

REMEMBERING AL WOODS

I was very sorry to hear of Al Wood's crossing the bar. My wife, Kirsten and I have many good memories of Woody. I would like to relate one.

In 1965 we were on Winchelsea Island at what was to become the joint USA/CANADA torpedo testing range. We worked 12 - 16 hours a day and about every two weeks we took YMT 9 to Nanaimo for essential supplies, such as: 6,000 lb. water, 2,000 lb. of Forcite 60% and food. Most of the crew would take advantage of this time to head to Victoria for a couple of days with their family. Except, of course, for the unlucky ones who were on duty. On this particular weekend, Woody and I were the chosen few. Early Sunday morning (around 0400) Woody shook me awake and asked for the keys to my car. My CAR! My car was the only thing of value I owned! I asked why? Woody explained that he had phoned his wife earlier in the evening and she had informed him that she had a surprise but she would not tell him over the phone. So he had lain awake in his bunk for the last six hours with his mind in overdrive, wracking it for what it might be. He had finally come to the logical conclusion that she was pregnant, and to him this news was too important to wait two full weeks. So, if he took my car, he could get to Victoria, get the news and return before we sailed. I handed over the keys to my precious car and he immediately headed for the parking lot.

My car was a 64 Triumph, which Woody was not familiar with, and of course it had a stick shift. After spending several minutes grinding all the excess metal off my gears, and still not able to locate reverse, Woody had the brilliant idea of screwing off the shift knob and taking it over to the street light so he could see the shifting pattern on it. While he was engaged in memorizing the shift pattern, the RCMP Constable drove up and inquired as to exactly what he was doing. Woody somehow logically explained the importance of the little black sphere in his hand in relation to his objective, and in the overall importance of it to his mission. I am amazed that the Constable did not take him into protective custody for immediate psychiatric observation! Now you may ask why would I give my precious car to someone whose stated secondary purpose was to try to set a new land speed record for a return trip from Nanaimo to Victoria? Well, Woody was more than a diving buddy - Woody had saved my life!!!

The previous Spring, Woody and I had been conducting a body search for a little girl who had been swept away into the Skeena River near Terrace, British Columbia. The river had massive log jams at every bend and so with one of us on a lifeline, we would search under these log jams looking for any sign of her or any colour. I was looking into one little pocket and when I turned to leave, the log jam shifted, pinning my left ankle between three big logs. Quickly I pushed, pulled, wiggled and squirmed, but there was nothing I could do to free my ankle.

I was trapped!

I then commenced giving the lifeline the series of sharp jerks, indicating to Woody that I would really appreciate his appearance at his earliest convenience. The space I was in was not much larger than a closet and I was occupying a good portion of it, and Woody was no small person. Somehow, he managed to get into it with me and then went through more twists and turns than a circus contortionist. He tried pushing with his feet while pulling my leg. He tried using his head and shoulder as a ram while he stood on my head. Meanwhile, we were hand signalling every idea we had. By this time I realized that my job was to stay alive, so that Woody would have time to do whatever he had to do. That meant conserving my air as much as possible. He tried everything and nothing moved! After a while Woody signaled he was going up. A deep breath in, ----hold it as long as possible, ----slowly exhale and repeat. I was not afraid and somehow knew that Woody would get me out even if he had to gnaw through the logs with his teeth. I also knew the only equipment we had was spare tanks and line. I was only under two feet of water and it was extremely bright. The logs had been tumbled by the current so that there was little bark left on them. They were a bright yellowish white and the water running through the jam bubbled with an effervescence that seemed to add more light, so it appeared brighter under water than above. Several hours later(or so it seemed)Woody was back. Unfortunately he did not bring the underwater saw or jackhammer that I had been dreaming about. He studied my left ankle with such an intent that in any other circumstance it would have been considered a fetish. He tried using sticks as levers, but there was not enough room to get anything of any size between the logs. The sticks just broke. Then I saw Woody taking off his glove and pushing his arm in next to my leg. I thumped him on the butt and tried to signal to him that this was not a good idea. I could just see both of us stuck in the same log jam. We would never live it down. Woody glanced at me with a "Don't bother me" look and continued to wiggle his arm in there. He pushed, he pulled, shook and rotated. I was convinced that my fears had come true and he was stuck too! Then it seemed as if Woody started to swell, ----his back grew bigger, ----it even looked as if his head was growing. Then he roared! Roaring underwater is a feat that is largely unappreciated, but Woody could do it. Suddenly, I felt the pressure release from my leg, and both my leg and Woody's arm popped out.

I was free!

Two days later I had nary a mark and was in fine fettle. Woody's left arm had the ugliest black and blue bruises you have ever seen. I don't know how he did it, neither did Woody, all I know is that he got me out.

Oh yes. The secret that Woody drove all the way to Victoria for? His wife was knitting him an Indian sweater!

Good Bye, Woody. God Bless you. You are a real friend.