

"I was terrified."

Leonard Brooks painted his way across the North Atlantic. He had been aboard many ships in Halifax, but this time he was on a Corvette escorting a convoy on the dangerous run to his native England. The small, fast, manoeuvrable Corvettes would roam around the convoys, always searching for signs of German submarines. "It is dawn in a convoy of hundreds of freighters - we are patrolling for subs - zigzagging up & down in the rough seas," Leonard wrote. "I made a quick water colour of the giant waves & black sky." One day he told the captain he would like to know how rescues at sea were carried out so he could do a sketch. "That's no problem," the captain said, and dropped four men overboard into the frigid waters and brought them up drenched in a net. "This is how men look when they're plucked from the sea."ⁱ

On the train to London, he struck up a conversation with another Corvette captain, a young man from Calgary on a three-day pass. Leonard soon realised the officer's nerves were shaken from the pressure of convoy duty, so he suggested they stick together. Reaching back to his knowledge of London from his Chelsea days, Leonard offered

his services as a guide. "The blackout was on and we walked down the street holding hands with two women officers so that someone would be touching the curb and someone the wall," Leonard recalled. "We invited them to accompany us for a drink at a club for the Polish and French Resistance officers. I don't remember what I did, but he disappeared with one of the women. Three days later he showed up in time to catch his train." Years later, a man accompanied by his wife and children came up to see to Leonard after a lecture in Vancouver. "Remember me?" he asked. "We went to London together. You saved my life."ⁱⁱ

From London Leonard went to the Isle of Wight, where all the Canadian naval artists were based, but he had no intention of staying there if he could help it. He wanted to get as far away as he could from his nemesis, Harold Beament, who had preceded him there. All told, there were seven naval artists, the others being Michael Forster, Donald Cameron Mackay, Rowley Murphy, Jack Nichols and Tom Wood. That was fewer than the Air Force, which had fourteen artists, and the Army, which had eleven.

So Leonard wrote to Harry McCurry, director of the National Gallery. "Some of the stuff I've seen shows more action and bombings and such than being aboard a ship," he said. "Would you be adverse to my painting a few things of

bombed out buildings and call it a navy man's viewpoint of London?" To Leonard's astonishment, McCurry agreed that he could be based in London. The director obviously stretched the "purpose" of the war artist, as enunciated by the Canadian War Artists Committee, which he headed: "As a War Artist appointed to one of the Canadian Services, you are charged with the portrayal of significant events, scenes, phases and episodes in the experience of the Canadian Armed forces, especially those which cannot be adequately rendered in any other way."

Leonard found a studio 55 Oakley Street in Chelsea, where he was soon joined by Michael Forster. Another resident soon came to Leonard's attention: Helga Overoff, tall, slim, blonde, young, attractive. German-born, she had been raised in Cairo. She claimed a distant kinship with Rudolf Hess, Hitler's former deputy who was also in Britain at the time, imprisoned after he flew to Scotland in an attempt to single-handedly negotiate an end to the war. After being interned for three and a half years on the Isle of Man, she was released and now worked for the Red Cross in London. "She was quite attractive," Michael Forster recalled. "Leonard liked her very much."ⁱⁱⁱ Leonard and Helga soon became lovers in a wartime romance that bordered on becoming something more serious. As his friend Fred

Varley had done during the Great War, Leonard had found companionship at a time when one lived for the day at hand.

Helga would often prepare Leonard's meals and bring tea to his studio when she left for work. She would also stand in line at stores to buy scarce food items for both of them. Once, Lieut. Commander Tovell Massey, a member of the Massey family and head of Canadian Naval Intelligence in London, scheduled a visit to 55 Oakley Street to see what Leonard and Forster were doing. Hoping to impress Massey, the two artists had Helga pose as a maid and serve them tea. Unfortunately, she tripped, sending a clutter of teacups, saucers and plates to the floor.

Earle Birney at this time was involved in an affair with British writer Margaret Crosland. Leonard and Helga sometimes double-dated with them. Leonard and Earle had renewed their friendship shortly after Leonard had settled in London, Birney staying overnight with him. They were sitting in the parlour when the night sky lit up and sirens announced a German V-1 bomb attack. Leonard grabbed his coat and headed for the door to witness the aerial show, but Birney, with two years experience overseas, knew better. "You're nuts," he told Leonard. He dragged Leonard under a table, just as Nell Brooks had done during the Great War's Zeppelin attacks.

Known in Canada for his moody, grey snow scenes, Leonard tried to capture "the feeling of gloom" in wartime London. Inspecting the aftermath of a bombing attack, he found himself one day on Braemerton Street, where he had stayed with the eccentric Cecilia Hamilton on his way back to Canada from Spain a decade earlier. There were gaps around No. 47 where houses had been destroyed. Looking at the house, he thought, "That old lady still can't be there." But she was.

Miss Hamilton refused to let him in because of the disarray caused by the bombings, but he begged her to let him peer down the hallway to the room under the stairs where he had stayed. Overcome by emotion, Leonard cried at the memories. He saw the watercolour he had given her when she refused to accept rent for the room. He took money out of his pocket and some chocolate bars and pressed them into her hands. As he looked back, he heard a flutter of wings and saw some pigeons fly out of her bedroom. They were her only companions amidst the rubble.

While Leonard was living in Chelsea much as he did as a young painter, albeit eating better, he enjoyed the perquisites of a commissioned officer. He was elected a member of The Churchill Club, established the previous year in Ashburnham House as part of Westminster School. Leonard

met British artists at the club and frequented the few wartime exhibitions, always anxious to see what fellow painters were doing. Out of this came his use of crayon resist and watercolour wash, a technique pioneered by British painters like John Piper and adopted by Leonard. The wax from the crayon resists water and gives the painting a distinctive texture. Leonard used this technique in *Minesweepers and Chimneys*, *The Solent*, *Isle of Wight* and *Pink Room*, *V-2 Damage*.^{iv}

A proud day for Leonard was the opening of the Navy Show 1 February, which he attended at London's Hippodrome where the sets he had designed were in place. Playwright Noel Coward addressed the cast after the show, congratulating them on their performance. King George VI and the rest of the Royal Family attended a matinee the following afternoon.

The war artists mainly chose their own assignments. Leonard would go down to Naval Intelligence to find out which ships were traveling to interesting areas and then go on board. For security reasons, the finished works were turned in to Naval Intelligence, which photographed them and passed them on to the National Gallery in London, which ruled on their appropriateness and quality. The Admiralty pass that the artists carried authorised them to board any

Canadian or British ship, whether the captain approved or not.

Leonard always kept McCurry of Canada's National Gallery apprised of what he was doing. On board ship after a stopover in Cherbourg, he wrote to McCurry 2 December:

Forgive the scrawl - We are rolling along in great style & the wardroom table gives a kick every so often. I have managed to work out a system of scribbling & taking notes on this kind of rough day. By devious ways I scribble a note or two on rough paper - dodge the spray & find my way below to re-draw and fill in as much information as I can - dash up again & repeat the performance. It looks rather ridiculous - but is very effective.

Leonard went ashore at Cherbourg harbour and painted the arrival of troops reinforcing those that had invaded France in June. He also sketched abandoned German gun emplacements that had defended the harbour.

Leonard wrote McCurry again 4 February: "Some of the best material has of course - nothing to do with Canadian Navy. Forster & I gaze with longing at V-2 holes - & walls - sleepers in the tubes etc. - but try & remember it is Navy material we should deal with."

McCurry replied 21 February: "I am sure you will be getting plenty of good material, and I would not even pass up the V-2 holes, the sleepers in the tubes, or anything else. It will all add to the picture of Canada at war, and, while you are attached to the Navy, I do not think that there is anything that says you must do exclusively naval stuff, although your superiors will undoubtedly expect this."

McCurry would not have been surprised at Leonard's ability to paint under adverse conditions. When seeking candidates for the war artist posts, he had canvassed the heads of the art societies for their recommendations. The Group of Seven's A. Y. Jackson, then president of the Royal Canadian Academy, said of Leonard: "Might respond - he can stand cold weather. Good outdoor guy."^v Jackson had sketched with Leonard, so he knew he could paint in the cold.

Of one hundred and thirteen works of Leonard's listed by the War Museum in Ottawa, most were sketches made on the spot, rather than renderings done back in the studio. Since action at sea was very intermittent, Leonard would wander over the ship he happened to be aboard, looking for a mundane slice of Navy life that he could bring alive in a sketch. Such was the source of his best known war painting, *Potato Peelers*, a gouache of two seamen wearing life

jackets and seated beside a couple of oil drums as they peeled potatoes, a convoy sailing in the background. Leonard's quickness in painting was a great asset for him as a war artist, but he did have one failing, to which he was prompt to admit. As Joan Murray said in her book, *Canadian Artists of the Second World War*, "A strong background in commercial art and particularly design helped."^{vi} This background Leonard did not have. "I'm essentially not a figure draftsman and I have to struggle with that aspect," he told Murray. "Yet I was able to catch sometimes on-the-spot authenticity, a mood, and that carries a long way in any expressive figurative painting."^{vii}

Leonard learned that there was to be a commissioning ceremony at Londonderry in Northern Ireland at which the HMS *Puncher*, a U.S.-built freighter converted into an aircraft carrier, was to be turned over to a Canadian crew, so he made arrangements to travel north by train. A late night out preceded his departure, so he was in no mood to talk to the officer slouched in the facing seat. When the train arrived in Londonderry, the two passengers realised that both wore the insignia of Special Services, so they introduced themselves. The other officer was Clyde Gilmour, then a war correspondent but later movie critic for

Maclean's magazine and the *Toronto Star* and host of the C.B.C.'s Sunday morning "Gilmour's Albums" for forty-one years.

The two men shared a taxi to their quarters where they decided to avail themselves of the officers date service for an evening of dining and dancing. The hostess at the service arranged for two girls; Leonard suggested to Clyde that they flip a coin to see who got the first girl to arrive. Leonard won.

"Leonard's girl friend for the evening was every man's dream of an Irish colleen," recalled Gilmour. "I picture her as a young Maureen O'Hara with a soft Irish lift to her voice. My girl looked like William Bendix. She had a slight moustache, very strong looking wrists. She was quite tall, lanky and she looked like she could easily beat me to death in a fair fist fight."^{viii}

William Bendix was the homely actor who had the lead role in "The Life of Riley" on radio and television in the 1940s and 1950s. Despite the inauspicious beginning, Leonard and Clyde became lifelong friends.

Leonard got together in London with a brother-in-law, George Silverman, one of the few Jewish flying officers in the Royal Canadian Air Force. He was known as the Brylcreem Boy for his dashing good looks. Leonard took George "to

meet some of the Battersea maids"^{ix} at the Six Bells and Prince Ted pubs. "We were like brothers," said George. "He raised my sights." At one of the pubs, Leonard told the woman behind the bar - her husband was in Africa fighting - that it was George's birthday. "She brought up a special little cask, all dusty," recalled George.^x So they celebrated a fictional birthday. Another brother-in-law, David, observed, "Women were very, very attracted to Leonard."^{xi}

Leonard liked to go down to Felixstone on the coast because the commander of one of the Canadian torpedo boats based there, Anthony (Tony) Law, was also a fine painter. Michael Forster once joined Leonard in Felixstone and the two men attended a late afternoon movie. When they came out, it was into a pitch-black night as an air raid was in progress and a blackout had been ordered. Neither man had brought his tin hat nor a flashlight. "We were showered with shrapnel all over the place," recalled Forster.^{xii} Forster, who had been born in India, marvelled at how Leonard, using the directional instincts honed in the woods around North Bay, led the way in the darkness back to the Naval base. "Leonard had a very good sense of where he was," he said.

Reva, meanwhile, had been corresponding with McCurry of the National Gallery. On 25 April she wrote him: "If, as you write, the Canadian artists might stay over there for any length of time after peace is declared, I might throw myself on your mercy and ask you to try and get permission for me to get over as soon as possible!" There is no record of a reply from McCurry.

When Germany surrendered 8 May 1945, Leonard and Earle Birney celebrated V-E Day together, although Birney was still recovering from a case of diphtheria. They stood in a War Office window three stories above the street and listened as Prime Minister Winston Churchill delivered his victory speech. Then they hit the pubs, like thousands of Londoners, relieved after nearly six years of hostilities.

But the war had not ended for Leonard. Five days after V-E Day, fifteen German submarines left Trondheim, Norway, for the Scapa Flow in Scotland, where they were to be turned over by their German crews. Since there were no docking facilities, the subs anchored offshore for boarding and volunteers were sought to accept the subs.^{xiii} Leonard volunteered.

Apprised at Naval Intelligence headquarters of the imminent arrival of the subs, Leonard had flown north with a Naval photographer to record the event. The isolated

Naval base nearest to the Scapa Flow was still in a state of drunken euphoria over the end of the war, which was probably why the commanding officer asked for volunteers to board the subs. "I, like a stupe, put up my hand," said Leonard. "The photographer with me did too." Leonard was issued a side arm and, accompanied by a seaman with a Sten gun, he and the photographer were taken by a motor transport boat to one of the subs. "I was terrified," confessed Leonard. "I had never even met a German sailor before, let alone a submarine crew." The trio boarded the sub at 4 p.m. and replaced the white flag of surrender with a British flag.

I remember the young U-boat captain very politely motioning me to go first down the conning tower. I climbed down and faced twenty longhaired boys, some of them spitting at me and getting their first glimpse of an 'Englischer.' They were playing the Horst Wessel song on a record and getting ready, I thought, to do their traditional blowing up of themselves.^{xiv}

When Leonard ordered the seamen to pass up on deck all liquor on board, the seamen took gulps out of the bottles as they passed them along. As a result, their hostility increased as they became intoxicated. Leonard also had them hand over all guns and knives. Leonard stayed up all night

with the captain in his quarters, fearful that the Germans would scuttle the sub with him on board. The captain, who was in his late twenties, spoke a bit of English and told Leonard they would blow up the fleet were it not for the fact that the Russians were holding German prisoners whom they might harm in reprisal. Glancing around the cabin, Leonard spied an art magazine and realised his host was an amateur painter. So the two men talked about art and Leonard had the captain write a word or two in the magazine as a memento. When Leonard saw that the captain wrote that Russia represented a threat to the west, he gave the magazine to Naval Intelligence.

Leonard was relieved the next morning and left the sub in a shower of spit from the submariners on board. The only incident in the entire operation occurred when a Canadian seaman on another sub shot himself in the leg.

By July, when Leonard was scheduled to return home, Helga Overoff realised that their affair was fast coming to an end, even though she had hoped he would stay behind with her. "Helga has got the jitters & is very upset naturally at the realisation of my departure," Leonard wrote to Earle Birney. He asked Birney to have Margaret Crosland call Helga occasionally to see if she was all right.

Leonard had told Reva that he had someone "looking after him" in London, but he obviously did not tell her that this person was a beautiful blonde who shared his bed. Helga and Leonard exchanged letters once he was back in Canada, one of them coming to Reva's attention. Leonard must have told Helga that Reva knew of the affair because she subsequently sent Reva a bolt of plaid, maybe her way of thanking Reva for the loan of her husband. "I hear from England occasionally," he wrote to Birney 18 November. "Things are coming out better for Helga and she is back in Scotland, toying with the idea of marrying a chap there who is pursuing her. I hope things clear up for her."

Appropriately, Leonard had returned to Canada 18 July 1945 on a Corvette, the same type of vessel that had carried him to war nine months earlier. This time he travelled with his friends Clyde Gilmour and Michael Forster, but they were unable to disembark because of an arsenal fire in Halifax in which some one hundred persons were injured.

Little could Leonard imagine that he was starting the countdown for the last two years of his life in Canada. Exactly two years to the day, Leonard and Reva would awaken for the first time in the Mexican town where they would live for more than half a century.

ⁱ L.B. to J.V., evening conversation 29 Aug. 1981.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ Michael Forster to J.V., interview 14 Oct. 1995.

^{iv} Christine Boyanoski, The 1940s: A Decade of Painting In Ontario (Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario 1984), 26.

^v Joan Murray, Canadian Artists of the Second World War (Oshawa, Ont.: The Robert McLaughlin Gallery 1981), 8

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 9

^{vii} L.B. to Joan Murray, interview 25 Oct. 1977.

^{viii} Clyde Gilmour to J.V., interview 25 Nov. 1994.

^{ix} L.B. to Norman Levine, letter 27 March 1991.

^x George Silverman to J.V., interview 4 June 1996.

^{xi} David Silverman to J.V., interview 11 May 1995.

^{xii} Michael Forster to J.V., interview 31 July 1995.

^{xiii} Jack Macbeth, Ready, Aye, Ready: An Illustrated History of the Royal Canadian Navy (Toronto: Key Porter Books 1989)

^{xiv} L.B. to Joan Murray, interview 25 Oct. 1977.

Chapter 16 "Frankly, I think you'll fall flat on your face, dear boy."