



# A GOOD RUN

Written by Francis Martell

*Illustrated by Jaxon Greene*

*\*This story was written by Francis Martell before becoming a resident of the St Anne Community & Nursing Care Centre in Arichat, N.S.*

On April 20, 1944, I was 14 years old living in the community of Arichat, N.S. on the south coast of Isle Madame, a small island off the coast of Cape Breton. The much-anticipated prosperity that the war effort had brought to the remainder of Canada and U.S. had not yet arrived in Isle Madame in the spring of that year. Residents facing near starvation in the throes of the depression remained desperate for gainful employment. So, for many youth, like myself, the allure of the European campaign was a magnet few could resist. At 14, I had no hope of enlisting in the regular army or navy but there were other avenues open to the kid with wanderlust, driven by the many stories he heard from his father's readings of older brother Wallace's tales, received in letters from far flung areas of the world such as New Zealand, Australia, France and Italy.

I was in Grade 8 in 1944 and not doing very well. Constantly bullied by older and more affluent kids, I did not regret signing on as an assistant fireman (coal shoveler) on the local coastal freighter serving the Strait of Canso and P.E.I. The S.S. Surf was owned by the Margaree Steam Ship Company. The 75-foot vessel was a re-purposed luxury yacht that carried general cargo as well as passengers and mail. Given that the ship consumed approximately two tons of coal per day to drive its two steam boilers, it was not long before the scrawny, six-foot and malnourished youth became overwhelmed. After five days I was out of the job with the words, "this job needs a fully-grown person," which I was not! I was paid off on Friday but returned the next week to speak to the cook, a family friend by the name of Narcisse Marchand. He was an affable, kind gentleman and I begged him for a job. I was hired as a cook's assistant where I could "work like a dog and eat like a pig," which I did, having never seen the likes of the bounty laid before the crew and passengers. I can still remember the cook telling me, "When I am through with you, your arse will be as broad as your Aunt

to the man or discover his whereabouts. He vanished and no one at the hospital could identify him. I landed in Vancouver and took a train to Montreal, where I was admitted to the Montreal General Hospital for five days on Dec. 10, 1948. When I arrived in Arichat at the age of 19, I was much older in spirit than the 14-year-old who had taken the job on the coastal freighter.

I returned to Arichat to find my parents in need of care. Returning to sea in the near future was not going to be an option. One day, I walked into a restaurant and saw the women I wanted to marry. Not deterred by the fact that she was already engaged, I pursued her until she said yes. A year later we married and have been married ever since. We have raised two children together, and although I have had some longing for the sea from time to time, I do not regret my decision to stay home. I ran two businesses for several years, but at the age of 39 I obtained my Grade 12 equivalency and enrolled in vocational school. I qualified as a journey carpenter two years later.

I have been retired since the age of 55, have traveled extensively, and have enjoyed many hobbies these past 27 years. We now live comfortably in a new apartment attached to my son's home, having sold our family home of 62 years just his past summer. I have survived several serious health issues and am now coping with memory problems. But, looking back, it has been a good run. Life is what you make of it, but occasionally there are a few curve balls along with way that are unanticipated. It is how you negotiate those curves that makes the difference.

THE END

between leaving Canada and my aging parents and my desire to make something of myself. We set sail from San Diego to Shanghai, loaded with munitions for the leadership of the Island of Formosa (Taiwan). The ship was bedeviled with mechanical problems and extreme Pacific Ocean heat, thereby extending the trip by weeks. Supplies of fuel, food and, water began to run low, and with it, tolerance for others. Long-time friends began snipping at each other, and as conditions worsened, concern for safety increased. Thankfully, port was reached before any major incidents arose. But, to an 18-year-old boy, it was a side of humanity never seen before and brought maturity forward by a decade.

Given the political unrest of the day, the ship was refused entry into Shanghai. Shortly after arriving, I developed a fever and quickly became ill. The captain ordered quarantine and a land-based physician ordered that I be brought to shore, where I eventually ended up being admitted to the Singapore General Hospital with a diagnosis of tuberculosis – literally a death sentence in 1948 in Asia. My ship sailed on without me to deliver its cargo. Alone, despondent, and unable to speak Chinese, I was desperate. One morning I received a visit from a Catholic Chaplain. I asked how he found me. He said that he was looking at the register for the day and when he saw my name he immediately thought I was French-Canadian, as he was. As a lapsed Catholic, I was skeptical, but as the days passed, I grew to trust the man. He became convinced I did not have TB and implored the Chinese physicians to take a second look. Time was of the essence, as I was scheduled to be shipped to a TB colony off the coast in a few days. After the examination the physicians tapped my chest for a great deal of fluid. Within days I felt better and soon, through the intervention of the priest, I was making arrangements to return to Canada to convalesce before returning to my ship, or so I thought. The priest never returned and despite many attempts to find him or his order, I was not able to put a name

Mary's." He never did achieve his goal despite his best efforts and mine!

In September of 1944, the Surf was tied up at the Dartmouth shipyards. My sister Yvonne lived alone in Dartmouth as her husband Stan was away fighting in the European campaign. I planned to stay with her to keep her company. However, I heard of another opportunity to ship out to, what I believed was an exotic destination, on the M.V. Clyde Valley. It was bound for the West Indies to deliver general cargo to Jamaica, Trinidad, Cuba, Argentina and Uruguay. I was hooked, and from then on made it my goal to travel the world on whatever ship would take me, eventually signing on as a permanent seaman with the Canadian Park Ship Company. Life was good for me during those years. I was doing what I always wanted, seeing the world as a young 16-year-old at a time when the world was in turmoil. For example, I was on the streets of Buenos Aires in 1946 when Juan and Eva Peron celebrated their victory in his first presidential campaign – crowds and celebrations never seen before by this 16-year-old boy from Arichat.

It can be said that it was a difficult way for a boy from rural Nova Scotia to grow up. Faced with few opportunities and the perception that one was a burden, it seemed a reasonable approach to life at the time. I have never regretted it. There were some difficult moments, especially when life's lessons have to be learned at such a young age from hardened seamen. There were moments though, that perhaps not fully understood to be significant at the time, later proved to be pivotal in my life. In 1946, at just 16, I was in Montreal and for the want of something to do, thought I would attend a union meeting. The, then Canadian Seaman Union, was later affiliated with the communist ideology. The meeting was packed with boisterous seamen. Speaking to issues, which were clearly over my head. One of the meeting organizers

approached me, probably because I looked so bewildered and out of place. Pulling me aside, he was very empathetic about me being too young to be there and associating myself with the people at the meeting, including himself. He was adamant that I should leave and not come back. I took his advice and refused to subscribe to the radical propaganda of the movement. His name was Gerald McManus, who was later interred as a communist sympathizer by the Canadian government. Fifty years later, while on a trip to Florida with my wife to visit my son's parents-in-law, I was thumbing through a family album that lay on the table. I was surprised to see a photograph of an elderly man who I recognized. I asked how they knew Gerald McManus. To my surprise, my son's mother-in-law remarked that Gerald was her brother, now living in western Florida.

It is a small world that we live in, as evidenced by the circumstances outlined. But, also that when you consider that in 1947 I was sitting in a bar in Italy, enjoying some furlough time with my ship buddies. I felt a hand on my shoulder. My brother Wallace, whom I had not seen for 6 years, was astounded to find me there. He was furious with me and insisted that I was too young to be away from home, let alone in a bar in Italy with a bunch of hard-drinking seamen. I prevailed and continued the seaman life until 1948, when circumstances conspired to end that chapter of my life.

I had decided to make a career of the sea and so worked hard to demonstrate that interest to the officers. I was elevated to the wheelhouse, taking a serious interest in navigation. To that end, I studied for my third-mate papers but was advised that I needed a total of 48 months of sea time before being considered for examination. I was short four months! I immediately signed on for a 12-month commitment. It was trying period on a personal and spiritual level. I was torn

