

George's Story

By

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It began when one of my sons climbed up to the attic of their newly acquired Bowen cottage and found a number of .45 revolver live rounds of ammunition. They both had the same thought: granted that many people on Bowen island had guns because they used to shoot the deer, but handguns? They were curious enough to go to the RCMP detachment on Bowen and tell them about it. The corporal asked where they had found these rounds and hearing that it was the attic of 987 Dorman Road, with the name "Harbour View" printed on its front, he nodded and said: "We think that was once a rum runner's cottage. Those guys carried handguns." So when I became the tenant and was asked where I lived I always proudly responded: "I live in the rum runner's cottage." People sometimes looked at me with a puzzled frown and would query skeptically: "On Bowen?" as though I had somehow besmirched their island by suggesting anything so gross. And that got me thinking.

I remembered that for years I and my wife and children used to spend our summers at Hood Point in a home about a stone's throw from a place called Smuggler's Cove. I naturally puzzled about this name and was told by several Hood Pointers that in fact the cove had once been favoured by smugglers because it was an ideal hideaway. However, other than the rumour, I had nothing to back up the story. But now at last I had something. Those handgun bullets provided real evidence, though they had nothing to do with Smuggler's Cove. Something began to nag at me – a memory which I couldn't in the beginning pin down. Then one night a figure appeared in my dream which I immediately recognized as George Reevey. Over the years when I was young George had run errands for my father who needed help for he had lost both legs above the knee in the first World War. In the past I had helped him but eventually I was going to university and either studying, skiing, or in animated conversation with my friends in the cafe at UBC for countless hours..

Long before this I had met George when he had become a rent-free roomer at my grandmother's rooming house. Under my persistent urging he told me his life's story.

He had been brought up in the toughest district of Belfast and became a member of a Protestant gang of youths who would beat up any Catholic kids who would not agree to "curse the Pope." Of course, if the Catholic gang outnumbered the Protestants, it went the other way and then George's gang was challenged to curse King Billy. This William of Orange, of course, was the King who had set his heart on making Ireland into a Protestant state, and at the Battle of the Boyne, still celebrated by Protestants, he seemed to be on his way to accomplishing such a conversion.

George's family were very poor and when the boy was fifteen they got him to sign on in the British navy as a cabin boy. By the time he was seventeen he had become an Able Seaman. I forget the name of the battle cruiser he served on, though he described it to me in some detail. It happened to be one of those engaged in the greatest naval battle of the First World War – the Battle of Jutland. It took two hits and was crippled but not sunk. Though many seamen's lives were lost, George was unhurt.

When the war came to an end George left the navy and returned to Belfast. But the city had little employment to offer, and he used the last of his seaman's savings on a voyage to Canada. In Halifax he laboured as a longshoreman and over the years worked his way across Canada, drawn to the west coast which he had heard was the most prosperous part of the country. But some months before he got there the economic depression of 1929 buried the whole of Canada in misery. He found himself in Vancouver not only out of work but even any prospect of work. Somehow he managed to get by going door to door, never asking for money but only for work in exchange for a meal. He slept out in an abandoned shack with five other men that winter of 1930. In the spring he read a help wanted ad in the paper requesting the services of a ship's bosun, immediately phoned in and secured an appointment. Luckily he had saved his naval rating and his service record, including his participation in the Battle of Jutland which cited him for cool self command under fire. He presented himself, making sure he was clean, and that his clothes were pressed though somewhat threadbare. George got the job.

He was very pleased when he presented himself next day at dockside, not in Vancouver, but surprisingly at an estuary on the Fraser River. It was more like a yacht than a ship, more than sixty feet in length. As well as an engineer there were three deckhands and the big captain, red faced and jovial. George easily fitted in.

The next day after dusk they raised anchor and slid out of the harbour. The Captain told George that they were picking up a special cargo and delivering it to a port in California. That was fine with George. And where was this special cargo? Oh, at a small island near Vancouver, the Captain told George – a place called Bowen Island. George thought he said "bone" and thought it was funny that anyone would name an island after a bone, or in fact that such a small island would have valuable cargo. The other thing that bothered George was that they were traveling without lights, but he said nothing.

Evidently the Captain noticed George's puzzlement for he invited George to sit down with him over a cup of rum, which George gladly accepted. The other thing that surprised George was the speed of the boat which he guessed at around twenty knots, not significant today but was then.

After the second cup of rum George asked if he could turn in. The Captain said there'd be no sleep for anyone until after the ship was loaded, which began within half an hour of their arrival at Snug Cove. George and the three seamen under him had to lift the heavy crates of cargo onto the ship which two Bowen Islanders delivered to the dock from somewhere up the hill. The job took a couple of hours, George remembered, partly because the Captain had ordered them to be as quiet as possible. After the cargo was all

loaded, they were told they could turn in for four hours. It was then around 11:00 PM.

Sure enough, George was shaken awake at 3:00 AM and told to wake up the others. Within 15 minutes they were on their way.

Again they moved at top speed without lights. In the wheelhouse the Captain told him they were carrying a consignment of booze, mostly rye whisky supplied by a new company called Seagrams together with some gin and a little brandy. There was only a smattering of Scotch because of its high cost. He said they were delivering all of this shipment to customers in San Francisco who were risking jail since prohibition in the States made liquor distribution unlawful. He said these distributors sold to speakeasies and moonlight cafes all over the State of California. The problem for the suppliers in Canada where there was no Prohibition was getting enough stuff to meet the demand, especially because of the threat posed by the U.S. Coastguard which in those days did not hesitate to sink a ship that resisted being boarded. But being boarded meant being taken off to prison in irons and the Captain said he'd never given in to the bastards but always outran them, though his craft had taken a few hits from small arms fire. He said he'd more than once opened fire himself and showed George a sniper's rifle under his bed and in his closet a Thompson machine gun. He slapped his side where he carried a revolver and told George he should wear one too, though not to deter the Coastguard. The sidearms were to discourage their customers, who were all gangsters, from getting greedy and thinking they could loot the ship. Only one customer was allowed on deck at any one time and he was always accompanied by two armed crewmembers. So far they'd had no trouble.

This particular voyage was completely successful, and the next one, too. But it was destined to end in a couple of years with the demise of Prohibition in the U.S. By that time the man who ran the rum-running operation, George Reifel, had become a multimillionaire. By that time, too, while George had made a top income, he had also become an alcoholic and soon spent all that he had earned. Eventually, more out of necessity than intention, he was able to remain sober for weeks and then for months, taking part time work here and there, eventually to become a rent-free roomer at my Grandmother's rooming house in return for work around the place. Years later when my Grandmother moved to our house to live he became a handyman to my mother and father. And that's when I squeezed out George's story.

With 987 Dorman Rd. becoming the source of supply for all that illegal booze, Bowen Island came to play a crucial role in British Columbia's social history.
