

THE CASE OF THE SPURIOUS SAWBONES

by Les Peate

In the fall of 1951, a lady glancing through her daily newspaper inadvertently unmasked one the most unusual deceptions in Canadian naval history.

She was the mother of a Doctor, Joseph Cyr, who was practicing medicine in Grand Falls, New Brunswick. To her astonishment, she read an account of an emergency operation performed on the deck of a Canadian destroyer off the coast of Korea—apparently by her son. She contacted Doctor Cyr, who, after reassuring his mother he was indeed still in civilian practice, called the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. A bizarre story unfolded. Ferdinand Waldo ("Fred") Demara

It began in early 1951, when an American named Ferdinand Waldo ("Fred") Demara entered Canada and became a Novitiate monk in Grand Falls. For more than a decade Demara had held positions in a number of religious orders, and as a psychologist, university lecturer, college department head, school teacher, and prison warden. Despite this impressive employment record, Demara—later to become famous as "The Great Imposter"—had obtained and held these posts on the basis of forged, stolen or nonexistent qualifications.

Demara became friendly with Doctor Cyr, and often visited the latter's offices. Eventually the visits ceased.

In March of 1951, a Doctor Cyr appeared at the Naval recruiting office in Saint John, N.B., and offered his pro-fessional services to the Royal Canadian Navy. He hinted that if the navy couldn't use him, the Army or RCAF would be glad to accept him. At this stage of the Korean War and with Canada's new NATO commitments, qualified medical officers were desperately needed by all three services, and no time was lost in processing this valuable recruit.



"Cyr's" credentials were accepted without verification, and three days after his visit to the recruiting centre, he was commissioned into the RCN as a Surgeon-Lieutenant. The normal two-month enlistment process took about one day.

Had a thorough background investigation been conducted, the authorities would no doubt have discovered that "Doctor Joseph Cyr" was none other than the ubiquitous Fred Demara, whose medical experience was limited to a few weeks as an unskilled hospital orderly in the United States.

The bogus doctor was assigned to the naval hospital at HMCS Stadacona in the Halifax area. Retired naval Captain "Mack" Lynch, who was a department head in Stadacona at the time, recalls "Cyr" appeared to be a fairly competent medical officer,

and a pleasant enough individual, although not a great mixer. Captain Lynch remembers that Cyr showed a great deal of interest in adapting aircrew selection psycho physical test methods (which Lynch had taken in World War II) as a naval screening procedure.

"Cyr's" hospital patients apparently survived his ministrations by a combination of generous use of penicillin, referral or consultation with other medical officers and, no doubt, a combination of physical fitness and sheer luck!

This idyllic existence ended on 15th June, 1951 when "Cyr" joined HMCS Cayuga in Esquimalt, B.C.—leaving three days later for the destroyer's second tour of duty in Korean waters.

"Surgeon-Lieutenant Cyr" managed to cope effectively with the few minor injuries and ailments which occurred en route to the war zone. He was fortunate in that he had a capable Sick Berth Attendant, P.O. Bob Hotchin, who handled most of the routine cases. The Petty Officer was surprised, and indeed gratified, by the way in which he was allowed to work with a minimum of direction and interference from his medical officer.

"Cyr's" biggest challenge came when he was forced to act as a dentist. His patient was none other than the Cayuga's Commander, Captain James Plomer. In the rush to prepare his ship for her return to Korea, Captain Plomer had no time to obtain treatment for an infected tooth, which became a problem during the westward voyage. The bogus doctor, highly perturbed, feverishly studied his manuals and racked his brain to recall any dental surgery that he had witnessed in the past. He eventually gained the courage to collect his dental gear, a large supply of anesthetic and make his way to the captain's cabin.

After administering a hefty dose of local anesthetic, "Cyr" successfully removed the offending tooth, and by all reports, Captain Plomer had no further trouble with it. His confidence no doubt restored, the bogus doctor continued to handle routine shipboard injuries and minor ailments as Cayuga entered the war zone.

On arrival off the west coast of Korea, Cayuga and her crew became involved in operations that smacked more of the "gunboat diplomacy" of the nineteenth century than the traditional picture of naval warfare. Captain Don Saxon, who was a Lieutenant-Commander at the time, recalls that the Canadian vessels would take part in commando-type operations against enemy-occupied islands. Selected members of the ships' crews would accompany members of U.S. or Korean Marines ashore and with their weapons and demolition charges generally create "alarm and despondency" in enemy circles. While our own casualties were light, the amount of "hairiness" involved was evidenced by a number of gallantry awards, including a Distinguished Service Cross for Saxon.

One of these "commando" raids led to Demara's unmasking. Following a highly

successful foray off the West coast of Korea, the only three seriously-wounded casualties—all South Korean guerillas—were brought back to Cayuga. One apparently had a bullet embedded in his lung. He was operated upon on the spot by the ship's medical officer, by all accounts successfully, although no one ever saw the bullet which was supposedly extracted. (Other reports indicate that "Cyr" also amputated a foot during those naval operations.) Whatever his qualifications, it would appear that the patients survived the attentions of the bogus doctor.

Unfortunately for the masquerade, news from Korea was scarce at that time. A pair of war correspondents snapped up the story of the "open deck" surgery—the account found its way into Canadian papers, and the real Doctor Cyr began asking questions. He remembers that his medical credentials were missing, but attributed the fact to a recent move. He also recalled that "Brother John"—Demara—disappeared at the same time.

Eventually, in October 1951, Captain Plomer received a signal to the effect that his medical officer was an unqualified imposter. He found this hard to believe, as in the opinion of the ship's officers, "Cyr" was a capable and popular doctor. Another message received the following day removed all doubts, and "Dr. Cyr" was transferred to a British cruiser RMS Ceylon, for transfer to Japan and subsequently to Canada.

Lieutenant Commander Saxon, with another officer, was detailed to search the doctor's cabin, and found letters and other documents which confirmed the imposter, Demara—there was no question of his identity by this time— had apparently taken an overdose of drugs that day. Whether or not this was a suicidal attempt is questionable, although Captain Plomer felt that it was.

On arrival in Canada, Demara appeared before a naval board of enquiry. There appears to be no record of disciplinary proceedings, and service records indicate that "Cyr" was given an honourable release and several hundred dollars in back pay. He left Canada (some reports indicate that he was deported) and returned to the religious field, eventually becoming a bona-fide clergyman under his own name.

John Melady, author of *Korea, Canada's Forgotten War*, recalls a telephone interview in which Demara "Had good things to say about Canada, the Canadian Navy and the officers and men he knew on the Cayuga." Demara supposedly participated in a Cayuga reunion in Victoria in 1979. The Reverend Ferdinand Waldo Demara died in 1982.



One minor deception remained as a result of Demara's escapade. In 1961 Hollywood made a movie, *The Great Imposter*, starring Tony Curtis in the title role. "He was nothing like the real thing", chuckled Don Saxon. "Cyr", as we knew him, was a pretty chunky 200- pounder—nothing at all like Curtis. And Edmond O'Brien was just as much out of place in the role of Captain Plomer."

Captain Plomer was listed in the film credits as "technical adviser" but Saxon feels that his "technical advice" was not always heeded. "I noted the incongruity of a Canadian naval board of enquiry consisting of a group of officers properly clad in RCN uniforms with every member sporting a black pencil moustache.

In one case, apparently, Commodore Plomer had his way. He was able to ensure that the correct hull number was used for his ship. This generated a deception which Demara would surely have enjoyed. Cayuga (Hull number 218) was on the east coast—the film crew was working out of Esquimalt British Columbia. As George Guertin, a naval veteran of the Korean War, recalls, "In 1961, I was out west on HMCS Athabaskan. We got an unusual order to 'paint ship'. A bunch of us had to close up the '9' on our side number to make out '219' read '218'. We were told that it was something to do with a movie. When we saw *The Great Imposter* we realized that there were really two imposters, Demara and Athabaskan...

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