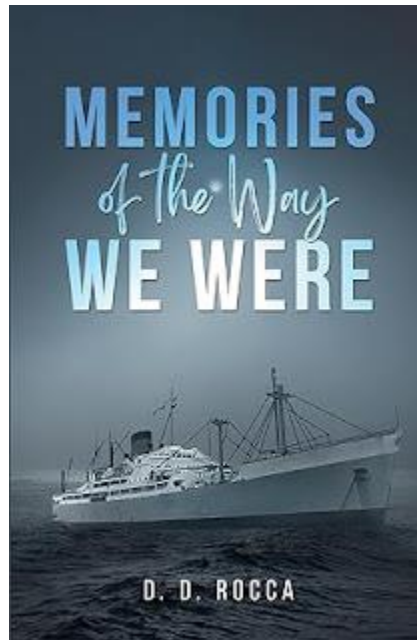


Thursday, June 20, 2024

Interview With Author Don Rocca About His Memoir



About The Book:

I stood in front of the headstone which read:

"Rita Rocca Nee Tomlin (15/6/1942 - 21/10/2020)" and thought, 'Is this all there is? Her name on a headstone with mine to follow.'

I remembered a warm May Day in 1948, when we both kneeled at the same altar waiting for a priest to give us our first taste of Jesus.

She, in her white dress, was wondering if the day would yield enough for a new doll and pram, while I wondered if mine would yield enough for roller skates and maybe a new football.

I recalled the honeymoon in Jersey in 1963, Miss World at the Royal Albert Hall in 1980, and the ball that followed at the Savoy Hotel.

I said, "Sorry girl, I can't give you a Taj Mahal, but I will write a book, which will hopefully make us more than just names on a tombstone."

1: What is your book, *Memories of The Way We Were*, about?

It's about the early morning of my life, though it starts by recalling the early years of my father's life.

It tells how he progressed from being a poor Italian immigrant, to becoming a successful business man, and the first alien to become a citizen of the Irish free State.

I tell how in the 1940s and 50s, we sometimes travelled across Europe and holidayed in Tuscany and beyond. I remember how in 1947 my brother and I played chasing each other around war ravaged Dunkirk.

In early 1960 I started my seagoing career, voyaging to such places as Algiers, where war was raging. The following years my ships took me to such places as Communist China....The American Great Lakes....East Germany.... South America.....the Philippines and Japan. Sometimes in dreams I can still smell the aroma of copra as we passed South Pacific islands.

2. What inspired you to write?

One day my business partner and I were servicing a Northrop Grumman Sperry marine Radar, and I noticed the Captain seemed amused that two old men could still climb tall Radar masts. Reflecting on this, we decided we had reached our sell by date, so we terminated our NGSMS agency and continued on a much-reduced basis. Having more time on my hands I started to put some memories on paper. When my wife died, I stood at her grave one day and recalled Peggy Lee's song 'Is This All There Is?' I finished my manuscript and sent it to Austin McAuley Publishers in the UK where it was accepted.

3. You are about to turn 83. As you reflect back on your life what stands out for you?

My generation were lucky to be born into a world at peace. The Marshall plan was a great success and it was a tide that lifted all boats. We had American comics with Batman and Superman. We had fabulous Hollywood movies. We had Rock and Roll music. We had ice cream parlours, where we sat and listened to Buddy Holly singing 'All my love, all my kissing, you don't know what you've been a missing'. Now my sun is well past its zenith, and I see the dogs of war are gathering again. We can only hope that the man who now looks so frail will prevail again when Autumn comes.

4. You spent many years as a seagoing radio officer. What was that like?

Well, I had a nice big comfortable cabin and an equally big Radio room, fitted with state-of-the-art equipment, which allowed me to communicate across oceans. I could call Chatham Radio WCC Long Island from the Canary Islands or San Francisco Radio KFS from Honolulu. Before going to my bunk at night, I often went out to the bridge with a mug of coffee, and myself and the officer on watch, would stare into the vast Ocean, and discuss how we would solve the problems of the world. Some nights crossing ice berg alley with a full moon shining on a large berg and a glassy sea, it almost made me believe there might be a God.

5. Does life on a boat look much better than on land?

Well, the first thing to say is that no mariner, excluding those in submarines, would ever refer to a ship as a boat. Ships carried boats. Long voyages could at times be boring. Imagine a forty-two-day voyage from London to Tsamkong in Red China and an equally boring week there? It did get better after a two-day voyage from Tsamkong to Hong Kong. In my day the majority of ships carried about forty men so there was plenty of room to relax on deck and sunbathe if the weather was good. Depending on the Chief steward and chief cook the food could be okay to excellent.

We could buy cigarettes and alcohol at ridiculously low prices. We always had a small library and sometimes a few films. We also had the occasional party, particularly if it was someone's birthday. These occasions had to be fitted in, between watches. My watches were two hours on and two hours off over a fourteen-hour day. Of course, sometimes the two hours off and indeed the ten-hour off for sleeping, sometimes had to be abandoned, if I was called out to repair the radar, send an important message, or copy important weather or ice reports. The deck and engineer staff worked four hours on and four off. This might give you some idea why sailors partied and enjoyed female company when the opportunity arose.

6. You were born in Dublin Ireland to an Irish mother and Italian father during World War II. What was your childhood like?

Our house was one of forty-eight situated in a nice part of Dublin. The estate was a cul-de-sac with only one way in and one way out. It could have been designed as a haven for children to play, and we did play, boys and girls together, sometimes in summer from nine till sundown.

Ireland's population was only two million and the primary industry was agriculture, so even in wartime, no one went hungry, or at least there was no reason why they should. Some things were rationed like tea, but that was of little interest to us. Petrol was difficult to get, but my father ran his old Ford on charcoal gas, which incidentally he manufactured himself as a sideline. Well actually it was made by three Italians, the government had interned when WW2 broke out. They were handed over to my father with their absolute agreement.

They were very well fed and paid. What a lovely way to spend a war!

As an infant I went to a convent school mainly for girls and then primary school with lay teachers. As I already said, we had American comics and Hollywood films. Things got better when the war ended, and we got a new Ford V8 in 1948. In the early fifties we got a 14-inch black and white television.

7. What was it like serving in the British Merchant Navy in the 1960s

It was good and I only suffered the occasional anti Irish remark. I always had a nice cabin and office. Every meal was silver service in dining saloons where every table had crisp white cloths with silver cutlery. I normally sat at the captain's table along with the deck officers. The Engineers sat at the Chief Engineer's table. He was the second most senior man on board. In fact, the C/E was considered by some, to be almost equal in rank to the captain.

Much of the mealtime conversations were about the war. Many of the senior men had served on Merchant ships. Some even served in the Royal Navy. Some survived being sunk by

U boats only to wind up as POWs. Others talked about Dunkirk and others talked about fighting the German and Italian navies in the Mediterranean Sea.

As a half Italian coming from a neutral country, I just listened to their fascinating stories.

8. Did you ever have any dangerous situations arise while at sea?

It was December 1961 and the MV POLAMHALL was sailing in the roaring 40s off the South African coast, when we lost engine power. We started to roll like we were in a tumble dryer, and matters weren't helped by the Second Officer remarking "I hope our cargo of iron ore doesn't shift or we'll be swimming with the fishes" The Captain ordered me to advise all ships in the area that we were not under command, and should consider us to be a navigation hazard. I also advised the Naval base at Simonstown we were not in distress but would advise them should our situation deteriorate. The engineers did eventually get the main engine going on reduced power, and we limped in to Walvis Bay for repairs.

In February 1963 the mv. Baron. Ardrossan was sailing across the Bay of Biscay when we were hit by a storm of hurricane strength. It came up so quickly we had no time to heave to and head into it, which is the safest thing to do.

Trying to go on reciprocal course would have been extremely dangerous, so we had to stay on course while the storm battered into our stern. The view from the wheelhouse was a mountain of water running away from us. It actually didn't stop our second officer going out briefly onto the for'd deck to record it on his cine camera. He was from the Isle of Man!

We lost two lifeboats which wouldn't have helped us anyway, and all the lower accommodation was flooded. The starboard weather door was stored in but the ship's carpenter and crew managed to shore it up with heavy blocks of timber. My cabin and the captain's suffered no damage as we were housed on the top deck. The chief officer put his best helmsman on the wheel and we made the safety of Falmouth harbour.

March 1961 the mv ARCTIC previously named Hollywood was alongside in Baton Rouge when the city was hit with the outer edge of a hurricane. At the time the storm hit I was in a local bar with some of the crew, and crew members from other ships. It was too dangerous to leave so we just partied along with the bar staff all night, and returned to our ship the next morning. A very happy memory!

9. How would you describe your writing style? I'd say nothing heavy or too academic, just easy going. The feedback I get is that readers feel they are present with me as they travel from page to page.

10. What challenges did you have in penning your book? No great challenges really. I'd just write a few chapters and leave it for a week or two before resuming. I relied on my memory and some old letters and diaries. I also consulted with some old colleagues I sailed with.

About The Author: The author, Donal Rocca, also known as Don Rocca was born on 5th August 1941 in Dublin, Ireland to an Irish mother and Italian father. After a formal education by nuns, lay teachers and Christian brothers, he started his third level education in Atlantic College Dublin followed by Kevin St College, Dublin. Further third level education spanning more than forty years took place in Plymouth Technical College and

Company courses run by Marconi, AEI, and Racal-to name but a few. Don became a seagoing radio officer with Marconi Marine in 1960 and in 1966 he joined their staff as a marine technical assistant. In 1974, he joined the Decca Radar Co. later Racal Decca rising to Dublin area manager in 1984. In 1993, Don in association with Kieran Campbell started their own marine electronics company. Camroc Electronic Ltd. CAMROC...CAMPBELL ROCCA. Don is still owner and joint managing director of Camroc Electronic Ltd.

For more info, please see: https://www.amazon.com/Memories-Way-We-Were-Rocca-ebook/dp/B0C3MZHMXZ/ref=sr_1_4?crid=2RUKBVJ0RCILO&dib=eyJ2IjoiMSJ9.4Hqbjiq-ZzUyN6xPJLTtx9w42I6FP4R2yKWC1MaqDHECAHznVu6hd6GgOk8Lp98gp7-gbIyCkuJcz_MDQw9-cdphEuHxI-1y-c5Y7QcSW4S_0_ER1V7tTYVUeMM2rJ5pFozqeFxFxHisoHeiIGcG3ybn8hssBWHYRYcsqDvZLfXaoxYUuGrH1BSEHpQXPafSA4F8cJ3H1tDF99KiaeRLBhVhPom0DqoDzUF2lUyNwSq2Y.cJk1nUIqJmpSTKqA8RisWOFrj6LpMneUu6EW9bV5afQ&dib_tag=se&keywords=Memories+of+The+Way+We+Were&qid=1718934359&srefix=memories+of+the+way+we+were%2Caps%2C72&sr=8-4