

USURPER

The HMS Usurper was supposed sunk by the German sub, UJ-2208/Alfred on October 3rd, 1943. It was thought for over 50 years that all who were on the HMS Usurper perished. This is where the historians are wrong, for there was one who survived against all odds, Sub-Lieutenant, Parker Frost.

Prologue

Boom! The explosion shook the submarine. The emergency lights came on. The sub had taken damage to its hull.

Someone was yelling for everyone to evacuate. I jumped out of my chair, pulled on my Steinke Hood, (a device which gave oxygen to the wearer while they were escaping the submarine) and went running to the hatch. I reached it and tried to remember my emergency training. "Open the hatch horizontally." I thought. At the moment, we were about 350 feet deep. At this depth, as I ascended, I would probably get nauseous, and have a spell of unconsciousness. The hood could also run out of air before I could get to the surface. I weighed my options before finally pulling open the hatch.

*

*

*

It was Great Britain, August 27th, 1943 and World War 2 was in full swing. I looked around the room at the other men standing there. There was a large range, some looked 6' 7" while others looked no more than 5' 4". There were 30 year-olds and others who couldn't have been more than 15.

"Parker Frost." A pretty woman had stuck her head through the door at the end of the hall. I stood up and picked up of my paperwork. I walked over to the woman and we went through the door.

"Ok, right this way." She took me over to a scale. I took off my shoes and stood up on the scale.

“193 pounds” She muttered taking a note. “Alright then lets go get your height.” She pulled out a measuring tape and asked me to stand against the wall. “6 foot 3.” she said writing it down on her clipboard.

I was waiting at home for my letter. It had been a week since my physical and I was having trouble falling asleep. My wife, Judy, rolled over and mumbled in her sleep. I went downstairs to do some work and tried to look over some reports for work but I couldn't focus. I kept thinking about when the letter would come. Eventually I started yawning. I went up to bed and got under the covers. I rolled around until finally I fell asleep.

When I woke up the next morning I got out of bed and slipped on my robe. I walked slowly down the stairs and out onto the porch. It was a beautiful morning; the sun was just peeking out over the tops of the houses and the ground was covered in morning dew and leaves. I walked out in my slippers and got the newspaper. I made a cup of coffee and sat down at the dining room table. The headline read: Italy Drops Out Of War.

“Honey did you hear the news?”

“No, what is it?” She was in the kitchen making pancakes.

“Italy has dropped out of the war.”

“Oh that's great news.” There was a pause. “How many pancakes do you want?”

“You don't seem very excited about this. I mean, this is huge news.”

“I know dear, it's just hard to get excited when you're so anxious all the time.”

“Oh, that's nothing. I'm just a little worried about whether the Navy will accept me.”

“It's nice that you're so patriotic but why not stay here. You have a solid job and we could have some kids, maybe even move to a bigger house.”

“I know, but I owe a service to my country.”

“Ok, just promise that you'll be careful?”

“I'll try dear. Now are those pancakes ready?”

It turned out to be a beautiful day. We went to the movies, the river, and finally we came home to make dinner. Judy immediately went to the kitchen to start cooking the chicken and I went to get the mail. There were a few bills and a letter from Judy's mother. I flipped through these quickly until I reached a letter addressed to me from the British Navy. I took the letters and walked back into the house. The other letters I set down on the table. Then I took out my letter opener and slit the top of the letter.

Dear Parker Frost,

We are happy to inform you that you have been accepted into the Royal Navy. You will be on the submarine, HMS Usurper. It will leave from Algiers on September 24th. Your position will be Sub-Lieutenant. Please sign in at the Navy base in Algiers by the 19th. While in Algiers you will be briefed on submarine procedure and safety. Included in this letter is a plane ticket for the 15th of September. Your captain will be Lieutenant David Roger Oakeley Mott.

Sincerely,

His Majesty,

The King.

I stood there looking at the place in which I would spend the next 18 days of my life. The water stretched out in all directions. Sailboats and yachts of all sizes skimmed across the water. Many of these boats would later be collected for use by the Navy. Seagulls and pelicans flew overhead occasionally diving to snatch at a fish. I was sweating on the dock and couldn't imagine what the heat inside of the submarine would be like.

It was September 24th; the day we were scheduled to leave. I had met the rest of my crew a week earlier. The captain would be Lieutenant David Roger

Oakeley Mott; a good friendly captain, but one who wouldn't take any dissent. There was also the telegraphist; Edward Henry Sidney Carson. Edward was a nice young man with a round babyish face. He could not have been more than 15 or 16 and I was surprised that the navy had let him join. William J. Bethell; an able bodied seaman, was a tall dark haired man who I suspected would have some difficulty navigating throughout the submarine because of his height. I thought I knew most of the 109 man crew by face but I knew I would never remember all of their names. I was in my uniform, it was stiff and uncomfortable but I imagined that once I broke it in it would be alright. I walked over to the open hatch and climbed down the ladder into the coffin.

We had been assigned to patrol off the coast of La Spezia, Italy. About 70 miles south-east of Genoa. After a few days underwater, the sub started to stink. No one would shower or change clothes; this wasn't by choice, but instead because there was only enough water for drinking. As the trip went on I lived for our time spent on the surface when I could finally get a breath of fresh air. Many of the novice sailors got sea-sick, further intensifying the stink every time they lost their lunch.

Being on the submarine was very boring. The HMS Usurper had once sunk the French ship, Château Yquem, but now it saw no action. The other sailors would often play chess and sometimes invited me to play but I was never very good at chess so I preferred to watch. The food had nothing on Judy's amazing cooking but it gave me enough sustenance to last me through the day. As my father once said to me and my siblings "It's amazing how the days fill up." and he was right. You may start off the day thinking: "Wow I have nothing that I need to do today." but then you go to work, you come home, you deal with taxes or bills, you eat dinner, watch some of the news, and all of a sudden, it's time for bed. On the submarine many of the same rules apply. You have to wake up, eat, do your job, and, as normal, all at once the day is over. Despite the busyness of living on a submarine, the dullness of it all was starting to drive me mad. I lost track of the days that we were out at sea but my favorite days were the ones I could spend with Edward. Edward and I would usually stay on the fringe of the

sailors. We were hard workers but made no attempt to draw attention to ourselves.

One night we were hit by a very big storm. Despite being more than 400 feet underwater the submarine was still rocking, throwing even the veteran sailors tumbling. Edward and I were sitting in chairs when he started to cry. Taken aback I stood silent for a moment, not knowing how to respond to the sudden breakdown. I finally gathered my wits about me and went over to talk to him.

“Edward what’s wrong?” I asked feeling awkward. He continued to cry.

“Edward come on talk to me.” I tried again. He sniffled and wiped his nose trying to get ahold of himself.

“It’s nothing.” he sniffled.

“Come on Edward, I know it’s something.”

“The Nazis killed both of my parents when they found that we were hiding a Jew in our attic. I was out at the store getting eggs for dinner and as I approached the house I heard gunshots.” He looked up at me with big eyes filled with tears. “I was scared.” He continued. “I ran all the way to my grandmother’s house, 4 miles away. My grandma drove back to our house to find my parents bodies lying on the floor. The Nazis didn’t even have the respect to pick them up. I stayed with my grandparents for a while before I decided that I wanted revenge. I applied for the army but they sent me here instead. I think that it is good fortune that I met you.” I sat there stunned. I had no idea how to respond to that. I put my hand on his shoulder and I sat there until his breaths turned slow and rhythmic. I placed a blanket on him and went in to watch a few more games of chess.

By the next morning (October 3rd) the storm had stopped and I had gotten about an hour of sleep. I went to my post at the sonar. Working at the sonar is much like driving a car on the highway. Most of the time it is a very dull and boring job but you must always be alert for if you don't pay attention, another submarine could sneak up on you. After a few minutes I was alerted that we had been ordered to move north-west into the Gulf Of Genoa.

It took us over 5 hours to get there and by the time we did, I was drifting off. Despite my attempts to stay awake, after a few more hours of patrolling the waters the rocking put me to sleep, securing the rest of the crew's death.

Boom! The explosion shook the sub. The emergency lights came on. The sub lurched to the right.

There was an all-call to evacuate. I jumped out of my chair, pulled on my Steinke Hood, (a device which gave oxygen to the wearer while they were escaping the submarine) and went running to the hatch. I reached it and tried to remember my emergency training. "Open the hatch horizontally." I thought. My thoughts were interrupted by another explosion and all of the lights went out. At the moment we were at about 350 feet deep. At this depth I would probably encounter nausea, and have a spell of unconsciousness. There was also a good chance that I would die of "the bends" because I ascended too fast. The hood might run out of air before I could get to the surface. I waited, listening for footsteps; I waited and waited but after hearing none and feeling the submarine starting to flip sideways, I opened the hatch.

Water rushed in, knocking me back. I fought against the current and finally pulled myself out of the submarine door. The air in my hood sent me rocketing up through the water, disorienting me. I immediately got a splitting headache and felt as though I would throw up. I tried to hold back my vomit because throwing up into the hood could result in death. The water was so dark that when I passed out there was barely a difference. I woke up confused. For a moment I forgot where I was. The jolt of the cold water brought it all back to me. The water was lighter here and my ascent had slowed. My breathing had become more labored and I could tell I was running out of air. I looked above me and thought I saw the surface. Yes! that was the surface! I started swimming to speed up. As I used the remaining bit of air I had left, it became harder for me to swim. The hood ran out of air and became a dead weight. I pulled it off and continued my swim. I was still 25 feet from the surface. I stopped thinking and let my body do the work. 15 feet, 10 feet, 5 feet.

I broke the surface and gulped the air as a starving man would gulp down food. I did not think that I had gotten the bends although my body hurt enough without it. I could see the coast about a mile away and after a moments hesitation, began to swim towards it. The human body is an amazing thing. Whenever I would think about giving up, my desire to live overruled it. When I was swimming it seemed almost a harder thing to stop and give up than to continue. Slowly the the coast grew closer and I aimed for a beach, filled with kids playing and splashing in the water. There were parents there too. One couple kissed and it reminded me of Judy. I renewed my efforts energised by the thought of her.

It wasn't until I was completely sure my feet could touch the bottom that I finally put my foot down. My shoes and my shirt had fallen off and the sand squelched between my toes. When I reached the shore and climbed out I immediately fell over. My legs, so used to the rocking of the submarine, were now totally useless on land. I was getting some odd looks so I started crawling to the end of the beach, worried that someone would call the police. Italy may have dropped out of the war but I was sure that if people found out that I was british, there would still be plenty of people willing to turn me in to the Nazis.

I found shelter beneath a palm tree and it was at that point that I spared my first thought towards Edward and the rest of the crew. It was my fault that they were dead. I had fallen asleep and we had been attacked. I was sure that none of them had lived; I could feel it in my heart. I wept for them until it got dark and I fell asleep.

By the next day my legs had improved enough to walk but I still felt very wobbly. I walked into the city and sat down on a curb to think. I was responsible for the deaths of all of the people on the HMS Usurper. I had no money, I had left it all in my cabin. I needed to get home. Over the next 2 months I begged and scraped together enough money to take a train up to Le Havre, France; and from there a boat to Portsmouth, UK. From there, I wired my wife that I was alive and made the last leg of the trip home to my nice little house, 1250 College Rd., Norwich, United Kingdom.

I never told anyone about the occurrences which had taken place. I was far too guilty to reveal my part in the tragedy. I will never forget my mistakes and I swear never to forget Edward Henry Sidney Carson.