

PALMER, Bruce

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## Former guard feels lucky to be retired

By JACK EVANS  
Staff Reporter

As a helmsman in the Second World War, Bruce Palmer served on convoy escort duty in the North Atlantic and on the murderous Murmansk route.

But he says none of those experiences created the kind of tension and terror he came to know in civilian life as a guard in various Kingston prisons.

But Palmer managed 34½ years, taking early retirement in 1979, "happy" and "lucky" to be out of it.

"There were a few inmates I could trust implicitly," he says with pride. And he even chokes up with emotion as he cites one major riot in Kingston Penitentiary where two elderly prisoners, hangovers from the rum running years and organized crime gangs who had come to respect him, rounded up dozens of their mates to guard his cell and promised him: "No harm will come to you, Mr. Palmer."

That was one of "at least five" prison riots Palmer can recall being involved in.

"Most of those prisoners don't care about life or limb for anyone but themselves," he said. But some had intelligence and showed amazing abilities.

Palmer recalls some of the espionage gang from the Gouzenko case days, of atomic scientist calibre in mathematics, "but couldn't remember what day it was."

And there was a banking executive who got into trouble for gambling "who could type faster with two fingers than a professional typist." He, too, was a genius with figures. Palmer describes him as "about five feet high and four feet wide."

Palmer said he took his duties as a prison guard seriously and interpreted his duties, "care and control" of prisoners, to mean as much care as control.

For instance, when one of his fellow guards deliberately smashed a prized Plaster-of-Paris casting of one of the prisoners, Palmer says he made the guard replace and pay for work.

And he and many other guards had their own ideas about who was guilty or innocent. To this day, he believes the Perth County youngster, Stephen Truscott, sentenced to prison at age 13, was innocent of murdering the girl he was accused of killing.

Palmer contends "All judges should spend at least a year working in the prison system before they start handing out sentences on the bench. Then they'll know what they're dealing with."

Then there were some cases where the criminals were "mental," and "you simply could not trust them," he said. He saved one guard's life when such a prisoner attacked him with the blade part of a paper cutter, and that prisoner was then transferred to Penetanguishene.

Palmer recalled another case where a young teenage boy was sentenced to "seven years" — for robbing a taxi driver of \$1.40 with a toy gun, acting on a dare. "He shouldn't have been there," says Palmer.

Early on in his prison guard career, Palmer says he realized the convicts had to have something constructive to do in all their spare time. So with the warden's consent, he developed a crafts program.

"I believe it was the first time in the federal service." He says the program spread to all federal prisons in the Kingston area and he was in charge of it, becoming a self-taught crafts creator and instructor along the way. He also became the prison librarian.

And in his early years he recalls the warden, with medical approval and witness, was allowed to use a device known as "the strap." It was a fearsome, bare-bottom punishment with a strap many times larger than a traditional school strap. "It was one thing even the toughest of prisoners feared, and it helped maintain discipline and nip many problems or riot talks in the bud," he said.

And when that form of corporal punishment was banned in recent years, the prison system lost its power to maintain discipline, he believes.

Still with many friends working in the prison system, Palmer reports: "It's hell in the service today."

And yes, he admits, some of the guards were tough and mean, and sometimes that is what was required.

"I'm fortunate to have survived," he says. "I'm glad I don't have to worry about those things now."

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