CANADIAN WAR MUSEUM

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWEE: Commander (Retired) William G. Brown

INTERVIEWER: Richard H. Gimblett

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Commander (Retired) William G. Brown

Interviewed 24 November 2003

By Richard H. Gimblett

Interview for the Canadian war Museum Oral History Program, of Commander (Retired) Bill Brown, Canadian Navy. Interview recorded by Richard Gimblett, in Ottawa, on November 24, 2003. [Tape 1, Side 1].

INTERVIEWER: Thank you very much, Bill, for agreeing to meet with me today, and to discuss your career in the Canadian Navy. I'd like to start, please, if you don't mind, right at the beginning, and ask you, why did you decide to join the Navy? When did you join the Navy, and why? Did you have any career aspirations, at that time? And why did you join the Navy, as opposed to either of the other Services?

BROWN: Well, I entered the Navy in the last months of the war. It was about March—April—of '45 that I went in the Service. At that time, I was an ordinary seaman in the RCNVR, with no particular—specifically, no aspirations to end up making the Navy a career. I was just another young Canadian who had been--I suppose, the lives of all of us were pretty much overshadowed by the war. And, at the age of sixteen, you got your registration notice, and that was in 1942, in my case. That seemed to be a very serious moment in the lives of most of the young people that I knew in those days. You know, they'd say, "Gee, did you get your registration notice?" This was registration for conscription. And, it was kind of a sobering piece of paper for a sixteen year old to get.

So, I plodded along in high school, not doing exceptionally well there, I must say. So, when I entered the Service, I had my matric, and so, this was recognized. In those days, most kids did not have their senior matric. I must confess that my senior matric was missing French, but this was not picked up, so… I had some other extra courses.

INTERVIEWER: Can I interrupt for just a minute? Was this in Ontario?

BROWN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you living?

BROWN: St. Catharines.

INTERVIEWER: St. Catharines.

BROWN: So, anyway, I fetched up in HMCS YORK, which was in Toronto—the shore—just out of it there. And [I] just did the normal square bashing one did at that time—learned how to wear your uniform—that sort of thing—just the basic military stuff. And then, went down to Cornwallis. I guess it was probably—it couldn't have been very long after V-E Day, because I recall V-E Day in Toronto. There was a great parade, and I do recall that very

clearly. You felt like a little bit of a fraud, being in this picture parade when you hadn't been in the Service long enough to really learn very much about it.

INTERVIEWER: But you learned enough to march in a parade though, I presume?

BROWN: Indeed, yes. So, there we were marching up University Avenue, towards the Parliament buildings, and all these people cheering the Navy as we went by. I thought, "Goodness. We haven't done much about the success of this war stuff." [laughs]

Anyway, down to Cornwallis we went. At that time, Cornwallis was a very busy, bustling place and I recall, something in the order of ten to twelve thousand people under training there. There were a lot of new entries, of course, but there were also a lot of training being done for sonar men and signalmen.

And then came VJ-Day. At that time, I had turned nineteen and like hundreds and thousands of others in Cornwallis, waiting to be demobilized. I happened to have an RCN Regular Force Warrant Officer as a Divisional Officer. By that time, I was working in the Seamanship School, as just a hand there, doing stuff like minor janitorial duties. [I was] in charge of the manual party of new entries and trainees, who just went down there every day, to do some of the cleaning and stuff like that. So, I was sort of a straw boss there. And, I guess I was noticed by this Divisional Officer who asked me if I ever thought of making the Navy a career. And I said I had not.

He then advised me there was a program being introduced to recruit people with matriculation from the lower deck for an Officer Training Plan, and outlined vaguely what it entailed. Basically, that I would go to the West Coast for a year or so, learn some of the things that one needed to know to be a Midshipman, and then be sent to the U.K. for Midshipman's time. So, that sounded pretty interesting to me. I then was remustered from the VR to the RCN.

My concern was, in those days, you signed a—I can't recall whether it was a five or a seven year—(top hitch?), as we called it, in the Navy. I wasn't too keen on the seven years on the lower deck. It never really occurred to me to find out if there was any kind of understanding that I was transferring, to the Royal Canadian Navy from the Volunteer Reserve for this program, period. However, this question never occurred to me, at the time, in my naivety.

So, off I went to the UGANDA, which was a West Coast ship at that time, having come back from the Pacific war in the summer of '45. And then we went out to the HMCS NAIDEN on the West Coast—the shore leaves there. And I say "we"—I -- met, I guess, about another dozen people like myself, who had been in the Lower Deck, and were assembled for this course—this program--on the West Coast. [We were] to proceed to the UGANDA, after we had been all organized. So once again, I started off square bashing and stuff like that, which seemed to me I had done in YORK, I had done in STAD in Cornwallis, and I was doing it again in the West Coast, in the NAIDEN. I was getting a little bored of this. Anyway, I certainly knew how to march. And then, we did that for the month of January, and then, we joined the UGANDA. We had a separate mess deck.

INTERVIEWER: Were you a Midshipman now, or were you still an Ordinary Seaman?

BROWN: No, no. I was an ordinary seaman. And so, the UGANDA went off to sea with me aboard and, I suppose, the best part of six or seven hundred other people. We did a loop around the Continent of South America which was a very interesting thing the first time at sea, other than my new entry training on the East Coast. Here I was, in this Canadian cruiser, which are relatively comfortable ships to live in—compared to, you know, the destroyers and the minesweepers and things like that—corvettes and frigates. And you felt kind of—you felt very proud of yourself, when you were serving one of these ships. They were impressive. They were nice ships to serve in. And they looked like a war ship, you know. They bristled with six inch guns, and four inch guns, and stuff like that. And I enjoyed that very much, that year in UGANDA.

INTERVIEWER: Can you tell me a little bit about what you did while you were on the cruise—the training that you went through? And who was the Captain, or the Commander of the ship?

BROWN: The Captain, at that time was Rollo Mainguy who you may know was the father of Vice-Admiral Daniel Mainguy. Captain Mainguy had been the Captain of the UGANDA during the period of the Pacific war and had lived through, I guess, the enormous embarrassment of having his ship's company vote themselves out of the Pacific war. And I always felt kind of -- even as an ordinary seaman, when I heard this story -- I felt kind of sorry for the Captain that had to— And later on in life, when I got to know a little bit more about being a Captain of a ship -- having to live through that what must have been, to him, a humiliating experience, because he was a very fine Officer.

Anyway, the period on board the UGANDA was to have been a year, and in fact, it was, about. It consisted of lectures in the forenoon and afternoon, covering a lot of the subjects that one would have taken had one gone to Royal Roads. … Your mathematics were extended to (serve the?) trigonometry, and you know, the solutions of it. (The PZX Sigma with the sextant?)

INTERVIEWER: This is for ordinary seamen?

BROWN: This was the training we were doing there, because this was what we would have done had we been at RMC. These people were all people who had matriculation, so they…

INTERVIEWER: OK. So, you were taking this training, not as an Ordinary Seaman, but as an Ordinary Seaman selected for possible commissioning?

BROWN: Officer Candidate.

INTERVIEWER: Officer Candidate—understood.

BROWN: And that's what we were called on the ship—Officer Candidates.

INTERVIEWER: Officer Candidates—right.

BROWN: And we wore white cap tallies, instead of cap tallies with the ship's name on them, or HMCS on them.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Was there a name for this program?

BROWN: Not that I ever heard.

INTERVIEWER: OK.

BROWN: OK, we were just referred to, and called Officer Candidates. I don't recall any—I wouldn't know if there was a name.

INTERVIEWER: No, that's fine. I'm sorry. I just misunderstood.

BROWN: I certainly wasn't….

INTERVIEWER: I'm sorry for the interruption, but thank you.

BROWN: No, it wasn't called the any…. There was no title to this program that I ever heard. Our Divisional Officer was a very fine Regular Force officer by the name of Fred Frewer, F-R-E-W-E-R, who was a much admired Officer, throughout his whole career. He entered the Service, I think, about 1938, or maybe '[3]9, but I'm not sure. Really, like most of the RCN Officers, in those days, spent most of his life—the war, at sea. That's sort of about as far as that subject goes.

Anyway, our course subjects in the UGANDA were Engineering, basics of a ship's power plant, electrics, weapons, navigation, and naval history. They had really quite an impressive collection of schoolmasters, on board, just for us. These Instructor Officers, as they were called in those days, really did a good job with their respective subjects they had. If you had high school Physics, or Chemistry, or Mathematics—the Math courses one did in high school in those days—you were really well positioned to hoist in all the course material. And it was well taught, I thought.

And so, at the end of the year, we did our final exams, of course. And, during the course of the year, we had dropped a few by the wayside. I suppose we started out with, probably, in the order of sixteen, or maybe seventeen. And there were, probably, five or six [who] were weeded out as being unsuitable, or they couldn't manage the course content, or just were removed from the course for unsuitability, for other reasons. And they were just quietly packed off, out of the ship. There was not much (garbled). We didn't specifically know the reason why any one of them were removed from the course. They just disappeared—in the port. Swam off?

So, then, at the end of the year, we were dined in the boardroom. Those of us who passed dined in the boardroom aboard the UGANDA, and kitted up with uniforms, and packed off to the RN. So, it was quite a business over the Christmas, New Year's period, in Canada, trying to get all the things one needed, to disappear to the RN, for about three years. My criticism of the period in the UGANDA probably was that, although, it succeeded very well in the things it was trying to teach us, the things that it didn't really teach us…

INTERVIEWER: Did not teach you?

BROWN: Did not teach us, were what to expect in a Royal Navy gunroom. We were not prepared for gunroom life. And it was a tough period of adjustment. I had never been to England in my life until I arrived there, as a Midshipman. And whistled into Ghees(?) to get the rest of the stuff I needed—the kit I needed. We'll come back to this. We had leave in about -- I guess a fortnight's leave -- in December, and left Canada right after the New Year.

INTERVIEWER: This would be the New Year of 1947?

BROWN: '47—correct.

INTERVIEWER: '47.

BROWN: And I think it was the MAURITANIA we went across on. And, of course, this was rather elegant. It was still trooping, to a limited degree. It was still configured as a trooper, but the main lounges and things had been restored to their elegance.

INTERVIEWER: And, of course, you had the cachet of being a brand new Midshipman, now, as well?

BROWN: Oh, indeed--yes. So, there we were, in—not, multi-berth cabins—but we were in cabins--not in, through the dormitories that had been fitted out, in the ships. We were in cabins that had been configured for, probably, three. [I] thoroughly enjoyed the experience of traveling in a North Atlantic Service ship. So, we arrived in Liverpool, in early January '47. It was cold. It was miserable. It was just the most terrible day, which we spent going from Liverpool, down to Portland, to join our ships.

And we had appointments. The officer that met us when we arrived brought our appointments with him. By that I mean, the appointment to the ships that we were to join. I was in a group that joined a British carrier, called the IMPLACABLE, which was a heavy fleet carrier at that time. Some of the others went to the—I guess, about half the group went to the—DUKE OF YORK, which was a battleship. A few went off to a cruiser, and I think it was the NORFOLK, but I'm not sure of that.

Now behind us, there was another course starting out in the UGANDA, to do the same sort of thing. It was, I think, four or eight months behind us, but I'm not quite sure of this. And it was a smaller group. I think it produced something like six Midshipmen, or, maybe seven. I'm not sure of the numbers. I know the group I was in generated, something in the order of ten to twelve Midshipmen. So, you can imagine, standing on Big Leaves(?) jetty in Portland, on a cold, January night—rainy--hungry—thinking, "This is terrible."

INTERVIEWER: "What have I gotten myself into?"

BROWN: Oh, dear—yes! No, it was a great adventure. And, there, off in the rainy night, you could see all these lights of ships that were secured to the buoys in the Portland Harbour. And, of course, this was a pretty mighty fleet at that time. There was a row of battleships. There was a row of heavy aircraft carriers. And, I think, there must have been, in the battleship row—there were all the surviving KG-5 class.

INTERVIEWER: KG-5—that's King George V class of battleships.

BROWN: And there were, I think, four or five heavy fleet carriers, and I just can't tell you how many there were of the light fleets. And cruisers—lots of them. Just a lot of everything. It was a very impressive sight. And, in the morning, you could appreciate what it was you were looking at. What was suggested at night, then, became clear in the morning. It was really quite an awesome sight to me, and to anyone who had never seen it before.

INTERVIEWER: You said you were unprepared for gunroom life. What was it about gunroom life that you found so different?

BROWN: Well, I think gunroom life, and the duties of a Midshipman—they were so foreign to any life experience one had ever had before. I had never been exposed to the English schoolboy kind of approach to life. I think these people were far more sophisticated than we were—far more. They would be discussing theatre, and music, and, of course, they had far more intimate experience with the war than we did. We were truly outsiders in that respect. Never having survived a bombing, and all that sort of thing. And, I suppose, we, then--without losing our Canadian accents—I don't think any of us did—adapted.

We got to London. We started to absorb the English way of life, and this was, in a way, something some of us really resisted. I wouldn't say I was one of them. You know, they were Westerners—"God damn it! I'm an Albertan, and I'm going to make sure everybody knows this, for the rest of the [trip], that's around me." People from Ontario didn't seem to be quite like that. But I always thought the Westerners were the most distinctive group of Canadians. Never really questioned about what they were. Never any doubt.

INTERVIEWER: So, it was a change in life—not just going to Britain, but you were learning a new career?

BROWN: Yes, it was a very, very, eye-opening experience. And what we found was the RN Midshipmen, who were, on average, probably two years younger than us, had a lot of life experience that we didn't have. One felt a little miscast in this role. At least I did, at first. I won't speak for the others, but I did, at first. So, anyway, once you got used to the form of hazing that went with this, and got with the spirit of the thing—and that's really the right word.

Of course, we were still living in hammocks, in the chest flat room. Midshipmen lived in hammocks forever. And you got used to the idea that you had a Royal Marines bandsman, who would make up your hammock every morning. You didn't have to take your hammock, and make it up, and take it down. The Royal Marines did that for you. You then became quite—you also developed the habit of early morning tea, as I did. And that was not because I particularly wanted early morning tea. But, the coffee was so dismal and so predictably awful, that you could safely order a decent cup of tea. And once I realized that this Marine was doing me a favour, by--in his eyes—ladling, probably three, or so--two teaspoons of sugar into my tea, which I did not like. And this, of course, was coloured with Carnation milk. There was no fresh milk on the island(?) So, once you got the milk thing reduced, and the sugar taken out—I suppose I've been drinking tea that way, ever since. First thing in the morning…

INTERVIEWER: You mentioned Ghees—going through Ghees.

BROWN: Oh yes, the … IMPLACABLE was sailing with the VANGUARD, as part of the ocean escort, as the late king and his queen were going down to South Africa to pay a post-war visit. You may recall that the last visit they had made to the Commonwealth, before the war, was to Canada in '39. So, we hied off, in January of that year—'47—to South Africa, in the IMPLACABLE, as part of the ocean escort. And there, you started to pick up your duties as a Midshipman.

In Portland Harbour, we'd been introduced to running boats—the ship's boats. Then, on this passage to South Africa, we were doing duties of Midshipmen, at sea. And that's where you really started to learn the business of being a sea officer. And people can criticize that training as much as they care to, but the fact is, the Brits certainly knew how to produce seagoing officers—they really did. You came away from them, I think, well trained, and with a service attitude, which never left you. And, I think this was one of the most valuable parts of this exposure to the RN, from '47, until early '50—well into '50.

You did a lot of things. You learned a lot of things. You went through a lot of formal training, but it was well done—it truly was. The kind of critical observation that was part of your daily life--when I say critical, I mean, you were being criticized, in a relatively positive way, a lot. As you adjusted to the routine. You got better at being a midshipman. You didn't get quite so much of this well intentioned, and sometimes, real sought after criticism. You know, their methods were simple. If you didn't do something, as you were to have done--for example, being a bit late.

Supposing, for example, were one in harbour, these ships were big. You couldn't get them into every harbour you went to, and so, you'd be running boats to get the liberty men back and forth. And, I used to love running boats. You know, I always seemed to be in the officers' boat, which meant that I wasn't dealing with boisterous liberty men coming back from the beach, full of, whatever the local drink was. I just had officers coming back from the beach, and they did not require very much. I mean there was no potential discipline problem there for the Midshipmen on the boat to deal with. Where there are some real tales of survival, from some of the Midshipmen bringing back liberty men--one of whom had to, actually, strike an aggressive Chief Petty Officer.

INTERVIEWER: Was this one of the Canadian Midshipmen?

BROWN: A Canadian Midshipman. And he said it was, rather, an impressive thing because, he said, he had never knocked anybody out in his life, before, and this guy was so full of, whatever it was he'd been drinking, that it didn't take much to, sort of, render him unconscious. But of course, this was no small event. Now you've got a Midshipman—a subordinate officer—offering violence to a senior non-commissioned officer.

So, there was no question about what happened--that this Chief had behaved aggressively towards this particular chap. I remember well how this was disposed of. Incidentally, this fellow went on to become a Vice President of Dalhousie University later on in life. Anyway, there was no charge pressed by the system, on the Chief Petty Officer, for offering violence to an officer. The subordinate, as junior as a Midshipman might be, still--the charge was there. And, the Chief Petty Officer was demoted to Petty Officer. He was not, you know, put

in cells. There was no incarceration in the Service—detention barracks—and I thought that was probably a very Solomon-like way to handle this.

INTERVIEWER: It seems that you learned a lot of that, sort of, background information.

BROWN: Well, yes, you got into situations which you could never invent in your wildest imagination. Life was not, in a daily way--you didn't have incidents quite as stark as this one where I just mentioned. But there were, just a lot of situations you got put into, or you found yourself in. They all kind of developed your, I suppose, officer like qualities, to handle these things. The Brits were very good at their—I never understood it. I shouldn't say, I never understood it, but at first, it was hard to understand, for a Canadian, of my previous experience, to understand the British class system. It was still alive and well, in those days. I'm told, it's much less apparent, now. But, in those days, it really was very present. It was an important thing that the Canadians not adapt this, and bring it home. Everybody that I'm aware of—all my contemporaries, and the ones who were not part of this particular system, but others, who were Midshipmen, at the time I was—you got to know them all very well.

You know, you went through life in those days, when everybody was going to be a Lieutenant for eight years—no matter how smart you were, how dumb you were—you were going to be a Lieutenant for eight years. Period. Well, that group of people, you got to know over your Service life, fairly well, because these are the people you were serving at sea with. And, I just don't recall any of them falling into this trap. There were no English accents from any of them. And those people, in the Navy, that sounded rather British--in my experience, were either Brits, and that's why they spoke that way—because they were Brits; or were former Reservists who, somehow or other, had thought this was the pose they should adopt.

INTERVIEWER: That's very interesting. This confirms some of the other separate research that I have done. I don't want to steer the interview towards you but you are confirming some important research that I have found. In that sense, then, can I ask a further question? You were serving time, in the Royal Navy, when, of course, your formal Captain—now Admiral—Mainguy, headed the Commission of Inquiry into the…

BROWN: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: …incidents in 1949—the Mainguy Report.

BROWN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Now, those transpired while you were in Britain, but you are indicating—you are providing evidence that is contrary to the findings of the Commission of Inquiry. Do you have any thoughts on that? And I ask you to put yourself back into that period. What were your impressions of the Commission at that time?

BROWN: Well, when we came back to Canada that Commission resulted in something called the Mainguy Report, and that was something we were all given to read. I'm sure everybody read it. I felt, as I read it, "It doesn't apply to me."

INTERVIEWER: It did not apply…

BROWN: To me. I mean, I didn't feel that I was over—that I'd cast myself in the role of a Brit officer. I think, the purpose of—I shouldn't say the purpose of—the training you got from the Brits, if you were sensible about it, was professional. And they were professionals. They were good at what they did. They certainly brainwashed you into believing that they did it better than anybody else. And, their attitude towards the superiority—the clear superiority—of the Royal Navy, vis-à-vis anybody else, really did rub off. And, I think, you believed a lot of things to be true, which may not have been.

It was not until I was, probably well into my career as a junior Lieutenant Commander that I came to recognize that a lot of the British opinions and attitudes were founded more on myth than fact. And I don't mean that unkindly, but there was no question about it, that the … U.S. Navy's professionalism was never really recognized in any of the comments I ever heard from the Brits. And having served with the Americans for more than two years, there was no doubt in my mind that I'd never seen anything quite so professional in my bloody life. I never have. It was the most impressive business I ever saw.

INTERVIEWER: I would like to move on to your time with the Americans, and how you came into that Service. Is there anything further that we should look at for your training as a naval officer?

BROWN: Well, as I said, other than that first year in the UGANDA, which was unique to this particular program, which never had a title that I'm aware of.

INTERVIEWER: I've heard of the phrase 'Upper Yardman.' This was not that program?

BROWN: This was not. No. The Upper Yardman program—it took Leading Seamen who'd passed their Petty Officer, and they were selected for training at HMS HAWK. And that was about a years' program. And what they did at HMS HAWK was about parallel to what we did at HMCS UGANDA. And I really had not heard of—I'd heard of it, but I didn't know much about it—the Upper Yardman Program. I, really, never seriously questioned why they were running this other, the program that I was in, when they had the Upper Yardman Program in place.

Unless, it was to shape our little minds in the Canadian mold, a little more at the beginning. Or why they hadn't introduced this program, where they would take people with the matric, from the lower deck and put them into Royal Roads, which they started doing later on. And I was talking to one of my colleagues that went through this program with me who lives here in town. What I proposed to him, that what we were doing, probably, was folded into the program that came along a little later, where they would identify suitable people, at the ordinary, or able seamen level, and put them into Royal Roads, as cadets. He wasn't so sure that he agreed with that. Not that it wasn't suitable, but that, that was what this program that we were on, morphed into--but I don't know. I really don't.

INTERVIEWER: OK. Anything else on your formative training, after you came back from Britain, or while you were still there?

BROWN: Well, while we were there, as you may know, the format was, when you sat your Midshipman's Board for Lieutenant, this was where you took your (muffled?) along, and your Midshipman's journal, which were all seen by the Board. And it was quite an

impressive thing, going before this Midshipman's Board for Lieutenant, aboard the flagship of the Home Fleet. And, one by one, you trooped into this august board, made up of the Captain of the battleship, and a few Commanders, and I think there was a Flag Officer present—I can hardly remember (muffled?). Anyway, they posed you various questions, which basically were situation things--you know, "what would you do, if?" [And] a few questions on conduct on the bridge, you know—one's duties, as an Officer of the Watch, and that sort of thing. And then, you got stamped with this pass, with a 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Class Certificate, which affected your eventual seniority as Lieutenant.

Then, you were off to the Royal Naval College Greenwich—that was the next thing that happened to you. This is, after, I think it was about a fifteen—sixteen--month period, as a Midshipman. And then, you arrived. By this time, you did know how to live in a gunroom. Gunroom life was now part of your life. You easily fitted into all—the system. You were comfortable in the system. You weren't a stranger in it. And Greenwich was a wonderful experience. It was a broadening experience for acting Sub-Lieutenants. And it was, I think, intended by the Admiralty to expose junior officers to a line of thinking that was not exclusively Navy, because Dartmouth had the... Our peers in the RN, basically, were all people who gone to Dartmouth at the age of thirteen(?). So, you can imagine how, perhaps, narrow, their view was.

So, anyway, after a couple of terms at Greenwich, you then went off to Sub-Lieutenant's technical courses. This was no different. All of this was now just like everybody else, whose rank was Sub-Lieutenant, who sat the Midshipman's Board on the days that I did. And after you finished all these technical courses, at the Gunnery School, and the Torpedo School, and the Navigation School, and the Communication School—all of which took about a year, or so--you were stamped "trained", finished, and were mailed back to Canada.

There's one thing that I've left out, and that was, at the end of the time at Greenwich you went to sea again, in a small ship, in a destroyer. Submarines and destroyers are what one did after Greenwich. And that was a nice change, you know, from sitting in a schoolroom.

INTERVIEWER: Anything special about your time in a destroyer?

BROWN: Not really. The destroyer squadron I was in, happened to be, mostly, in the Med at that time because the "Haifa Blockade" was in force, and all the problems—the Post war problems--in Palestine, as it was called, at that time associated with the creation of the state of Israel were starting to bubble up.

INTERVIEWER: Were you part of the Haifa Blockade?

BROWN: Not really. No.

[Canadian war Museum Oral History Program Interview with Commander (Retired) William Brown. End of Tape 1, Side 1.]

[Canadian war Museum Oral History Program] Interview with Commander (Retired) Bill Brown, Ottawa, 24 November 2003. [Tape 1] Side 2.

INTERVIEWER: Bill, we just finished the first side of the tape. You were on your Sub's technical courses, in Britain. And then, I presume you came back to Canada. Can we pick up the story from there, please?

BROWN: OK. Well, about twelve that finished all this training, came back to Canada, in March '50. … And then, we were appointed to our various ships. I was sent to the cruiser, ONTARIO, and, of course, that summer, the Korean war began. Captain Hugh Pullen was captain of the ONTARIO at that time and very much hoped that his ship would be sent off to Korea, to form part of the U.N. fleet out there. However, the ship had lost a lot of its equipment from the time it paid off in 1945, until it was re-commissioned, a year or two later. And it was really ill-prepared, from a training point of view, and an equipment point of view, to go into any war zone, as much as he would have liked it. And I think we all would have been keen to go. I envied those who were in the destroyers because they went whistling off in, I guess, August [or] September '50, they were on their way.

INTERVIEWER: July '50, actually. Yes. Very early July.

BROWN: So, I envied them.

INTERVIEWER: Did you stay in ONTARIO through the Korean war period, or did you…?

BROWN: No, I stayed there for a year, and then got involved with junior officer training—the university program--for about a year. Then I was appointed to an east coast Bangor class minesweeper, PORTAGE.

INTERVIEWER: Interesting, that you say you got involved in junior officer training, and of course, you're arriving back in Canada, just after the Mainguy Report was published, and then, you are suddenly implementing its recommendations. Do you have any thoughts on that?

BROWN: Well, I've never really given much thought to this particular officer training program, but it was probably one of these things that was long overdue to fully exploit, and that was the potential for getting, sponsoring, and supporting young university students, as career officers. A little later on it did occur to me that this was a very, very good thing to have done, from the Navy's point of view.

And thanks be to an Instructor-Commander, by the name of Herb Little, who was the mastermind behind all of this. Because of his academic credentials, and his pre-war exposure to the academic hierarchy in Canada, he was accepted anywhere he went. He was a former Rhodes scholar, and a Headmaster of (muffled?). The Navy was lucky to have someone like him, and this, then produced an officer corps that was heavily larded with people who had the breadth of arts educations. And there's no question about it—they were better educated than we were. I don't think, in the arts, they necessarily were, but I think they brought a dimension to the officer corps that it didn't have. Some people were critical of it—the system—but I think we gained by it, very much.

INTERVIEWER: As I was flipping the tape, you mentioned to me, you started some thoughts on the Mainguy report. Would you care to follow them up, please?

BROWN: Well, I think the main thrust of that report was, the officers, generally speaking, were not adhering to some of the really basic principles of what an officer's duties to the troops are. And, if you recall the Naval toasts, the first one is, "To our men." And they'd forgotten to--those words really had some meat to them, and I think, they had… In many ways the Mainguy Report pointed out the fact that, you know, the Officers weren't looking after their men properly.

For example, in those days, we had broadside messing for the troops where "cooks to the galley at noon". … The designated hands from each mess deck would go down, pick up twelve meals or fourteen meals--whatever it was—for each mess deck, and take them back. And then, that mess deck would divvy this up, and serve it, and have their lunch, or their dinner. The officers, of course, were eating in the wardroom, and had a separate galley, and often, it was a separate menu. And when they took away the officers' galleys, went for central messing—and I'm not sure of, quite, the phrase that's used now, to indicate that there is one galley that cooks for the whole ship—the quality of food really went up. And this manifested—you know, what this meant was the officers started really paying attention to what the men were eating, because that's what they were eating. It's an interesting little observation.

INTERVIEWER: And that central galley also brought in the cafeteria style messing.

BROWN: Well, I guess, that's the word I'm looking for—cafeteria style messing. And that, the standard of eating, vittling, in the ship was simply improved, in a marked way. I think if you relate that to the Mainguy Report, it's got some meat to it—what I just said.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. I would like to move on now, to the second area of interest that you indicated in our pre-interview discussions, and that was, your involvement in the Cuban Missile Crisis, as an exchange officer with the United States Navy. Could you describe to me, quickly, how you came to have a position with the U.S. Navy Carrier Division, and what it was that you were engaged in, during the Cuban Missile Crisis?

BROWN: After I finished my training, as a junior officer, in England, I went back again, a couple of years later, to do a long course. And this was a fifteen-month training period, in Torpedo and Anti-Submarine Warfare. These were called TAS Officers, as you may be familiar. Term long dropped, when the Weapons Officer designation came along. Anyway, I had been at sea, with the 3rd Squadron, for about three years. I was on the FISWATER(?) for about three years. We had had a position in Task Group Alpha—which was what the CARDIV 16—was one of the roles that CARDIV 16 had.

Task Group Alpha was to develop ASW tactics, and the equipment, for the U.S. Navy. A lot of stuff on trial would come first to CARDIV 16, in either its destroyers or the carrier. Each Carrier Task Group that the Americans had, consisted of a carrier and eight destroyers. And the Admiral whose staff I was on was the Senior Admiral of the Anti Submarine Warfare Task Groups, and there were five of them. And these were in the, what the Americans called, ESSEX-class conversion. They were the smaller of the carriers--of the fleet carriers--that they were operating. And, they weren't like any other Navy standards. They were big carriers. And they, I think, displaced in the order of forty, forty-five thousand tons.

INTERVIEWER: They were bigger than the IMPLACABLE, for example.

BROWN: Oh, indeed—yes. Yes. So, we had had a TAS Officer on this staff for, probably, the best part of ten years. I was fortunate enough to be sent there, I think, simply because I was, by that time, a very experienced TAS Officer. I spent a little bit of time teaching, but not a lot. But, I spent a lot of time at sea, as such. I relieved a Canadian who was in that particular billet, and -- I don't believe it was an exchange billet. I think it was just one of these situations. It was an integrated billet, I think they called it. So, I was just treated like a U.S. Navy Officer. I was given security clearances to the U.S. Navy Top Secret which is pretty unusual for a foreign officer. And that pretty much included everything but nuclear stuff.

That subject was closely compartmentalized from anything I ever had to do. The Americans were so sensitive to any nuclear information. The presence on board was never discussed. I mean it was just a non-subject, to an outsider. You're living with these people for, in my case, two plus years and I don't recall this subject ever, ever coming up. The Navy talked about a lot of things, but not the nuclear side. But you knew, when things were getting stressed up because the aircraft were cordoned off with yellow tape, the police marked off a 'no go area', with Marine sentries. This was a very clear signal—you do not go there. You just don't.

INTERVIEWER: But that wasn't aimed just at you—that was compartmentalizing it from the rest of the ship's company, as well?

BROWN: Oh, indeed. There are some lovely little stories about that. An Admiral was doing an inspection and he came up to this Marine who was part of the guard detail on this nuclear-armed aircraft, and he asked him what his orders were. He said, "To let nobody pass this tape." And the Admiral said, "If I went past that tape, would you shoot me?" He said, "I would say, 'Good bye Admiral.'" [laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Now which carrier were you on? What was the name of the ship?

BROWN: I was in the INTREPID, which was the first one, and then, the RANDOLPH. I came back to the INTREPID later on. The difference between these two ships was, and their usefulness of the fleet, was the INTREPID had heavy arresting gear which could take the crusader--which was the F-8--which was a very heavy airplane with a very high ramp speed. The heavy arresting gear was needed for that aircraft, and a few others. So, the INTREPID was hauled out of its normal activity, and we were hauled out of our normal schedule, in—I think it was—October, of that year.

INTERVIEWER: October--of which year, now, is this?

BROWN: We're now talking …the Bay of Pigs was?

INTERVIEWER: '61.

BROWN: OK, then [it was] '62.

INTERVIEWER: OK. October of '62.

BROWN: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Was this in advance of the…?

BROWN: Well, we were just hauled out. Our schedule was changed. That's all we knew. Then we went off the coast of Virginia, which we were operating out of—we were in a Norfolk based carrier. We were operating in the exercise area, off the Virginia coast. And, this was not an unusual thing for us to do. But our ASW schedule was just set aside, and we were used, because of our heavier resting gear, to re-qualify--I'm not sure quite how many--squadrons for day and night landings. And so, we went out and did--I think my numbers are right—it was either twelve or fourteen hundred arrested landings. And that's a lot. That was a lot, in a space of about two weeks. And that was just—the catapult was going 'bang, bang, bang', night and day as we re-qualified all these pilots.

And then, at the end of that, we then offloaded our squadron—our Air Group, rather—when I say we off-loaded, we off-loaded all of the aircraft that had engine hours that would indicate they were going to be flown in to check, within the next month, or so. Do you know what I'm talking about?

INTERVIEWER: No.

BROWN: Flying an aircraft into check? Well, every so many hundred hours, you've got to do certain things on an airplane. And the engine hours top out, and I think on the engines that we had on the Trackers, I think, it was a big servicing milestone at the five or six hundred hours point, but I wouldn't swear to that. And so, we then got our aircraft back on board, with, zero engine hours on them.

So, we started out on this kind of mysterious deployment. Nothing had been said about what we were off to do. But, the news of the presence of missiles in Cuba, and the American position that this will not be allowed, had been stated by this time. And the showdown was coming up. And quite frankly, most of us thought we were going to war. We really [did]. And I speak for myself. I told Max, who is my wife, who was living there with four children in Norfolk, outside of town, "Just keep the car full of gas. And if you get a notice to evacuate, or [hear] an announcement that there's hostilities with Russia -- this is the biggest naval complex area, in the States. Just get out of town. Just drive west. Just go west. Don't go north. Just go west. And then, when you get far enough west, by that time, people will be knowing where the fall-out area if this occurs. Then, get up to Canada, and keep your fingers crossed."

So, there we were leaving, and my wife and children in Norfolk, in a very benign foreign country, nevertheless. It was kind of an uneasy feeling that I had—very much so. I guess I was no different from anybody else of the ship's company. And so, we hied off to the blockade—to our station in the blockade -- with our squadron of ships, and that's where we spent the next month, or so. And it was really a period of wondering if the other shoe was going to drop. It was really a period of--I can't recall any period of great uncertainty that I had ever experienced that was comparable to that. It was just an eerie feeling of "What is going to happen next?"

INTERVIEWER: Right. What duties were you performing on the Task Group staff, at that time?

BROWN: Well, by that time, I was the Staff Watch Officer. And, having come fresh from sea, I was very much up to date on, you know, maneuvering a fleet, and stuff. And this was interesting, the way the Americans did business. You didn't have the signalman, on the bridge, who produced the maneuvering message. We were used to, in Canada, under the British way of doing business, turning to the signalman, and say, "Alter course together to 090." And he would, then, say, "Turn 9." And around you'd go. Or turn 090. Where it is, when you were in the States, you were the person who would punch the Fleet Signal Book, and put the signal together on what you were going to do. You'd rotate the screen—the screen access log, sort of, stuff, which I'm sure you're very familiar with. But you didn't do this via the signalman.

INTERVIEWER: Which, incidentally, is the way that we still do it. It's the signalmen [that] do it, in the Canadian Navy.

BROWN: We were at sea so much over that two-year period—you became as good at this, and probably better at it, than most of the Canadian yeomen because they just didn't have this intense experience, with a decent size fleet to maneuver, with a carrier, on a daily basis. So anyway, this period you want to speak of—getting back to that. Here am I, an integrated billet, in a state of hostilities, really, existing the moment they used the word, "Block," when effectively, a blockade was announced. That is an act of war, as you probably know.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

BROWN: Well, they called it a quarantine, so they could avoid the use of the word blockade, I suspect. But there was no question in the minds of any of us that were there that this sub-hostility state of war—just sub. And so, we were living like a ship of war lived. This continued up until the time that the Russian ships delivering these missiles turned around and they reversed. I can't say to my certain knowledge because that would be not correct, but I seriously believe that there was an unequivocal statement made by the Americans to the Russians, stating that, "If those ships proceed beyond this point, we will do what we have to do to stop them. And you, Mr. Khrushchev, better turn them around."

INTERVIEWER: And you, in INTREPID, were that point, I guess? Were you the first line? Did you come into contact with any…?

BROWN: No, there were destroyers to sea ahead of us. There were certainly four, and maybe, all of the ASW carrier groups were at sea. There was one Russian submarine that got in difficulties and ran out of battery, really. It was kept down by U.S. destroyers, until he just had to come to the surface for battery charging. So, this submarine literally gasped to the surface -- a FOXTROT. I think I've got a photograph of it here. And there may have been a second submarine that surfaced during this period. But this one I know of for sure.

So, I suppose we felt pretty good about that. We were going about business. We could, in fact, intercept, and pin down a submarine when this was demanded of us. At that time, the SOSUS system was very highly—the location of the SOSUS system arrays was highly classified. The results that they were getting were passed to us at sea, through the ASW

organization of SACLANT. It was pretty tremendous coordination of all of the information that was available on submarines. And it worked.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Were you involved in that exchange of information—the "cueing"-- I believe was the term that they…

BROWN: No, I wasn't. I was, again, just the Staff Watch Officer, on the bridge. But again, the reason they had a Canadian on this Task Group, through the office staff, was because the U.S. Navy did not have the equivalent of a long course officer. They full recognized that we brought a kind of knowledge to the table that was not part of their library of knowledge.

INTERVIEWER: No. You mentioned before, about the difference in professionalism between the Royal Navy and the U.S. Navy, with just the under-appreciation of the American system. It is a different system from the Royal Navy training and you, as a Canadian, were on board that staff, to act as a compromise between the two systems, was it?

BROWN: No. I was there just as—the Admiral's staff was fairly sizeable. He had a CARDIV 16 staff, which was the operation of the carrier task group. He had ASW Forces, Atlantic Staff, which was the coordination of the ASW information that was available to the U.S. Navy, and that included, amongst other things, the current and future operating areas of the nuclear submarines. We had to know that, of course. But this was kept away in a separate kind of ops room, which I never was in. I never was in there. And, that again, was very much part of the exclusivity of nuclear information—the whole nuclear business, including nuclear submarines—from foreigners. I must have been bursting with curiosity on occasion, but, you know, after you had been there a little while you had to learn not to raise the subject.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Right. Did you have many examples of being able to apply your special TAS experience?

BROWN: What you could do was, look at a battery thermograph, and probably, … you had as good as understanding of what the sonar conditions were like as anybody around. Although, towards the end, the Air Groups were getting—their level of knowledge was going up, up, up. And the sonabuoy techniques—I think that they were exploiting the sonabuoy information much better.

We had a few problems in the Air Group. We were the first Air Group to have the Sea King helicopter and we had the most experienced helicopter pilots flying them. Now, this may sound like a good thing, but it wasn't because a lot of these people were removed from fixed wing aviation. In the early days of jet engines, the damage they could do to the ears was not acted upon, and maybe, not understood as fully as it might have been. So, there were a lot of people were removed from single seat fighters, for example, because their audio faculties had deteriorated to the point that they couldn't really fly by themselves. They could fly as a copilot, but they couldn't pass the medical to go on their own.

So, some of these people got shifted off to helicopters, because there was two guys in the cockpit. Well, a lot of them were in helicopters because—and I say a lot—in the U.S. Navy, I think, a fair number fetched up in helos, because they were not very good instrument pilots. So, they were very uneasy. And here they are in helicopters, flying all these hours in

helicopters, because they're dawn to dusk aviators, and night operations. Have you ever flown a night op in a Sea King?

INTERVIEWER: Yes I have, and a Sea King having to go into the dip, at night.

BROWN: OK. Well, you know what I'm talking about then.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. That's a very heavy reliance upon instrument.

BROWN: You bet. And it's a very high-tension kind of aviation. The results they were getting from this first squadron of Sea Kings—they were not encouraging. But when they started getting some—the results started picking up—when some of these good instrument pilots got into this helicopter squadron. You could only conclude that, maybe, a lot of these flights—that ball didn't get too wet, sometimes.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Yes.

BROWN: So, this was food for thought.

INTERVIEWER: Absolutely. Can we take a bit of a diversion on this? In a related program at the War Museum, we are discussing the introduction of the Sea King helicopter into the Canadian Navy. Were you able to take any of your experience with the U.S. Navy--carrier operations with the Sea Kings—back to the RCN, when you came back, recognizing RCN is getting Sea Kings at that time, and was still operating their own carrier, as well?

BROWN: In London, at that time, there was a Commodore, by the name of O'Brien, who later became CANCOMFLT.

INTERVIEWER: That'd be Scruffy O'Brien?

BROWN: Yes. And, there was another Canadian down in CARDIV 16, at that time, who was a communicator. He inquired as to what these two officers were going to be doing when they got back to Canada.

INTERVIEWER: He--Admiral O'Brien?

BROWN: Yes, then Commodore O'Brien. Because he was going up there as CANCOMFLT. So, we were both well reported on by the U.S. Navy, so O'Brien said, "I want these two people on my staff." So, when I got my appointment from CARDIV 16 to BONAVENTURE, I was not at all enthused, because I thought, "Here am I. I've just spent about five years straight at sea, in very intensive operations. By Golly! Right now, this system owes me a frigate. I should be a frigate Captain. I've had my command status for years and years—haven't even seen Lieutenant. So, I'm going back as an Operations Officer to CANCOMFLT.

So, I made a comment to this effect when I was in the presence of some people who were working in the staff at London. And, in the course of casual conversation, one of them said to Commodore O'Brien, obviously, "Lieutenant Commander Brown, down in CARDIV 16, isn't too enthused about being appointed to the BONAVENTURE with you." And so,

anyway, that's where I went. And O'Brien, who I had never met before--his first words to me, when Jim Cuss(?), who was his Chief Staff Officer, took me in to meet the Commodore, and introduced us. And O'Brien's first words to me were, "Brown, I hear you don't want to join my staff." And I thought, "Ouch. Oh, boy. This is going to be a happy bloody marriage!" I had a real sicky feeling as I walked out of there.

So, anyway, in about three weeks or less, he had me right in his pocket. I just had such an admiration for that man—he was so sharp. He had a real sense of humour. He was just a very intelligent person. I never worked for anybody quite like him. He could size up a situation at the speed of light, and put his finger right on it. He was just that sort of person. I thought he was a remarkable officer. So, it ended up, I spent two years about with him on that staff and it was one of the happiest periods of my life in the Service. I just loved him.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Did you look specifically at the introduction of the Sea King helicopter, or the ASW?

BROWN: Well, by the time I got there, the Sea King had been integrated into the Air group quite happily, and all the teething problems, I think, were behind them, by the time I got there. If there were any—I don't know. But they really operated successfully, I thought. And their schedule was tight. With the size of the unit establishment of helicopters—I forget whether we had—twelve, I guess—on board—might have been sixteen, but I don't think it was—I should know this.

INTERVIEWER: No, that sort of detail is not important. But these are Sea Kings aboard BONAVENTURE?

BROWN: No, they could keep three on station, around the clock, which was pretty impressive.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. Very. Now, were you looking, as a Fleet, Ops Officer, were you involved in developing tactics for the employment of the Sea Kings?

BROWN: In operating a carrier, there's a few basic principles--one of which is: there's squadron business; there's ship business; and there's staff business, and you don't mix them up. The tasking of individual flights—the staff just doesn't do that. You just task the squadron—task the Air group, but you don't get involved. It's never appreciated, and it never helps anybody. The squadron commander does that.

INTERVIEWER: Right. So, you weren't looking at that, even from the bigger picture employment point of view?

BROWN: Well, the staff would say to the Air Group Ops, and the ship, "Here's what we want to happen—how we want the helos deployed, in the next twelve hours." Then, the helicopter squadron was responsible to produce a serviceable aircraft with a crew to do this. And the ship was responsible to provide the airport facilities from which this Air Group could operate.

INTERVIEWER: Right. And presumably then the control of the aircraft once they were airborne.

BROWN: Oh, yes. That ship worked so well. I was so impressed. Having come from an U.S. Navy carrier of quite no comparison in size, the Air effort from the BONAVENTURE—I think it was just a class, by itself. You know, the aircraft serviceability factor, and the flight safety factor—it was unbelievable. In the whole time, I was there, I don't think we had but one--I think I recall one episode. No, there were two episodes where we had landing gear problems, and had to take a tracker into a barrier, and take a helicopter down onto a cushion, to try and keep the collapsed folio from collapsing even further. And, of course, you'd then get a rotor shock to the engine, and the gearbox would do all sorts of bad things.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Right. It strikes me, from my perspective of today, that you were in, kind of, a unique position of having witnessed carrier operations in the Royal Navy, the U.S. Navy, and then, the Canadian Navy. Do you have any general observations you would like to make on that?

BROWN: Well, I think it was just a tragedy, regardless of the reasons it happened, it was such a tragedy to have to lose this standard of competence that the Canadian Naval Air had achieved. They were just an amazing group of pilots and aircrew, in terms of the results they could achieve. In the same way, the carrier had a remarkable performance record in terms of its ability to provide a good serviceable airfield, in the middle of nowhere, for the Air group, on a continuing basis. It was no small achievement, and I don't think Canadians, even when it was happening, appreciated just the significance of what was achieved by Naval Air.

But, as time goes by, you look back on it, and you find that operating one carrier is a very inefficient way to have a presence of naval air. The Australians found this to be the case, as did we. It was just taking up so many of our resources. If you were operating two, you would need more personnel, of course, but in terms of all the infrastructure support, you wouldn't need a heck of a lot more for two, than you had for one.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Now, when you left the carrier…

BROWN: I then went to the Joint ASW School—and, I'm not sure what it's called now—in Halifax, on staff there. And I did a study on the operational application of the hydrofoil. It took about a year to do it. I used to drive a lot of the qualified submarine captains nuts, taking their time on the trainer to be the, you know, qualified submarine CO, doing the sort of things that a qualified CO would do. It gave it a sort of dimension of realism that otherwise, you might not have had. Well, that went on for the best part of a year.

INTERVIEWER: That was studying the effectiveness of the hydrofoil, as an ASW?

BROWN: The application of. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And that was at, you say, the Joint School—that would be the Joint RCN/RCAF….

BROWN: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: …School, that is now the Maritime Warfare Centre—the Canadian Forces Maritime Warfare Centre.

BROWN: Yes. Well, I guess the Maritime Warfare Centre was the right name for it.

INTERVIEWER: Now, did you ever get your own frigate?

BROWN: No. The frigates were pretty much passé, by the time I got to sea again, which was about less than a year later. I was back at sea. We resurrected the minesweepers in the summer of '67—the Centennial year—for Junior Officer training. So, we brought out the CHALEUR, CHIGNECTO, and the FUNDY, from Portland. Anyway, I was appointed as Squadron Commander. Was it THUNDER? I think it was THUNDER was the fourth one. Anyway. That was the summer of Centennial year, and that was just a wonderful—we had a lot of great fun, going to all the little places up and down the St. Lawrence River and Newfoundland, and so forth and so on, that you couldn't get bigger ships into. And this was just a wonderful experience. Even the Magdalan Islands…

INTERVIEWER: And you had a good reception?

BROWN: Oh, yes.

INTERVIEWER: We look back now on the problems with Quebec nationalism, but you had no sense of that, then?

BROWN: No. Not at all. It was just, there was so much (bonne année?) in Canada, in that Centennial year. You kind of wonder where it disappeared to, so quickly.

INTERVIEWER: I see the tape is coming to an end here. Any final thoughts before we sign off?

BROWN: Along what lines?

BROWN: Just--I guess, job thoughts, on your training, professional development, RN versus USN?

BROWN: No. I then went, from the minesweepers, to the CHAUDIERE, as Captain. And then, from the CHAUDIERE, back to the BONAVENTURE. Jack Pickford—Commodore Pickford--was there, and then was CANCOMFLT, and Andy McMillan was his Chief Staff Officer. I went back to BONAVENTURE, and then, from BONAVENTURE, I went to SKEENA. And I think I probably must have had as much sea time, as anybody else in my rank. It seems to me, that the teen years of my two older boys, I completely missed, which in hindsight, I rather regret that.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. It was a different way of running a navy, then. Bill, thank you very much for talking with us today. I appreciate it deeply.

BROWN: Well, it was kind of fun. I hope my memory hasn't played too many tricks on me here.

INTERVIEWER: No. No. Not at all. Thanks very kindly.

BROWN: You're more than welcome.

[Canadian war Museum Oral History Program Interview with Commander (Retired) Bill Brown, on November 24, 2003. Interview ends.]

TRANSCRIPT ENDS