

Robert “Red” Larsen wrote that he joined the RCN at HMCS DISCOVERY (Stone Frigate) at Vancouver, British Columbia on 19 March 1951. I had asked if I could become a Diver – I don’t know why, but I had always enjoyed the water, although I was not a good swimmer. I was informed by the person who signed me on, CPO Miles that I had to have another Trade first, before I could apply to take a diving course. I didn’t know till later that the Navy had signed me up as an OSS (Ordinary Seaman Standard), but I later assumed they did this because I had asked about the diving Trade when joining up. Thankfully I had been made an OSS because Stokers always got a bad time when they tried to get into diving, specially from their own Branch; case in point – CPO2 Bill Cubitt being sent to the Seamanship School to change over to the Seaman Trade in order to become a Clearance Diver! He was already one of the better ones at knots, boats, rope-work, etc. I had to wait at DISCOVERY for three weeks while the people at Naval Headquarters decided when to gather the next group of New Recruits across Canada to send them by train for New Entry Training at HMCS CORNWALLIS in the Annapolis Valley, near Digby, Nova Scotia. In the meantime I was allocated to work with the Manual Party, where we were involved in building a shooting range for the Naval Reserve Division, with a Petty Officer Marshall being the supervisor. At the end of one day at “Secure”, he took the Officer, LCdr MacDonald out to see what a marvellous job the newly poured end wall looked like – it was about six to eight feet tall, if I remember correctly. Anyhow, as they stood there admiring it, the form gave way, and it collapsed right before their eyes. Here I thought I had joined the Navy to see the sea, not a “cee”ment mixer! Also while I was there, two of the Ship’s Company, “Bash” Brandt and a guy named McIntyre “borrowed” the DND panel truck one night, and rolled it over in the adjacent Stanley Park. It was quite an introduction to the Navy for me!!

Three weeks later I left on the CNR (Canadian National Railway) train for New Entry Training at HMCS CORNWALLIS, picking up many other New Recruits at all the major cities we stopped at in Canada. Everyone was asking each other what Trade they were allocated, Stoker or Seaman, but I couldn’t say, until I was informed at CORNWALLIS that I was officially an OSS, or Seaman. There was a few hours stop over when we arrived in Montreal, Quebec, before we changed to another train for the trip down to Saint John, New Brunswick. Needless to say, most of the guys got themselves some booze, and some quick drinks before the train departed. Of course, for this part of the journey there was a contingent of Shore Patrol who were to accompany us and, at this juncture prior to boarding, had all suitcases, etc. opened, confiscating all the booze. I’m sure the Shore Patrol had quite a party that night! We took the ferry across to Digby and then on the train for the short ride to HMCS CORNWALLIS, where there must have been 8 or 10 screaming Chiefs and Petty Officers to greet us. I’m sure if the train had delayed just 5 minutes longer, 75% of the New Recruits would have stepped back on it and left for home! We then made our way in a group to stay in Joining Block for two weeks, which was a real eye-opening adventure, to say the least. We were issued our kit, upon which we first stencilled our name and Official Number, followed by sewing them in with heavy black thread before the end of the two weeks were up. While in Joining Block, the NCO’s would sell us irons for pressing our kit, then buy them back for a pittance when we later departed CORNWALLIS. We later heard that some Senior NCO’s were up on charge for stealing back some irons! I don’t know how true this was. I ended up in a double Division “Annapolis”, which was twice the size of a regular Division; I believe we had 160 New Recruits, or more, in total. We were assigned a Divisional Officer (Lt. Cassells), a Divisional Chief and a Divisional Petty Officer First Class as I recall, and they supervised us pretty well from day to day. The Petty Officer’s Second Class who used to stay each night in the “H” Blocks, were mostly taking Leadership Courses during the day. It was like a Duty Watch for them, and they rotated on some kind of schedule, with some of them being quite good at this job, and others just the opposite. It was quite a regular sight to see a Division out in the evening or night, running up and down “Persuasion Hill” with their kit bag held

above their heads, for some minor infraction (putting a garter snake in somebody's bed, maybe) incurred on one person by another. Then everyone in the Division was able to enjoy this calisthenics exercise!! There was also the duty that we New Entries were assigned every night, an all-night fire watch in four hour stages, and for which the P2 had to sign the Watch Book also. As for daily Class Leaders, I think we just rotated through everyone in the Division, but the first few were more often the re-entry personnel who knew the ropes. Commander Patrick David Budge was the ship's XO (Executive Officer, or Second in Command), who frequently taught seamanship classes in the Seamanship School, on top of the hill overlooking the Parade Square. He would make very good use of his "stonakee" (which was a chunk of one inch diameter hemp rope, sewed up in canvas) with three good whacks across one's buttocks if you dozed off during his seamanship lectures. Let me tell you, it woke you up pretty quickly! Of course, punishment was part of your everyday life, in some cases. The Gunnery Officer was named Hodgkins (he ran a guy to death in HMCS NADEN) and his stare went right through you, plus there was "Boots" Green and Bob Carter bellowing out Parade Orders. Number 11 punishment as I recall, was running around the Parade Square with a 303 rifle over your shoulder for an hour, then working at manual labour for another hour, plus getting up earlier in the morning for a muster count, then again on the Parade Square before breakfast.. One hot summer evening, when I was on Number 11, eight guys on punishment went down from heat exhaustion – three were carried off on a stretcher. The lead runner was a coloured guy named Paris who could really run endlessly and, unfortunately, the P1 in Charge kept ordering us to keep up to him. I'm sure if we could have caught him, there would have been a serious altercation, but we survived, as did Paris. Let me tell you, that after two consecutive sessions of Number 11 (each session was for 14 days), you were in excellent running shape.

When I was drafted to HMCS CRESCENT, I still kept my interest in diving up, as there were two Divers on board, PO 1 Vanalstine, and I believe the other one was Mel Melanson, however there no diving activities occurred during my time aboard her. I was then drafted to HMCS NADEN on the West coast (my home coast, as I joined up from there), where I ran across Fred Olkovick, who had been in HMCS DISCOVERY with me, waiting to go to CORNWALLIS. He was already on a Diving Course, but he was very uninformative about any diving information, except to really say "*It was a closed shop*". So I sort of gave up on the notion of being a Diver, and ended up as a Gunnery Layer Rate on HMCS ATHABASKAN, heading for Korea in October, 1952. On board there were two Divers, PO1 "Speed" Ricard and an AB Stoker, whose name I cannot recall. Sometime during the Spring of 1953, while at sea, there was a requirement for Speed to plug an intake valve for the Engineers, using hard hat gear. The whole thing turned somewhat crazy (I will explain fully sometime later), and Speed ended up over the side and down about 8 feet on a stage, ***with his air intake hose disconnected!!!*** The result – the AB Stoker was fired. Now Speed had no surface support party, if another job came up. He asked for volunteers to learn about diving, so they could be his surface support team. That's when three of us, George Sutcliffe, Jim Balmforth and I got involved. We did quite a bit of diving party exercises and instructions, any time we were in port, etc. It would take too much time to tell all that transpired, except to say that we all became fully aware of what diving was all about. After returning to Victoria BC in December 1953, Speed Ricard got all three of us on a diving course (there were about twelve starters) in January 1954, and Ben Ackerman informed us that this would be a Clearance Diver course. The trade conversion from DV's to CD's at NSHQ had been very slow in its evolution, and was not official when our course finished; therefore we were rated DV 3's on completions of this course in June/July 1954. I was then a DV 3, and part of the West Coast Diving Unit till the end of my first 5 year hitch, ending in March 1956, when I left the RCN. I **officially became a Clearance Diver** on the first conversion course (DV to CD) to be held on the West Coast, shortly after I re-entered the RCN in September 1956. This course lasted about three months, if I remember correctly. There was no such thing as a Ships Diver qualification before applying for a Clearance Diver course at that time. The first Ships Diver course took place on the West Coast in 1958, with CPO2 Bill Cubitt as the Course Instructor, with myself being the Course Standby Diver.