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The Continuing Education of Carl Bedal



By Brock Weir

This week, Carl Bedal will be back at the head of the classroom.
It's a comfortable place for the retired teacher, but when he stands before students once again, he will be sharing a subject that some might find decidedly uncomfortable: the realities of war.
Now in his 95th year, Mr. Bedal, a veteran of the Second World War who served in the Royal Canadian Navy during the Battle of the Atlantic, has dedicated the last decade to ensuring students never forget those who made the ultimate sacrifice.
?I feel a responsibility as a past educator to do something to assist with the interpretation of Remembrance Day,? says Mr. Bedal. ?There's no glory in war. It's a terrible thing and I think students should know that.?
Mr. Bedal's wartime journey began in his hometown of Brighton when he was fresh out of high school in 1943. He and three other friends drove to Kingston to enlist, choosing the Royal Canadian Navy for purely practical reasons.
?I wanted to know where I was going to sleep,? he says. ?I knew aboard ship you slept in a hammock, but if you were in the Air Force you had no idea where you were going to sleep, and you certainly didn't if you were in the Army. Growing up in Brighton, I was always right slap up against the water in Lake Ontario and water was everything to me.?
After completing the training process, Mr. Bedal arrived in Nova Scotia, where he was posted to HMCS Trail, a corvette assigned to the Triangle Run, a route designed to protect convoys of more than 100 ships embarking from North America en-route to the United Kingdom laden down with service personnel and supplies. Once halfway across the Atlantic, they made the return voyage with ships heading back to our shores.
?Imagine, if you can, looking up at a 70-foot grey wave streaked with white foam, then, moments later, being on top of it looking down into a 70-foot trough of water,? Mr. Bedal recalled in an essay entitled At Sea. ?Seasick every day, food didn't interest me. In the process of being ill-disposed, I learned one could survive a long while without food, but liquid was essential. I found Coke and crackers worked best, but I still retched. Imagine upchucking with no food on your stomach ? better something than nothing. Too, I learned quickly that bringing up worked better from the leeward side of the ship rather than from the windward.
?With many living so close together, discipline had to be strict. Routine had to be followed. Cleanliness was essential. To help ensure that the deck (the floor) was surfaced with thick orange-coloured linoleum. Every morning, an off-duty watch collapsed the table and scrubbed the floor with caustic soda. They used buckets, mops, hand brushes and rubber gloves, the latter to prevent burning their hands with cleaning fluid. Cleanliness of the body was another thing. With hot showers only available on the shore, BO prevailed in the mess deck after a few days out. Fortunately, we spent at least a third of our time in the open and in the freshest air known to man.
?My lookout duties required that I stand just below the open bridge, protected only by a canvas barricade up to my chest, where I could see through an arc of 180 degrees from bow to stern on the starboard side. In the biting winds and exposed to salt spray, I was provided with good quality binoculars, allowing me to methodically scan my semi-circle horizon looking for U-Boats that prowled

about with only their periscopes slicing the water. This represented serious business at any time, but especially during the hours of darkness.

?Two events occurred on lookout that I vividly recall. On one occasion, at night, as we plied the Gulf Stream, the bow of the ship produced phosphorescence as it cut through the water ? not unusual ? but when I saw a stream of light racing toward our ship at right angles I froze. I imagined nothing but a torpedo aimed broadside to us. Fortunately, before it struck our ship, it veered off to the side, the telltale trace of a playful porpoise that decided to give me a scare.

?Once during the daylight watch, one of our navy planes approached from the rear of the convoy ? always a welcome sight confirming that others were also looking for subs. On lookout, I saw the pilot signal to us using his Aldis lamp (a bright light with a manual shutter used for short range communication during radio silence). The captain on the open bridge above shouted down to me, ?What's he saying?' Fortunately, my high school cadet corps experience with Morse code sufficed. After reading he brief message, I told the captain, ?He says, ?What's cookin'?' I interpreted the signal as simply a light-hearted greeting from another serviceman who was equally bored with his repetitive task.?

Speaking 73 years later, Mr. Bedal seems almost sceptical at first that his time on the Triangle Run in the last years of the Second World War counts as overseas service, but indeed it does, and there is no small degree of pride just under the surface.

After Victory in Europe in May 1945, Mr. Bedal, along with his fellow Navy servicemen, was asked if they wanted to continue their service in the Pacific Theatre, which was still raging at the time. Every sailor in his outfit, including him, duly signed up. But, due to ships needing to be refitted for this theatre of war, the conflict was ultimately over before Bedal was able to embark.

Discharged from the Royal Canadian Naval Volunteer Reserves with the rank of Able Seaman in February of 1946, he returned home and had to make the adjustment back to civilian life. Helping him make that adjustment was his dogged determination to continue his education.

He pursued a General Arts degree at Queen's University and, from there, began teaching career that lasted nearly 35 years, serving at the elementary, secondary and university levels, with his focus in secondary school being physics and math. As part of the University of Toronto faculty, he taught up-and-coming educators.

Along the way he met and married Marie, his wife of 66 years, and they subsequently raised two daughters. His daughters gave the couple three granddaughters and, most recently, a great-granddaughter.

The Bedals moved to Aurora nearly nine years ago to be closer to their daughter Sarah and her partner Ronen. Now residing at the Holllandview Trail retirement community, Mr. Bedal lives alongside a number of Second World War veterans who often make the trek to local schools to teach kids and teens about the conflict.

Mr. Bedal's return to the classroom began six years ago when he was interviewed by Veterans Affairs Canadas for The Memory Project, an online archive of first-hand accounts of wartime service.

?This went on the internet eventually and, as a result of that, schools picked up on it,? says Mr. Bedal, adding that students and teachers as far away as Calgary took his story to heart and began writing to him with thanks. ?You would be surprised at what these kids can do; even in the younger grades it is absolutely amazing.?

He shares one particular letter from an elementary school in Etobicoke thanking him for his contributions to freedom, peace, and the values Canadians hold dear. ?Your gift was so good that it gave each Canadian peace and a place called home where we can live in freedom,? wrote the student. ?If we didn't have peace, what would we do??

?It's amazing what teachers can do as well,? says Mr. Bedal of in-class Remembrance Day education. ?Not enough teachers really do this kind of thing and I don't know why they are reluctant, but they are ? especially at the secondary level. I don't know why they seem to have an antipathy to the fact we have to protect our country and it requires three services to do this. With these activities, it is possible to let students share in knowing what Remembrance Day is all about.?

When he goes into classrooms, he shies away from making a speech. This isn't out of any reluctance to share his experience; rather it is his own thirst for knowledge of what makes the students tick and what they want to know. He'll introduce himself and give some of the ?technicalities? of his service, but then, he says, ?I turn it loose for questions.?

?I want to know what they want to know about the war,? he says, adding that, true to form as a teacher himself, he comes in prepared with an arsenal of questions of his own. ?I want them to meet me and share what their thoughts are with me. I really didn't realise the significance of my service until years went by and now that I am talking to students, I realise how significant my little role in the Navy was. At the time, it never entered my mind and it must have been because of my youth in part because we were so busy with our responsibilities and very seldom heard the radio or read the newspaper.

?The significance of what was going on around us at the time did not impinge upon me with any strength. Every year it is more significant to me, when I think about what I was doing at the time and how I have affected the lines of communication, the lines of

traffic across to Europe in order to support the troops, food, armament, gasoline, you name it. We took those ships across safely.?