

Down to the Sea in Party Ships...

Warships, if they don't die a flaming early death in faraway dots like the Falkland Islands, have the lifespan of a racehorse. If they are destroyers they have the same grace and pedigree. Thirty-five years ago I served in what was contemptuously described in yesterday's *Globe & Mail* as "the Party Ship" pulling a last prank (by mysteriously sinking herself after being sold to become a video game), but then she was Her Majesty's Canadian Ship *Yukon*. She was new, she was beautiful. She was powerful – and when the Soviet fishing fleets trawling south of the Bering Straits for American nuclear submarine secrets knew she was racing out of the mist and through their nets at thirty knots they called her "the Gray Ghost" in their reports to the Soviet Admiral disguised as a fisherman aboard the factory ship.

Yesterday, the party ship was supposed to have gone to the knacker's yard as part of an electronic children's game of Battleships in San Diego. When she was young herself, *Yukon*, and I, and two hundred and fifty other members of her company played games for our living. It was called Anti Submarine Warfare and she and we were bloody good at it. Too good for our government: on one occasion, unreported, we pursued a Soviet diesel submarine into an un-named inlet somewhere near Prince Rupert, and then waited for forty-eight hours for Lester Pearson and his cabinet to decide what to do about it. The answer was Nothing. We were told to let our cornered quarry go. The Swedes were not so delicate: given the same opportunity, or offense to national sovereignty, they forced their intruder to the surface and an ignominious retreat across the Baltic.

In Canada we do things differently. Pearson and his Defense Minister Paul Hellyer turned their attention on the hunter, not the hunted. Hellyer decided to turn the navy into the army through Unification and a malaise set in which eventually became a disease called The Somalia Enquiry. But that's another Armed Forces bedtime story.

Aboard *Yukon* I had the throb-in-the-throat task of supervising the last lowering of the White Ensign from the staff at her quarterdeck: a flag that had flown through all the battles fought by the RCN, but merely another relic of Empire and subservience to London which Lester Pearson was determined to stamp out – for that was the real reason behind the change from Navy blue to CAF shit-brindle khaki.

The best naval officers have always made the worst politicians because doing business in the great waters of the sea allows no room for compromise. When the wind turns to the southeast, or a copper swell runs ahead of a hurricane, decisions have to be made on the spot and at a moment's notice. *Yukon*, when she was young, had Dick Carle, one of the best, as her Captain; and Bill Chaster, an eccentric ex-submariner as his Second-in-Command. Once, after entertaining the mayor of San Diego and a famous go-go dancer (by chance, my personal guest) called Watermelon Rose at a cocktail party on the quarterdeck, Chaster almost had us arrested by the San Diego police for quoting Shakespeare too loudly in the street.

Carle and Chaster are both dead, too soon. *Yukon* has had her time – but her life was much more than a party, and I like to think that, faced with being a laughing stock on Entertainment Tonight, a fine and noble ship found one last scrap of honour among the rust and committed her own thoroughbred body to the deep, taking with her many thousand Canadian sailors' memories.

God bless her, and all who sailed in her, is a cliché to remember.