

I first met the old man a few months ago, when I was on assignment to do a history piece on Fernwood. It seems that he had worked for ages at the archives, and still possessed a near-photographic memory of the little bits and pieces of history that had shuffled through his fingers. Since that time, I had made it a habit of dropping by on Saturday afternoon with a six-pack and a bunch of questions. At first I thought that I was doing the old man a favour, giving him some company as he dotted off into old age, but after a few weeks, I began to wonder if it was the other way around...

ESQUIMALT NAVAL BASE

So I arrived on time this week, cold Budweiser bottles tucked under one arm, and some questions buzzing in my head. I rang the bell, and waited. And waited. This was strange. With that odd, disconnected mild concern that occurs in younger people when visiting the elderly, I tried to peek through the translucent glass blocks on his door. Finally I saw the blurred outline of the old man coming to the door, and was not surprised that the primary thing I felt was relief.

"Come in, come in." The old man looked a little rushed, and his appearance was... well... odd. I mean, not strange, but I hadn't seen him this way before. It looked as if he was getting ready to go out, or something.

"Good thing you're on time this week, I've got a hot date." With that statement, he turned to go back down the hall to the bathroom, and motioned me towards the kitchen. I stood there, dumbfounded for a moment, then shaking my head, made my way into the kitchen.

I proceeded to rummage about, collecting a couple of glasses, and pouring two beers for us. As I made my way into the living room, the old man reappeared, looking more "kempt" and dapper than I had ever seen him. I could feel an odd smile on my face.

"What?" he said, looking at me. I quickly wiped the smile from my face.

"A hot date, eh?"

"Yah. With this really nice lady who works at the library."

"The library?" This was new. Was the old man going down to the library to brush up on his historical knowledge? The wondering wasn't far off, I suspect, for the old man blushed just slightly, and I could see his back was up a bit.

"I like the library. Have since I was a boy." He indicated his age by holding his hand out, parallel to the floor, at about waist height. The old man then moved over to his favourite couch, sat down, and quickly had a sip of beer. Was he covering his embarrassment?

"Well... uh... that's good. Getting out is good. I she cute?" I asked, perhaps to cover my embarrassment.

"She's a very handsome lady." I haven't ever figured that statement out, and this being the first time I'd heard it outside of western movies, it's meaning wasn't any clearer.

"So, anyway... what today? More Langford, going back to Fernwood? Maybe a dash of Oak Bay, or James Bay?"

"No, actually. I was wondering about CFB Esquimalt."

"What, exactly, were you wondering about?"

"Well, when you drive by the old entrance, there's an arch over it that says HMCS Naden."

"Yes, of course. That's what the base was known as, that is, up until '66, when the Feds did the near-disastrous reorganization. Then it became Canadian Forces Base Esquimalt."

"But why 'HMCS?' I thought that that was for ships."

"Her Majesty's Canadian Navy." He paused for a moment. "But I suppose at times it means 'His Majesty's.' Depends." He leaned back into the sofa cushions, and thought for a moment. "You do realize, of course, that the Canadian Navy was modeled on the Royal Navy."

"The British." He looked at me with a bit of a withering glance. Boy, am I glad I didn't say - what, the Norwegians?"

"Yes. The name of the base was usually taken from the name of the depot ship that carried the roll of the names of the officers and ratings that served there. Old RN tradition, I hear."

"So HMCS Naden was a ship?"

"Absolutely. Apparently she was a fine little sailing ship, about 88 tons or so. Originally she was sold to the Navy Department for use as a tender in training in sail. Then she took over depot ship duties from the old 'Rainbow.' Now, that's out of the way, what next?" He glanced at his watch. It must be a really hot date.

"Well, what about the Rainbow?" The old man thought for a moment, and took another small sip of beer. I looked at my glass and realized I hadn't had any yet, so to fill the pause, I took a sip, too.

"Why don't we start at the beginning?" he asked. I nodded, though I still wanted to hear about a Navy ship called "Rainbow." "We'll get back to Rainbow soon enough. The history of a navy base is really all about the ships and men that sailed from the base, you know, but there are still a few interesting bon mots to get to those ships."

I waved my hand expansively. "Lead on McDuff." he grunted, and shot me another one of those withering looks.

"Well, I suppose if you look at the official website, you'll get the old 'CFB Esquimalt is Canada's west coast naval base. It is part of the Maritime Command... etc, etc. But I don't suppose you want the typical GuvCan verbiage. Well, let me think a moment." We both paused for another sip. "I guess you could figure out that up until the 18th century, the only people around were the natives. Esquimalt, of course, is a native word, probably a bastardization of a slightly different word or phrase, but it's accepted that it means 'the place of gradually shoaling waters,' or just 'place of shoaling waters.'"

"Shoaling?"

"A shoal is a shallow place."

"Oh." I nodded, and took another sip. The old man just looked at me for a minute, then continued.

"I guess it was in 1790 or so that the place first saw Europeans. A Spanish explorer by the name of Don Manuel Quimper sailed into Esquimalt Harbour and proclaimed it 'Puerto de Cordova.' There's some debate on what happened next, as some accounts say Quimper went ashore and put a cross on a hill, while others maintain that he never set foot on the land. I suppose it's no never mind, because in 1843, HBC Chief Factor James Douglas," he gave me a questioning look. I looked blandly back at him and nodded, yes, I remembered. "Douglas looked around, and decided that there were too many trees around Esquimalt Harbour, so he picked Victoria Harbour as the site for the HBC fort. It's said that, while he didn't want to put the fort right there in Esquimalt, he did see the agricultural potential of the area, and signed a series of treaties with the natives, and eventually established the Puget Sound Agricultural Company, and three farms were established in the Esquimalt area."

"That's the same company that was responsible for Captain Edward Edwards Langford's place?" It was, perhaps, unfortunate that this ended up sounding like a question.

"Very good" the old man said in his best school teacher voice. "I'm glad that all that I'm telling you isn't leaking out onto the barroom tables." I blushed a little again, and noticed the old man sneaking another glance at his watch.

"Well, what next?"

"As you may, or may not know," there was a distinct, if subtle, emphasis on the "not," "Esquimalt is one of the finest natural harbours on the west coast of the Americas. The RN, at the time, had their Pacific station at Valparaiso, Chile, which had been established in 1837. The quality of Esquimalt Harbour was not lost on the British, and they began to keep a force around the area. In 1846, during the Oregon Boundary Dispute, the RN plunked a squadron into Esquimalt Harbour, a force of four ships that included, uh, let's see..." he tapped his forefinger on his chin a few times, then lifted the finger triumphantly into the air, "HMS Pandora, Fisgard, Cormorant and Herald. It was HMS Pandora that did the first real survey of the harbour, and determined that the narrow entrance and deep harbour made it an ideal place for a naval station."

"Pandora, Cormorant, Herald and Fisgard?" I asked. "Those are street names."

"Yes. While many of Victoria's streets are named after the men of the HBC, many of Esquimalt's, and I suppose, the Greater Victoria area's streets, too, are named after the Royal Navy ships that berthed in Esquimalt. I guess the next milestone was 1848, when HMS Constance rolled into Esquimalt Harbour. While there, according to her ship's logs, Captain Courtenay posted a note and glued one into the ship's log that officially proclaimed the territory in the name of her majesty, Queen Victoria."

"But the HBC was already there."

"Yes, but the Oregon Dispute was still pretty raw, and the English didn't have all that much presence in the area yet. Remember the story of Captain Langford. This note went a long way to establishing the lands for Britain, and helped keep the Americans at bay," the old man paused and chuckled a little, perhaps pleased with his little pun. "I guess this proclamation didn't go over all that well with the natives in the area, and there was some kind of trouble there. The Constance's logs indicate that they sent some men and guns over to the fort, and did some gunnery practice in the harbour to quell things with the natives. I suppose it did the trick, as Fort Victoria was never attacked, nor burned to the ground."

"I've heard that some HBC forts had troubles like that."

"Yah, there were a few, I suppose. But not here. Anyway, the RN created the Royal Navy Establishment at Esquimalt in 1865, officially giving the RN another Pacific Station." There was that low chuckle from him again, and he continued. "You know, the RN had as many as 15 ships in the squadron here at Esquimalt during the 1860's, but I guess economics continued to play a part. The Crimean War with Russia was a big part of that, I suppose."



"The Crimea? Isn't that in Ukraine?"

"Of course. But in 1855 or so, the British thought that they may have to attack Russia from the Pacific, and were preparing a campaign. James Douglas was

given the task of building some hospital huts at Esquimalt, to deal with potential casualties of such an attack. That attack never materialized, but those three huts were the beginnings of permanent shore facilities at Esquimalt."

"Whatever happened to the hospital huts?"

"I guess they only treated one patient, some sailor with scurvy, I believe, and the huts were subsequently used as barracks for Royal Engineer surveyors that surveyed the lands after the Oregon dispute. Later, on about the same site, brick and frame buildings were erected between 1887 and 1892 to house the Royal Naval Hospital. What's interesting here is that these buildings were apparently designed by Teague."

"Lewis Teague?" Again, I had spoken without my brain being engaged.

"Of course not. Not the Hollywood Director. God, that 'Cujo' was a terrible adaptation. I mean John Teague, the architect." The old man shook his head and took another small sip. I noticed that his beer was going down very slowly. With a start I realized that mine was, too. I took this as a good sign as the old man continued.

"The RN, even with economics playing a factor, continued to improve the facilities at Esquimalt. I guess it was by about 1887 that they had finished a major drydock project, giving the Pacific Fleet a state-of-the-art repair facility. It's said that the first ship to use the facilities was HMS Cormorant." He glanced at me with that school teacher look again, and I nodded. I had been noticing that pretty much every name I'd heard so far had had a street named after it, or him. After I nodded, that low, dry chuckle came out again.

"I don't know what it is about the Victoria area, but big construction projects often seem to run to troubles. You know, of course, about the Memorial Arena replacement building, uh, Save-On-Foods whatever..."

I nodded, smiling. Ancient history, sure, but I maybe had a lead on current events.

"Well, the original Memorial Arena was over budget, too, and at least one other rink before. And before companies had trouble with sports facilities, there was this drydock. I guess two companies went bankrupt, and a provincial government got the boot over the rising costs. It was all worth it, though, as the Royal Navy ended up with a great facility, one that could house the largest navy ship in the Pacific. The graving dock there was used all the way up until 1927, averaging something like 21 ships a year. Of course, the Feds built a new dock in '24, but the old dock still got some use, even into WWII. Now that's quality construction."

I shook my head. I had figured that cost overruns on big construction was a new thing. I guess not. "The world is run on economics..." I mused softly.

"You can say that again. It really started to affect the RN as the 19th Century came to a close. The RN had to reorganize, and get their monetary house in order, and the number of ships at Esquimalt continued to decline, when in 1902, they decided to decommission their bases in Canada, giving naval defence responsibilities over to the Dominion. I understand Australia faced similar issues."

"So then it became a Canadian Navy base?"

"Well, not so fast. In 1902, Canada didn't have a Navy, and there was debate in the House of Commons as to what to do. Many were in favour of simply renting men and material from the RN to keep coastal defence. And it wasn't until 1905 that the pennant was officially struck, and Esquimalt was decommissioned as an RN base. However, the debate raged until 1910 when the Naval Services Act was passed, and Canada officially got a navy."

"So that's where Rainbow comes into the picture." The old man nodded, and once again, I caught him glancing towards his watch. I tossed back the remains of my beer, and rose to go into the kitchen. He might have a date this night, but I had dibs on his time right now. I nodded towards his half-empty glass, and he shook his head. He leaned back into the sofa cushions, and thought a moment. I could hear him as he took up the tale again.

"In order to establish a navy, Canada needed ships, and the government subsequently

bought a couple of British ships, the Niobe, and the Rainbow. Both were older, mostly obsolete cruiser types, even though they were both screw driven, and not paddle wheelers. Rainbow was pretty light, with just a few guns, but had a complement of around 300 officers and crew. She was commissioned into the RCN in August of 1910, but didn't get to her station in Esquimalt until November. She spent a few months cruising up and down the coast, showing the flag and doing recruiting, but ended up spending most of her time tied up at Esquimalt, due to the lack of personnel in the Canadian Navy. It was in 1911 that Rainbow got her commanding officer, Commander Walter Hose, on loan from the RN - he eventually transferred completely, looking for greater opportunities in the colonies, and truly made his name in the Royal Canadian Navy. In fact, most historians credit Hose as the man who saved the Navy in the inter-war years."

"Quite the guy. I don't suppose that's where the phrase 'getting hosed' came from?" That withering glance, followed by the chuckle again.

"I don't know. I doubt it. Hose was known as the consummate Navy man. I guess those early years were not fun, though, for there was very little political will to build up the Navy in Ottawa, and Hose had to fight for everything he got. Eventually, some locals organized a Naval Volunteer Reserve, and they certainly had the blessing and the help of Hose and Company, even if they couldn't contribute in a monetary way. It was pretty lucky that this citizen's reserve was formed, though, when Canada went to war in 1914." Another quick glance at his watch. I wondered what time his date was.

"When Canada entered the war, there was lots of wild talk about an Imperial German squadron in the Pacific that could potentially bombard the west coast. The squadron included Leipzig and Nuremberg, both modern cruisers, and Rainbow was ordered to defend the coast from these potential marauders." At this, the old man just shook his head and reached out for another sip from his glass. "It was really ridiculous, as Rainbow was not only undermanned, it was undergunned. They didn't even have any high explosive shells on board, just old-style gunpowder shells. I doubt that they could have even dented the armour of Leipzig with those. But sail she did, and was actually at sea with her reduced compliment, when Canada declared war with Germany. Thus it was that Rainbow was the very first Canadian Man-of-War to sail as a belligerent."

"So, what happened? Did Rainbow ever meet Leipzig?" I found I was leaning forward. Time was forgotten. I loved war stories.

"Well, historians love 'what ifs,' and there have been plenty of them on this issue. There are even records that show the German ships were hunting Rainbow - as they called it 'The Canadian Training Vessel.' But I'll tell you what I think would have happened had the two ever met.

Remember, Rainbow was undermanned, didn't even have a full complement, and a third of those were volunteer reservists. She was undergunned, and had virtually no armour. Had Rainbow ever met Leipzig, Canada's first belligerent man-of-war

would have been Canada's first naval defeat." That low, dry chuckle again. He shook his head. "As it was, they never did meet, but Rainbow acquitted herself very well. She patrolled the west coast, the only allied warship for a time, as far south as Panama, and managed to capture a few German-owned yachts and other smaller ships. I guess Hose was a very good commander. Rainbow is credited with exemplary service, but eventually, as the situation in the Atlantic deteriorated, Rainbow's complement was transferred to the East Coast, and she was re-christened as a depot ship. Eventually, she was sold for scrap in 1920."

"That's just too bad. Not even a museum piece." This time I shook my head, and took another drink. The old man followed suit with a sip and another glance at his watch. I had the distinct feeling that my time was running out for this Saturday. But I wanted some more.

"What next?" The old man glanced up at me.

"World War I was pretty interesting. One of the best stories is about CC1 and CC2, the two submarines."

"Subs. That's cool."

"I suppose. You see, we had very few ships, and there's several stories about these two subs. What's clear is that the two boats were built at a shipyard in Seattle for sale to the Chilean Navy. The deal fell through and the government of British Columbia bought them. Some say that the Feds bought them through BC in order to help the US maintain their neutrality,



and others say the boats were bought by BC as a gift to the Feds. In any case, the Feds ended up paying for them. You see, it was thought that submarines would be perfect defence for Esquimalt, as the narrow channel and somewhat shallow waters would make any attacking ship's course fairly obvious."

"Did they actually sink anybody?"

"Not so far as I can tell. What's the best part, of course, is the purchase itself. They had to sneak the subs out of Seattle harbour and into international waters, where the actual transaction was made. Then, the boats headed for Esquimalt."

"With all of the wild rumours about German bombardment and task forces in the Pacific headed for Vancouver Island, new artillery installations had been put in at the mouth of Esquimalt Harbour. You might remember Fort Rodd Hill Park?" I nodded. I've been there. It's very cool. I had always thought, ever since I was a boy, that the old gun emplacements were really neat to play in. Suddenly it hit me. In 1914, those guns were manned by nervous young men.

"Nobody told the gunners that the subs were coming in, of course, as it was supposedly a secret transaction, or, by the other accounts, a simple gift that was a surprise for the feds. In any case, the two subs just about ended up sunk before they could be put into service. I guess they passed, and went into service. By 1917, like most of Canada's Navy, the two subs were ordered to the east coast. In another milestone for Canada's navy, the ships were the first Canadian warships to pass through the Panama Canal. However, by the time they reached Halifax, they were in need of major refits, and eventually were decommissioned without any more wartime service."

"Okay, so that's WWI. Then what?" This time, I glanced at my watch. Time was moving fast, but then I always found war stories made the time go by pretty fast.

"What happened after the war? Well, less and less money for the military, of course. The 'inter-war years' as they are called today, was disastrous for Allied military budgets. Of course, the politicians thought that they had won the 'War to End all Wars,' and felt that militaries were somewhat redundant. They never considered or would have given credence to the fact that a demented Austrian corporal and paper hanger would eventually engulf the entire planet in another war in just a couple of decades. But during this time, the Navy decommissioned most of her ships, and all of the military went into decline after the build-up during the war. The same pattern was followed during the Second World War, with a huge build-up during the war years."

"Did we ever build our own ships, or did we just buy them from the British?"

"Both, actually. Initially, during both wars, we bought old boats from the Brits, but we did build our own vessels. During WWII, the Yarrow's yard employed over 4000 people, and built dozens of ships for the war effort."



"That made me feel better. I personally thought the four subs we had recently bought from the Brits were not the best bargains, but that's my opinion. "So the pattern was the same for both wars, eh? That's a bear."

"Bear? Yah." The old man smiled suddenly. "That reminds me of one of the great stories of the inter-war years. The Naden Bear."

"Which ship was that?" The old man shook his head again.

"Not a ship. A bear. You know, family Ursidae, those big, brown growly things with big teeth and sharp claws?"

"Oh. A bear."

"Yes. A bear. The crew of HMCS Thiepvall was in Hokkaido, Japan, in 1924, and they were there for a couple of months, refitting and restocking, before returning to their home port of Esquimalt. You see, Thiepvall was the official support ship for Major Stuart MacLaren's attempt at a round-the-world flight, and it was hard on the ship, as she battled tough seas and limited supplies. It's said that when she docked in Hakodate harbour, there was only enough coal on board for an hour's steaming, and not a drop of fresh water was to be had, so I guess the layover did everyone some good."

"The bear," I urged the old man, "The bear."

"During their time there, the crew befriended the bear, and I guess, decided to adopt him and take him home with them. The story goes that the naval crew got the little guy addicted to gin, and made sure that the bear had a tippie each day at the bugle call of "Spirits Up." There are even stories of a very grumpy bear appearing at the quartermaster's door if he missed his daily tot. I guess that some of the officers even took the bear out to the bars in Esquimalt with them."

"They took a bear to bars?" I was incredulous. This was beyond my ken.

"Oh yah. By today's standards, I suppose, they treated that bear pretty awful. Of course, there was no PETA in those days."

"That might be a good thing."

The old man grinned at that. I guess our views on the politics of PETA were similar. "So what happened?" At this, another head shake, and another pause to sip his beer. It was very near the end, and I got the feeling that today, once the beer was gone, the talk would be over.

"Well, like most of these stories, the bear came to a bad end. The story goes that Bruno, that was the bear's nickname, ate a combination of caustic soda and soap, and died. Damn. But I guess there is something about bears and the Canadian military. Of course, you know the story of Winnie the Pooh." That one I had already heard, and I nodded. I also didn't want to tire the old man out before his big date, but we hadn't even talked about WWII. The old man must have been getting psychic or something, because he seemed to read my thoughts.

"Then there's WWII. Of course, the Canadian Navy acquitted itself marvelously during that conflict, and this time, the build-up was massive. From their very modest rolls in 1939, by 1945 and the cessation of hostilities, Canada was floating the third largest navy on the planet." I was taking a sip at the time, and nearly shot the drink out my nose. I coughed and looked incredulously at the old man, who nodded.

"As I'm sure you're aware, much of Canada's Navy fought in the North Atlantic, running convoy escorts and developing their world-class skills at hunting subs. This was a carry-over from WWI, and Canada is widely credited with inventing many of the modern methods of anti-submarine warfare, including the first use of helicopters on small ships like destroyers and the like to hunt subs. Third largest navy." Another of his patented head shakes. "Of course, after the war came the inevitable downgrade, and now we're where we are."

"But we did participate in the Pacific War?"

"Oh, of course. We were there, and in Korea, of course. Perhaps the most interesting event of WWII for Canada in the Pacific was the 'Uganda Incident.' Right there at the end, after Germany had surrendered, and just before Japan capitulated, the Feds decided to make service in the Pacific a volunteer duty. Uganda was already in theatre, performing shore bombardment and the like. When the notice arrived that men had to volunteer to serve in the Pacific, they had been out there, away from family and whatnot, for quite a while. The "incident," what some call a "mutiny" – it never was, by the way – happened when the majority of the crew voted not to volunteer for Pacific duty. Faced with the problem of being in a war zone with less than half the complement willing to serve, the Captain did the only logical thing, he turned around and steamed for Esquimalt. Thus it became that the Uganda is probably the only warship in the history of any navy to vote themselves out of a war." The old man grinned at me. "Typical for us left coasters, I suppose. Radicals all. Sounds like something that would happen in Fernwood." I grinned back at him, and this time, he deliberately looked at his watch. I knew at this point that that was all for today. I was a bit disappointed that I wouldn't hear more that day, but I got up from the chair knowing that I had heard some great stories. I reached down and tossed back my beer. The old man took my glass and headed for the kitchen with his glass, as well.

"You might as well take the rest," he said. I shook my head, then realized he couldn't see me.

"No, that's all right. I'm sure they'll get put to good use here."

The old man was grinning again as he showed me out. "You need a ride, or anything?" I asked at the threshold. Then I noticed a new, red Toyota Prius pulling up out front. I turned to the old man, whose grin, if anything, had gotten larger.

"I think I can handle it from here. But thanks. Next time?" I reached out for some reason and shook his hand.

"Next week."

The old man and his house in Fernwood are fictitious. However, the stories he tells, as best we can discern, are factual, if not 100% correct. Any errors or omissions are the fault of this author, who is indebted to the CFB Esquimalt Naval and Military Museum and their comprehensive website, as well as the sites of MARPAC, and particularly to other history sites out there, in particular ReadyAyeReady.com The author encourages everyone to partake of the services of these websites and/or visit the museum, where you are bound to have a great time. Remember, history is real, reality is transitory.



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