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He Saved Sailors' Lives, Countless Others

Dr. Charles H. Read Jr., a flight surgeon aboard the HMS Nabob in World War II, went on to make invaluable medical contributions during peacetime.



ENLARGE

A Royal Navy aircraft carrier off the coast of Norway, Sept. 16, 1944. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

By Michael Judge

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Living in a college town, I'm more likely to meet someone from Generation X, Y or Z than a member of the "Greatest Generation"—those who endured the Great Depression, defeated Hitler and Emperor Hirohito, and in the postwar era ushered in the biggest expansion of wealth and quality of life in human history.

Yet, largely due to my wife's cooking (she runs a small café; try the eggs Benedict), I had the pleasure of meeting—and calling friend—a medical doctor from the Greatest Generation. As somehow so often turns out to be the case with the heroes of World War II, he lived through harrowing warfare—in this case, a torpedo attack by a Nazi U-boat on the first Canadian-manned aircraft carrier, the HMS Nabob—and then went on to make invaluable contributions to society in peacetime.

Dr. Charles H. Read Jr. was already in his 90s when I met him at my wife's café several years ago. A tall, gentle man with a shock of white hair and a mischievous grin, he had heard I was a writer and editor and wanted to show me a manuscript—a memoir he had written about his service as a flight surgeon in the Royal Canadian Navy during World War II and his days as a country doctor on Prince Edward Island at war's end. Over coffee, he handed me the story of his life, neatly typed, double-spaced in a brick-thick tome. A bit overwhelmed, I was, to be honest, dreading reading it.

But then he told me his story, and I was captivated. How on Aug. 22, 1944, the Nabob was struck by a German torpedo off Norway's North Cape. How he did his best to tend to the wounded. How none of the injured crewmen complained, but instead urged him to tend to the others first. How most of the crew was forced to abandon ship—he climbed a rope ladder up the hull of another vessel, stinging from the Arctic air and sea.

Eleven Royal Canadian Navy sailors and 10 Royal Navy sailors died on that terrible day. More than 20 seriously injured sailors lived; Dr. Read naturally credited their survival to the hard medical work of others.

After the war, he worked for about a year as a family physician on Prince Edward Island, delivering babies, tending to the elderly, saving more lives. The long manuscript that Dr. Read showed me covered his wartime experiences and his time on Prince Edward Island. An editor suggested that he split the

memoir into two; the section about the latter period produced the charming book “This Navy Doctor Came Ashore,” published in 2012.

Dr. Read began studying endocrine disorders while a resident at the Royal Victoria Hospital in Montreal in 1946, and continued his research as a fellow at Massachusetts General Hospital at Harvard University. He then took a post as a professor in pediatrics at the University of Manitoba, where he developed one of the first diets for diabetics. In 1954, he became a medical professor at the University of Iowa, where, in addition to his clinical practice, he developed the first method for measuring human-growth hormone, helped better understand the role of lipids in causing arteriosclerosis, and developed the insulin assay to more accurately measure insulin levels in diabetics. He even found time to open a free medical clinic that has treated thousands since opening in the early 1970s.

Last week, at age 97, Dr. Read died from congestive heart failure. Knowing what kind of a man he was, I suspect that at some point he saw the doctors and nurses around him and thought: Tend to the others first.

Mr. Judge writes about culture and the arts for the Journal.