

Howard Smedley wrote to Chuck Rolfe, many years ago, that he was working as a Shipwright in HMC DOCKYARD, Esquimalt BC shortly after the start of World War Two. He requested, and received, a leave of absence from his job so that he could enlist in the RCNVR, at HMCS NADEN, on 21 January 1941 as an Acting Shipwright 4th Class. After completing his Basic Navy Training at HMCS NADEN, he was drafted to HMCS GIVENCHY (NOIC Vancouver) on 2 February 1942 as part of a maintenance crew of the “Fish Boat Fleet”, which were the fishing boats that were confiscated from the Japanese/Canadian fishermen after Japan attacked Pearl Harbour. On 18 August 1942 Howard was drafted back to HMCS NADEN, where he subsequently applied for training as a Navy Diver, and was successful in passing the course, after which he was rated Diver 2nd Class on 6 March 1943. He received his diving training under Mister Bill Cryderman, using Seibe Gorman diving gear. On 16 May 1944 he was drafted to HMCS AVALON in St. John’s, Newfoundland, where he found little difference in working Morse Diving Gear used there. The one big difference I found between the East and West Coasts was the temperature of the water. In Esquimalt we dove with bare hands and found the handling of tools quite simple, whereas in East Coast waters it was, as you know, necessary to use mitts attached to the suit, and this made working in some cases very difficult. Anyone who has tried to fit and secure the fairing plates over the Asdic Dome securing bolts certainly knows what I am referring to! Installing the numerous countersunk screws could at times be extremely frustrating, to say the least. Ice in the helmets I found to be no problem. We did a certain amount of training with Self Contained Dry Suits, using the Salvus Fire Fighting gear adapted for underwater use, however I cannot recall ever using it on any job. We entered the suit through a large belly opening, which was watertight, by pulling all the loose folds together and securing it with a clamp. The air supply was boosted by an Oxygen cylinder, and purified by protosorb crystals, which were in a watertight container. An inflated collar acted as a reservoir to contain the required air. I think this might be a good time to inject the point that all these incidents took place over 45 years ago, so they might suffer somewhat in the recollection of them. I have many happy memories of the time I spent in Newfy as a member of a closeknit, efficient and hard-working diving team. We also had a couple of experiences that had the potential for a disaster, but which turned out OK in the end. One I recall was very similar to the one that Stan Stephenson was involved in many years later – being caught in a retracting Asdic Dome! Jack Daley was underwater working on a retractable dome this one day, with all the usual safety precautions in effect:- the fuses were removed from the raising and lowering mechanism, and the warning sign indicating that a Diver was working on it underwater was in place over the fuse holder. Someone ignored all these signs, replaced the fuses and proceeded to raise the dome, catching Jack’s air hose between the dome and the dome housing. I am unable to recall the details of how we successfully overcame this most hazardous situation, however I do remember it was resolved with no injuries to the Diver. On another occasion that had its humorous, as well as its serious side, an incident occurred when we were doing a propeller job on a vessel berthed third ship outboard. Tom Murphy was down on a bottom line when the Royal Navy Salvage Tug, TENACITY moved in to berth on the outer vessel directly ahead of us. We were still using a 45 ft Harbour Craft as our Diving Tender then, with the handpump located in the passenger cabin, and there were two matelots providing the pumping power. For whatever reason, the Tug TENACITY had problems getting out of reverse, and kept coming back at us. Luckily she bounced off us with no serious damage to our vessel, however she hit hard enough to send our pump crew flying, and dragged us some way with her. The humorous part (afterwards) was the Chief, standing on the stern deck, shouting through cupped hands “*Come up Murph, come up*”. I’m certain Tom Murphy couldn’t hear him, as our telephone was mounted inside the cabin on the after bulkhead. Fortunately, Tom Murphy survived and, as soon as we got him topside, he was out of the suit, rapidly disappearing for’ard. A few seconds later we could see him bounding and leaping over the ships berthed ahead of us – heading for the RN Tug TENACITY!!! Some time after this

incident, we took possession of our new Diving Tender, complete with accommodations, compressors and recompression chamber, etc. – what luxury! Our normal berth was between the two fingers running out from the main Jetty. Escort vessels were berthed on these fingers. One day the vessel berthed near us had a mix up of some kind, and suddenly moved towards us, bows first. It hit us amidships hard enough to crush our main deck to within 6” to 8” of the main hatch coaming. The hull was also crushed to within a few inches of the waterline. Some of the crew were down in the foc’sle taking things easy. Once we were hit though, they didn’t stop to get dressed, but came pouring out in various stages of dress and undress. Again, we were lucky to get away with no injuries to the crew, although the Diving Tender did not fare as well. On the Jetty adjacent to our Diving Tender, there was a hatch which opened up to the valves to provide shore side electrical power, water, steam, etc. to ships tied up there. The Coca-Cola truck used to make its deliveries down the Jetty, and along the fingers to the ships berthed there. This one day its left rear wheel collapsed the hatch cover, dropping the wheel into the hole and spilling about eight cases of Coke into the harbour, where they came to rest on the bottom – right at the stern of our Tender!!! Needless to say, *salvage!!* was the immediate thing that entered our minds. It wasn’t very long after things quieted down, and the truck had departed, that a Diver was suited up and the salvage was completed, without the loss of a bottle I must say, and we had free Coke for some time after that. Listed below are the names of our Newfoundland diving crew that I can remember: -

Warrant Bos’n Lawrence “Lon” Chaney, the Diving Officer, Vernon, BC
Albert “Ab” Hanley, Saint John, New Brunswick; Allan Whitehead, Vancouver BC;
Clarence Sluggett, Victoria, BC; Jack Daley, Victoria, BC; Jim Patterson, Victoria, BC;
Frank Law, Thunder Bay, Ont; Bob Swiderski, deceased; Tom Murphy, Halifax, NS.

The following were not members of our diving crew, but were people I knew at that time:-

Hap Porteous on HMCS ORANGEVILL. Every time his ship was in Port, he would be over to visit us, and our Galley’s grocery supply always benefitted from his visits! He returned to Victoria BC after WW II, and ended his career as the Foreman in one of our Underwater weapons Shops in HMC DOCKYARD, but has now passed on.

Jeff Pitt and “Snick” Pitt, both Calgarians, as was Hap Porteous. Jeff continued as a civilian Diver when he returned to Victoria after the War. He served on the West Coast and has passed on now.

Chuck Smedley, my namesake. I knew him in the post-War years as the Diving Officer on the West Coast, but he returned to the East Coast after that.

The names of other wartime Divers who remained on the West Coast that I knew are:-

Alf Larsen of Victoria, BC; George Luscombe of Victoria, BC; C.W. Cadwallader of Victoria, BC who is a post war Diver. He served his time as a Shipwright Apprentice in one of my shops, and joined the RCN on completion of his Apprenticeship, subsequently taking the necessary training to become a Navy Diver. Shortly after VE Day, the Newfoundland diving crew was disbanded, and I was drafted to HMCS SCOTIAN in Halifax NS as part of the diving crew there. I was discharged from the RCN on 12 October 1945 and returned to my old job in the Shipwright Shop in HMC DOCKYARD, Esquimalt BC. I eventually became the Superintendent of Hull Shops in the Ship Repair Department, retiring for good on the 30 December 1975, and now live in Victoria, BC. Howard enjoys his retirement by gardening, wine making, photography, trailering around the country and salt water fishing. He sometimes encounters “Cotton” Peters when he is out on the briny looking for salmon.