



The Dowager Empress and Anastasia

SOMETIMES EVEN A SMALL TOWN like Maple Ridge is reached by a breath of world history.

During the 1970s John George Bruce and his wife lived in retirement in the 21400-block of Donovan Avenue. Bruce had joined the British Navy in 1900 three months short of his 13th birthday as an able-bodied seaman and by the Second World War was a Corporal and a deep-sea diver. Among his more colourful stories is the claim that he had physically carried the Dowager Empress Maria Feodorovna, the mother of Czar Nicholas II of Russia, and his daughter Anastasia off Russian soil in their escape from the Bolsheviks.

In a 1972 interview Bruce remembered this incident as follows:

Commander Isaacson called me over and pointed this piece of land out to me and said, "Now Bruce, I have a job for you and there might be a little bit of danger in it. There will be a boat from the destroyer. It'll be a Montague whaler. You are to pick your own crew as you know the men better than I do. The boat will be here around 10:00 o'clock at night. You'll leave at around 11. Muffle your oars with rags. You mustn't talk to the crew or tell them anything about what's going on. Just go over there and lay about 300 yards offshore and wait until you see a flashlight go on twice." I manned the boat and went and laid off and no sooner got there and the lights went on. Of course there were no other lights anywhere. It was very dark as we were quite a way from Sevastopol. There were 60- to 80-foot cliffs all around. There was a bit of a beach. There was no rise or fall in the Mediterranean.

I pulled in bows on, and I walked ashore through about 18 inches of water. There was a group of about 20 men and there was a smaller group to one side. Somebody came over to me. He just took me by the arm. He didn't speak to me or anything. He took me over to this small group and there were two females there and we led them over to the boat and I picked up the older one and carried her out to the stern sheets of the boat. She was the same age and size as my mother. I then went back and got the other one. I could tell that the second one was just a girl. They'd have had to wade through the water if I hadn't carried them.

We shoved off and I was in the stern with them. We went back to the ship and when we got there our picket boat was there. That's a fast boat that they use for dropping torpedoes. And so we transferred them aboard it. They were taken right away to the Agamemnon. My crew and I went back aboard the Volga again, and the whaler went back to the destroyer that it belonged to, and the next morning before dawn all the ships pulled out.

When we got to Constantinople a destroyer came out with food to the Volga and brought an English newspaper written by a war correspondent with a big headline that the Dowager Empress had escaped the Bolsheviks. There was never any mention of the girl but everyone seemed to think that she was Anastasia.

Bruce's life in the Royal Navy was full of adventure. He watched pirates throw slaves off their ships off the coast of Africa and witnessed a mandarin line up a group of suspected pirates and then chop off their heads. The pirates had been forced to get down on their hands and knees and extend their heads in preparation for their own execution by the mandarin. None broke rank and all had their heads chopped off at 10-second intervals. Bruce was present at the Suez Canal when the American, French, and British Navies intercepted the Russian Fleet en route to engage the Japanese in battle in the war of 1904/05. The British denied the Russian Navy access to the Suez Canal and forced them to take the longer route around the tip of Africa. This resulted in the Russian Fleet going into battle out of fuel. The stall tactic also gave the British time to provide the Japanese Navy with state-of-the-art ships that resulted in the Japanese winning the war of 1905. Upon leaving the Navy and after logging for a spell in the Skagit Valley in Washington State, Bruce came to Canada.

In Canada he went back to diving and participated in the building of the Lions Gate Bridge and fish ladders at Hell's Gate in the Fraser Canyon.

Opposite

**Able Seaman John George Bruce,
Royal Navy, circa 1918.**