two ship's Lieutenants whom I particularly liked, added their little jabs to the chorus; has the date for the Royal wedding been set yet? Does *Gieves* have my measurements for elevator shoes?

Debby stayed out of it, but I sensed he was paying close attention.

Once clear of the harbour, after sea dutymen secured, I was tidying something up at the back of the bridge when Debby slid over beside me.

In a lowered voice, but with a canny glint in his eye, he spoke these sobering words:

“You’re damned lucky, Plawski, that you showed up in time for the home waltz!”

After a stopover in the Azores, we crossed the Atlantic which marked the end of my Midshipman training.

I was deeply grateful to the officers and men of the *Algonquin* for their gracious treatment while I was embarked, and had no way of knowing that I would once again have the opportunity to sail in this ship, though under very different circumstances, eight years later.

Nor could I have known that this would be the last time that I would see Debby Piers.

The return to Halifax marked a significant transition for us both.

Debby was promoted to Commodore, and I to Sub Lieutenant, which meant that we became one-ringers on practically the same day.

Debby was appointed to the Royal Military College of Canada as its first Naval Commandant, while we Subbies were heading for Greenwich.

Before embarking in the *Empress of Britain* for the voyage to Liverpool, we attended Hugh MacNeil's and Alison's wedding, an unforgettable affair where the newlyweds paraded from the church under an arch of traditionally upraised swords, our newly sewn gold stripes proudly gleaming in the morning light.

I had often speculated about why Captain Piers chose me for such conspicuously unique attention; could it have been my growing passion for his favourite sport of golf? Or could the fact that, though his wife had a daughter, he and Janet never had a son?

Accompanying these ruminations many years later was the persistent recollection of the puzzle of the abandoned *Morgan*, the memory of which, though nearly forgotten, still squatted uncomfortably in the crowded graveyard of my conscience.

Closet skeletons are by nature possessed of an inherent desire for forgiveness, so when this little guilt-gorged-gremlin started to clamour for attention, I quickly interpreted it as an excuse to establish contact with Debby.

Accordingly, in November of 2002, I wrote him a letter.

Unwittingly, it assumed the form of a confession.

Succumbing to the need for exculpation, I laid out the facts of these past transgressions; I wrote about crashing the car, abandoning it on the beach and nearly missing the ship under sailing orders, after which, vastly relieved, I sat back to await his verdict.

It came in the form of a phone call.

Hearing my Captain's voice, slightly halting now, but still brimful of the well-remembered timbre of authority laced with wry amusement was an unmitigated delight.

It turned out that Debby knew nothing of this episode, which he now found profoundly amusing.

The conversation with Debby was an unforgettable treat, and though I was still craving to inquire what prompted him all those years ago to select me for such special treatment, I didn't have the guts to ask.

I'm glad I didn't; it is the mystery behind myths, fables, and fairy tales, which gives them their unique fascination.

Whatever the reason, I will always remain bewildered yet profoundly privileged to have had the honour of spending a year as my respected mentor Desmond Piers' doggy, under his enigmatically paternal command.

## **Historical Notes**

### **Rear Admiral Desmond William Piers, DSC, RCN, 1913-2005**

Piers joined the RCN in 1932.

He was the XO of HMCS *Restigouche* when the war started, became the CO in 1941, and then commanded HMCS *Algonquin* till the end of the hostilities.

After a stint as the Executive Officer of HMCS *Magnificent*, he was appointed Director of Naval Plans and Operations in Ottawa, then in 1955 took command of the cruiser, HMCS *Quebec*.

In 1956, he became the Commanding Officer of the First Canadian Destroyer Squadron and CO of the refurbished *Algonquin*.

In the following years, he served as the Commandant of the Royal Military College and held numerous high-level appointments with NATO, NDHQ, and the Canadian Joint Staff in Washington.

Promoted to Rear Admiral in 1962, he retired five years later and settled in Chester, NS, where he lived with his wife Janet till 2005.

Janet's daughter, Anne, still lives there at the time of writing.

### **Vice Admiral Hugh MacNeil, RCN**

Hugh's career path mimicked Debby's in two significant ways. He was appointed to command HMCS *Algonquin* [ 2 ] in 1976, and like Debby served as the Commander of the First Canadian Destroyer Squadron.

Hugh's distinguished service included command of the Standing Naval Force Atlantic, numerous high postings associated with NATO and SACLANT, and increasingly essential responsibilities in NDHQ culminating with his promotion to the rank of Vice Admiral, and appointment as Deputy Chief of Defence Staff till his retirement in 1989.

He resides in Newport, NS, with his wife, Alison.

### **Jacques Petit, RCN**

Jacque's naval career continued till his retirement.

Though we've lost touch for many years, his gallant initiative in risking his own skin by saving three marooned buddies from the serious charge of being absent from the place of duty remains in my memory as a rare example of character.

This act not only delivered the truants from some tedious exchanges, but must undoubtedly have facilitated one of them to parlay a record of undetected crime into an eminently illustrious career.

[Since this was written, I did manage to contact Jacques, who lives in Montreal, and with whom I had a chance to reminisce at length about our early days in the navy.]

### **King Umberto II, of Italy, 1904-1983**

Umberto was the only son of Italy's King Victor Emmanuel III.

In 1946, a referendum was held to determine the future of Royalty in post-war Italy.

Since Emmanuel was tainted by his support of Fascism, to increase the chances of the Monarchy's survival, he abdicated in favour of his son, Umberto.

This tactic failed; the referendum abolished the Monarchy in favour of a Republic, and since the Royals were prohibited from ever setting foot on Italian soil, Umberto settled in Portugal after a 34-day reign.

Umberto was homosexual; nevertheless, his arranged and unhappy marriage to Marie - José of Belgium produced four offspring, which included the young heroine of this telling.

## **Maria Gabriella Giuseppa Aldegonda Adelaide Ludovica Felicia Gennara, 1940**

Maria's disastrous, though mercifully short encounter with Midshipman Plawski, RCN, propelled her into the orb of Mohammed Reza Pahlavi of Iran.

Since the Shah was at that time divorced from his first wife, Pope John XXIII vigorously opposed the union, setting the unfortunate Princess adrift again until 1969 when she married a Romanian.

She became a linguist and a historian and had published several works on the subject of Italian History as well as a treatise concerning Jewellery in the House of Savoy.

Marina de Brito y Cunha's beauty and originality hopefully led her to fulfil her propitious destiny.

Plawski's brief brush with Royalty caused him to elevate his ambitions considerably, which reached an apogee when he married a commoner, Rita Schumacher, who like Maria Gabriella boasts a constellation of names, but since all are terms of endearment sourced from multiple languages, they are much too numerous to itemise in this synopsis.

### **PostScript**

Remember the banker who saved our asses in Nassau?

In discussing the draft of this story with Hugh, he told me that he subsequently learned that it was the banker who settled the bill with the car-rental company and hushed the whole thing up.

I raise a glass to our silent Samaritan.

### **Photo Galery (2)**

Note: a photo of Plawski looking spiffy in whites was posted in *the Signal*



The End