

PADDLE BOARD DIVERS – Part 3 By Chuck Rolfe 30 October 2014

This Diver **Attack on York Redoubt**, near the entrance of Halifax Harbour, as related to me by the late CPO Stan Stephenson in 1995, is a saga told by the Yard Maintenance Tender No. 7 (commonly referred to as 7 Boat) as speaking in the first person.

I suppose by now, that the exchange of Diving Teams between different countries, is a pretty commonplace experience, but I recall my first one quite vividly, as I was involved as a sort of Rescue Boat should the occasion arrive – and it did! This Exercise was both land and sea oriented, and was to have split-second timing (well, within reason anyway), which was to finish up at a rickety old wharf below York Redoubt. York Redoubt is a 237 year old Fort with muzzle loaders situated on a high promontory on the Halifax side, overlooking the harbour entrance. Some while back, a person (probably a California surfer) decided that the Diving Unit should have a half dozen things that resembled a surfboard be made up by HMC DOCKYARD to round out some new Diver qualifications. These items looked like a long flat-sided teardrop, and after a few sessions of practice, some of the lads actually had tears of pain from trying to move their arms the next morning! The boards were about eight feet long, twenty inches wide, six inches deep, with a rounded blunt nose, a rounded bottom and, from half way down, tapered to a point and, of course, a brass drain plug. Because they were built by the civilian Shipwrights (who no doubt knew how to build boats and such, and even repair some of them), they were put together with brass nails and sealed with white lead – no glue on the joints of course, reasoning that the water would swell the plywood and make the thing tight, besides, it did have drain plugs. Rather than go out and buy the plugs, the job was farmed out to the Machine Shop, who eventually turned out six beautifully crafted pieces. Even though they looked like brass and shone like brass, they stuck to a magnet!! Those guys didn't care one way or the other, but a compass sure did and, even a thick coat of black paint wouldn't stop the leaking – which sure did make them heavier. The big plan called for a team of three Divers and their Paddle Boards to be dropped off about a mile from shore out to seaward, and thence paddle to the base of the cliff, light off a couple of thunderflashes, then proceed to the wharf, thereby denoting a successful attack. The Divers land team was to be dropped off by vehicle, a mile or so inland from the Commissionaires shack at York Redoubt, announce to those chaps that they were prisoners, and to await transportation back to the Unit. It all looked so good on paper but, as in many plans, this one was to go awry. For those not in the 'know', the old Fort was first conceived when Britain had problems with its colonials, and wanted something to guard the approaches to the harbour; nothing really elaborate as they had the Halifax Citadel then, just a few modern muzzle loading thirty six pounders, gun pits and a look-out. Outside of a few gun salutes, the only excitement it ever saw was when a captured United States rebel tops'l schooner escaped from Bedford Basin and made its way to sea via the shallow passage between Lawlors Island and Eastern Passage, the range being too long even for those huge cannons. WW I and WW II changed the picture somewhat and the guns were replaced with modern Naval big bore pieces, but at the time of this exercise it had long been abandoned and now only occasionally used as a DND demolition range, hence the Commissionaires shack. The day of the briefing was one of those late summer days that started out perfectly; the sun shone, the wind was light and the harbour approaches nearly glassy. It was arranged that a Yardboat with radar would drop off the three Paddle Boarders at sea and return to base, while I was to wait at the wharf with medicinal supplies – just in case. At dusk, everyone concerned departed for their consigned places, and that's when things started to go wrong. First the wind picked up a little, then it clouded over and the sea got a little bit lippy, but nobody was worried, or seemed to care. I have to mention that when the visiting southern Dive Team (USA) arrived at our Unit, they brought along their own Corpsman, Diver of course, and their own brand of 'comfort', a case of sparkplugs (48 one and a half ounce 100% OI' Methusela) each, which was divided between the two Attack Teams. The Sirs onboard me did partake of the goodies whilst the lads onboard the Yardboat went dry, as it was considered to be a dangerous

substance to ingest prior to commencing an Exercise, particularly on the open seas. Now the people who built the York Redoubt wharf knew what they were doing when they placed it there; as at that place it was really nice and calm, while a few miles away it was blowing up a bit and the seas were getting lumpy, to say the least! You would have thought that the radios would have been tested a couple of times before starting the Exercise, but just because they had worked a few months ago, it should be okay now, right? Not so. Nelson had died years ago, and so did my batteries, with the result that the Team at sea couldn't make their situation known to higher authorities to see if they could abort the mission. Anyway, the three on their Paddle Boards decided to make a go of it. It wasn't long after that one of the Paddle Board seams opened, which made for heavy going, what with all that water sloshing around in its belly, so that Diver turned back to the Yardboat. The other two Paddle Boarders kept on course by looking at the dark shoreline while kneeling upright, a tricky thing to do in calm waters, but much more difficult with rising waves. What with darkening skies and bouncing all over the place, it was soon impossible to make out the shoreline, so they had to steer by the small compass mounted in front. You guessed it, that needle pointed straight at the drain bung!! With the wind changing direction every little while, it was a wonder that one of the two remaining lads even made it to the rendezvous; his Paddle Board was waterlogged also, and was left right there amongst the rocks for later recovery. I know that coastline, and I can say positively that there isn't a garden path anywhere near where that lad landed, so he had a pretty rough time walking around the large boulders to get to the wharf, specially in an Italian drysuit, with no padding on the soles. At this time the Yardboat had decided to meet with me to bring the one lad and his waterlogged board back, and to catch up on events. After listening to the tale of the one lad successful in reaching the wharf, it wasn't very long before the two of us were steaming full ahead to the search area to look for the one lost lad, with a Sir hanging over the rail upchucking his libations. I don't know for sure the exact time the lost lad was picked up by the other boat, but false dawn was beginning in the east when next I saw him, and he was one happy soul. He was sicker than a dog should be, but his spirit became much happier when issued a couple of medicinal belts. During this time, the land Team had carried out their task and were happy as a bunch of larks, even though one old Commish had to have his mouth blown into, and his chest thumped a couple of times. It went something like this(I wasn't there you see, I was at the wharf and then out searching for our lost lad). The land Team left on time loaded down with survival gear, thunderflashes, smoke flares, first aid kit and Medic, and for sure, a case of sparkplugs. Looking back, I think that the first error in judgement was in giving care of the case to one of my young lads, who above all else believed in sharing a good thing now, and not later. So, as the truck carrying the Team who were going to make land war around Herring Cove bounced along a dirt road, an issue to uphold their spirits was made in good Naval tradition. Somehow, their civilian driver dropped the crew off at a dead end and, with a wave, merrily took off, leaving the lads not knowing where in hell they were, and right then didn't damn well care either, as there were no Sirs with them to lead. After a short discussion, it was considered a good idea to look for water, as one of the lads said he could hear surf and it was that-a-way, but the water they were looking for was the kind to mix with the frequent issues of medicinal stock!! Anyway, after tripping around in the dark for a couple of hours, right there in front of them was the objective – the Guard shack, and sitting around a cozy little coal stove with coffee perking on it, were two elderly Commissionaires. Another conference was quickly held, and it was concurred that it was no fun just walking in and telling the old gents that they were prisoners, and then call for a cab. So what was decided was that they would bang in the door, light and throw in a half dozen thunderflashes and, for good measure, a couple of smoke flares as well, yelling at the top of their lungs also – if they could find their tongues that is. Well it happened just like they planned, except that only one old chap ran out, the other one just keeled over in a dead faint, with one hand still clutching the hot coffee pot! It took a little while before the smoke cleared, and the laughter to peter out, before someone looked in and saw the old gentleman still laying there, not moving nor breathing. Panic ensued! It sure didn't

take long for the USN Medic to get his gears moving and doing his job. What with breathing into him, and giving him some great thumps on his skinny chest, he was sitting up again in jig time, wondering what was going on and mumbling over and over *"Its Vimy Ridge again!"*. Of course he straightened right up and was quite happy after a new pot of coffee was made, and strengthened up with a couple of sparkplugs poured in. Eventually transportation arrived to take the Teams back to the Diving Unit, leaving the Guard shack in merry spirits. It was a fairly long trip back, as there hadn't been any bridges built across Halifax harbour yet. It must have been a rugged cross country outing, as every one of the six lads had to have assistance from the Duty Watch to get back on board the Gate Vessel – muscles seized up, or something like that they said. The de-briefing took place that afternoon, when everyone was up and around, the end result being not to use the Paddle Boards when the wind was up, and secondly, to ensure that land Teams carry water canteens. The usual 'going away party' for our southern neighbours was held that evening, and was to end when the keg of beer went dry; I guess someone had forgotten the seemingly endless supply of sparkplugs that kept appearing from our good southern allies, so the party took two days & nights to end. As with all parties, glasses always seem to be in short supply, to correct this anomaly some of the lads used the round bottom glass protectors of watertight lamps, which did an admirable job of keeping the beer in the glass. However, if you let go of it, then it just tips over and the nectar spills out. It was decided during the party, that if your glass fell over twice you were cut off; naturally there was always a lad who just couldn't seem to understand why a round bottom container just refused to stand by itself. Those Paddle Boards were around for some time after this, but were only used thereafter as a play toy kind of thing, unless of course you were mentally unbalanced – but then again, this is the Diving world! There was this one Sir who had so much Brass on his arms that he couldn't return a salute, who stated after watching one of the Divers training sessions, *"Egad, they're a bunch of bloody masochists bent on self-destruction"*, and then in a whispered aside to his Aide *"To the Mess James, for a quick one"*. S'truth. Well, it wasn't too much longer after this, that a great change took place in the diving world of the Royal Canadian Navy. First of all, the Founding Father of this new diving era was gone, along with the portly Executive Officer, scars and all(his rear cheeks had recovered nicely, thank you), and of course some of the more dependable "Aces" too. In their places came a few Sirs and Hands with odd accents, which took quite a while to get used to – it's a good thing that my wheel and engine room telegraph is in a universal language, or there would have been problems. You see, one of my lads was tying and retying his shoelaces beneath the scuttle of the little Wardroom, and just happened to overhear the head Sir giving instructions to this new Diving Instructor(imported of course)as to what he should do with these dogbodies under his tender and loving care, the answer was *"Anything you want, but kill 'em"*. Well, it wasn't too long before the for'd Mess deck was abuzz with rumours and prattle, such as *"Next thing us guys will be doing, will be taking lessons learning to drive on the lefthand side of the road"*, as if we weren't doing that now, after leaving the Put-Put Club just after midnight fer gawds sakes!