

Alfred Wurtele in his own words

My sheltered, sometimes frustrating life started at the age of four when I fell out of a second storey window. How that came about is clear, but it is lucky that I bounced off a small, overhanging roof and merely broke a leg.

My father was No. 1 Cadet of the first 18 Royal Military College Kingston. I never knew him, as he died of heart failure when I was three years old. My mother, bless her, was left with five young children to bring up.

At age 15 I passed an examination for entry into the Royal Naval College of Canada at Halifax, completing a three-year term and graduating as a Midshipman on 01 August, 1916. My first ship was HMS Leviathan, sister ship to the Good Hope, which was lost in the Battle of Coronel. When action stations were sounded, and on other occasions, all but the Captain and Commander moved at the double. The Captain, Marcus Rolly Hill, was a large man (known to the troops as "Make Us Really Ill"). He had an interest in his five Canadian Midshipmen and was on hand at 6:00 a.m. when we did "physical jerks" trying to "heave the head". He asked the Admiralty that his Midshipmen be sent to HMS Renown, one of two battle cruisers. As his ship was about to go into refit, we were sent to the Gunnery School in Portsmouth and eventually we got our appointments.

The Renown and Repulse were remodelled battleships with a speed of 35 knots. While under training I was also Midshipman of the 1st picket boat.

From the Renown, I was sent to HMCS SHEARWATER, originally a full-rigged ship but now stripped of almost all of her sails. At Bermuda, I passed my Seamanship exam aboard HMS Caesar, a heavy cruiser noted for its two funnels in line in abreast formation. I could handle a picket boat and I had a full set of star and sun sights. That was enough to get me through and I became an Acting Sub-Lieutenant.

From there I was appointed to HMS Swift, a destroyer of the Dover patrol. There is a little frustration here. The ship had arrived at Silly-Weir London dock. She had been on the Middle Barrage patrol when she struck a floating mine. A portion of the hull had been blown off below the Sub-Lieutenant's cabin and he had been killed instantly. The two other Executive Officers had left the ship and Captain Amedroz was living in London. It was believed that the repairs would take two to three weeks and there was a fully trained crew onboard. The Captain came down to visit the ship occasionally. I sent half the crew in leave alternately, and we did do some route marches.

We got back to Dover two months later to resume our Middle Barrage patrol, Belgium coast, Monitor patrol, etc. That was when I saw the only shot fall in anger. It fell in line, but short. We put up a smokescreen.

The Swift was moored in Dover Harbour one day when HMS Glatton, a monitor, blew up. We were fairly close to that ship, which had been coaling the day before. A flame shot up to the top of the truck of the mast and the fore part of the ship became crowded with the crew. Our Navigator, King-Harmon, took the whaler, which had been rigged for sailing, alongside the Glatton and very many of the crew got down the mast.

As the First War neared an end, the Swift left Dover and we were in Dundee when the Armistice was signed. We witnessed first hand the surrender of the German Fleet. As we were not included in the British Escort Fleet, Admiral Beatty objected to our presence. Finally, we found ourselves in Scapa Flow where, with other destroyers, we were a so-called guard for the German destroyers. I spent Christmas 1918 in a trawler, circling the group.

The Swift eventually went back to Dover, where she was paid off. I did one more session in the cruiser HMS Cleopatra in the Baltic before returning to Canada.

This is the end of this story. I enjoyed being New Entry Training Officer, Naden, and, up to a degree, being Captain of Stadacona, with a great deal of frustration from a senior officer. I retired in 1945.

Then I became an Esquimalt Councilor for six years, followed by Reeve of Esquimalt for 14 years. This is all another story.