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Mrs Hartley Dunford

An Autobiographical Sketch
by
Captain Charles Rubidge, R.N.

Peterborough, Ontario, Canada
1870

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[title page annotation:
C.M. Rubidge Dunsford
My beloved father. C.M.D.]

I, Charles Rubidge, son of Robert and Margaret A. Rubidge (Maiden name Gilmour,) was born on the 30th day of April, 1787, at 4:20, p.m., and was baptized at St. George's-in-the-East, London. My mother died in 1795, aged 30 years, deeply lamented. As she was a sister of the late Elizabeth Portlock, the wife of Capt. Nathaniel Portlock, R.N., I was committed to their care for a short time, and sent to school at Gosport. On the 16th of October, 1796, I entered the Royal Navy as a volunteer of the first class, on board the Arrow, Sloop of War, commanded by my uncle, in which ship we lay at Portsmouth during the mutiny. To this excellent man I was greatly indebted, as his good advice saved me from many errors. He died a Captain, in Greenwich Hospital, in 1818. On the 17th day of March, 1800, I joined the Ceres Troop Ship, and at Cork we embarked the 31st Regiment, who then wore Powder and Pigtails. Arrived at Gibraltar we disembarked the 31st Regiment, and embarked the 90th, when after some stay in the Harbours of Malta and Port Mahon, in the Island of Minorca, the large expedition collected there proceeded to Marmorice Bay in Asia, one of the finest harbours in the world. After remaining there a long time, the whole of the fleet, with the Transports, sailed for Aboukir Bay, in Egypt. At the landing of the Troops under Aboukir Castle, effected under a very heavy fire, many boats were sunk and men killed or wounded. For months after this I was constantly employed in a boat, night and day, moving troops, prisoners, luggage, provisions and the wounded; rough work this, sleeping in an open boat, often obliged to eat raw salt beef and pork. Egypt taken from the French, we embarked a detachment of the 42nd Highlanders, badly affected with ophthalmia, and conveyed them to England; our Captain, Charles Jones, caught this disease, went to sick quarters, and lost an eye. After a short stay we again embarked troops and sailed for Jamaica. On this station we lost the second Lieutenant, three midshipmen and three of the crew. I was the only mid who returned to England. The Ceres was then paid off. After a

short time on shore I joined the William, Store Ship, going out to Malta. There I was drafted into the Agincourt of 64 guns, Captain Sir Thomas Briggs. Again visiting Alexandria, in Egypt, we returned to Malta and sailed to join the fleet under Lord Nelson, off Toulon, where, after encountering a succession of heavy gales off Cape Cicie, the ship started two of the butends, by which she was in danger of foundering, when, by signal, running under the stern of the Victory, Lord Nelson hailed us to make the best of our way to Malta. Fortunately the wind was fair for that port, which we reached in a few days, expecting the ship to founder all the way. We had eleven feet of water in the hold, the decks forward were scuttled and hand-pumps put down. The four chain-pumps were kept constantly going night and day, every tub and bucket in the ship used in bailing out water. Providentially we reached the harbour of Malta in safety. The ship repaired, we sailed again to join Lord Nelson's fleet off Toulon, stopping at Syracuse and Messina in the Straits of Messina, passing Mount Aetna and Stromboli in the night; being close to the latter we saw a great stream of lava pouring down its side. At daylight in the morning when in sight of the Island of Corsica we saw two large French Frigates about four miles off, to which we at once gave chase and we continued to follow them with all sail until the evening, when the wind failing them and favouring us we got within gun-shot of them, and our hopes were greatly raised for a short time, but soon again they caught the breeze which enabled them to get to the harbour of Calvi, in the Island of Corsica. What might have been the result of an action between two heavy Frigates, carrying long guns, and a 64, with carronades, 68 pounders, on the main deck, and 24 pounder long guns on the lower deck, it is not easy to say, but certain it is, we would gladly have attacked them, although the odds were greatly against us. In 1805 I removed to the Orpheus with Sir Thomas Briggs, and passed my examination for a Lieutenant's Commission on the day the news of the Battle of Trafalgar arrived in London. On the 9th of February, 1806, I was appointed Sub-Lieutenant of the Censor Brig, and on the 29th of October, 1806, was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant and appointed to the Modeste Frigate, commanded by the Honourable George Elliott. At that time my health was bad and I was advised not to risk a voyage to India. To me this was a severe disappointment, as the Captain's father, the Earl of Minto, was going out with him as Governor General to India. Although the appointment was so desirable I gave it up, and Lieutenant Drury replaced me. On the arrival of the ship off Calcutta poor Drury was sent in the Cutter on duty, and crossing the Bar the boat was upset and he and all the crew were drowned. In February, 1807, my health being re-established I was appointed third Lieutenant of the Regulus, an old 44 on two decks. This ship was paid off on the 4th of July, 1807, and on the 5th I joined His Majesty's Bomb-ship Aetna, and became first Lieutenant. Our armament was two mortars of 13 and 10 inches, and eight carronades. The first service of this ship was with the inshore Squadron, bombarding the City, the fleet in the dockyard and the heavy batteries of Copenhagen. What with the fire from these and from numerous Gun and Mortar Boats, for three days it was hot work, and many men were killed and wounded. Our ship, although struck several times, escaped. The Charles, an armed Transport, lying half a mile outside of us, was blown up, a shell having reached her magazine. When our batteries on shore were ready, at 12 o'clock at night, they, with the Bomb-ships, Mortar-boats and Gun-boats, opened a destructive fire on the City dockyard, and their flotilla; the sight was awfully grand. In a short time the Cathedral and other churches, with a great part of the City, were on fire. Next day the City and Fleet surrendered, and in the Autumn the whole of the Danish Fleet were taken to England. The next service of the Aetna was at the destruction of the Fleet in the Basque Roads, in 1809, which commenced at night by sending in which a flood-tide and a strong wind upwards of Twenty fire-ships filled with gunpowder, congreve-rockets, and all sorts of combustibles. Our ship having taken up a position close to the channel leading into the harbour to

bombard Isle De Aix, was nearly set on fire by one of the ships, in a blaze, drifting right down upon us, and we only escaped by veering out cable, and, as the tide was strong, by giving the ship a sheer, fortunately she drifted clear of us. The following day most of the French Fleet were aground, lying over on their beam-ends, when, on the flood tide making, the signal was made for the Aetna, the Conflict and other small vessels to weigh and run in, but they were immediately followed by the Empereuse, Lord Cochrane, and all the other Frigates, and were soon followed by four of our smallest Line-of-Battle Ships. Once anchored, a general action began; by the time the ebb tide made, four of the enemy's Line-of-Battle Ships and three Frigates were on fire. The Aetna, the only Bomb-ship with the Fleet at that time, for two days engaged the Batteries on Isle De Aix, when the Devastation joined. For three or four days we ran in on the flood-tide to bombard some of their Line-of-Battle Ships still on shore; on the second day we grounded close to one of their large ships on fire, and for some time expected her to blow up. An anchor was soon laid out and we hove off taking up a position to engage one of their large ships on shore, Lord Cochrane came on board and expressed great satisfaction with the ship's position and laid the 13 inch Mortar three times, when being convinced that he was not a good artilleryman, he resigned the task to the Marine Artillery Officer, who was more successful, he dropping a shell into a lighter along side the enemy's ships and sinking her, and exploding many other shells close over the 74, at which Lord Cochrane was in ecstasies. During this day I was wounded in the right leg, and one of the crew had his breast badly lacerated. Our Commander, William Godfrey, was posted and made a Companion of the Bath for the good conduct of the Aetna here and at Copenhagen. My claims as first Lieutenant were urged by Colonel Beaumont, M.P., and my uncle Captain Portlock, and the former received an answer from Lord Melville to say that a note was made of my name to be considered with those of other meritorious officers. (See Appendix.) The following year the Aetna was again employed in the bombardment of Flushing, and her marked good conduct was most particularly alluded to in the Gazette by Admiral Sir George Cockburn. As our acting Commander, Pane Lawless, had only been appointed to the ship three days before she was taken into action, this good conduct could not be attributed to him, as he had not before served in a Mortar Vessel. He got his promotion, the first Lieutenant did not. The following year we sailed for Cadiz, and on our arrival were constantly employed bombarding the enemy's batteries. Here I was again wounded by the bursting of one of our own shells in the mouth of the Mortar.¹ In September, 1810, our commander was advanced to Post-rank, and I got the command of the Hardy, gun-brig. In here I was employed on a very arduous service and conveyed many persons of rank from Cadiz to Faro, Cape St Mary's, to join the army of the Duke of Wellington. One of my passengers was the present Earl Russell, Prime Minister of England, at that time travelling for his health. The Hardy being found defective was ordered home, and on her arrival at Portsmouth, in compliance with a general order, the guns were unloaded and the next day we sailed for Sheerness to be paid off. Running up channel along our own coast, the wind very strong, at four p.m. a Lugger was seen standing for us, mistaking the brig (she being disguised) for a Merchantman. On nearing us she hoisted French colours. On the instant I ordered the brig to be hove to, hoping the Lugger would run along side, instead of which she ran her bowsprit over the quarter, and although the crew and Marines were armed and ready to board her, the sea was so rough that it was impossible to do so. A constant fire of musketry was kept up for some time and as the men on board the Lugger were quite exposed they must have suffered severely by their mistake. We had four men wounded, the sergeant of Marines and one seaman badly. At last the Lugger fell off from us, and we got one of our long guns to bear on her, but did not disable her, and our attempt to catch her was something like a cow after a hare. The Assistant Surgeon had gone ashore at Portsmouth and was left

behind. I had to dress the wounds of those hurt. On the 17th day of November, 1811, the Hardy was paid off, and after a few months on shore,² I was, on the 12th of May, appointed to the command of the Bloodhound, Gun Brig, and on reaching Plymouth, joined, and received Mr Schaw, a King's Messenger, on board, and at once sailed for Annapolis, in Maryland, America, taking out a repeal of the Orders in Council. After a long passage we arrived in the Chesapeake and took on board a black Pilot, who took us safe up but never mentioned that War was declared against England some time before. Near Annapolis, it being calm, I left the Brig in my Gig with Mr Schaw for the Town; on arriving at the hotel an American Officer waited on me and politely informed me that I and my party were prisoners, but on parole. The next day orders arrived from Washington to consider the Brig a Flag of Truce. All sorts of inducements were held out to my crew to desert, twenty of them did so in two days. Finding I was likely to lose all hands I got the Brig under weigh and anchored far out in the Chesapeake, and arming the officers and trustworthy men a stop was put to any more desertion. Mr Schaw having returned from Washington we sailed for England, and on the 2nd of August the ship was struck by lightening, the report being so loud that it appeared as if all the guns (at the time double shotted) had gone off at once. The electric fluid first struck the main-top gallant-mast cutting the top-gallant sail and gaff-top-sail to pieces, and splintering the main-mast badly. It then blew the lead out of the water-tank in front of the main-mast and descended by the stove-pipe into my cabin, blew up the spirit-room hatch and expended its force amongst barrels of rum within two inches of the powder magazine.³ From this time until the peace of 1815 I commanded the Bloodhound on the Plymouth, Falmouth, and Swansea Station, conveying vessels to and from those places. Sailing round so dangerous a coast we were often in the greatest peril. On the 18th of November, 1815, the Bloodhound was paid off at Plymouth. Still being desirous to continue in the service, I made repeated applications to the Admiralty for active employment until 1819, when not having the slightest hope held out to me (even at a distant day) of service afloat, I emigrated with my wife and three children to Upper Canada. We arrived at Quebec on the 24th of June, 1819, but did not reach Cobourg until the 19th of July. In those days there was no conveyance from LaChine to Prescott except by Bateau or Durham-boats, and only two steam-boats plied between Quebec and Montreal, and they took two days and a half to accomplish the distance; the names were the Quebec and Swiftsure. On landing from the Schooner at Cobourg we met with a warm reception from our worthy old friend Captain Boswell, R.N., and his family, and received houseroom under their hospitable roof until the Spring of 1820. During the winter I employed two men to put up the logs of a house, and in the spring, on the 8th of May, I took my wife and three children out into the bush. Mr George Kent⁴ being the first actual settler in Otonabee, I was the next. Nothing more than the bare walls of my house were up and the shingle-roof on. At once I began to clear off about an acre of land and got in some Potatoes, Indian Corn, Turnips, &c., and through the summer and autumn employed tow Americans to chop and clear off about four acres more, whilst my time was occupied in preparing my log house for the winter, doing all the carpentry work myself. The late Mr Covert and the Hon. Chief Justice Draper, C.B.,⁵ came out to see us in June, the latter at the time thinking to put up a shanty on one of my wild lots, in which to pursue his studies, but all the charms of settling in the woods faded away before the next morning. We had all to sleep above, only a few loose boards being placed for bedsteads, the house was quite open, without door or window, and the Mosquitoes and Blackflies were as bad as they well could be.⁶ At once I was placed on the Commission of the Peace, and am now, in 1870, the oldest Magistrate in the whole of the Newcastle District, which now forms the Counties of Northumberland and Durham, Peterborough and Victoria. During my long residence in Canada I have filled many honourable situations in the County. At four Elections I have

been Returning Officer. In 1825 and 1826 I assisted the late Hon. Peter Robinson in the settlements of Immigrants brought out by him from Ireland. I cut and cleared a road from Rice Lake to Peterboro' through the woods to facilitate the transport of the people and stores from Cobourg, which which the Lieutenant Governor, Sir Peregrine Maitland, was so much pleased that his Excellency gave me a Town and a Park Lot, and for a short time this road went by the name of Rubidge Road. In 1831 I was appointed, by Lord Seaton, Immigrant Agent at Peterborough, and during that year located four thousand people from England, Ireland and Scotland; and by being strictly impartial in the distribution of lands I believe that universal satisfaction was given. I conclude this statement of some events of my life, with most devout thanks to Almighty God for His goodness to me and all my family. It pleased Him to remove from my side, on the 16th of April, 1868, the faithful and loved partner, for more than half a century, of all the vicissitudes of my life, after she had attained the age of 79 years and 6 months. For twenty years I served afloat as an officer in the navy, and during that time had many narrow escapes from death. Now in 1870 I am in my 84th year, and am one of the oldest officers in the British Navy. From 1819 to 1841 I mad a farm and worked hard on it, until appointed Registrar of the County of Peterborough, which situation I still hold.⁷

Appendix

Letter from Richard Jeffreys,
Lieut. Marine Artillery, on board Lord Gambier's ship
Exeter, June 17, 1841

My dear Rubidge:

....

So much for my own concerns; and now to the 'leading article' of your letter. In truth, I do think you have strong, aye, most strong, claims upon the Admiralty for your past services. Well do I remember the days of our servitude together at 'Basque Roads,' and fearlessly assert for your skilful and gallant exertions in judiciously placing the 'Aetna' in the situation you did, (for with due respect to the gallantry of poor old Godfrey, who seemed to have delegated the chief management of the ship to you,) – I do think you were entitled to the greatest praise. And I recollect Lord Cochrane's observations upon coming on board while we were throwing our shells, 'that the Aetna was placed in a capital position,' and he, I think, was no mean authority – he was also pleased to express himself in terms of approbation at the manner in which the Old Bomb did her duty. The very circumstance of your being wounded in the leg surely ought in justice to entitle you to the small boon you crave, that of being an out pensioner of Greenwich. But these are sad stingy times, and by-gone services are too often shamefully neglected.

I am delighted to hear so good an account of your self and family. May God ever bless you and them with all possible prosperity is the wish of yours most sincerely,⁸

Richard Jeffreys.

Endnotes

1. CMD comments: "Was married the 20th of Jany 1810 to my dear Mother, Margaret Clarke. CMD. My mother was the handsomest woman I ever saw – she was the belle of Kensington in her youth. So wrote General Ward, a friend of my Father and Mothers, of Woodland Castle, Swansea, Wales. CMD."

2. CMD comments: "accompanied by my dear Mother. CMD"

3. CMD comments: "My Mother's canary was killed by the lightening. CMD."
4. CMD comments: "who had a wife & one son & one daughter John Kent & Sarah Kent. CMD."
5. CMD comments: "who was at that time articled to Mr Thos Ward, near Port Hope, & walked there every day – 7 miles from Cobourg. CMD."
6. CMD comments: "My Mother, two little brothers & sister came to the log house when in this state. The ladder by which they got aloft had to be pulled up at night to keep the bears out. My dear Mother's experience was something truly wonderful, for an English lady. Such hardships she had to endure, my loved father helping her in every way possible. He was a man in ten thousand. His daughter, who loved him dearly, C.M. Rubidge Dunsford."
7. CMD commented: "Died Feby 15th 1873. Had my Father lived four years longer he would have been an Admiral by seniority." Earlier she observed he "died 1873, aged 86."
8. C.M.D commented: "And Captn J's prayer was most abundantly blessed. CMD"