

AN ETHNOGRAPHY
OF
MARINE CONVOYS
DURING
WORLD WAR II

by

MORGIANA P. HALLEY,
B. A. (U.C.L.A., 1967), M. A. (M.U.N., 1989)

Department of English Language and Linguistics
The University of Sheffield
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ABSTRACT

This study is an ethnographic exploration of the experiences of those who sailed in marine convoys during World War II, based on extensive field interviews in North America and Britain. The introduction, relating the background and original intentions of the research, is followed by a methodology, including sections on bibliographical sources, fieldwork, analysis and presentation. There follows an outline history of the convoy system and some of its practical aspects in the twentieth century, drawing primarily from printed sources, while field interview data are extensively exploited to investigate the individual's view of the convoy experience, emphasising such essential duties as position-keeping and shipboard conditions as they affected both officers and uncertificated crew members. Reasons for going to sea and leaving the sea are explored, as well as major impressions of shipboard life, convoys, and the war at sea, including an exegesis of why certain men preferred certain watches.

Attitudes, perceptions, and relationships are then considered, using bibliographical sources as background, but drawing largely from field interviews. Relationships between merchant and military personnel, shipboard departments, officers and ratings, and between seafarers of differing ethnic, national and/or racial backgrounds are investigated. Seafarers' self-perceptions, both within their closed circle and as members of the larger society, are scrutinised, together with how they believe themselves to have been perceived and treated by landmen.

Recreational pastimes and active genres of folklore are examined. The former range from reading and conversation to music and crafts, while the latter involve primarily custom and belief, focussing on initiatory practices. An extensive glossary augments the chapter on language, which treats nicknames as well as shipboard terminology and sayings. The concluding chapter encompasses the findings of the research, a critique, and suggestions for further exploration. It is followed by the bibliography and appendices. The study represents merely a beginning of the analysis of the substantial fieldwork corpus.

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FRONTSPIECE

(Image of the statue at the American Merchant Marine Veterans Memorial in San Pedro, California, USA. Designed by Jasper D'Ambrosi in 1986 and cast by his sons Marc and Michael D'Ambrosi in 1987. The original image which went on this page is lost. The statue, depicts one merchant seaman helping another climb a Jacob's ladder during a rescue at sea.)

DEDICATION

TO

MY MOTHER

MADELEINE JANE BEYRLER STEELE, B.A., M. ED.

Her eyes were the colour of the sea in sunlight. Her favourite toast was: “Men and ships!” Her first beau and the love of her life, who much later became my stepfather, was a merchant seafarer. It was she who first gave me an interest in the sea, who read sea stories with me in my early childhood, who -- after her marriage to Fred Steele -- encouraged my enquiries of him when we were at the family home together.

It was she who taught me to read and gave me the stimulus to learn, who encouraged my curiosity and was pleased to use words like “questor” and “valiant” in reference to me -- words which were inconceivable from mother to daughter in our generations. My mother gave me the encouragement to stay at my first University for eight years and come away with my degree in hand, despite physical and emotional problems which almost stopped me in midstream. It was my mother’s unfailing support and encouragement which took me from a safe and comfortable, albeit unfulfilling existence eighteen years later and sent me back to pursue a post-graduate degree successfully. And it was my mother who supported me in my desire to “go the distance” and crown my academic accomplishments with a Ph.D. despite my age and other obstacles. Had it not been for her influence in my earlier life, I should never have had the courage and determination to face three major obstacles en route to this final goal and to overcome them all.

When she heard of my intention to do an ethnographic study of merchant seafarers, her pleasure was manifest, and she gallantly devoted

herself to maintain and support my every effort, although she became terminally ill before the project was well underweigh, much less completed. She had from the outset been one of the staunchest supporters of the enterprise and it was her desire that I continue the fieldwork rather than spend time at her bedside. Without her assistance, I could never even have begun such a seemingly Herculean task, and surely never could have completed it. None of this would have been possible without the financial and personal support which I received from my mother, even in the last stages of her final illness, and the emotional strength I drew from her even beyond that time, and no words can express my debt to her in this regard.

It was a crushing blow when, shortly after I had begun my first travelling fieldwork, and while she was to all appearances in fine health, she was unexpectedly diagnosed with terminal cancer. I continued to work, as she urged me to do, and was half a continent away, just finishing the North American interviews, when she finally succumbed to her illness and died. I lost my firmest supporter, my best friend, my most conscientious critic, and my major source of financial aid with one blow. That she was my female progenitor is of no consequence. What matters is what she taught me about sticking with an undertaking until it was finished, regardless of the circumstances, and the ardour and enthusiasm with which she always inspired and sustained me.

My deepest regret is that I will not be able to share the celebration of the accomplishment with her in a physical form. How many times during the entire adventure -- for adventure it has been -- I have longed to share with her the thrill of unexpected moments of enlightenment. I know she has been with me every step of the way and I know that she is with me now, and if I could say one thing to her at this moment, it would be:

Thanks Mum, it's all your fault!

She'd get a laugh out of that. I can almost hear her now.

~~~~~

## **IN MEMORIAM**

In the final stages of my writing-up period, I received word of the death of a good friend and respected colleague, Dr. David Buchan. The loss of his presence, both personal and professional, will be sadly felt throughout the academic community. Since it was in one of his classes that the original embryo of this entire project was born, I feel that my mother would want to share a little of the limelight with him. Thank you David Buchan. Your tutelage has not been wasted. If nothing else, you taught me the proper use of the word "rubric".

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

There is no better way to begin my acknowledgements than to paraphrase Tony Lane:<sup>1</sup>

My greatest debt is to the ex-seafarers who talked to me, who wrote or telephoned in response to questions, and who loaned or donated items from wartime slop bills to T-shirts with logos of veteran's groups. Without these men and their contributions I could never have stepped over the threshold into the daily life of the merchant seafarers' war. Their names are listed in an appendix at the end of this work. A number of their wives were also of great assistance, by taking part in the interviews themselves, expediting matters generally, or simply by making me welcome in their homes. Most of these gracious ladies are not mentioned by name. Additional thanks go to those informants and academic colleagues who exceeded my requests for information by also providing meals, transport, additional references and ephemera, or even temporary accommodation.

My stepfather, Capt. Fred A. Steele, and my best friend, Peter J. Crowther, for support at times when I most needed and least expected it, not the least of which support was financial.

My supervisor, Professor John D.A. Widdowson, for support and forbearance as well as his gracious lady wife and my other colleagues at CECTAL: Mrs. Beryl Moore, Mrs. Donie Donnelly, Dr. Julia Bishop, Andy Pearce, Robin Wiltshire, Don Bates (and his seafaring nephew), and Sarah Myers.

The Centre for Cultural Tradition and Language and the Department of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Sheffield, for providing two hundred pounds toward financing the transportation for my British fieldwork and being supportive in other ways too numerous to mention.

My ever-vigilant proofreaders, Rik Barnes, Kenneth Killiany, and Patrick Smith; Patricia Blauvelt and her husband, Don, who got me properly installed on the Internet; my ftp tutor, Mark Poole, who also did the graphic scans for the appendices and most of the "tables"; M.J. Richardson, who created the frontispiece I wanted to see; and my colleague at CECTAL, Vanessa Toulmin, who actually submitted the manuscript for me.

E.J. Heins, Jr. and the US Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II in south Carolina, who donated a jacket which I have worn proudly throughout the research period and a hundred-dollar cheque with which I was able to purchase essential bibliographical reference material.

Dr. D. Robert W. Holton and Dr. Andrew Aitchison for accommodating me in their homes during the British fieldwork.

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<sup>1</sup>. Lane, Tony, *The Merchant Seaman's War*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), vii.

Tony Lane, Dr. Don Willett and Dr. Mike Gillen for allowing me access to their own work, providing me with invaluable resources, and perhaps most of all giving me the opportunity to talk briefly with people who understood both the vocabularies from which I drew -- the working maritime and the academic simultaneously.

The staff of Computing Services and the Information Technology Centre at the University of 'Sheffield, especially Glynis Hulme, C.J. Lamb, and Gillian Smith.

Innumerable groups and individuals without whose support, encouragement, and active assistance I never could have succeeded include: The American Folklore Society Occupational Group (especially Mia Boynton and Bruce Nickerson); the SIU Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship and the SIU *SEAFARERS' LOG* (especially Jessica Smith and Jeanne Textor); Wendy Steele; the staff, officers and watchstanders of the *S/S Jeremiah O'Brien* and the *S/S Lane Victory*; the San Francisco office of the SUP; RMT Shipping Grade newspaper *THE SEAMAN*, and its editor, Jim Jump; Sailors' Snug Harbor, Sea Level NC; the Royal Naval Association, Belfast, Northern Ireland; Frank Braynard of the American Merchant Marine Museum, and the American Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, NY; the California Maritime Academy; the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, Nova Scotia; the War Memorial Museum of VA; the American Merchant Marine Veterans Association, particularly the Desert Mariners and Southwest Regional Headquarters in Fort Apache AZ (John Forsberg) and the Road Runners Chapter in Albuquerque NM (especially Marty Hrivnak); the Combat Merchant Mariners of World War II (Kermit Haber); the United States Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II and *THE ANCHOR LIGHT*; the San Diego Maritime Museum (especially Craig Arnold and Win Bagley), Bob Madison and his colleagues at the U.S. Naval Academy and the Naval Historical Center; Rory O'Connell of the Imperial War Museum; Karl Kortum and Ted Miles of the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco; C. A. Lloyd and the Navy Armed Guard Veterans Club; Tim Rizzuto, curator of *USS Kidd*; Annie Dodds and Maureen Devlin of October Films; Capts. Nick Barbara; Dick Connelly, Frank Ford, Stephen Ford, Gene Harrower, Harold Huycke, and Arthur Moore; the late Mr. Charles Chodzko, Kenny and Rochelle Goldstein, Archie Green, Sandy and Bobby Ives, Douglas Jones, Joanne Knight, Tom Lewis, Ian Millar, Gerard Mittelstaedt, Robby Owen, Anne Phillips, Simon Rae, and Alan Smith. A number of people who were instrumental in retrieving lost references for me deserve special mention: Bradley Creevey, Richard W. Collins, G.L. Glossop, Anne Lee, Christopher Lee, Stephen Liscoe, Espen Ore, Ian Oxley, Nicholas White, "Sean", and "Tony".

And last, but assuredly not least, seven people whose kindness and friendship saw me through the darkest hours. The order is alphabetical: Ian Chard, Aden Clark, Amanda Evans, Eldon Hallam, Keshav Langlois, Darren Moore, Keith Saunders and Adrian St. John.

To any whom I may have overlooked, I tender my deepest apologies. It is difficult to recall all those who have been so generous and helpful over the time and space involved in such a venture. If I have left you out, I did not intend to do so, but a faulty memory is my only excuse. You know who you are, so thank you too.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Man has been building vessels in which to float on the waters of the earth since before the advent of written history. The National Maritime Museum series, *The Ship*, tells us: "From at least Upper Paleolithic times, c40000 [sic] years ago, waterborne craft have been essential for the exploration of lake, river and sea, the colonisation of new lands and the sustainment of trade."<sup>2</sup> Vessels worthy of the term ship, planked craft capable of navigating offshore waters and making long exploratory or commercial voyages under sail or rowed by oarsmen, date back to at least the Bronze Age, if not before<sup>3</sup>, and waterborne vessels of innumerable varieties are used today for sport, recreation, commercial, and military purposes.<sup>4</sup> Few would deny the popularity of small boats for recreational pursuits, and several companies have seen fit to produce T-shirts and other souvenirs bearing an illustration from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows* showing Rat and Mole in a punt with the quote:

There is nothing -- absolutely nothing -- half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats.<sup>5</sup>

Man's eternal romance with the sea has been noted by writers throughout the ages and John Masfield's poem, "Sea Fever", has been cited so often to illustrate this relationship that it has become almost hackneyed.

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<sup>2</sup>. Sean McGrail, *Rafts, Boats and Ships: From Prehistoric Times to the Medieval Era*, vol. 1 of *THE SHIP*, ed. Basil Greenhill (London: HMSO, 1981), 5.

<sup>3</sup>. McGrail, 15.

<sup>4</sup>. "The ease of travel and safety of sea carriage quickly made the ship the chief means for transporting people and goods over great distances. By 3000 B.C. many ports had been established to handle the ever increasing trade. Aided by the growing hazards of land travel, sea travel continued to grow." Craig J. Forsyth, *The American Merchant Seaman and His Industry: Struggle and Stigma* (New York et al: Taylor and Francis, 1989), 90.

<sup>5</sup>. J.M. Cohen and M.J. Cohen, *The Penguin Dictionary of Quotations* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1960), p. 175, #9, [from Kenneth Grahame 1859-1932, *The Wind in the Willows*, chapter 1.]

Other verses better exemplify the feelings of the modern seafarer for his career, his vessel, and/or the sea itself. The line “dirty British coaster with a salt-caked smokestack”, from another of Masfield’s works, “Cargoes”,<sup>6</sup> is more likely to put a lump in the throat of a twentieth-century seafarer or bring a sentimental tear to the eye of his wife. C. Fox Smith’s “Merchantmen” and some of Kipling’s works, including “The Liner She’s a Lady” and “Such as in Ships” also appeal to the emotions of the modern merchant mariner. Simply attributed to “H.G.”, the poem “Sold for Scrap” was found on the unnumbered final page of Alex Aiken’s book, *In Time of War*. The text of its last verse, given here, would be a certain “tear-jerker” at any gathering of those with contemporary maritime connections:

*For they will come with vicious tool,  
Scarce waiting for my guts to cool;  
And they will rip my plates apart,  
And they will break my hull and heart:  
When falls my stack then falls my pride,  
No more I’ll meet the morning tide;  
So bid I farewell to the sea;  
There’s none will ever weep for me.*<sup>7</sup>

Up to the present, if one mentioned “sea lore” to an anglophone folklorist, the immediate response would be a reference to Horace Beck’s *Folklore and the Sea*. It is of singular interest that he mentions in the “Epilogue” the fact that all his data were of relatively recent vintage, although he states:

As one runs over the material in these pages, one becomes conscious that there is more small-boat lore in it than big-ship lore ... it has been collected from people connected with smaller craft. It is popularly thought that the clipper ship was the great carrier and creator of maritime folklore. This is incorrect. Clippers may have been excellent conveyances for creating sea chanties, for the work required it, but the crews were made up largely of a raggle-taggle bunch of men picked up by fair means and foul in saloons and gutters in every waterfront slum where big ships tied up. They were aboard, many of them, for only a single voyage, and left the ship nearly as ignorant as when they

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<sup>6</sup> “Cargoes”, John Masfield, *The Collected Poems of John Masfield* (London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1923 [1925]), 56.

<sup>7</sup> Alex Aiken, *In Time of War* (Glasgow: by the author, 1980), [412].

entered her. Further the modern steamship is not much better, being manned by mechanics with little or no knowledge of the sea, and less interest in it.<sup>8</sup>

When one considers the open romanticism and sentimentality of many not-so-ancient mariners, Beck's assertion regarding modern ships' personnel becomes open to question and investigation. Discussing a vessel in which he had served since her launching, one elderly retired Chief Engineer, who was interviewed during the fieldwork for this project, became quite emotional as he spoke of her sinking in convoy, as if describing the loss of a well-loved friend.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 1)<sup>9</sup>

An inordinate number of writers of seafaring literature past and present were themselves seafarers at least for a time. Among the best known of these were Richard Henry Dana, Joseph Conrad, C.S. Forester, and Nicholas Monsarrat, but numerous others achieved varying levels of popularity. Present-day mariners evince an interest in such literature by their ability and willingness to recite verse works such as Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or Kipling's "M'Andrew's Hymn" from rote memory<sup>10</sup> and their general tendency to recommend such reading matter, both prose and poetry, to anyone with even a passing interest in the subject.<sup>11</sup> Some have even cited the works of authors of maritime fiction for boys, Percy F. Westerman or Howard Pease, as having influenced their original decisions to make the sea a career.<sup>12</sup>

Robin Craig noted: "The advent of the cargo-carrying steamship in the 19th century was one of the most important developments in industrial history

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<sup>8</sup>. Horace Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* Rpt. 1985 (Mystic, CT: Mystic Seaport Museum, Incorporated, c1973), 410-411.

<sup>9</sup>. These reference numbers will be explained thoroughly in Chapter Two, Section C.

<sup>10</sup>. Personal conversation with Carter Houston and Charles Sauerbier, home of Capt. and Mrs. Fred A. Steele, Jr., December 1989.

<sup>11</sup>. Personal experience, especially with Capt. Fred Anderson Steele, Jr., but also with a significant number of informants.

<sup>12</sup>. Howard Pease [Clinton Johnson, HMC 90-24, TTC p. 1]. Percy F. Westerman [Richard Playfer, HMC 92-24, TTC p. 1; Capt. Michael Curtis, HMC 92-31, TTC p. 5]. For an explanation of these reference numbers, see Chapter Two, Section C.

yet it is almost completely neglected by historians.”<sup>13</sup> This is indubitably the case, yet how much more severely neglected has been the history of those who shipped aboard these vessels? Even quite early on it was remarked that:

Much has been written of ... ship construction, improvement in life saving apparatus, volume of ... trade ... but little has been said concerning the marine personnel, without which[sic] modern construction and marine transportation would be of little value. The man power[sic] on our ships is the most important item in the merchant marine industry, and that man power[sic] is the most neglected of all our social units.<sup>14</sup>

It was inevitable that the basis for such a study as this one must be face-to-face interviews with men such as these on both sides of the Atlantic. Many of those interviewed have made it clear that they feel it crucial that the historic role of the merchant seafarer during the Second World War be revealed and described to those who would otherwise remain ignorant of the vital part he played in the war effort. Recognising the trust placed in me by those interviewees, one of the primary aims of the present work is to discharge this obligation.

It is unfortunate that many colleagues in the investigation of occupational folklife and labourlore denigrate the type of study I have made, preferring the viewpoint of the social historian to that of the folklorist treating a collected ethnography. My sole defence in this regard is to say that I hope, in the words of Archie Green, undisputed master of this style of research, to “...combine genres into a craft mosaic by pursuing artistry and enactment....”<sup>15</sup>

In his ground-breaking article, “Is There a Folk in the Factory?”<sup>16</sup> Bruce Nickerson concluded that there was “either a folk in the factory or a group of

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<sup>13</sup>. Robin Craig, *Steam Tramps and Cargo Liners*, vol. 5 of *THE SHIP*, ed. Basil Greenhill (London: HMSO, 1980), 4.

<sup>14</sup>. James C. Healey, *Foc's'le and Glory-Hole: A Study of the Merchant Seaman and his Occupation*, rpt. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1969), 3, quoting a 1929 issue of *Merchant Marine Bulletin*.

<sup>15</sup>. Archie Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 370.

<sup>16</sup>. Bruce E. Nickerson, "Is There a Folk in the Factory?", *Journal of American Folklore* 87 (1974), 133-139.

people with many folk-like characteristics.”<sup>17</sup> This may be said of modern merchant shipping as well, for despite Beck’s allegations, the twentieth-century merchant seafarer fits Nickerson’s prototype as well as does the factory worker. The fact that Nickerson eschewed genre-specificity at the time of his original article is not insignificant, for it was his lead that encouraged students of labourlore and occupational folklife to emphasise cultural attitudes and “face-to-face verbal material”<sup>18</sup> such as PENs (Personal Experience Narratives) in their studies, rather than to seek a specific genre, perhaps one inappropriate to the particular cultural experience under investigation. Nonetheless, he, himself, recognised the worth of generic concepts and data within the broader framework of such an investigation and even stressed the value of traditional behaviour and custom, with their inherent esoteric/exoteric factors,<sup>19</sup> as subjects for analysis in such a study.<sup>20</sup>

The sea and its lore have always been personal interests of mine, due in large part to my background, since many of the men in my family have been involved in merchant shipping. From my earliest Quaker antecedents in New Bedford, Massachusetts, to my stepfather, a recently retired deck officer of the United States Merchant Marine, my family has had seafaring connections. When I was quite young, my interest was excited by the writings of Howard Pease, an American author of adventure novels for juvenile (primarily male) readers, similar to the earlier British writer, Percy F. Westerman. I daydreamed that I was the female counterpart of his teenage hero, Tod Moran.<sup>21</sup> Later I thought seriously of entering the California Maritime Academy, or some

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<sup>17</sup>. Nickerson, 134.

<sup>18</sup>. Nickerson, 135.

<sup>19</sup>. William Hugh Jansen, "The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore," in *The Study of Folklore*, ed. Alan Dundes (Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 43-51.

<sup>20</sup>. In a personal conversation with Nickerson at the 1988 annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Cambridge, Massachusetts, he encouraged me to pursue the current endeavour, despite the misgivings of some of my contemporary colleagues in occupational folklife.

<sup>21</sup>. See both above, on page 3, and further, in Chapter Four, where several informants as well have cited the influence of maritime literature and adventure stories for boys as significant in their decision to go to sea.



similar educational institution which would prepare me for life as a deck officer. That eventuality seemed far more likely than my ever getting accepted as an ordinary deckhand, since officers had their own quarters and “unlicensed” crew members in those days usually shared sleeping and living areas. Life aboard a passenger vessel as, for example, a stewardess or laundress, held no interest whatsoever for me; it was the cargo tramps I wanted; but the time had not yet come for maritime academies to open their doors to females. I am pleased to report that this is no longer the case, and young women are now accepted into training for all areas of merchant shipping.

When my mother, a divorcee, re-met and subsequently married her childhood sweetheart, a deck officer in the American mercantile marine, I eagerly lapped up all the information possible from listening to his conversations with her and with his colleagues. One major cause of bitterness among these men was the fact that, although they had been exposed to mortal danger during World War II, and had been required to enlist in the U.S. Naval Reserve, where “honorary” officers’ ranks had been bestowed upon them, still they had never been accorded the status of “veterans” nor the associated privileges.<sup>22</sup>

In essence, the lowest-ranking military sailor in the United States Navy would have reaped more lasting benefits from one year of uneventful wartime military service to his country than would a Master Mariner who had remained in the Merchant Service, sailed from the beginning of the war to its end, and been sunk more than once and wounded in action as well. This seemed most unfair, and the merchant seafarers went to battle for their rightful share of

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<sup>22</sup>. See immediately below as well as Chapter 5 for comment by American, Canadian, and British seafarers on this subject.

these rewards, which they nominally gained on 19 January, 1988,<sup>23</sup> too late for most of them to obtain much benefit therefrom.<sup>24</sup> It has since been made clear to me that Canadian merchant seamen had not yet been so recognised at the time the interviews were being conducted in 1990 and 1991,<sup>25</sup> and that the recognition afforded the British seafarer was inadequate to such an extent that some disability claims are only now being recognised and processed, some fifty years after the event.<sup>26</sup>

During the studies leading to my Master's degree, I was assigned a paper on "Folklore and Group Culture (Occupational)." I chose as my subject the modern merchant marine, and was warned that there would be little in the way of primary reference material in print to assist me.<sup>27</sup> Feeling this surely could not be the case, I continued with the project and was desolated to find such misgivings fully justified. The focus of that paper was an effort to exhibit the linkages between folklore and culture as generalities through group culture and group folklore as major categories, specifying the particular group culture examined as that of an occupational group -- modern merchant mariners. In order to investigate such connections, it was necessary to explore some definitive aspects of behaviour.

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<sup>23</sup>. This date is specified on "Application Instructions for an Armed Forces Discharge Certificate American Oceangoing Merchant Marine of WWII", a photocopy of which document was obtained from Capt. Fred A. Steele, my stepfather, and which document also bears the rubber stamp identification of Ian A. Millar, President and Founder of The Sons and Daughter's[sic] of U.S. Merchant Mariners of World War II.

<sup>24</sup>. Many of these American seafarers have expressed the personal opinion to the researcher that all they got out of being recognised as veterans of World War II was the right to be buried in Arlington National Cemetery with military honours. cf. HMC 90-39, TTC p. 1, remarks by Cliff Rehkopf.

<sup>25</sup>. The Canadian Merchant Marine achieved recognition as veterans of World War II on 1 July 1992, according to Mrs. Doris Cumby of the Department of Veteran's Affairs in St. John's, Newfoundland. Capt. Paul Brick (HMC 90-69), Capt. E.S. Wagner (HMC 90-71), Capt. Thomas Goodyear (HMC 91-4, 91-5, 91-6), Thomas Burton (HMC 91-7, 91-8), Harold W. Squires (HMC 91-9, TTC pp. 2 and 5), Frank Power (HMC 91-10), Edward Stanley Hoskins (HMC 91-11), Elbert Coldwell (HMC 91-12).

<sup>26</sup>. British Veterans' medical benefit claims for merchant mariners were discussed by Arthur Lee, (HMC 92-48, TTC p.8) amongst others.

<sup>27</sup>. David Buchan, personal communication, 1986.

It has been suggested that all shared human behaviour which is not biological in nature is cultural, as are the products of that behaviour, be they speech, gestures, artefacts, music, or building techniques, and that grouping organises society.<sup>28</sup> Seafaring is an occupation which lends itself almost immediately to such group demarcation for a number of reasons. First, in most societies it has traditionally been an almost exclusively male vocation. Further, because of its exploratory aspects and the limits of early technology it has frequently involved extended periods of dissociation from the participants' native lifestyle and from society in general, as well as obligatory introduction to lifestyles foreign to the participants' own and the generation of a shipboard society to replace the shoreside one for those living aboard over protracted intervals. In addition, specialised technological understanding is vital to the seaman, male dominance is traditional, extended periods of isolation from general society limit social interaction to the occupational group itself, and exposure to "things foreign" is often necessitated by circumstance. When these aspects of the occupation are coupled with the hazardous nature, even today, of water-borne life and work, one can easily see the many lines of demarcation separating this occupational group from other groups and enclosing it within itself.<sup>29</sup>

The basic aim of the group culture paper was to describe and discuss the cultural pattern of the occupational group studied, with the stress on its folkloric aspects. This cultural pattern of a group, as described by one social scientist with a maritime interest, would include: "folkways, mores, laws, habits, customs, etiquette, fashion, etc., which characterise any social group at

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<sup>28</sup>. John J. Honigsmann, *Understanding Culture* (Westport CT: Greenwood Press, 1977 [Rpt. of orig. 1963, NY: Harper and Row]), 3 and 64.

<sup>29</sup>. Jansen. In this context see also Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance* (New York: The Free Press, 1973) and *The Other Side: Perspectives on Deviance* (New York: The Free Press (Macmillan)/London: Collier Macmillan, 1964) and Mariam G. Sherar, *Shipping Out: A Sociological Study of the American Merchant Seaman* (Cambridge MD: Cornell Maritime Press, Inc., 1973).

any given moment in history. The fact that these patterns are ever-changing is of importance in understanding the social position of the seaman.”<sup>30</sup>

Foreign-going<sup>31</sup> sea trade prior to the inception of supertankers and container ships was distinctive and unique, not only among land-bound pursuits, as must be apparent, but even with regard to other maritime occupations, such as fishing, coasting, and, in more recent times, the offshore oil industry. Liners<sup>32</sup> regularly returned to the same harbour, but for a tramp crew<sup>33</sup> the itinerary was often unknown even to the ship’s Master himself until the moment of lading an appropriate cargo and receiving the accompanying paperwork.

Despite the more obvious influences of the predominant occupation of a community on the lifestyle and general practices of those so employed and those with whom they have frequent contact, it would appear at first glance that little is readily available in the way of standard bibliographical material pertaining directly to the folklore of the modern merchant marine.<sup>34</sup> There are, however, numerous biographies, autobiographies, journals, logs, collections of letters, and general overviews, both factual and quasi-fictive, in which one may find relevant data.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, an interest in oral history and in the folkloric and ethnographic aspects of history has recently developed among

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<sup>30</sup>. Forsyth, 31.

<sup>31</sup>. “Going foreign” or “going deepwater” are terms commonly used by seafarers to describe long-term employment on lengthy voyages away from one’s home port and native country as opposed to “going coastal”, “home trade”, or commercial fishing.

<sup>32</sup>. Liner -- Any seagoing general cargo vessel with a previously advertised schedule of ports of call. She usually carries passengers and mail. The remainder of the cargo is typically a variety of relatively small lots of valuable commodities. [From Ronald Hope, *The Merchant Navy* (London: Stanford Maritime, 1980), 37.]

<sup>33</sup>. Tramp -- Any seagoing vessel which moves freely from port to port without a fixed schedule or route. She is available for hire at prevalent rates and sails wherever the hirer or charterer desires she should. She primarily carries a single type of cargo at any one time, and only infrequently carries passengers, because of the uncertainty of her itinerary. A tramp is usually a standard cargo ship, but the term can also apply to a bulk carrier or tanker. [Hope, 37.]

<sup>34</sup>. Horace P. Beck, *Folklore and the Sea* and Margaret Baker, *Folklore of the Sea* (London *et al*: David and Charles, 1979).

<sup>35</sup>. “...sailors...have used diary, log book, poetry, and fiction to narrate their experience.” (Green, 430.)

maritime historians and several books have been published in the recent past which evince these propensities.<sup>36</sup> It is worth noting that most of these latter sources present their information more contextually than do the early folklore collections. When a seaman-informant in one of these books, whether actively working or retired, mentions a belief, custom, or story, it is often presented in the context of his daily life and work, giving a fuller view of the functions of these collected items and their relative importance to the people who hold and transmit them than the dry lists offered by antiquarian scholars. Other disciplines, such as sociology and labour history<sup>37</sup> have recently found the seafarer of interest, and, even at the present time, efforts are apparently in progress to further document this lifestyle from a number of differing scholarly viewpoints.<sup>38</sup>

As was only natural, one of the first bibliographic investigations of this study was into Horace Beck's *Folklore and the Sea*, quoted above. When his astigmatic view of the modern seafarer was compared with a statement by one of those "mechanics" he had maligned, the following came to light, demonstrating a marked contrast:

Ships to the seaman are not just things of steel and machinery. They have definite personalities and each ship he has served in lives in memory, not as the thing that provided him with a means of livelihood for a certain period of time but a sentient entity with a definite personality. There are good ships and bad (though there are some who say that there is no such thing as a bad ship but that it is only a question of "the men that's in them") and all leave their firm imprint on memory. Cursed though they may be at times of discomfort and hard work, there are few ships which in retrospect do not hold pleasing memories. Early in my seafaring years I served in

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<sup>36</sup>. Justin F. Gleichauf, *Unsung Sailors: The Naval Armed Guard in World War II* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990), John M. Waters, *Bloody Winter* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1984) and others.

<sup>37</sup>. Tony Lane, *Grey Dawn Breaking: British Merchant Seafarers in the Late Twentieth Century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986) and *The Merchant Seaman's War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), and Eric W. Sager, *Seafaring Labour: The Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada 1820-1914* (Montreal: McGill - Queen's University Press, 1989).

<sup>38</sup>. Academics with whom I spoke, such as Mike Gillen, Eric Sager, Tom Walker, and Don Willett, indicated that they might be interested in publishing such works in the not so distant future.

tramp ships, knowing all the discomforts and privations of poor food and conditions, treatment that left much to be desired, and monotonous toil under extremes of climatic conditions through long hours that would stagger a modern industrial worker. Yet memory holds few of these things. I have only to shut my eyes and I can smell again the odour of a tramp ship, an odour that is compounded of such things as stale food, dirty water and cockroaches in the galley, Stockholm tar, fish oil -- dirty bilges and the hot greasy smell of winches working under a tropic sun.

Yet these things do not conjure unpleasant memories. That is part of the magic of the sea. However much they may impinge upon the senses with anything but pleasing results at the time there lingers[sic] in memory only the moments that one longs to recapture....<sup>39</sup>

Combining contradictory data such as these with what I had learned from personal experience and contact with seafarers, it occurred to me that the time was perhaps ripe for a researcher to broach the heretofore pristine field of chronicling the traditions of modern merchant shipping from the viewpoint of a folklorist and ethnographer. Vessels of several thousand tons deadweight capacity with triple-expansion steam engines or diesel turbines could not be as void of ethnographic and folkloric interest as Beck would have one believe, or as it might at first glance appear from standing collections; there must be as much of “a folk” aboard ship as in the factory. I therefore approached Horace Beck personally, making the effort to travel from Memorial University of Newfoundland to South Street Seaport Museum in New York City for a meeting on maritime folklore at which he was to be the keynote speaker.

Knowing that he had a fondness for ‘Screech’ -- a brand of black rum easily available in Newfoundland, but virtually unobtainable in the United States -- I armed myself with a bottle, and embarked on my quest. After his speech was finished, I approached him, proffered the gift, which was graciously received, shook his hand, and explained my situation. I assured him that there was no personal antipathy in my disagreement with his opinions, but that, feeling further exploration was indicated, I intended to

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<sup>39</sup>. J.E. Taylor, *Of Ships and Seamen* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1949), p. 9.

devote the rest of my professional life to demonstrating their inaccuracy. With a characteristically sceptical half-grin, he replied gruffly, “Well -- I wish you luck.” Thus I received sanction for my project from the established scholar with whom I differed, and the serious work began. With the efforts laid forth in this study, I have initiated critical folkloric and ethnographic inquiries into the traditions of modern<sup>40</sup> merchant shipping and, if I should become personally unable to pursue them in greater depth, I hope with this work to beget in others a similar compulsion to do so.

I have not entered this research with a “thesis”, nor have I emerged with one. The intent has not been to prove an already constructed hypothesis,<sup>41</sup> but to explore the seaman’s ingenuity and traditional lifestyle within his occupational framework. An ethnographic human context was the focus and little consideration was given any area of the seafaring and shipping industry which did not have to do with the men involved and their lives. This enquiry was not concerned, for example, with maritime economics, marine architecture, or naval tactical history, but with the lives of men aboard ships in merchant convoys during the Second World War. It has been noted that ethnographic thinking conceives the research process as inductive or discovery-based, rather than limited to the testing of explicit hypotheses,<sup>42</sup> and I have conformed to that paradigm to the best of my ability.

The foundation of the investigation was the World War II convoy system on a global basis. The scope was then narrowed, focussing on the North Atlantic “run”, although individual remarks on events in the Pacific, Mediterranean, or Arctic theatres of war, or the Indian Ocean, were retained if their content seemed relevant to the convoy experience in general. The

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<sup>40</sup>. “Modern” in this case should be taken to mean “since sail was replaced by steam and motor to drive the majority of vessels engaged in sea-borne commerce.”

<sup>41</sup>. Other than the existence of viable folklore aboard modern merchant ships.

<sup>42</sup>. Martyn Hammersley, *Reading Ethnographic Research: A Critical Guide* (London and New York: Longman, 1990), 8.

intention was to examine the shipboard experience of seafarers in an ethnographic manner, and the research itself wandered, in an exploratory sense, through social contexts, in the footsteps of Green and Nickerson, attempting to exercise their methods for the study of occupational folklife ashore upon seafarers.

After the experience with Horace Beck as recounted earlier, I had approached the study with the firm intention of proving only that -- to juggle Nickerson's phrase -- there was indeed "a folk" aboard the merchant ship. In this collected study of occupational lifestyles and traditions, however, fewer traditions than lifestyles have been uncovered. This was quite a startling development, since fisherfolk have been noted for centuries as tradition-bearers and the military seafarer has been similarly steeped in tradition. There are a number of possible reasons for this surprising paucity of traditional lore aboard merchant vessels and these will be covered in Chapter Seven. The task has not proven altogether thankless, however, and amongst the sectors that remained unscathed was my personal favourite, that of fools' errands on which newcomers and "green hands" were sent. A search was undertaken simultaneously for unusual words and nicknames.

The earliest approach to interactive social material was purely comparative, the intent being to compare and contrast data from opposite sides of the Atlantic. It has been possible to accomplish this, although not to as great a degree or in as great a depth as had been originally foreseen. Perhaps a somewhat better perspective on this may be obtained by examining the methodology involved in the study as a whole.

The main thrust of the work evolved from the field research itself. No one, to the best of my knowledge, had attempted such an ethnological survey of seafaring on a wide scale. The endeavour, using a social network approach,



facilitated by my family and their friends, veterans' groups, and trade unions, attempted to ask as many people as possible what their experiences had been aboard ship during the Second World War, especially in the convoy situation. This involved meeting a broad spectrum of seafarers in face to face interviews, and using such techniques to "get inside the minds" of those whose first-hand experience was to be recorded while they were still there to ask. This was personal testimony and the time element was vital. The numbers of men with relevant experience were rapidly declining and the interviews had to be conducted while the subjects were still mentally active and physically capable of sustaining a prolonged interview situation.

A quite significant amount of archival and bibliographical work was also imperative, as it was essential to create a firm foundation on which to ground the data gained in the personal testimonies. The results of this quest were more secure than were the interview subjects, in that extant publications and museum collections are less transient than human beings and certainly less liable to be significantly impaired by advancing age than mere mortals. The distances between the institutions involved, however, were just as extreme as those between the homes of the informants, and the need for extensive travel to reach both the personal and institutional sources was paramount. For this reason, the following chapter includes a lengthy and detailed itinerary of the active fieldwork, culled from my field journal. This reveals the total number of people potentially and actually interviewable whose personal testimony forms the basis of the detailed description and analysis in the main body of the study. It also enables the reader to discern which sources were helpful, which gave less information, and which would be important to approach for continued research in future.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

#### **A. Bibliographical Sources**

The initial research for this project was bibliographical in character, and that effort has continued to the present moment. The list of cited works appended to this study is only a fragment of the extensive annotated bibliography amassed over the past few years, which now includes more than 1500 titles. Sources have included the holdings of public libraries, educational institutions and maritime museums, as well as private collections. The earliest bibliographical inquiries took place while I was still completing my Master's thesis. Thereafter, whenever I found myself with access to a public library or maritime museum, I attempted to spend at least enough time there to examine the catalogue of holdings for titles not previously discovered. Other resources came to light as the result of suggestions by colleagues or informants and these recommendations often included institutions and individuals as well as individual texts.

The greatest disappointments during the research period were my visit to the Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia, where the library facilities were unavailable even to staff due to asbestos removal operations, and my visit to the British National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, where most twentieth century materials had been removed to set up an exhibit on the two world wars that was not scheduled to open for a further ten to twelve weeks and to which I was unable to return. The most fruitful resources in the United States were visits to the Porter Shaw Library (part of the National

Maritime Museum in San Francisco), the Paul Hall Memorial Library of the Seafarers' Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship in Piney Point, Maryland, and the libraries of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy (Kings Point, New York) and the California Maritime Academy. In Canada, the most productive were the Marine Museum of the Atlantic in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Memorial University of Newfoundland. At the latter, both the Queen Elizabeth II Library and the Maritime History Archives advanced the maritime aspects of the research, while the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive<sup>43</sup> augmented ethnographic and folkloric materials. The most valuable sources in the United Kingdom have proven to be personal visits to the British Library Document Centre at Boston Spa and the Picton and International Libraries in William Brown Street, Liverpool, excepting, of course, the Inter-Library Loan system, through the University of Sheffield Library, which has been exceedingly rewarding as well.<sup>44</sup> Not the least of the resources have been several more modern media -- academic discussion lists accessed via computer networks.<sup>45</sup>

Many books and articles have been published about the life of the merchant seaman during the age of sail. Little in the way of published matter dealing with life in the mercantile marine since steam, diesel, and other such technologically "modern" means of propulsion replaced wind, however, rapidly manifested itself in the earlier days of the research. In terms of the Second World War, that period between 1939 and 1945, many authors had

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<sup>43</sup>. Hereafter designated solely by its acronym of MUNFLA.

<sup>44</sup>. It is unfortunate that almost all the booknotes taken from these acquisitions were lost when a case of computer floppy discs went missing, well into the writing-up period. The Sheffield Central City Library proved an invaluable resource when I was attempting to retrieve references which were lost on the discs.

<sup>45</sup> Some of these sources were also instrumental in retrieving information lost with the floppy discs.

extolled the gallantry of the seagoing warrior<sup>46</sup>, but very little was available, even in fiction<sup>47</sup>, which dealt with the actual day-to-day lives of his civilian brothers in the merchant service. Notable exceptions were the writings of Tony Lane<sup>48</sup> and a few biographical and autobiographical works which were anything but easily obtainable<sup>49</sup>. Some of these I have only seen briefly and never had an opportunity to read in depth<sup>50</sup>. Several periodicals, such as the U.S. Navy's magazine, *All Hands*, and a number of speeches (especially those by Admiral Emory S. Land, dealing with the United States Merchant Marine) have been cited in more extensive works, such as Felix Riesenberg's *Sea War* and Stan Hugill's *Sailortown*, but were not found in a readily accessible location.

The only widely known fictional works for adult readers dealing with the twentieth-century merchant seafarer have been the short stories of Guy Gilpatric and of Dr. Neil Munro, the latter writing under the pen name of

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<sup>46</sup>. W. Howard Baker, *Strike North* (London: Trojan Publications, [n.d.]); Alfred Cecil Hardy, *Everyman's History of the Sea War in Three Volumes* (London: Nicholson and Watson, 1955); Robert Hughes, *Flagship to Murmansk* (London: Futura, 1975); Walter Karig: *Battle in the Pacific (prepared from official sources)*, *Battle Report: The Atlantic War*, *Battle Report: The End of an Empire*, *Battle Report: Pacific War: middle phase*, *Battle Report: Pearl Harbor to Coral Sea* (New York: [Farrar and] Rinehart, 1944-1949); Alistair MacLean, *HMS Ulysses* ([Garden City NY?]: Doubleday, 1955); Arthur J. Marder, *From the Dreadnought to Scapa Flow* (5 vols) (London: Oxford University Press, 1961-1970); Nicholas Monsarrat: *Corvette Command*, *The Cruel Sea*, *East Coast Corvette*, *H.M. Corvette*, *Three Corvettes* (London: Cassell/New York: Lippincott, 1943-1945); Samuel Eliot Morison: *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*, *The Two-Ocean War* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1946-1962 and New York: Ballantine Books, 1963 (pb)); Dudley Pope, *Convoy: A Novel* (New York: Walker, 1987); etc.

<sup>47</sup>. Guy Gilpatric's *Action in the North Atlantic* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1943) and James Pattinson's *Last in Convoy* (New York: McDowell, Oblensky, [1958, c1957]) seem to be the exceptions that prove the rule in fiction.

<sup>48</sup>. Lane, *Grey Dawn Breaking* and *The Merchant Seaman's War* previously cited.

<sup>49</sup>. Alex Aiken, *In Time of War*; Frank Laskier, *My Name is Frank* (New York: Norton, 1942); Hal Lawrence, *A Bloody War: One Man's Memories of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979); E.J. Quinby, *Ida was a Tramp -- and Other Reflections* (Hicksville NY: Exposition Press, 1975); C. Tillman, *Engine Room Sea Stories 1931-1945* (Oakland CA: by author, 1986).

<sup>50</sup>. S.J. Hartland, *The Dustless Road* (Reading: Educational Explorers Limited, 1965); Frederick Sawyer Herman, *Dynamite Cargo: Convoy to Russia* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1943); Norman Lee, *Landlubber's Log: 25,000 Miles with the Merchant Navy* (London: Quality Press, 1945); Colin MacKenzie, *Sailors of Fortune* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., 1944); Hugh Mulzac, *A Star to Steer By* (New York: International Publishers, 1963); Tom O'Reilly, *Purser's Progress: The Adventures of a Seagoing Office Boy* (New York: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1944); Allen Raymond, *Waterfront Priest* (New York: Henry Holt, 1955); Quentin Reynolds, *Convoy* (New York: Random House, 1942).

‘Hugh Foulis’. Gilpatric’s works dealt primarily with a Chief Engineer<sup>51</sup> named Mr. Glencannon, who sailed on tramp steamers, and they appeared in North American popular literary magazines throughout the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s. Most of these magazines are no longer in publication. Anthologies of the stories were also published in book form.<sup>52</sup> In addition, Gilpatric wrote a novel, *Action in the North Atlantic*, which was subsequently made into a wartime film, starring Humphrey Bogart and William Bendix.<sup>53</sup> Para Handy, Munro’s character, was the skipper of a Scottish coaster and the stories appeared first in the Glasgow *Evening News* and then in three short volumes, not being gathered into a single omnibus<sup>54</sup> until after the author’s death in 1931. That date, however, renders them chronologically irrelevant to the current research.<sup>55</sup>

The works of Howard Pease and Percy F. Westerman, noted previously, were intended for juvenile readers and were extremely popular in their day, although their acceptance has waned to the extent that the works no longer appear on the shelves of most young people’s libraries. Pease’s entire output was twenty-two titles, of which at least sixteen had nautical themes, while Westerman’s yield was almost triple that number with only a minor segment focussing upon the mercantile marine. In *Twentieth-Century*

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<sup>51</sup>. Throughout this work, in order to provide a distinction and avoid confusion, I have used upper case initial letters for all ranks and ratings, such as Mate, Boy, and the like, despite the fact that this is not the prevalent usage.

<sup>52</sup>. Gilpatric’s stories appeared in such North American magazines as *The Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's*. Among the anthologies of these stories as published in book form were Guy Gilpatric, *The Canny Mr. Glencannon; in which is set forth a true account of the numerous recent and stirring events in the exemplary life and charitable works of Colin St. Andrew MacThrockle Glencannon, Esq., chief engineer of the S.S. Inchcliffe Castle* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1948); *The First Glencannon Omnibus, including Scotch and Water, Half-seas Over, Three Sheets in the Wind* (New York: Dodd, 1945); and *Mr. Glencannon Ignores the War* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1944).

<sup>53</sup>. Guy Gilpatric, *Action in the North Atlantic* (New York: E P Dutton, 1943). The film is mentioned in Gleichauf, 213, and I can testify to its existence from personal knowledge, having viewed it in its entirety more than once on television.

<sup>54</sup>. All the information on the ‘Para Handy’ texts and their publication is derived from the Foreword of Neil Munro, *Para Handy Tales* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1969 [Rpt. of London: William Blackwood and Sons Ltd., 1955]). I am grateful to my friend, Alan Frith, for obtaining a copy of this book for me.

<sup>55</sup>. It is interesting to note that a BBC television series based on the Para Handy stories made its debut on Sunday, 31 July, 1994.

*Children's Writers*, the reviewers class Pease's works as "action-filled, suspenseful, and convincing," the characters as "vibrant and alive".<sup>56</sup>

Unfortunately for poor Westerman, his "writing falls too easily into cliché and his characters into stereotypes" and he is charged with a lack of "imaginative sympathy", while a change in fashion which rendered inappropriate the actions and qualities of his heroes led to declining readership.<sup>57</sup>

Many volumes whose titles have been gleaned from the catalogues of maritime libraries there has been too little time to examine in adequate detail<sup>58</sup>. Others have been highly recommended by informants or colleagues, but have never actually been located in the course of the research.<sup>59</sup> These include not

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<sup>56</sup> D. L. Kirkpatrick, ed., *Twentieth-Century Children's Writers* (London: Macmillan, 1978), 983.

<sup>57</sup> Kirkpatrick, 1319. Despite repeated endeavours, I was never able to locate a single Westerman work to read for comparison with Pease.

<sup>58</sup> Robert Greenhalg Albion and Jennie Barnes Pope, *Sea Lanes in Wartime: the American Experience 1775-1945* ([Hamden CT]: Archon Books, 1968); Robert Earle Andersen, *The Merchant Marine and World Frontiers* (New York: Cornell Maritime Press, 1945); Ivor Halstead, *Heroes of the Atlantic: The British Merchant Navy Carries On!* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Company, Inc., c1942); Elmo Paul Hohman, *History of American Merchant Seamen* (Hamden CT: Shoe String Press, 1956) and *Seamen Ashore: A Study of the United Seamen's Service and of Merchant Seamen in Port* (New Haven CT: Yale University Press, 1952); Douglas How, *Night of the Caribou* (Hantsport NS: Lancelot Press, 1988); J. Lennox Kerr, ed., *Touching the Adventures of Merchantmen in the Second World War* (London: Harrap, 1953); George G. Killinger, ed., *The Psycho-Biological Program of the War Shipping Administration* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 1946); Donald G.F. MacIntyre, *The Battle of the Atlantic* (London/Sydney: Pan Books, 1st. pub. 1961; 1st Pan, 1969, also 1983. New York: Macmillan, 1961. London: B.T. Batsford, Ltd., 1961); Nicholas Manolis, *We At Sea: the epic of the American Mariner* (New York: Anatolia Press, 1949); David Masters, *In Peril on the Sea: War Exploits of Allied Seamen* (London: Cresset Press, 1960); Samuel Duff McCoy, *...Nor Death Dismay: A Record of Merchant Ships and Merchant Mariners in Time of War* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1944); Allan Nevins, *Sail On: The Story of the American Merchant Marine* (New York: United States Lines, 1946); William G. Schofield, *Eastward the Convoys* (Chicago/New York/San Francisco: Rand McNally and Company, 1965); William L. Standard, *Merchant Seamen: A Short History of Their Struggles* (New York: International Publishers, 1947); Kurt Weibust, *The Crew as a Social System* [full bibliographical information not available].

<sup>59</sup> Homer H. Hickam, Jr., *Torpedo Junction* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989); Terry Hughes and John Costello, *The Battle of the Atlantic* (New York: Dial Press/J. Wade (London: Collins), c1977); Sir Archibald Spicer Hurd, *The Battle of the Seas: The Fighting Merchantmen* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1941); Glenn B. Infield, *Disaster at Bari* (New York: Ace Books, 1971); Kaj Klitgaard, *Oil and Deep Water* (Chapel Hill NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1945); James B. Lamb, *The Corvette Navy: True Stories from Canada's Atlantic War* (Toronto: Macmillan, [1982?]); Emory Scott Land, *The United States Merchant Marine at War* (Washington DC: U.S. Government, 1946); Marc Milner, *North Atlantic Run: The RCN and the Battle for the Convoys* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985); Dan van der Vat, *The Atlantic Campaign: World War II's Great Struggle at Sea* (New York et al: Harper and Row, 1988).

only volumes of personal experience narratives and the like, but also elementary reference materials.<sup>60</sup>

The one item whose lack I most regret was recommended by Robert Madison, a professor of English at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland.<sup>61</sup> He said that Richard McKenna, author of *The Sand Pebbles*, had contributed an article to a book edited by Robert Shenk, that the book was called *The Left-Handed Monkey Wrench and Other Essays*, that it had been published by the Naval Institute Press in Annapolis, and that it, or at least the essay in question, dealt with fools' errands upon which novices might be sent at sea. Despite painstaking searches in every library and museum with which I subsequently dealt, I have never yet seen either book or article.<sup>62</sup>

Effort has been made by some scholars in recent years to report factually on the mercantile marine during the age of sail, and even the earliest days of steam, in the form of social history, labour history, and sociology.<sup>63</sup> At least one volume has been published recently which treats occupational folklife and labourlore generally, but which has fuelled the research for this particular project as well.<sup>64</sup> Also, during the data-gathering period leading to

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<sup>60</sup> I personally own the volumes by Sawyer and Mitchell on the Liberty ships, Victory Ships and T-2 tankers, but have only been given the merest glance at their book on the Canadian and British equivalent of these vessels, *The Oceans, Forts and Parks*, at the office of Captain Paul Brick, an informant in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and momentarily glimpsed a corresponding work on the British "Empire" boats on the shelves of the International Library in Liverpool. I also own Capt. Arthur Moore's absolutely invaluable *A Careless Word... ..A Needless Sinking* [full refs. footnote <sup>80</sup>, this chapter] on US merchant losses during World War II and John M. Young's *Britain's Sea War: A Diary of Ship Losses 1939-1945* (Wellingborough, Northants.: Patrick Stephens Limited, 1989). The Admiralty publication, *British Merchant Vessels Lost or Damaged by Enemy Action During the Second World War: 3rd September, 1939 to 2nd September, 1945* (London: HMSO, 1947) would have been a truly worthwhile addition as well, had I been able to locate a copy for sale.

<sup>61</sup> Personal conversation, late June 1990.

<sup>62</sup> A friend facetiously quipped that I myself might appear to have been sent on a fool's errand in this instance.

<sup>63</sup> Craig J. Forsyth, *The American Merchant Seaman and His Industry: Struggle and Stigma* (New York, et al.: Taylor and Francis, 1989); Marcus Buford Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987); Eric W. Sager, *Seafaring Labour* (Montreal: McGill -- Queen's University Press, 1989); Mariam G. Sherar, *Shipping Out: A Sociological Study of the American Merchant Seaman* (Cambridge MD: Cornell Maritime Press, Inc., 1973); et alia.

<sup>64</sup> Green, *Wobblies, Pile Butts, and Other Heroes*, cited previously.

this study, an excellent book was published concerning the United States Navy Armed Guard -- that segment of the military which was assigned to protect merchant ships sailing under the American flag by living aboard them and manning whatever armaments they carried.<sup>65</sup> The Navy Armed Guard was roughly equivalent to the Defensive Equipment Merchant Ships gunners (DEMS) aboard British flag vessels,<sup>66</sup> although the terms cannot be regarded as altogether synonymous. The differences between the two will be treated at a later point. I know of no book dealing specifically with the DEMS gunners or the Territorial Army and Royal Marine gunners who also served aboard British and other Allied ships, but at least three further books deal with the U.S. Navy Armed Guard.<sup>67</sup> I have acquired one for my personal library and seen the others only in the personal libraries of others. *Gunners Get Glory* was in the library of C.A. Lloyd, the man who headed the Navy Armed Guard veterans' organisation at the time of the North American fieldwork, and the Brinkley book, which would seem not only the most germane to this study but an absolutely essential reference, has only been briefly glimpsed within the personal library of Ian Millar in North Carolina.

Not surprisingly, the majority of published North American sources containing personal experience narratives on the subject here treated were books and booklets of limited circulation published by trade unions or shipping companies primarily at the time of the Second World War or

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<sup>65</sup>. Gleichauf, *Unsung Sailors*, cited previously.

<sup>66</sup>. Hereafter, the acronym will be used to refer to this group, as it is in common use among most seafarers, military people, and historians dealing with the period of World War II.

<sup>67</sup>. *United States Navy Armed Guard Veterans of World War II* (Dallas TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1987); Lloyd Wendt, chron., *Gunners Get Glory: Lt. Bob Barry's Story of the Navy's Armed Guard* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1943); and Dyron Lavon Brinkley, *The U.S. Naval Armed Guard and the Merchant Marine of World War II* (Torrance CA: by author, 1986).



immediately thereafter.<sup>68</sup> In the case of the trade union publications, many of these were undeniably propaganda, such as the colour comic “Heroes in Dungarees” which was funded by the National Maritime Union and glorified the (union-organised) merchant mariner at war in the most florid style imaginable.<sup>69</sup> In the United Kingdom, the majority of the shipping company histories were contemporary to the war and there was some effort at government propaganda immediately after 1945.<sup>70</sup> It was a pleasant surprise, therefore, to discover that there were also a few recently published titles<sup>71</sup> beginning to offer an account of the daily life of the merchant seafarers of the Second World War for less limited and more unbiased consumption by the general public. Several of these were collections of personal experience

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<sup>68</sup> Eugene F. Hoffman, *American President Lines' Role in World War II* (San Francisco: APL, 1946); Marquis James, *The Texaco Story: The First Fifty Years, 1902-1952* (New York: The Texaco Company, 1952); John H. Melville, *The Great White Fleet* [United Fruit Company], (New York *et al*: Vantage Press, 1976); Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, *Ships of the ESSO Fleet in World War II* (New York: Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) (SOCOJ), 1946).

<sup>69</sup> See also the section in Chapter Six dealing with attitudes ashore. “First published in ‘Comic Cavalcade,’ a comic book with a newsstand circulation of over 400,000, and later reprinted for distribution to schools, troops and labor organizations, this comic strip represented the first attempt by a national trade union to enter the comic strip media..” Donald Edward Willett, “Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union, 1936-1945”, (Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Texas A-and-M, American History, December 1985), 167, citing dual sources from 1944.

<sup>70</sup> Stanton Hope, *Tanker Fleet: the war story of the Shell tankers and the men who manned them* (London: Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Co., 1948); Malcolm Falkus, *The Blue Funnel Legend: A History of the Ocean Steam Ship Company, 1865-1973* (London: Macmillan, 1990); George F. Kerr, *Business in Great Waters* [Peninsular and Orient], (London: Faber, 1946); W.E. Lucas, *Eagle Fleet: The story of a tanker fleet in peace and war* [Eagle Tankers], (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1955); Ministry of Information (for the Ministry of War Transport), *Merchantmen at War: The Official Story of the Merchant Navy: 1939-1944* (London: HMSO, 1944); Stephen W. Roskill, *A Merchant Fleet in War* [“Blue Funnel” Alfred Holt] (London: Collins, 1962); Hilary St. George Saunders, *Valiant Voyaging* [British India Steam Navigation Company], (London: Faber and Faber, 1948); “Taffrail” (Capt. Taprell Dorling), *Blue Star Line At War, 1939-1945* (London/New York *et al*: W. Fouldham and Co., Ltd., 1973); Sydney D. Waters, *Ordeal by Sea* [New Zealand Shipping Company], (London: New Zealand Shipping Company Ltd., 1949).

<sup>71</sup> *Battle of the Atlantic: An Anthology of Personal Memories* (Liverpool: Picton Press, 1993); Doddy Hay, *War Under the Red Ensign* (London: Jane’s, 1982); Alfred Lund, *The Red Duster* (Whitby, N. Yorks.: Whitby Press, 1989); John Slader, *The Red Duster at War: A History of the Merchant Navy during the Second World War* (London: William Kimber, 1988); John Terraine, *Business in Great Waters* (London, Cooper, 1989); etc.

narratives, verse, or quasi-fiction published by The Marine Society and edited by its Director, Dr. Ronald Hope.<sup>72</sup>

Undeniably the single most comprehensively chronicled convoy of the war was that to North Russia, widely known by its Admiralty code name, PQ17. The volumes written about this ill-starred venture include official reports, justifications for the actions of those then in authority<sup>73</sup>, accusations against others in authority,<sup>74</sup> eyewitness descriptions from crew members<sup>75</sup>, and in-depth exposés by professional investigative journalists.<sup>76</sup>

A few other volumes about convoys to Russia<sup>77</sup> or Malta<sup>78</sup> have been published within the past two or three decades, and there are one or two more dealing with individual North Atlantic sailings.<sup>79</sup>

Among further areas well worth investigating in connection with this study but for which there was insufficient time were the activities of the

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<sup>72</sup>. *Sea Pie (Fifty Years of "The Seafarer")* (London: Fairplay in association with the Marine Society, 1984); *The Seaman's World: Merchant Seamen's Reminiscences* (London: Harrap (in association with The Marine Society), 1982); *Seamen and the Sea: A collection of new sea stories by Merchant Seamen* (London/Toronto: George G. Harrap, 1965); *Twenty Singing Seamen (Stories)* (London: Stanford Maritime, 1979); *Voices From the Sea (Poems)* (London: Harrap [for the Marine Society], 1977).

<sup>73</sup>. Jack Broome, *Convoy is to Scatter* (London: William Kimber, 1972).

<sup>74</sup>. Vice Admiral Sir John Hayes, *Face the Music* (no loc.: Pentland Press, 1991).

<sup>75</sup>. "Ferocious" O'Flaherty, *Abandoned Convoy: The U.S. Merchant Marine in World War II: The Full Story of the Debacle of Convoy P.Q. 17 told for the First Time by "Ferocious" O'Flaherty (Mariner)* (New York: Exposition Press, Inc., 1970); Paul Lund and Harry Ludlam, *PQ 17 -- Convoy to Hell: The Survivors' Story* (London: New English Library, 1968, 1969, 1970), etc.

<sup>76</sup>. David Irving, *The Destruction of Convoy PQ-17* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968); Theodore Taylor, *Battle in the Arctic Seas: The story of Convoy PQ 17* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1976), etc.

<sup>77</sup>. Brian Betham Schofield, *The Russian Convoys* (Philadelphia: Dufour Editions, 1964) and *The Arctic Convoys* (London: Macdonald and Jane's, 1977), also *The Rescue Ships*, co-authored by L.F. Martyn (London: William Blackwood and Sons Limited, 1968).

<sup>78</sup>. Peter C. Smith, *Pedestal: The Malta Convoy of 1942* (London: William Kimber, 1970); Peter Shankland and Anthony Hunter, *Malta Convoy* (New York: Ives Washburn Inc., 1961); Ian Cameron or Donald Payne[?], *Red Duster, White Ensign: the story of the Malta Convoys* (London: Frederick Muller, Ltd., 1959/Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1960) and a couple of paperbacks.

<sup>79</sup>. Ronald Seth, *The Fiercest Battle: the story of North Atlantic convoy ONS 5, 22nd April-7th May 1943* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., c1961 (1st US 1962)); John Waters, *Bloody Winter* (Annapolis MD, et al: Naval Institute Press, 1984); Martin Middlebrook, *Convoy: The Battle for Convoys SC.122 and HX.229* (London/New York: Allen Lane/William Morrow, 1976/1977 (c1976)); etc.

United States Coast Guard,<sup>80</sup> the Canadian coastal forces,<sup>81</sup> and the British lifeboat services.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>80</sup>. Rex Ingraham, *First Fleet: The Story of the United States Coast Guard at War* (Indianapolis/New York: Bobbs-Merrill, [1944]); Arch A. Mercey, *Sea, Surf and Hell: the United States Coast Guard in World War II* (New York: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1945); Malcolm F. Willoughby, *The United States Coast Guard in World War II* (Annapolis MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1956, 1957).

<sup>81</sup>. Michael L. Hadley, *U-Boats Against Canada: German Submarines in Canadian Waters* (Kingston/Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1985); Stephen Butler Leacock, *et al*, *Canada's War at Sea* (Montreal: A.M. Beatty, 1944) and a number of publications sponsored by the Navy League of Canada.

<sup>82</sup>. Charles Vince, *Storm on the Waters* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1946).

## **B. Fieldwork**

In a consultation which preceded our formal relationship, I mentioned to my current supervisor that I thought an ethnographic study of modern merchant mariners would be worthwhile and it should be done now, while a large number of them were still living active, productive lives, with their mental processes unimpaired. It was then suggested to me<sup>83</sup> that the area was far too diverse to be adequately investigated by a single study, but that a more limited segment of it would make an excellent topic. I felt I had a natural inclination towards the convoys of World War II, not least because veterans' status had only recently been granted to merchant mariners in the U.S., and the subject was prevalent in the conversation and interests of my family and their familiars.<sup>84</sup>

The men interviewed in the course of the fieldwork were all Anglophones and all but one or two were native-born to areas now part of Canada, the United States of America, or the United Kingdom. Had time and funds been unlimited, I should have preferred to include various other groups in the sample, including Scandinavia and the Low Countries, the Free French, and Australasia, among others. It was, however, beyond the capacities of any individual to accomplish such a prodigious feat without unlimited resources. Those eventually interviewed were for the most part retired and inactive merchant mariners (although a few were still sailing or actively working in maritime-related fields at the time of the interviews and a few of the men's wives participated marginally in the interview sessions). A substantial minority of the sample had been military gunners serving aboard merchant vessels during the Second World War, and a very few, only four or five of the total of more than one hundred, were military men who had served aboard

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<sup>83</sup>. John D.A. Widdowson, personal communication, Summer 1989.

<sup>84</sup>. See the Introduction and Chapter Six for further information on this subject.

naval escort vessels. One was a soldier in the U.S. Army who had travelled to the European Theatre of Operations aboard a troopship in convoy. He was included because he was a willing volunteer and it seemed worthwhile to include the views of one who had been a sort of unofficial participant/observer at the time of the convoys themselves. The questions asked were substantially the same in all instances although, as no formal questionnaire was involved, the order in which they were asked was not inflexible and at least one query (but seldom the same one) was overlooked in almost every interview.

The understandable constraints of time and of the availability of interviewees carried even more weight when borne upon the shoulders of a single investigator than they would have done upon a team effort. These restrictions were all that kept the project within reasonable bounds. With unlimited facilities and an international network of confederates, one might have envisaged a cross-section of Allied convoys, including those originating in Australasia and other major Pacific staging areas, as well as an in-depth investigation into the participation of non-Anglophone Allies and neutrals. Such endeavours, however, were beyond the capabilities of a mere individual and so were never envisaged as part of the enterprise, much less attempted.

Certain questions which later became part of the model were not among those asked systematically in the earlier interviews. The question of which watch was the informant's favourite, for example, only arose by chance, part way through the North American fieldwork. Responses proved so interesting that this question was regularly included in succeeding interviews, and also disclosed that those who favoured a specific watch often appeared to have certain other attitudes or preferences in common.<sup>85</sup> Other areas of interest were only revealed when the writing began, and, never the result of formal questioning, arose gratuitously from the database at irregular intervals,

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<sup>85</sup>. See the section on Favourite Watches in Chapter Four.

exciting enough interest in my mind to be included in the final study.

“Washing Machines”<sup>86</sup> is an example of one such topic, which nearly became a subsection in itself.

A free, conversational technique of interviewing allowed the informant to lead the way, rather than to follow the researcher in a “tape-recorded questionnaire” format. The first few interviews laid the basic ground rules for the procedure which was to be followed throughout. The first questions asked almost inevitably dealt with how and when the informant first went to sea, at what age, and in what capacity. Many respondents presented their discharge papers or union books and went through a ship-by-ship history of their seafaring lives. Such recitals were seldom curtailed, as they enabled the informants to organise their memories in such a way as to implement further contributions, and made them feel more at ease within the interview situation. If, as was sometimes the case, they retreated into their memories, forgetting who the interviewer was and completely ignoring the presence of the tape-recorder, this was considered to be a premium and an indication that the job was being done properly.

Although naturally a little tentative at first, I soon developed a basic format for interviews. After receiving a response from the initial mail contact, I would send a letter telling the informant when I would be in his area and suggesting an expedient date and time for an interview, urging him to ring or write to confirm that such a time would be agreeable to him. If such a response was not forthcoming or if time considerations precluded, I made a final telephone contact myself to confirm the interview date, time, and location, including directions, before proceeding. Only once did this system break down, and even that interview came to a successful denouement.

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<sup>86</sup>. This subject is covered in Chapter Three.

Most of the interviews were conducted at informants' homes and in a one-on-one situation. Group interviews were considered less than desirable, as they tended to allow more freedom to the already voluble, while suppressing the often more tempting tidbits proffered by the more reticent and less loquacious. Occasionally a group interview was unavoidable and I was compelled to make the best of the situation. A few interviews were conducted in a private home other than that of the informant, in my own temporary residence, in a business office, or in a more public venue such as a club, pub, hotel lobby, union hiring hall, or retirement home. Several, during the earlier phases of the fieldwork, took place aboard restored merchant vessels of the World War II period which now hold the status of floating museums. In many cases there are vague suspicions that a different venue might have slightly altered the result, but any significant variation of either the quality or the quantity of data obtained would have been extremely unlikely.

I made a concerted effort to dress neatly, but casually, for interviews. Many former ratings would have been discomfited by excessive academic formality in a researcher's appearance or demeanour. I also attempted to avoid being overly casual or familiar in conduct, thus maintaining my tacitly somewhat "official" status in such a manner as to imply recognition of the value of each individual informant's contributions. The fact that I came from a seafaring background, already understood many of the terms used, and was not a complete neophyte to the data I was given, was to my advantage. If, however, something was about to be disregarded by an informant on the grounds that "you already know about that", he was gently reminded that everyone sees things from a different perspective and that it would be advantageous for me to get as many views as possible, or that the average reader might not know, so a complete and informed definition or description

was preferred, in order that inaccuracy might be avoided. This technique usually achieved the desired result.

On arriving at the venue and meeting the informant, I tried always to offer a firm handshake and a business card by way of self-introduction and not to depend too heavily on any entrée provided by a third party. Such dependence has occasionally proven prejudicial to fieldwork undertaken in similar circumstances. Once we were seated, I produced my release forms. Several men were a bit reluctant to sign, saying there was no need for such paperwork, as they were “obviously” willing participants. I then explained the necessity of such documents to confirm this willingness and to deter the unscrupulous from exploiting the unwary. This usually led to a more relaxed atmosphere, as I often described the wording of the release forms as characterising me as some sort of “God’s gift to the merchant seaman”, which brought a note of gentle humour into the proceedings. Once a release form was not returned to me. I believe this to have been an oversight on the part of the informant and still hope to obtain this release. I have taken the precaution of not using that person’s name in the current study, although I believe he would not have objected to my doing so. A few others urged me to use extreme discretion with their data and/or their identities, and I have done so to the best of my ability.

The tape-recorder was always equipped with a fresh tape and batteries before arrival at the venue, so there was a minimum of fuss getting out the microphone and plugging the whole thing together. Several of the more technologically-minded of the men visited, it seemed, would have much preferred a discussion of the relative merits of tape-recorders to an ethnographic oral history interview, but they usually allowed me to guide them in the appropriate direction without undue difficulties or squandering of time. Once the tape was running, the recording was headed with an introduction



giving the date and location and the informant's name. This presented the prospect of the researcher making a mistake and lightening the atmosphere still more,<sup>87</sup> and simultaneously assured that basic data were correct. More than once I was laughingly corrected as to the date, the pronunciation of the informant's name, or some similar datum.

Other than the fact that each interview was usually begun by asking how, when, at what age, and in what capacity the informant first went to sea, questions were asked in a random order, depending on where the informant led the conversation. After the first few encounters, it was discovered that certain frequent responses were to be expected. In England, for example, the question, "How did the Departments get along aboard ship?" usually got a response something like, "Oh, you mean the old 'oil-and-water' thing? There wasn't much of that by the time the Second World War came along." Questions regarding beliefs involving 'luck' usually drew a blank, but there were some delightfully surprising results as well, like the man who divulged that his maternal uncle had been born in a caul, which he (the informant) had subsequently carried for luck while at sea.<sup>88</sup>

The itinerary for the North American fieldwork took me from my parents' home in Southern California north to British Columbia and back, then through Nevada, Arizona, New Mexico and West Texas to the Gulf of Mexico. I followed the Gulf Coast to Florida, then crossed into Georgia and up the Atlantic Seaboard to Halifax, Nova Scotia and back to Delaware. These travels took almost a year to complete, beginning late in the autumn of 1989, covered well over four thousand miles, and were interspersed with visits with friends throughout North America, meetings with e-mail "pen pals" and

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<sup>87</sup>. I once introduced an informant on tape by the similar surname of a colleague of mine and on another occasion introduced a second tape with the name of another mariner who had been mentioned just before the tapemran out.

<sup>88</sup>. This will be more fully covered in Chapter Seven, Section B.

an occasional sidetrack for purely personal reasons, such as a traditional music festival. This segment of data collection was concluded in late August of 1990, just prior to my departure for the United Kingdom. After a period of settling in and some preliminary writing, I conducted one individual interview on the outskirts of Sheffield in spring of 1991 and a group interview in Belfast, Northern Ireland, in the summer of that year. After a hiatus of several months I returned to Canada in October for a half-dozen interviews in Newfoundland followed by a further gap. The remaining interviews in the study were conducted over a three-month period in the spring of 1992 and most took place in Merseyside, varied only by a brief jaunt to the south of England and one dual interview in Mansfield.

A fairly detailed itinerary, excerpted from my field journal, follows here. This account is of consequence because no one heretofore, to the best of my knowledge, has undertaken an occupational ethnography of this scope and magnitude, and the itinerary outlines both the scheme and the range of the research involved. Ethnography, by its very nature, requires a rehearsing of and commentary on informants and context, and the itinerary does this as well. Personal testimonies were collected on an exceedingly wide scale and the itinerary gives the details. With its aid, the reader can readily identify the people and institutions visited in the course of the research and discern which were most helpful, which gave less information, and which might prove important sources for future research. The itinerary reveals the total numbers of people potentially and actually interviewable, whose personal testimony forms the basis of the detailed description and analysis in the main body of the study. It also provides me with the opportunity to acknowledge and thank again some of the many whose help was so valuable to me. Using a social network approach, I asked as many individuals as possible to share their convoy experiences, meeting them face to face and, through their interview

testimony, “getting inside the minds” of those who experienced these things first-hand before their rapidly declining numbers rendered such interviews impossible.

Despite the fact that my stepfather, Capt. Fred Steele, had an extensive background in the Merchant Service, we found the interviewer/informant relationship virtually impossible to establish. This was not for lack of willingness on either side, as he has given and sent me many important items of information and provided me with the basic intelligence on which my work has been founded, but rather it was the result of a difficulty in communication. In consequence, the first interview was with a family friend, Capt. Emerson Chodzko, whom I visited at his home in Long Beach, California, over the holiday period of Thanksgiving, 1989, and with whom I had two interviews during that time. During this November holiday period, I also visited the Port of Los Angeles in San Pedro, including the Los Angeles Maritime Museum and the recently constructed and dramatic Merchant Marine Veterans’ Memorial depicted in the photograph which forms the frontispiece of this study.

In Wilmington, between Long Beach and San Pedro, I discovered the *s/s Lane Victory*, a World War II “Victory ship”<sup>89</sup> under restoration by the United States Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II<sup>90</sup>, and made some important contacts aboard her, which led to further interviews on a return visit to the area. One of the men encountered on this first call, Mr. Isaac B. Givens, had been a Steward and ship’s Cook and I had the good fortune to experience his talents first-hand at a later date. The USMMVWWII were also kind

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<sup>89</sup>. L.A. Sawyer and W.H. Mitchell, *Victory Ships and T-2 Tankers: The History of the ‘Victory’ type cargo ships and of the tankers built in the United States of America during World War II* (Cambridge MD: Cornell Maritime Press, Inc., [1972?]), 48. Hull number V78. Still listed as “In Reserve Suisun Bay, Cal.” Victory ships were a type of standard ship design. “Standard” ships will be discussed in a subsequent chapter.

<sup>90</sup>. Hereafter referred to as the USMMVWWII.

enough to publish in their newspaper, *THE ANCHOR LIGHT*, a request for convoy information which brought in numerous responses both by mail and telephone. A number of the resultant interviews were held aboard the vessel herself, either on deck or in the mess areas.

Returning to my parents' home at the end of November 1989, I re-encountered some of my stepfather's classmates from the California Maritime Academy. John Marshall Dallas, Carter Houston, and Charles Sauerbier all live nearby and I had met them socially on previous occasions, so it was no difficulty to induce them to visit, or to talk. Although only a partial interview of the tape-recorded variety resulted, a number of bibliographical references were offered and much secondary information was obtained. "Marsh" Dallas donated a mimeographed letter from a United States Navy Pharmacist's Mate aboard the USS *Savannah* in the Mediterranean during the Sicily and Salerno beachheads.

Shortly after this, I left to spend Christmas in Washington State, and, passing through San Francisco, visited the *Jeremiah O'Brien*, a restored Liberty ship.<sup>91</sup> I obtained several interviews with volunteer watchkeepers aboard, was given a tour by Bob Burnett, the curator/"ship's husband" of the *O'Brien*, visited the nearby Porter Shaw Library (part of the National Maritime Museum, and housed, like the *O'Brien* herself, at Fort Mason near San Francisco's Polk Street Wharf Maritime exhibits and the main National Maritime Museum building), and was encouraged to return in January or

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<sup>91</sup>. L.A. Sawyer and W.H. Mitchell, *The Liberty Ships: The History of the 'Emergency' type Cargo Ships constructed in the United States during the Second World War* (London, et ux: Lloyd's of London Press Ltd., (2nd ed.) 1985), 59 [Her present 3" bow and 5" stern guns came from the USS *Palawan*, Liberty ship hull number 2400.], 104. She was hull number 230, launched 6.43 by the New England Shipbuilding Corporation West Yard in South Portland, Maine, with a General Motors Corporation engine. A complete section of this book, pp. 229-237, deals exclusively with the *Jeremiah O'Brien*. Liberty ships, like the later Victories, were standard ships.

February for the “steaming weekend”.<sup>92</sup> Among the interviews collected aboard the *O’Brien* before I continued northwards was one with a purser, Bob Imbeau, who had been a paymaster in the Army Transport Service<sup>93</sup> and who said that although it now rather shamed him to admit it, he had actually enjoyed his wartime experiences.

After the holidays, I returned to the coast, first to Western Washington University in Bellingham, where I had had correspondence with James Hitchman, a maritime historian whose name I had found in a listing of maritime researchers obtained through Lewis “Skip” Fischer of the Maritime History Archives at Memorial University of Newfoundland. I then proceeded to Victoria, British Columbia, where, at the University, I called upon Eric Sager, a scholar whom I had previously met when he was visiting Newfoundland in connection with the publication of a book on early Canadian seafarers and the conditions under which they worked.<sup>94</sup> Like Hitchman, he provided me with bibliographical references and the names of further scholars with whom to make contact in the course of my Canadian and American inquiries.<sup>95</sup>

Retracing the route toward San Francisco, I stopped once more in Washington to visit Capt. Harold Huycke, a marine surveyor and maritime historian whose contributions were of inestimable value. I then continued

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<sup>92</sup>. In order to keep the *O’Brien* in working trim, volunteer workers raise steam in her monthly and turn her screws over slowly while she remains tied up at the dock. This is often an occasion for showing of videos related to seafaring as well as for communal meals, drinking, and a good deal of camaraderie, including story-telling and reminiscing. I determined to plan my return south to include one of these.

<sup>93</sup>. ATS, later MSTS (Military Sea Transport Service), now MSC (Military Sealift Command).

<sup>94</sup>. Eric Sager, *Seafaring Labour*.

<sup>95</sup>. Sager told me that Marc Milner in New Brunswick was doing work on the Royal Canadian Navy’s role in the Second World War. As I was “writing-up” this thesis, my supervisor passed me bibliographical information indicating that Marc Milner had two books being published by University of Toronto Press, both of which were scheduled for distribution in October of 1994. One was titled *North Atlantic Run: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Battle for the Convoys*. The other, which was also connected with the Naval Institute Press, was entitled *The U-Boat Hunters: The Royal Canadian Navy and the Offensive against Germany’s Submarines*. I have seen neither of these books.

south to Portland, Oregon, and the Oregon Maritime Museum, a small institution of limited holdings, but one of the most beautifully organised I had the pleasure of visiting during my North American inquiries. One of the volunteer “watch-keepers” at the museum also gave me an impromptu interview. This man, Paul Buhman, subsequently sent me a useful copy of his maritime memoirs, which he had compiled for his grandson. While visiting friends in Southern Oregon, I received a telephone call from Capt. Frank Waters, who had responded to the USMMVWWII request and who lived quite nearby, so I had the pleasure of getting an unexpected interview before leaving the state. This eighty-nine-year-old man turned out to be one of the most elderly of my interview subjects.

After a visit to the library at the California Maritime Academy, I conducted interviews with two retired members of the Academy’s faculty at their homes in the nearby town of Napa. One, David Grover, had been the dean of the “schoolship” (CMA)<sup>96</sup> until recently and had also written two books of some value to the research.<sup>97</sup> I was also made aware<sup>98</sup> of a series then running in a local paper about the “Port Chicago Explosion,” a local maritime docks disaster of the Second World War, and was able to ring the paper and acquire the entire series of articles in photocopy.

Returning to San Francisco for the “steaming weekend” on the *Jeremiah O’Brien*, I obtained seven further interviews with watch-standers whose regular volunteer work aboard was limited to steaming weekends only. Two of these were veterans of the U.S. Navy Armed Guard, rather than merchant seafarers, and a number of others, as might well be supposed, were

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<sup>96</sup>. The California Maritime Academy just mentioned.

<sup>97</sup>. David H. Grover and Gretchen G. Grover, *Captives of Shanghai: The Story of the President Harrison* (Napa CA: Western Maritime Press, 1989) and David Hubert Grover, *U.S. Army Ships and Watercraft of World War II* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987).

<sup>98</sup>. The man who brought this to my attention was the watchman at the caravan site[trailer park] where I stayed, at the Napa Faigrounds.

Engineers. It is interesting to note at this point that most, although certainly not all, of the veterans who associate themselves with the restoration of these wartime vessels either hold or at one time held a valid licence/certificate/ticket as either a Deck<sup>99</sup> or Engine Officer. Only a few retired as mere ratings or crew members, although many had sailed in those lesser capacities during their wartime service.

Among the interviews at this juncture was included the only one with a crew member from a United States Navy escort vessel.<sup>100</sup> Other informants during this period were Bill Krasnosky, whose main recollections of the Russian convoys involved writing a humorous newsletter and trying not to get caught at it, and who felt that to be lucky one must be Irish -- hence he had “changed his name to ‘O’Krasnosky’”, and John Pottinger, who was once asked to take a Hawaiian “troublemaker” into his “black gang”.<sup>101</sup> It transpired that this Kanaka’s<sup>102</sup> unsavoury reputation had sprung from the fact that the other members of the black gang on his ship were of Scandinavian descent and they tended to attack him when in their cups.<sup>103</sup> A chance visit to the ship by an ex-Navy Armed Guard named Herb Wilson, from Banning, California, led to some fascinating notes and a promised interview when, as projected, I reached the area near his home.

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<sup>99</sup>. Throughout this work, in order to provide a distinction and prevent confusion, I have used upper case initial letters for the names of the departments (Deck, Engine, and Stewards’/Catering), although this is not the prevalent usage.

<sup>100</sup>. Jim Moore (HMC 90-9).

<sup>101</sup>. The “black gang” are the Engine Room ratings. The term probably originated when all steamships were fuelled by coal and those who worked in close proximity to this fuel were blackened either by the coal dust or the soot resulting from the use of such fuel. It is to be noted that the licensed Engineers are not considered to be part of “the black gang”, just as certificated Deck officers are not usually included in the term “crew”. It is also noteworthy that the term is currently falling out of favour because of the possibility of its being taken in a “politically incorrect” light.

<sup>102</sup>. A slang term meaning Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and deriving from the Hawaiian language. The equivalent for a “white” person of European background would be “haole”.

<sup>103</sup>. John Pottinger, HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2.

It was quite impressive to go into the Engine Room and see a triple-expansion steam engine actually in motion. The workings of the ship were explained to visitors by the volunteer watch-standers and there was even a jury-rigged “washing machine” which attached to a part of the ship’s machinery and agitated a broom handle in a bucket of laundry. Although this was “faked”, I was assured that similar “Rube Goldberg or Heath Robinson devices” had commonly been used aboard during the vessel’s heyday.<sup>104</sup> In the evening a video was shown of one of the *O’Brien*’s most recent memorial cruises, including mock attacks by aircraft from the re-enactment group “The Confederate Air Force”. Another film had a good deal of historic footage in it. Both were extremely entertaining. One of the ladies tending the ship’s “slop chest”<sup>105</sup> had been the subject of a propaganda photograph called “Wendy the Welder” when she was a young factory worker during World War II. I bought a copy and also acquired copies of several essential reference books, including Sawyer and Mitchell’s *The Liberty Ships*, mentioned above.<sup>106</sup>

With further time to spend in the Porter Shaw Library, I procured photocopies of some intriguing materials, including the propaganda comic book already mentioned, which exhorted men to join the merchant marine.<sup>107</sup> Another photocopied acquisition was a magazine article written by Bill Kooiman, one of the volunteer library staff.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>104</sup>. This subsequently proved to be the case. See Chapter Three.

<sup>105</sup>. A “slop chest” is a sort of ship’s canteen where tobacco, toiletries, sweets, and clothing may be purchased while at sea. Purchases made from the slop chest are usually not paid for at the time, but noted, and the total is deducted from the seafarer’s wages at the end of the voyage when he signs off the ship’s Articles. The “slop chest” on a floating museum is basically a gift and souvenir shop.

<sup>106</sup>. See footnote <sup>47</sup>. Also purchased during this visit were Capt. Frank F. Farrar, (*Between the lines of...*) *A Ship’s Log Book: Tales of adventure, mischief, and mayhem* (St. Petersburg FL: Great Outdoors Publishing Company, 1988) and Robert J. Young, *The Lessons of the Liberties* ([no loc.]: American Bureau of Shipping, 1974).

<sup>107</sup>. “Heroes in Dungarees”, NMU Publication No. 20, rpt. from *Comic Cavalcade* 8 (c1943).

<sup>108</sup>. William Kooiman, “S/S Carlton: Gallant Ship or Turncoat?”, *Sea Classics* 21:12 (December 1988), 66-71 and 79.



While in San Francisco I spent an afternoon with Archie Green, the doyen of occupational folklife and labourlore scholars, and received a wealth of valuable information and assistance from him. He delighted me both by considering my research commendable and also by declaring his opinion that my choice of subject area was both unique and deserving of study. He maintained that merchant shipping was heretofore so untouched by ethnographers and folklorists that I might possibly be the only scholar to have given it proper consideration. There was, as well, a meeting with Karl Kortum, the Director of the National Maritime Museum, who presented me with several offprints of the writings of the late Capt. Fred Klebengat, whose stories are revered by Pacific Coast seafarers as being authentic and true-to-life as well as entertaining. I also made my initial contact with one of the seafarers' trade unions, the Sailors' Union of the Pacific (SUP), and was invited to come to the union hall where they proposed to assemble a few veteran seafarers for an interview, a quite successful endeavour. It was suggested that a similar contact might be made with the Marine Firemen, Oilers, Watertenders and Wipers (MFW), but time proved too short for this enterprise. The SUP hall itself was impressive, with a lovely facade and a bust of the union's founder, Andrew Furuseth,<sup>109</sup> as well as an interior oil-painted multi-panelled memorial to merchant seafarer members of the SUP lost during World War II, with a list of their names. It is unfortunate that I not only had no photographic equipment, but that the interior lighting was also insufficient to permit an adequate photograph of the latter.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>109</sup>. A similar if not identical bust of Furuseth, as well as one of Harry Lundeberg, a subsequent union official, are to be found at the doors of the SIU Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship in Piney Point, Maryland.

<sup>110</sup>. At this point I received the first notification of my mother's illness, which, together with her subsequent death, radically affected the itinerary, the schedule, and the work itself.

Before leaving the San Francisco area I visited Charles Tillman, author of *Engine Room Sea Stories*,<sup>111</sup> and gleaned a plethora of useful information, although no formal tape-recorded interview took place. Continuing southward, and conducting interviews as I went, I visited two of my stepfather's old shipmates, Fred Lewis and Bill Kirby, from each of whom I obtained profuse and informative data. Moreover, one gave me further bibliographical sources and both furnished me with copies of photographs and documents, many of which I had previously been unable to obtain. One of these men provided the best individual datum that I received during the entirety of approximately two and one half years of research, but unfortunately it was not amongst the tape-recorded material.<sup>112</sup>

Upon returning to my parents' home, still early in 1990, I discovered my mother was in hospital two hundred miles away, and there was a large pile of letters from respondents to the notice in the USMMVWWII *ANCHOR LIGHT*. A constant stream of telephone calls greeted me as well. My mother had been acting as my secretary, answering letters and making notes on telephone calls, but her illness had brought this aid to an abrupt halt and I now found it necessary to accomplish such tasks myself. Furthermore, I succeeded in conducting an interview or two before returning to the south, during one of which, with Hank Adams, I was first made aware of both the British programme which trained merchant mariners to man the guns mounted aboard their ships during the war, and also the unusual broad-mindedness of the common merchant seafarer with regard to socially divergent behaviours such as homosexuality and transvestism.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>111</sup>. C. Tillman, *Engine Room Sea Stories 1931-1945* (Oakland CA: by author, 1986).

<sup>112</sup>. This item, a migratory anecdote incorporating a proverbial comparison, will be covered in Chapters Seven and Eight, as both terminology and seafaring folklore.

<sup>113</sup>. This will be embraced in Chapter Five, where relationships and attitudes are discussed.

On this visit to the Los Angeles area, I returned to the *Lane Victory* and also made contact with the Masters', Mates' and Pilots' Union Hall in nearby Wilmington.<sup>114</sup> Masters', Mates' and Pilots' is the Deck Officers' union, to which my stepfather and most of his friends belong, and I had been advised to make contact with Capt. Nick Barbara if at all possible. Although we never actually met, I had a long and fruitful telephone conversation with Capt. Barbara and the union's clerical staff also referred me to Capt. Richard Connelly, with whom I had a very profitable interview. Furthermore, during this visit to the union hall, I had occasion unexpectedly to meet the executive officer for the China Coast Chapter of the American Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II (AMMVWWII), who is from the Marine Engineers' Benevolent Association.<sup>115</sup> He provided a number of useful data. I also called in at the Wilmington SUP/MFOW Hall, but the results of that visit were only minimally rewarding.

A side trip to the small towns of Banning and Yucaipa provided me with all that I had been unable to record during my brief shipboard chat with Herb Wilson in San Francisco. I also called in to see Emerson Chodzko's father, who had been a superintendent of longshore dockers during his working life, and yet another interview resulted in a total of four hours of tape-recorded material.

During a week's sojourn in San Diego in March, I invaded both the Public Library and the San Diego Maritime Museum as well as getting in a few good interviews. Two of the interviews conducted during this period were with non-white respondents, which began to broaden the scope of the research, and one was with another of my stepfather's ex-shipmates. Capt. Richard Connelly, who had been recommended to me by Masters, Mates, and Pilots,

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<sup>114</sup> Wilmington, California, is actually a part of Los Angeles Harbour.

<sup>115</sup> Usually referred to as MEBA, this union has two branches, to one or the other of which most Engineering Officers belong.

gave me an interview, extensive bibliographical information, several photos of the Merchant Marine Memorial in San Pedro, and a chance to view two superb videos dealing with my area of study. He also suggested further sources to explore.

While in San Diego, I had an extended telephone call with Capt. Gene Harrower, curator of the Oregon Maritime Museum, who was wintering in nearby La Jolla. Although unable to see me, he was full of worthwhile suggestions for future investigations. We later had some correspondence by mail as well, which supplied further invaluable data.

One additional stop at the *Lane Victory* was made, during which I observed the mounting of a “three-inch fifty” gun in her stern gun tub, finished off the interviews with visitors and actual watch-standers aboard, and had the unprecedented opportunity to eat in her crew’s mess a lunch (or perhaps more accurately a dinner) prepared by Mr. Givens, the retired Victory ship Cook I had met on an earlier occasion. This gave me a far better idea of the type of meal actually served to American merchant mariners during World War II.<sup>116</sup> The food was flavourful and hearty in nature. Although this was certainly not *haute cuisine* nor yet “home-cooking,” it was very tasty and appealing as well as nutritious and robust. This meal, a Saturday lunch for the volunteer workers engaged in the ship’s restoration, was served on the ship’s heavy-duty dinnerware by a staff dressed in “galley whites”, and eaten in the ship’s mess rooms much as it would have been had she been in wartime service. I was given to understand that comparable meals would have been typical of those served on American-flag cargo vessels during World War II. Later developments in the fieldwork, however, have led me to the conclusion that

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<sup>116</sup>. The meal began with beef barley soup and continued through pot roast with gravy and garnish, green beans with onion, potato pancakes with chopped scallions, toasted French bread, to apple pie with cheese. Coffee and fresh lemonade were offered as a choice of beverages. Even a garnish of chopped parsley was sprinkled over the meat as it was served -- an informal formality.

both British merchant seafarers of the period under investigation and military sailors from both sides of the Atlantic at that time might have expected a somewhat lower standard of victualling both in quantity and quality and that a similar Victory ship in a wartime convoy situation would most probably have had a Messman to serve the meal at table, rather than feeding “cafeteria-style”.

My next move, in March, was to start eastward via interviews in Bakersfield, California and Las Vegas, Nevada, to a visit with my stepsister in Arizona, near whose home lived another interview subject, and then quickly across New Mexico and to the Gulf Coast. I little knew at the time how convoluted my schedule was shortly to become. Albert Precious, in Las Vegas, proved difficult to locate, and the interview was exceedingly brief as a result. My Prescott Valley, Arizona informant, Jack E. McGinty, graciously loaned me his personal copy of a book by Robert Carse<sup>117</sup> which I had been anxious to read, and the Arizona AMMVWWII (American Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II) representative, John Forsberg, in Fort Apache, invited me to drop by, saying he was certain he could line up a few interviews locally. Not only did he produce five interviewees, but he also put me in contact with the New Mexico branch of AMMVWWII, which connection brought an additional two interviews my way. I unfortunately found myself unable to visit the fabled Merchant Marine cemetery in New Mexico where so many merchant seamen who died of respiratory complaints, especially tuberculosis, are buried. It was somewhat amusing that so many ex-seafarers had settled in the driest part of the United States, where there is no coast, but I discovered most of those who lived here had either been Radio/Wireless Operators or engine room personnel, which fact may perhaps have some bearing on the circumstance.<sup>118</sup> One of the desert informants, Ed Stanko,

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<sup>117</sup> Robert Carse, *There Go the Ships* (New York: William Morrow, 1942).

<sup>118</sup> The flatness of the desert, like that of the sea, enhances radio communication and the Engine Room is hot and fairly detached from the feel of being at sea.

allowed me to photocopy a booklet produced by the MFOU [Marine Firemen, Oilers, Wipers and Watertenders Union] about wartime procedures, which also included a number of personal experience narratives from union members.

In Albuquerque, New Mexico, the local AMMVWWII president, Pat Brinkley, was a particularly interesting interview subject in that he was the only man interviewed who had undergone a “line-crossing” initiation on first crossing the Equator who felt that the rite had been not only unpleasant, but dangerous, harmful, and unnecessary. Marty Hrivnak, my other New Mexico interviewee, brought me a copy of the 1990 MEBA [Marine Engineers’ Benevolent Association] calendar I had been seeking, as well as that for 1991 and a “Road Runner Chapter AMMVWWII” T-shirt.<sup>119</sup>

Proceeding to Texas, I approached a fellow academic, John Minton, for information on how to find the Texas Maritime Museum. The Museum told me I might find one of their freelance researchers helpful. He was Gerard Mittelstaedt, the town librarian of McAllen, Texas, who graciously invited me to come and “hook up my rig” in his driveway. I did so, finding the family congenial and accommodating. We did some work with my computer discs and I located more bibliographical sources, both at McAllen and at the university in nearby Edinburg.

At length I arrived at the Maritime Museum on the Gulf Coast, where I received mail which had been forwarded me. The director obligingly guided me to a few prospective informants, only one of whom “panned out”, and I moved on fairly rapidly towards Houston, where the weather was so abominable I was unable to visit and view the well-known turning basin at the end of the Houston Ship Channel. I did visit Galveston twice, but was unable to make contact with the man recommended by the Arizona AMMVWWII.

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<sup>119</sup>. These items are with the Halley Maritime Collection in the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield in South Yorkshire.

On the first run to Galveston I visited the Rosenberg Library, a highly commended institution, and stopped by the Texas A-and-M University at Galveston Maritime School to check out the library there as well and see if their “schoolship”<sup>120</sup> professors might have anything to offer. One of them, Capt. Steve Ford, suggested I ring his father, Capt. Frank Ford, when I got to the Washington, D.C. area, and gave me the telephone number. I was also universally advised to talk with Dr. Don Willett, but he was unavailable on my first visit.

There was some sort of maritime museum/park nearby,<sup>121</sup> but as it advertised only a submarine exhibit, I did not go. This was one of my biggest mistakes, since this display also included the only preserved “DE” (destroyer escort) still in existence, but I was not made aware of the fact until some time later.<sup>122</sup> I returned to Houston, where I stayed for a day or two more, trying to make contact with Dr. Willett and with prospective informants and typing up tape tables of contents in my inadequate spare time. By this time, it was late spring.

The contact with Willett finally established, I returned to Galveston, where I lunched with him, discussing his doctoral thesis on the history of the National Maritime Union (NMU) and various other bibliographical references. This was one of the most rewarding episodes of my academic research in North America, since this man’s lines of enquiry paralleled my own in many respects and there was never the necessity of defining the terms in which we spoke, for we were both well-versed in academic and occupational seafaring parlance alike.

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<sup>120</sup>. An academic institution for the training of merchant marine officers. Usually designated as an “academy” or “maritime academy”, but not in this instance, and the term “schoolship” is always acceptable..

<sup>121</sup>. Seawolf Park on Pelican Island.

<sup>122</sup>. The vessel so designated was the U.S. Navy’s equivalent to the corvette which proved so effective as a British and Canadian convoy escort. The one at Seawolf Park is the USS *Stewart*.

I spent about a week crossing Louisiana, accomplishing little in the way of actual work beyond the completion of further “TTCs” [Tape Tables of Contents]. On leaving Baton Rouge, I noticed a destroyer, the USS *Kidd*, as a floating museum in the river, and decided to pay a visit. There I was told of the existence of the destroyer escort at the marine exhibit in Galveston, but of course by that time it was too late to return. The *Kidd*’s curator, Tim Rizzuto, gave me a good deal of worthwhile bibliographical information, especially on destroyer escorts and the men of the United States Navy Armed Guard.

I found New Orleans a city one could not navigate easily without knowing the territory, especially in a “rig” such as my mini-motorhome, and I was forced to abandon the projected effort to stop by the union halls there and make only a brief stop. Moving through Mississippi and Alabama, I had only one interview, with a Mr. Harvey Watson, whose nickname, “Pig-Eye”, had been given him in infancy by his mother. He gave me to understand that he had married under that sobriquet and until recently had even been listed as “Pig-Eye” in the telephone directory, and that most of his neighbours would not have known him as Harvey until the last year or two. This was quite interesting, considering my investigations into nicknames.

A brief stop in the Florida panhandle was enough to convince me that neither sufficient time nor money was available to reach prospective informants in the southern regions of that state, so I proceeded to Georgia. Savannah, Georgia was without a doubt the most gracious city I have ever visited, also producing several good interviews. One, the only one of its kind in the course of this research, was with an Army veteran who had been carried on a troopship. Two more, both good but one totally delightful, were with ex-Engineers, and the final one was with a Master Mariner who was the docking



master and river pilot for a local tugboat and towage firm<sup>123</sup> at the time of the interview.

On entering South Carolina I made contact with Mr. E.J. Heins from USMMVWWII [United States Merchant Marine Veterans of World War II]<sup>124</sup> in Charleston and was collected by him the following day and driven to three interviews, all with retired Master Mariners, one of whom had met his wife aboard ship when she was sailing as a stewardess during the 1930s. Her input as a mariner was very interesting as well, although she had not been actively sailing during the war years. During the course of this day's developments, the Charleston branch of the USMMVWWII presented me with a jacket<sup>125</sup> and a cheque for one hundred dollars towards the cost of my research. Since I knew of two essential reference books<sup>126</sup> costing approximately fifty dollars apiece, I earmarked the donated funds to that end.

In North Carolina I visited Sailors' Snug Harbor, a home for retired merchant seamen, and also called at the North Carolina Maritime Museum where I purchased a book dealing with sinkings in "Torpedo Alley" as the Atlantic Coast of the U.S. was known during the early part of the war.<sup>127</sup> It was unfortunate that the authorities in charge of Sailors' Snug Harbor had set up the interviews there in a group format and it was thus more difficult to elicit information from the individuals involved than it might otherwise have been. The youngest of the three was seventy-nine, the middle one eighty-five, and

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<sup>123</sup>. Crescent Tugs.

<sup>124</sup>. USMMVWWII and AMMVWWII are separate organisations, as is Combat Merchant Mariners of World War II.

<sup>125</sup>. This was a "windcheater" style in white fleece-lined nylon, with a representation of the *s/s Lane Victory* and the words "U. S. Merchant Marine Veterans World War II" emblazoned on the back in golden yellow.

<sup>126</sup>. (Capt.) Arthur R. Moore, *A Careless Word... ..A Needless Sinking* (Kings Point NY: American Merchant Marine Museum at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, 1983), Rev. ed. with addendum, 1985 and Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, 1885-1985* (New Brunswick (USA) and London (UK): Transaction Books for SUP, AFL-CIO, 1986).

<sup>127</sup>. James T. Cheatham, *The Atlantic Turkey Shoot: U-Boats off the Outer Banks in World War II* (Greenville NC: Williams and Simpson, Inc., Publishers, 1990).

the eldest eighty-nine, and between them they had both speech and hearing difficulties. Also, a fourth man arrived about halfway through the interview and began to interrupt and shout obtrusively. Apparently he was thoroughly disliked by the others and the eldest and youngest left the interview shortly after his arrival, although the eighty-nine-year-old returned when it was evident that the disrupter had himself gone.

Before leaving North Carolina, I visited Ian Millar, a solicitor[lawyer] who has been conducting private researches into the United States Merchant Marine of the World War II period from personal interest. I investigated his private library for bibliographical sources and was also given some photocopied documents and duplicate copies of a book or two which he thought might assist me in my work.<sup>128</sup> During this period I also made telephone contact with Mr. Kermit Haber of CMMWWII [Combat Merchant Mariners of World War II] and received the names and addresses of several more prospective informants in the “Mid-Atlantic” area.

Throughout the spring and summer, despite my mother’s illness, my parents continued to receive and forward my mail and our twice-weekly telephone conversations concerned valuable research information as well as personal and family topics.

In Raleigh, North Carolina, I attended a monthly breakfast meeting held by Navy Armed Guard veterans and spent a further hour or so at the home of the group’s leader, C.A. Lloyd, where, although there was no formal interview, I was once more allowed to explore a private library seeking

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<sup>128</sup> David Irving, *The Destruction of PQ 17* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1968) and Jak Peter Mallmann Showell, *U-Boats Under the Swastika* (New York: Arco Publishing Company, Inc., 1977 2nd ed., c. 1973).

informational sources and also purchased a book of personal experience narratives by U.S. Navy Armed Guard personnel.<sup>129</sup>

Approximately a week in June was spent near Newport News, Virginia, where there were several people to interview and a number of museums to visit. The War Memorial Museum housed an extensive collection of World War (both I and II) propaganda posters. In Virginia Beach, the Life-Saving Museum bookshop had several intriguing titles<sup>130</sup> and I also interviewed my first veteran of a prisoner-of-war camp. He had preserved his diary and autograph book of that unfortunate experience, written on toilet paper, in a plastic-protected notebook. It was fascinating, although I later had to make the unfortunate decision to omit all such prisoners' reminiscences from the finished study in the interests of limiting it to a reasonable size. Time considerations precluded my visiting the Naval Museum, despite repeated efforts to do so, but I did call at the eminent Mariners' Museum where the library and the section with displays dealing with "power" vessels were closed due to renovations in progress, but the bookstore area of the gift shop yielded further bounty.<sup>131</sup>

Moving closer to the capital itself, I telephoned Capt. Frank Ford, who told me that, although he himself had not been in the Merchant Marine during the war, he had several friends who had, and gave me their telephone numbers. I also visited the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History, where their Maritime exhibit was located, and obtained a researcher's

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<sup>129</sup>. *United States Navy Armed Guard Veterans of World War II* (Dallas TX: Taylor Publishing Company, 1987).

<sup>130</sup>. C. Brian Kelly, *Best Little Stories from World War II* (Charlottesville VA: Montpelier Publishing, 1989) which I purchased and both Malcolm F. Willoughby, *The United States Coast Guard in World War II* (Annapolis MD: U.S. Naval Institute Press, 1956, 1957) and Homer H. Hickam, Jr., *Torpedo Junction* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1989) which inadequate funds prevented my acquiring.

<sup>131</sup>. Clinton H. Whitehurst, Jr., *The U.S. Merchant Marine (in the 1980s): In Search of an Enduring Maritime Policy* (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1983), which I did not buy and John M. Waters, *Bloody Winter*, rev. ed. (Annapolis MD, et al: Naval Institute Press, c. 1967, 1984, 2nd printing 1987) which I purchased as an essential reference.

permit for the National Archives. The videotape, “Full Speed Ahead”, which was shown in the Smithsonian exhibit, was remarkable and extremely enlightening. Had I been able to purchase a copy for personal reference, I would have done so.

In the Washington, D.C. area, I managed to conduct interviews with several people, including one of Capt. Frank Ford’s colleagues, Capt. Vincent Finan, who gave me extensive photocopies of articles and papers.<sup>132</sup> I also visited nearby areas of Maryland, where I called on colleagues at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis and interviewed two more men who were probably the most impressive of my North American informants.

One of these latter was Mr. Edward H. Richards,<sup>133</sup> a black man from the British West Indies who had been one of the first to break the North American colour bar in the deck crew. He had had a laryngectomy several years before, but nonetheless gave me a one and one-half hour interview by throat-talking. The effort caused him considerable and obvious discomfort, but he nonetheless managed to tell his story articulately<sup>134</sup> and with feeling. The other was another of Capt. Ford’s referrals, Capt. John Klocko. A hearty older man with a comfortable home, he appeared relaxed, untroubled, and completely at ease throughout the major portion of the interview, but eventually the subject turned to the first Master under whom he had sailed after obtaining his Third Mate’s ticket.<sup>135</sup> The ship was lost on the voyage

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<sup>132</sup>. Vincent Finan, “Maritime Labor Relations -- A Revolution -- 1935-1980.” (Unpublished paper, 31 pp., undated) and John McPhee, “Looking for a Ship, Parts I, II, and III,” (The “Reporter at Large” segment of *New Yorker* magazine, 26 March (40-73), 2 April (46-86), and 9 April (45-79) 1990).

<sup>133</sup>. I was referred to Mr. Richards by Mr. Kermit Haber of Combat Merchant Mariners of World War II.

<sup>134</sup>. I am told that some will read “for a black man” here, and consider my use of the word “articulate” thus demeans Mr. Richards. I hasten to inform them that Mr. Richards was unusually articulate by any standard, far moreso than many of the other informants and amazingly so for one who was compelled to throat-talk.

<sup>135</sup>. The word “ticket” used in this context signifies an official licence or certificate of competence. The seafarer refers to his “lifeboat ticket”, his “AB’s ticket”, his “Chief Mate’s ticket” or even his “Master’s ticket”.

subsequent to Klocko's signing off the Articles and apparently the master was also lost after displaying great heroism in saving a large number of his crew. Capt. Klocko began to cry as he told the story, but, instead of asking me to discontinue the interview, he took a handful of tissues, blew his nose, and continued to talk until the tape and the interview came to a natural conclusion. I shall never forget either of those men. Their endurance, composure and desire that the whole story be told affected me deeply.

In Baltimore, Maryland, I paid a short call to the *John W. Brown*, a Liberty ship in the early stages of restoration. For some time after her wartime service she had been a training ship in the New York Harbor area and more work was necessary to return her to her former state than was required, say, to refit the *Lane Victory* after she had been "in mothballs". Aboard the *Brown* I purchased another essential book<sup>136</sup> and was allowed to copy a verse which appears elsewhere in this study, "Guarding the Frigidaire".<sup>137</sup> I distributed some literature which had been given me by the Navy Armed Guard veterans' group in North Carolina, and had some enlightening conversations with people, but no actual interviews took place.

I had been advised by a number of people to call at the Maritime Institute of Technology and Graduate Studies (MITAGS), an upgrading school run by the Masters', Mates' and Pilots' Union in Linthicum Heights, Maryland, where my stepfather had studied for and obtained his Master's licence. Capt. Nick Barbara had recommended that I speak directly to the school's chief administrator, Capt. Elsensohn, but he was unavailable. On a second visit, I spoke with the second-in-command, John Bobb, and also saw a number of Capt. Barbara's artistic efforts in the Memorabilia Room.

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<sup>136</sup>. John Gorley Bunker, *Liberty Ships: The Ugly Ducklings of World War II* (Rpt. c. 1972, Naval Institute Press, Salem NH: Ayer Company, Publishers, Inc., 1988).

<sup>137</sup>. See Chapter Five, Section A for the complete text of this "poem".

Capt. Klocko suggested I visit another upgrading school, the Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship, run by the Seafarers' International Union (SIU) at Piney Point, Maryland. The SIU was to be one of the most useful contacts made during the North American fieldwork. Not only did they allow me unlimited access to the Paul Hall Memorial Library at the Harry Lundeberg School and its associated archives, and arrange an interview with one of the pensioners living there, but they also housed and fed me for five days on their regular upgraders' basis of three full meals daily plus a "night lunch".<sup>138</sup> The staff was universally accommodating and my gratitude to all those who assisted me there is boundless.

The editor of the union newspaper, *SEAFARERS' LOG*, came from SIU headquarters at Camp Spring, Maryland, to interview me and published a full page spread on my work. She, Jessica Smith, and her colleague, Jeanne Textor, instituted a campaign, albeit unsuccessful, to raise funding for my research, and the Paul Hall Memorial Library undertook to archive and copy all my North American field recordings and to send copies to the Northeast Folklore Archives at the University of Maine at Orono, as well as to ship the originals on to me at the University of Sheffield.

After one last fruitless attempt to reach Capt. Elsensohn at MITAGS in July, I proceeded to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where I made contact with Professor Kenneth S. Goldstein, a friend and colleague, who assisted me in my efforts to complete my tape tables of contents. I also stopped briefly at the SIU Hall in Philadelphia and at the Philadelphia Maritime Museum, where I once more delved into bibliographical resources.

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<sup>138</sup>. This is the usual arrangement of meals aboard American-flag vessels. The "night lunch" of cold cuts or sandwiches and leftovers from the day's earlier meals is not standard aboard British-flag ships. See Chapter Five, Section A for a discussion of the U.S. Navy Armed Guard and their frequent pilfering of this privileged snack. Note also "black pan" and "hoodle" in Chapter Eight -- the British answer to the "night lunch".

In Maine, I primarily spent my time catching up on tape tables of contents. I did, however, make a trip to the town of Halliwell, to visit Capt. Arthur Moore, the author of one of the two books I had determined to purchase with the money given me by the USMMVWWII in Charleston, South Carolina. This book, entitled, *A Careless Word...A Needless Sinking*,<sup>139</sup> is the most complete reckoning of United States Merchant Marine losses during World War II ever compiled. I obtained an autographed copy of the book and a good deal of source information before continuing north to Halifax, Nova Scotia.

My first “port of call” in Halifax was the Marine Museum of the Atlantic, where the staff was most obliging. I spent some time in their library, gathering a plethora of bibliographical data, and also had worthwhile conversations with both Marven Moore, the curator, and Graham McBride, the librarian. The latter informed me that the museum is currently involved in a project to take oral histories from Canadian merchant mariners of World War II. The researcher is a woman named Lyn Richard. While in Halifax I also had occasion to view a half-hour National Film Board video on the Halifax convoys, entitled “Gateway to the World,” toured the restored corvette HMCS *Sackville*, and visited the Wandlyn Inn’s Convoy Lounge, a hotel bar recommended by Capt. Connelly when I was in Long Beach. This bar overlooks Bedford Basin, which was the assembly point for the North Atlantic convoys leaving Halifax, and is decorated with enlarged photos of the basin in active use for that purpose.

At this time, I managed to locate and purchase three extremely worthwhile books on the Canadian contribution to the North American war

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<sup>139</sup>. See footnote <sup>80</sup>.

effort through convoys and convoy escorts.<sup>140</sup> I also conducted three interviews, one aboard the *Sackville* with an ex-RCN [Royal Canadian Navy] veteran and two with Canadian Master Mariners, one of whom was still actively working as a marine surveyor. I then returned to Maine, spent a few days at the Penobscot Marine Museum in Searsport, where I had once worked, and returned southerly.

Before leaving New York State, I made two more stops worth noting. I managed to make contact with Mike Gillen, who had conducted several of the tape-recorded interviews with merchant seafarers in the archival holdings of the Paul Hall Memorial Library at the Harry Lundeberg School. The final New York visit was to the United States Merchant Marine Academy at King's Point. I spent the night on their harbour-front campus and once more delved into library holdings. In addition I visited the American Merchant Marine Museum, located on the Academy grounds, and made the very congenial and valuable acquaintance of the curator, Frank Braynard, whose interest and input was as worthwhile as that of Karl Kortum at the National Maritime Museum in San Francisco.

On leaving King's Point, I drove back through New Jersey and on to Wilmington, Delaware, where I had scheduled two interviews. The first was with Harry Kilmon, the second with "Tex" English, who had a fascinating story about a sort of out-of-body experience involving a dream shared by himself at sea and his mother and sister ashore. The last thing I did before leaving his home was to telephone my mother in hospital. She had suffered a setback, and I immediately started back to the Pacific Coast. I was not destined to see her again, as she died shortly after six o'clock the following

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<sup>140</sup>. Alan Easton, *50 North: An Atlantic Battleground* (Markham, Ont.: PaperJacks, 1980 [1st printing Ryerson 1963.]); Hal Lawrence, *A Bloody War: One Man's Memories of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1979); and Frederick B. Watt, *In All Respects Ready: The Merchant Navy and the Battle of the Atlantic 1940-1945* (Don Mills, Ont.: Totem Books (division of Collins Publications), 1986, 1st published Prentice-Hall, 1985).



morning, 20 August, 1990. I returned to my stepfather's home for the memorial service, put my affairs in order, and proceeded to the University of Sheffield, a little late, but still within the schedule previously set by myself and my supervisor.

My first interview in the United Kingdom was the result of a chance encounter with a woman on a Sheffield bus. She struck up a conversation, perhaps because of my North American accent, and asked what I was doing. When I explained my area of research, she said her father, who lived in the nearby suburb of Dore, would be a likely candidate for an interview, and she would set it up for me, if that would suit. I said that would suit eminently well. Mr. Geoffrey Arnold was an excellent informant and gave me much fascinating information, although he was not actually involved with the Merchant Navy<sup>141</sup> during the period of the Second World War itself.<sup>142</sup>

Not long after this "foot-wetting" I received an unexpected lagniappe<sup>143</sup> from Don Bates at the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language (CECTAL). He had mentioned my project to his nephew, presently a working merchant seafarer. The nephew had subsequently sent Don a list of sources, a couple of illustrations, and the address of the trade union newspaper for the British mercantile marine ratings.<sup>144</sup> I subsequently wrote them and received a full-page "spread" quite as nice as the one I had received from the SIU *LOG* in the States. This led to a number of positive responses from prospective informants throughout the United Kingdom.

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<sup>141</sup> . Throughout this work, I have used the term "Merchant Navy" in its common colloquial sense, to represent the entirety of the British mercantile marine. In actual fact, the term applies with complete accuracy only to a limited number of shipping companies.

<sup>142</sup> . As an interesting coincidence, while engaged in my writing-up, I met another woman on a Sheffield bus and discovered she worked in the same place as does Mr. Arnold's daughter, Jacquie Crowther. It transpired that she, too, had a father who had been in the Merchant Navy.

<sup>143</sup> . A lagniappe is a tip or gratuity, a little something extra.

<sup>144</sup> . This organisation, once the National Union of Seamen (NUS) is now part of an amalgamated union, the Rail, Maritime, and Transport Workers (RMT). The section dealing with seafarers is known as RMT Shipping Grade, and the newspaper is *THE SEAMAN*.

In July of 1991, I made a trip to Belfast, Northern Ireland, to visit a friend. Before leaving Sheffield, I wrote to the RMT<sup>145</sup> offices in Belfast and also to the Royal Naval Association which had been located by my friend, Dr. Robert Holton. I received positive replies and viewed the trip as a “working holiday”. Unfortunately, I was unable to make adequate connections with the RMT people, but I did manage a rewarding two-hour multiple interview session in the bar area of the RNA. After returning to Sheffield, I received by mail, from the Belfast RMT, a list of seven names of prospective informants. I had hoped to make use of this list on a second trip to Northern Ireland, but this proved impossible.

Amongst the letters I received as a result of the article in *THE SEAMAN* and of broadcasting my business card in all likely situations, was one from a marine artist in Wales who offered bibliographical sources as well as the names and addresses of at least two veterans’ associations. I wrote letters to them and, although I did not receive direct response from the individuals to whom my letters were addressed, letters and telephone calls began to arrive at CECTAL indicating that the North Russia Association had published a notice in their newsletter, the *NORTHERN LIGHT*. One of these responses was a boxed split-ring cover with clippings, typescripts and photographs carefully preserved in plastic.<sup>146</sup> This was easily the most impressive of the postal replies from any area of the fieldwork.

One of the responses from *THE SEAMAN* came from a young man in St. Nazaire, France, Bertrand Clément, who was producing video ethnography documentaries and videotaped oral histories of contemporary seafarers. We carried on a brief but fruitful correspondence which led to my approaching several other organisations for information, their names and addresses having

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<sup>145</sup>. See previous footnote.

<sup>146</sup>. The sender of this item was Ron Westerman of Cardiff.

been supplied by M. Clément. One of these resources, *Missions to Seamen*, was unable to assist my research directly, but gave me a number of additional society and organisation addresses. M. Clément, who, like myself, came from a seafaring family, also sent me a picture of the St.-Nazaire pilot boat of which his father had been captain.<sup>147</sup>

Before leaving Newfoundland in 1989, I had approached academics at the Maritime History Group at Memorial University to ask if they could suggest other researchers whom I should approach for information during my fieldwork. One of the names thus acquired was that of Tony Lane from the University of Liverpool. When I first made contact with him in 1990, he recommended his newly-published book, *The Merchant Seaman's War*, discussed in the bibliographical resource section of this chapter, and invited me to get in touch with him again, as well as suggesting that I go to the Imperial War Museum in London and have a look at some of his collectanea. I did so and was gratified to find that much of his research for *The Merchant Seaman's War* paralleled the fieldwork in which I was currently engaged. After several tentative brushes by post and telephone, I eventually went to Liverpool and met Tony in the autumn of 1991. In the course of our interchange, he generously offered to share with me a list of his own informants, which I accepted with delight. Before returning to Sheffield that day, I paid my first visit to the Merseyside Maritime Museum, which I found very interesting but, like many museums, geared to an earlier period than that which I was actively investigating.<sup>148</sup>

In October of 1991 I returned to Newfoundland to participate in the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society. During my stay there a

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<sup>147</sup>. This was a large photocopy of what appears to be an excellent charcoal sketch. It is now with the Halley Maritime Collection at CECTAL.

<sup>148</sup>. "The Battle of the Atlantic" exhibit opened in the summer of 1993 and is replete with artefacts and other items of great value to this research.

rather meaningful moment occurred. This was the fourteenth of October, the anniversary of the day the ferry *Caribou* was torpedoed and sunk by a German U-boat. I was also interviewed by the local newspaper and the Canadian Broadcasting Company, as a result of which publicity I managed to arrange and conduct six interviews with Newfoundland residents, five of them native Newfoundlanders, who had been merchant seafarers during World War II. Due to time restrictions several other interview possibilities were missed. Further in-depth examination of the library at Memorial University disclosed that enlargement of my annotated bibliography had made it possible to expand on my past inquiries there. Even my host's father, who had served in the Canadian Coast Guard during the Second World War, supplied me with further avenues of inquiry.<sup>149</sup> The informants assisted beyond the interview context by bringing to my attention relevant books, newspaper articles, and radio broadcasts, and I gained access to or acquired copies of as many of these as I could during my short stay. It is unfortunate, however, that the single stated objective of the trip beyond attendance at the Meeting itself was never accomplished. This was a visit to the Crow's Nest, an officers' club for both military and merchant services in the city of St. John's.

In the winter of 1991-1992 I suffered some severe setbacks due to ill health and unfortunate circumstance.<sup>150</sup> This was not, however, a time for despair, but for regrouping and attacking from a different angle. In March of 1992, armed with the list of informants provided by Tony Lane and the responses to the original notices in the *SEAMAN* and the *NORTHERN LIGHT*, I had written seventy-seven letters, resulting in about fifty positive responses. Five

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<sup>149</sup>. The book suggested by Douglas Rutherford, Senior, was Tony German, *The Sea Is at Our Gate: The History of the Canadian Navy* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, Inc., 1990).

<sup>150</sup>. I was unexpectedly diagnosed with a condition that made major surgery imperative and almost immediately thereafter lost a case containing floppy discs which comprised nearly all my collated research materials, and the back-up copies as well. The subsequent time expended in the attempt to salvage as much of the lost data as possible combined with the prolonged period of postoperative recuperation curtailed my activities to such an extent that I effectively lost a year's work.

widows responded to say that their husbands would have been glad to assist, but had died since Lane's original fieldwork; a similar number of men expressed regrets that ill health now precluded interviews for which they had volunteered earlier; and two prospective informants passed away during the actual fieldwork period, before I was able to interview them.

Many British seafarers were decorated during the war for courageous and gallant acts. Two such were among the first respondents to my original journalistic queries. In the long interim period, however, one had become ill and so regretfully declined an interview and the other, apparently offended by the lack of an immediate response to his original letter, answered the later enquiry by saying he felt that I could get as much information from a public library and so as well refused an interview. This was unfortunate indeed, as one entire chapter in Doddy Hay's *War Under the Red Ensign*<sup>151</sup> was devoted to the second man's experiences both at sea in convoy and ashore in the Russian ports on the Kola Inlet. Of all my informants, only one Briton asserted and subsequently verified that he had been recognised by a "Mention in Despatches".<sup>152</sup> The others, like many of the North Americans, exhibited commonly held medals and ribbons such as those for having seen action in specific theatres of war or for having been torpedoed. Only a favoured few in the United States had merited the decoration proclaiming them to have been amongst the crew of a "Gallant Ship"<sup>153</sup> and if any of my North American informants had received personal distinguished service honours, I was not so informed.

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<sup>151</sup>. Doddy Hay, *War Under the Red Ensign*, Chapter 23: "Long Days and Long Nights", 133-141.

<sup>152</sup>. James Crewe's wife urged him to tell about receiving the oak leaf cluster for bravery for jettisoning the code books when his ship, the *Chilean Reefer* was attacked and sunk by the surface raider, *Gneisenau*. He showed me the clippings in his scrapbook. (HMC 92-22, TTC p. 4)

<sup>153</sup>. The "Gallant Ship Award" was bestowed on a merchant ship which had defended herself and others to the extent of destroying enemy vessels or aircraft.

I organised the remaining British informants into five groups and a “singleton” and arranged to lodge with friends on the longer trips in order to better accommodate both temporal and financial considerations. Because of Tony Lane’s home venue, the majority of the British sample were located in the Merseyside area and, although I regretted not having a broader geographical representation, I felt that, since Liverpool had been the major convoy staging area for the “Western Ocean”<sup>154</sup> during World War II, perhaps the limitations in scope might be justified by contextual as well as personal constraints. It is to be noted at this juncture that there were no non-white informants among my British sample, despite the incontrovertible fact that the crews of many British vessels were colonials from Hong Kong, the Indian sub-continent, the Middle East, and Africa, as well as British-born members of ethnic minorities from such seafaring enclaves as “Tiger Bay” in Cardiff. Stories were sometimes told about non-whites, by white interviewees, but I never got a completely accurate racial/ethnic picture on either side of the Atlantic.

Peter Crowther, a research associate at the University of Manchester, offered me accommodation while I was doing the Merseyside fieldwork. The first of these forays embraced three days at the end of March 1992 and resulted in seven interviews totalling ten hours. It also showed me where my original strategy was imperfect. My initial plans had been made using a road atlas, but since it was necessary for me to exploit public transportation in most cases, the first requirement which became evident was that any further arrangements must be facilitated by use of a railway map of Merseyside.

Almost immediately on my return to Sheffield I left again for further fieldwork, this time in the South. On the train to London I had the fortuitous

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<sup>154</sup>. The North Atlantic is frequently so-called by the British seafarer and the term in this context is widely understood.

occasion to share a table with a man who had begun his career as a marine Engineer, but been made redundant. Although he was too young to be considered an informant for the purposes of my thesis, we had a very lively and interesting conversation. I then conducted one interview with a London resident, Herbert Taylor, who met me at the Merchant Navy Hotel in Lancaster Gate. Mr. Taylor was very articulate and had brought with him a copy of a thesis he had written for the Open University, and which he generously allowed me to photocopy before returning it to him.

On arriving in Bath, I was met by Andrew Aitchison,<sup>155</sup> a research assistant there, who had, like Crowther in Manchester, graciously offered to accommodate me during my fieldwork. My first sortie from Bath was to Plymouth, where I interviewed Fred Lavis, who had been a ship's gunner. I was surprised to discover that he was not, strictly speaking, a DEMS<sup>156</sup> gunner, as those were all Navy men, but had been a volunteer from the Territorial Army. He had handled a Bofors gun and smilingly informed me that the Territorial Army volunteers had taken over the manning of the larger guns from the Royal Marines, who "had better things to do". Mr. Lavis also invited me to a reunion of ship's Gunners near London on 2 May 1992, which I regretfully found myself unable to attend, but beyond his service as an informant in his own right, he gave me the name and address of a fellow Gunner, Frank Brown, who lived in Bath on the same street as my friend Aitchison! On returning to Bath I rang up Mr. Brown, called on him, and thus completed two interviews on a day when I had only expected to do a single one.

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<sup>155</sup> Now Dr. Andrew Aitchison and no longer at Bath.

<sup>156</sup> DEMS stands for Defensive Equipment Merchant Ships and the gunners under this programme both in the UK and Canada were naval ratings. Army gunners stationed aboard merchant vessels were not properly so called.

On Tuesday, 7 April, I conducted a most rewarding interview with Mr. Alan Kingdom in Southampton, then went on to Gosport with Mr. and Mrs. Roy Williams. Williams was a mine of bibliographical information and Royal Navy trivia in addition to being a voluble (and valuable) informant. On the train down that day I had met two seafarers currently employed by Peninsular and Oriental (P-and-O) Lines, who were returning to their ships after leave ashore. One was a Cook and the other an Engineer, and again I had a pleasant surprise and interesting travelling companions. My ignorance of British geography proved unfortunate, however, as another of Tony Lane's informants lived on the Isle of Wight and, had I realised its proximity to my venues in Southampton and Gosport, I would surely have attempted to arrange an interview with him as well.

On Wednesday I returned to London, where I visited the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich and had another interview. On the train to Greenwich, I shared a compartment with two ladies whose husbands had been in the Royal Navy during the war, and they gave me quite a lot of information about the game of "Housey-housey" or "Tombola", which had been played aboard ship.<sup>157</sup> Unfortunately I was in a position neither to tape-record this conversation nor to take written notes of it at the time, so I lost a good deal of the information from my memory before it could be put on paper. Most of it consisted of nicknames for the numbers called out during the game.

Despite the international reputation of the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, I found that, unfortunately, the exhibits which would have proven my major interest had been removed in preparation for a presentation which was to open that July. I did, however, locate several useful titles in the

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<sup>157</sup>. See Chapter Seven, Section A for a further discussion of this game.



museum bookshop<sup>158</sup> and several more at a nearby maritime bookseller's establishment.<sup>159</sup>

My one further interview before returning to Sheffield was with a man<sup>160</sup> who not only gave me an hour and a half of worthwhile data on tape, but also provided me the opportunity of viewing two relevant videotapes and, in addition, was very helpful in suggesting other references and printed sources.

I returned to Manchester and thence to Merseyside in mid-April and spent a week interviewing people who lived in the Wirral area. All were gracious and forthcoming. One gave me four pages of collated information on nicknames from a book he is currently writing for his shipping company.<sup>161</sup> Another gave me his copy of the Tony Lane interview tape from the Imperial War Museum in order that I might copy it for my own work.<sup>162</sup>

On leaving the last of the Wirral interviews I returned to Liverpool via the ferry, which has now become less of a regular means of commuter transportation and more of a guided harbour tour. I did get to see the original premises of Alfred Holt ("Blue Funnel") Lines and the Cammell-Laird shipyards, however, and it was a vast relief to cross the river at least once on the surface instead of by underground trains. The ferry docks near the Liver Building, in an area where many incoming merchantmen docked in wartime, and a memorial to Merchant Seafarers lost at sea during the war stands nearby.

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<sup>158</sup>. The best were Craig J. Forsyth, *The American Merchant Seaman and His Industry: Struggle and Stigma* (New York, et al.: Taylor and Francis, 1989) and Ronald Hope, coll., *The Merchant Navy* (London: Stanford Maritime Ltd., 1980).

<sup>159</sup>. Capt. A.G. Course, *The Merchant Navy: A Social History* (London: Frederick Muller Limited, 1963); George F. Kerr, *Business in Great Waters* (London: Faber, 1946) and Martin Middlebrook, *Convoy: The Battle for Convoys SC.122 and HX.229* (London: Penguin [Allen Lane], 1976).

<sup>160</sup>. An East Sussex resident, he preferred, for personal reasons, that his name not be used.

<sup>161</sup>. The informant was Capt. Graeme Cubbin, and the book is to be a history of the vessels owned and managed by the T. and J. Harrison company.

<sup>162</sup>. This informant was Thomas Killips. Although J.H. Shackleton offered to send an already made copy of his own interview with Lane, he apparently was unable to do so.

It is quite impressive, but not as overtly dramatic or conducive to sentimentality as that located in the Port of Los Angeles.<sup>163</sup>

On the first week of May I returned to Crowther's house, now a "home from home", and spent a week interviewing people in Liverpool proper. Again all were generous and forthcoming. The most difficult interview was the one with "Timy"<sup>164</sup> McCoy, who had been a POW and had compiled his maritime and prison-camp reminiscences into what he called his "script", an impressive spiral-bound work, of which he gave me a copy. Mr. McCoy was extremely gracious and certainly voluble enough, but he had his own story outline in his mind and it was therefore difficult to lead him into answering my specific questions rather than elaborating upon his own themes. The most useful visit of the week was that with Barney Lafferty, who even telephoned me in Manchester to include information he had remembered after I had left his home.

During this research trip my host, Peter Crowther, a computer scientist, set up a computer terminal at his home to correspond with my format, so that I might not lose time working on my TTCs.<sup>165</sup> As a result, I finished the organisation of my materials much more rapidly than I would otherwise have done and was able to expedite progress to the writing stage significantly.<sup>166</sup>

Between this and my final Merseyside expedition, I had a joint interview in Mansfield with two men who had served in the Royal Navy on convoy escort vessels. I was conveyed to this interview in the car of Peter

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<sup>163</sup>. The Port of Los Angeles is located in the city of San Pedro, California and a photograph of the memorial there forms the frontispiece of this work. It is mentioned toward the beginning of this Section.

<sup>164</sup>. Mr. McCoy uses this spelling, but pronounces his name "Timmy". Although his given name is Thomas, he was thus nicknamed after an early star of cinema "Westerns".

<sup>165</sup>. Tape tables of contents.

<sup>166</sup>. It was these materials and TTCs as well as the extensive booknotes taken from several volumes acquired with great effort through Inter-Library Loan which were lost in the box of discs and had to be redone from the ground up. The back-up files were lost as well, since I had taken them all in to do an update.

Appleton, a considerate friend from the University of Sheffield, rather than being constrained to rely on public transportation which would have entailed almost prohibitive time considerations.

On the final week of my fieldwork, I again worked from a base at Peter Crowther's Manchester home. Between interviews I managed to stop at the Picton and International Libraries near Liverpool's Lime Street railway station and there located several titles relevant to my research. Capt. "Laurie" James during this closing period of the fieldwork provided me with nearly one hundred pages of transcript from his interviews with Tony Lane. The very last interview of the 1992 research was with Rex Rothwell of Radcliffe, in Greater Manchester. He collected me from Crowther's home, gave me an excellent interview as well as a printed datum<sup>167</sup> that I had been anxious to locate, and finally deposited me at Manchester Piccadilly Train Station whence I returned to Sheffield.

One of the most interesting bits of information not relevant to the current work was that two of the British informants, both deck officers who came up through apprenticeship programs, had daughters who had followed them to sea. Neither of these women achieved a Master Mariner's ticket; both came ashore and married after serving several years at varying ranks. One, now with a family, like so many men before her, has gone into marine insurance -- left the sea in fact, but not in spirit. So my original dream has been fulfilled by others.

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<sup>167</sup>. Ludovic Kennedy, "Convoy", *Saga* (March 1992), 37-45. This article was first mentioned to me by Keith Marshall, HMC 92-30, TTC pp. 3-4

## C. ANALYSIS AND PRESENTATION

Following the first bibliographical investigations, I embarked on the field collection described in the preceding section and both proceeded simultaneously until autumn of 1990, when the groundwork of the writing itself was begun. It is interesting to note that, despite extensive training in “how to elicit information from a reluctant informant,” one of the first things I learned in dealing with World War II veteran seafarers was never to attempt too forcefully to persuade a reluctant person either to give me an interview or to discuss a specific subject. The most frequently cited reason was neither shyness nor embarrassment, but rather a desire to keep a traumatic experience buried in the depths of memory and not to dredge it up again to a damaging level. Despite this, almost everyone I approached for assistance was anxious to contribute to the enterprise in one way or another, whether by suggesting reading material, by telling me of a friend or colleague who would prove a good subject for an interview, by recommending a particular library or museum, or by other, similar support.

A quote-cum-paraphrase of Timothy Lloyd and Patrick Mullen from *Lake Erie Fishermen* is entirely appropriate here:

[I was] open to whatever kind of traditional lore [I] might encounter and [was] actively seeking folk beliefs.... However these kinds of folklore were not forthcoming; instead the [seafarers] usually talked about their own experiences, and [I] shifted [my] attention to these personal experience narratives.

Over the course of [the] fieldwork, [I] began to notice certain recurring themes in conversations and narratives (some of which led to the organization of this [study]); as fieldworkers do, [I] began to try to direct ... conversations toward these themes, while still trying to maintain an open-ended situation.<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>168</sup> . Timothy C. Lloyd and Patrick B. Mullen , *Lake Erie Fishermen: Work, Tradition and Identity*, (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), xii.

Insights gained through tape-recorded fieldwork data were organised into categories based upon recurring themes which arose both in arranged interviews and in casual conversations with merchant seamen. The first areas of my own personal interest to be sought were easily recognisable folkloric genres: beliefs, customs and practices thought to affect the “luck” of a vessel or a person for good or ill, and initiatory rites, ranging from such formal ceremonies as “crossing the line” to the more colloquial “fools’ errands” on which “greenhorns” were sent. Also developing from the same roots, and augmented by a peripheral interest in dialect studies, came the spheres of terminology and nicknames, as well as the broader themes of occupational and recreational techniques, customs, and pastimes afloat. From my supervisor’s suggestions and the interests of family and friends, I drew the subject areas of attitudes and relationships. Comments were elicited on relationships between the departments aboard ship, between licensed and unlicensed personnel, between military and civilian seafarers, and between different ethnic, national, and regional groups within a crew. Queries were also made as to what impelled a seafarer to turn to maritime shipping as a career in the first place and what his reasons for leaving the sea might have been. These inquiries led to further comments, not formally solicited, about the seafarer’s perception of himself within his occupational role. Attitudes of people ashore toward the merchant mariner were investigated from the project’s inception, since there seemed at first glance to be a significant difference between such attitudes in the United Kingdom and in North America. These apparent differences have been affirmed by many of the interviews, but some rather astonishing corollaries have also arisen, most of which will be elucidated in Chapters Five and Six. The individual’s view of the convoy experience in specific was requested as part of the broader overview. Most interviewees were also asked to describe any events or characters they perceived as worthy of note and remembrance, whether the story was of an amusing or a dramatic nature.

These questions led to the acquisition of a substantial database of personal experience narratives (PENs), which forms the paramount substance of the fieldwork, but which unfortunately had to be laid aside from the finished study in the light of subsequent events.<sup>169</sup>

The topics or themes listed above were not all covered by the very earliest interview questions, but as the fieldwork progressed, they developed one from another, until the final research pattern was concrete, though not invariable. The format thus evolved became so successful in eliciting the sorts of responses anticipated, and in organising them into a workable format, that it developed into the sequence of chapter headings and subheadings now revealed in the Table of Contents. The resultant synthesis of these specific areas of enquiry into the final sequence here presented was the end result of a good deal of shuffling and rearranging, but the actual components never varied after the outset.

It has been, of course, necessary to provide a certain amount of relevant material on the background and methodology of the entire study, as well as some basic information on the history and practical aspects of the convoy system itself for the reader who might be unfamiliar with it, but after that point, the areas examined were those whose primary data sources were the interview material.

As in the interviews themselves, the first line of inquiry after the essentials mentioned immediately above was why one would choose to go to sea in the first place, and allied to that -- why leave the sea, if one enjoys the seafaring life? These were fundamental questions which seemed to evoke particularly interesting responses when geared to the period shortly before,

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<sup>169</sup> The temporal difficulties created by the loss of the floppy discs and my health problems rendered the full transcription and use of these data in this particular study an impossibility. It is hoped, however, that full use may be made of them in a future project.

during, and immediately after World War II. General impressions of shipboard life during the relevant period were also considered. A related question was that of which watch<sup>170</sup> was a given seafarer's favourite, and why. These investigations were edifying, as they gave indications as to the general character of the individuals with whom the study dealt. Further enquiries dealt with the individual's view of the experience of sailing in convoy, including conditions aboard and position-keeping,<sup>171</sup> providing additional material for analysis. The footing provided the study by these fundamental questions and their answers was essential in establishing an ethnographic significance for the project as a whole.

Until the present day, to the best of my knowledge, no academic work has been published which has examined the physical and social conditions of merchant shipping in general, but which has foregrounded the folkloric and social aspects of the occupation. This appears to have been the case even when the scope of those studies is limited to the convoys of the Second World War. There is therefore an aspect of individuality and originality to the present research which might have recommended it to my notice even without my strong personal interest and involvement. After the ground elements had been set in place, therefore, the analysis of the material and the early drafts of the study moved forward, focussing initially on attitudes, perceptions, and relationships at sea. This area, not one which gripped my interest at the project's inception, became more and more stimulating as the study progressed.

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<sup>170</sup>. A seafarer's work period. The word's meaning parallels that of a factory worker's "shift".

<sup>171</sup>. This term is commonly used amongst North American seafarers to indicate maintaining the position of a vessel within the convoy's established pattern. Also called station-keeping or maintaining station/position amongst British seamen, this task took up much of the time and attention of both Deck and Engineering officers whilst sailing in convoy. Its vital importance in that wartime context was the subject of much comment within the interviews, as it had and has little or no significance amongst the navigational duties of the peacetime merchant seafarer on a ship sailing outside a convoy situation.

My personal interest as a folklorist had been aroused from the outset by the search for recreational pastimes, folkloric practices, custom and belief, initiations, nicknames, and terminology. Although this aspect of the research produced fewer results than had initially been expected, nevertheless a significant body of useful data has surfaced, including a quantity dealing with my personal favourite topic, that of fools' errands for greenhorns. Surprisingly, however, the area of belief and superstition was a comparative desert, especially when contrasted with the analogous corpus of data gleaned from fishermen and fishing communities. Seafaring terminology and nicknames were fruitful fields in some interview contexts and barren wastelands in others. Many of those interviewed said they recalled there having been nicknames and specialised terminology, but that they could no longer bring specific terms to memory.

Tape-recordings were numbered in chronological order by year of recording.<sup>172</sup> All the TTCs for 1989 and 1990 exist in hard copy, and all those from 91-1 onward are preserved in both Microsoft Word for DOS 5.5, Word for Windows 6 and WordStar 5 format on three-and-one-half-inch floppy discs as well and are also on three separate hard disc systems for back-up and safe-keeping.<sup>173</sup> When data from the interview tapes are used as exempla in the text of the thesis, they will be referenced HMC (Halley Maritime Collection) [tape number, e.g. 90-43], TTC (Tape Table of Contents) [page number] or occasionally TR (Transcript) [page-number], where applicable. The order in which tapes have been assessed and information inserted is the chronological order in which the interviews themselves were conducted, thus HMC 89-2 usually precedes HMC 90-6, which in turn precedes HMC 92-30, etc. If,

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<sup>172</sup> For example: 89-5, 90-52, etc.

<sup>173</sup> A larger segment was originally retained on floppy discs, but after the loss of the original database it was impossible to retype the previous holdings in their entirety.



however, a certain item's relevance in the written work is out of keeping with its position in the collection, its relevance will be given priority.

Once the actual writing-up of the study itself was properly underway, quotes from the database were inserted under the appropriate headings. The specific areas into which the data have been grouped are based on the major areas of information received, which in turn are based on the specific areas into which enquiry was made. The process of selection was necessary for several reasons. First, the sheer volume of collected data -- 165 tapes -- made it physically impossible to completely transcribe the entirety of the collection, much less to incorporate every item of relevant material into the study itself. Secondly, it was necessary to choose specific topics for more detailed analysis to avoid the problems which would have resulted from trying to cover too large an area of data at one time. Thirdly, and resultant from the first two considerations, it was necessary to decide what to dismiss from the investigations and on what grounds.

Perhaps the most important area of investigation was that of the "Personal Experience Narrative" or "PEN".<sup>174</sup> I had naively expected to be able to use more of these in the text, in fact having outlined an entire chapter consisting solely of PENS, but was forced in the end to abandon that project and to mediate between the raw tape-recorded data of the informants' personal testimony used and commentary or analysis. The only way effectively to handle the massive corpus of data acquired was to encapsulate. It was thus necessary to sacrifice a certain degree of authenticity in order to represent the views expressed by the seamen, to draw out the essence of what was said and relinquish the often prolix and informal style which, of course, carries the conviction of actual spoken discourse. In a few sections, however, I was able

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<sup>174</sup> Lloyd and Mullen note that "Personal narratives reveal the complex intertwining of individual and social identity in ways that no other verbal expressions can" and that they "are an important part of any group's folklore, a fact long recognized in folklore scholarship." *Lake Erie Fishermen*, xxiv.

to move to brief segments of direct transcription in order to give the full flavour of authentic language and the men's own expression and speaking style. For the reader who wishes to hear the actual words of personal testimony, all encapsulated material is fully referenced to the tapes by means of footnotes as described above. When such first-hand data is presented in inset "quotation-style" paragraphs, an effort has been made, wherever possible, to use indented first lines for those where the text is directly quoted or adheres closely to the actual testimony and to omit such indentation when the information is intensely paraphrased and heavily encapsulated.

The attempt to include both North American and British seafarers in this study has given the task a virtually Herculean aspect. Despite the best of intentions the fieldwork data has become slanted in some respects. The vast majority of the British interviews, for example, were conducted in Merseyside and with natives of that area. There are more Deck officers in the sample than anything else and the British ratings seem to have a leaning towards the Catering [Stewards'] Department. Only one or two of those interviewed had been born in a country other than Canada, Ireland, Newfoundland, the United Kingdom, or the United States and none had retained such citizenship. More than one informant expressed a wish that someone would extend work such as this to include the other Allied participants of World War II, such as the Dutch, Norwegians, Greeks, and Free French. Others have desired that the research extend further into the British Empire -- to Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Singapore, and India. These are indeed worthy goals, but limits must be set to dispose the task within the range of capabilities of a single individual. Similar constraints had to be observed with regard to the convoys themselves.

As a neophyte I believed that the only Second World War convoys of any significance were those which traversed the North Atlantic between

England and North America or those dispatched from the British Isles to supply the then Soviet Union through the North Russian ports on the Kola Inlet of the White Sea -- Murmansk and Archangelsk.<sup>175</sup> Since my first fieldwork interviews were with seafarers on the Pacific Coast of North America, I was soon disabused of that notion.<sup>176</sup> There were far more sectors of operation than these to be taken into account in a comprehensive study of convoys, even those limited to British and North American involvement. Fewer convoys of any size were active in the Pacific than in the Atlantic, but a number of “round-the-world” voyages set out in convoy from San Francisco and found their way eventually to New York via the Panama Canal or one of the Capes, and toward the end of the War through the Red Sea, Suez, and the Mediterranean. The entire voyage in such a case would most probably not have been made in convoy, but major portions of it would have been. The Malta convoys, too, as any serious student of the British war at sea will know, were crucial to the eventual Allied victory, and there were yet others, the small ones which “hopped” through the islands of the South Pacific or the Bering Sea or around the coasts of India or Africa, and the ones which replaced the Kola Inlet convoys temporarily after PQ18<sup>177</sup> by supplying the Soviet Allies through the Persian Gulf via a land route. In the long run, I decided to maintain a focus on the North Atlantic convoys, but not to exclude the others entirely, as occasional data of value derived from them as well, which were innately too important to be overlooked.

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<sup>175</sup>. The latter was usually known simply as Archangel by most Anglophones.

<sup>176</sup>. Rudy Jasen, HMC 90-4, was involved in four convoys on four different ships between October 1942 and V-J Day. All four were in the Pacific. The smallest involved three merchantmen and three escorts, while the largest incorporated sixty vessels. Allan Rynberg, HMC 90-6, had no convoy experience outside the Pacific theatre. Bob Leach, HMC 90-10, was only on one convoy, from San Pedro to Ulithe. Jim Cunningham, HMC 90-10, reminds the interviewer of the Rio to Trinidad convoys, which were about a nineteen-day trip at eight knots. William Kirby, HMC 90-13, had no experience except in the Pacific Ocean. Moreover many British informants were involved with Indian Ocean trooping convoys as well as those to Australia and New Zealand, the South Pacific islands and ports in Africa.

<sup>177</sup>. The Admiralty code name for the last of the PQ series of convoys to North Russia. When the North Russian convoys were reinstated some months later, a new numbering system was used. The PQ series was discontinued because of the high casualty rate resultant from the visibility of targets in the almost 24-hour daylight of the Arctic summer.

Among my informants on both sides of the Atlantic were a number who had spent relatively little time at sea during the war, having been captured and placed in camps or aboard enemy-held vessels as prisoners. These men often had fascinating tales of the situations and conditions inherent in their detention, but after some consideration I decided against using the experience of their imprisonment in this enterprise, as it detracted from the original course of the work and would have led to unnecessary complications. It is to be hoped that someone else will undertake this particular ethnographic research while these informants are still available for further interview.

As has been noted earlier, the individual convoy most extensively described in print is PQ17. Also heavily documented are other North Russian convoys such as PQ16 and PQ18, and the Malta runs such as ‘Pedestal’. Gleichauf, in *Unsung Sailors*, his paean to the U.S. Navy Armed Guard, makes the point that “The Murmansk run was rivalled in hazard and losses only by the supply run to Malta...”<sup>178</sup> and that has made both noteworthy to writers who prefer the sensational to the routine. For this reason I have chosen to devote less of my time and effort to these well-known enterprises than to others which may be less celebrated. In fact, in this study far less time and effort are dedicated to the investigation of individual convoys than to exploring the overall picture of “convoy” as a generality, rather than as a specific instance.

One notes with interest this observation from the Preface to *The Red Duster at War*:

To include every event relating to the ‘Red Duster’ would mean many volumes. ... It is not forgotten however, that some of the finest service was rendered by men who, exposed to all the dangers, in ships both large and small, came through the war unscathed and without spectacular adventure.<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>. Gleichauf, 171.

<sup>179</sup>. John Slader, *The Red Duster at War*, 11. The “Red Duster” was the affectionate nickname by which the flag of the British Merchant Service was known, while that of the Royal Navy was called the White Ensign.

This truism is all the more evident in the light of fieldwork such as the interviews on which this work is based. Many informants who readily shared their wartime experiences were apologetic for the lack of what one might term “good theatre” in what they had to offer. What becomes more and more apparent as one works with these men is that data of interest to the researcher are not always those in which suspense, drama, excitement and action are spectacularly manifested, but more often those in which a quiet self-effacing statement suddenly puts the entire study in perspective. When Robert Imbeau sheepishly said that he had rather enjoyed the war, because he was never in a life-threatening situation, but was given the opportunity to travel as well as to advance rapidly on the job,<sup>180</sup> he gave a far more accurate picture of what numerous seafarers experienced than does the sensational poster image of a shark-encircled raft on an oil-slicked sea beside a sinking tanker in flames. Both representations are legitimate, but despite the high percentage of casualties in the merchant service, the uneventful voyage and the seaman who “never got his feet wet” are still more typical than those who were “hammered,” even taking into consideration those who were sunk more than once and returned to sea each time.<sup>181</sup> More British mariners were hit or sunk than were North Americans, but again it appears to be more a factor of the actual numbers and geographical locations involved than anything else. There were more miles of North American coastal waters to begin with and far less of those miles were in any serious degree of jeopardy than the perilous shores of the tiny British Isles, especially in that area off the eastern coast which was known as “E-boat Alley”.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>180</sup> Imbeau, HMC 89-5B

<sup>181</sup> Joe Milcic, HMC 90-5, was sunk, but by an expanding cargo of wet grain, not by enemy action; Allan Rynberg, HMC 90-6, was under attack, but never hit nor sunk.

<sup>182</sup> This name was given to the area nearest the Axis E-boats’ home ports -- the Wold Channel off England’s East Coast, the English Channel itself, and the limited surrounds. Nor should it be forgotten that immense losses to merchant shipping occurred on the Atlantic Seaboard of the U.S. before and shortly after that country’s involvement with the war.

Slader notes that “more attention has been paid to the ‘liner’ shipping companies and some of the famous ships which they owned” despite the fact that “[t]he brunt of the attack ... was often borne by that workhorse of the seas, now virtually extinct, the tramp steamer;” and that “[t]heir personnel, unsung heroes of many races and creeds, are not forgotten.”<sup>183</sup> This again is undoubtedly true when looked at from a certain perspective. Many of the major liner and tanker shipping companies have company histories currently in print, sometimes specific to the war years, which have either been subsidised by the companies themselves, or written because of personal interest on the part of their authors.<sup>184</sup> A fairly large proportion of the remainder, however, do deal with the tramps for several reasons. First and probably foremost, the standard ships,<sup>185</sup> such as Liberty ships, (“*Sam*” boats as they were often called in the U.K.), Victory ships, Empires, Oceans, Forts, and Parks were primarily employed as tramps either under the auspices of the War Shipping Administration in the United States or the Ministry of War Transport in the United Kingdom, and there were more of them by the end of the war than of any other type of vessel. Second, a number of recent authors have expressed a “gut feeling” that the tramp steamers and their contribution to the war effort have been neglected and these writers have therefore taken it upon themselves to rectify this perceived deficiency. Third, it has been a common failing of professional writers to disregard the fact that many tankers were and are also tramps and that many tramps also carry small numbers of passengers, thereby

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<sup>183</sup> Slader, 11.

<sup>184</sup> See Section A in this chapter where such works are listed in footnotes <sup>25</sup> and <sup>27</sup>.

<sup>185</sup> These were ships which were built to a standardised pattern. Books giving detailed attention to the standard types were written by L.A. Sawyer and W.H. Mitchell. Among these titles are *From America to United States: The History of the Merchant Ship Types Built in the United States of America under the Long-Range Programme of the Maritime Commission* (In 4 parts), (Kendal UK: World Ship Society, 1979); *The Liberty Ships*; *The Oceans, The Forts and the Parks: Merchant Shipbuilding for British Account in North America during World War II* (Wartime Standard Ships -- Vol. 2) Liverpool: Sea Breezes, 1966 [2nd ed. 1990?] Sponsored by the Honourable Company of Master Mariners [UK]; and *Victory Ships and T-2 Tankers*. I believe there may be a further volume dedicated to the "Empire" class which was manufactured in Great Britain. The volume on Liberty ships dedicates pp. 208-209 to those vessels sent to the United Kingdom as 'SAM' ships.

confusing their own perspective of the issue. And fourth, but by no means least, there remains the coincidence that a goodly number of seafarers themselves, especially the English, looked down upon the “Western Ocean sailor” who had served only aboard North Atlantic passenger liners as being less of a mariner, less capable of fulfilling the duties that identified a true seaman than was one who sailed on tramps.<sup>186</sup>

Although the current work, like Slader’s, pays scant regard to ships and crews of other nations, both Allied and neutral, their contributions were both considerable and commendable and should not be overlooked.<sup>187</sup> Again, the omission has been on the grounds that insufficient resources were available to permit their inclusion and not on the basis of any perceived lack of merit.

Throughout, I was mindful of two concepts perhaps best stated by Jan Vansina.<sup>188</sup> Firstly: “Interviews are social processes of mutual accommodation during which transfers of information occur. If no social relationship can be established ... the information will be minimal, often inaccurate, and usually perceived as extorted under duress.” Secondly: “When a performance has been recorded, the information acquired becomes permanent and becomes testimony, whether the information is widely known or not.” Constantly trying to remain conscious of both these important facts, I always sought to establish an amicable social relationship in which “mutual accommodation” was easily achieved and to carefully and accurately record all the testimony offered, without being any more intrusive than was absolutely necessary under the circumstances.

Because of the fact that a free conversation type of interview was employed, the data included a wealth of material which was irrelevant to this

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<sup>186</sup>. Barney Lafferty (HMC 92-54, TTC p. 9), Tom Thornton (HMC 92-56, TTC p. 8).

<sup>187</sup>. Slader, 11.

<sup>188</sup>. Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, (London: James Curry, 1985), 63.

particular research. Seafarers from the Engine Department have gone into great technical detail to explain breakdowns and repairs. Deck officers have given elaborate explanations of how convoys were arranged and numbered and what the hierarchy of rank was. Even members of Catering staff have specified the sizes of tins used, and described recipes or processes employed in certain instances to produce specific desired results. Any researcher who wishes to delve into the collectanea for information on these and similar subjects will find copies of the data archived at the Paul Hall Memorial Library at the SIU Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship in Piney Point, Maryland, at the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History in the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine at Orono, and at the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield in South Yorkshire, England, as well as in the personal possession of the researcher.<sup>189</sup>

After a simple introduction, the study proceeds to an overview of its methodology, bibliography, and fieldwork, including analysis and presentation. This is followed by a short history of the convoy system and its practical aspects, drawn mostly from bibliographical sources. The subsequent investigation of the individual's view of the convoy experience and of wartime shipboard conditions leans heavily on extracts from the interview material, as does most of the rest of the study with the sole exception of the final chapter. Only the necessary background material has been drawn from bibliographical sources.

The next segment of the work explores the informants' reasons both for going to sea and for leaving the sea, as well as their major impressions of

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<sup>189</sup> . Any but limited access to these materials will be restricted to those who have my written permission, however. At present only the Newfoundland interviews made in late 1991 are in the holdings of the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive, under similar restrictions.



life aboard ship. Successive concerns are attitudes, perceptions, and relationships of shipboard groups both at sea and ashore. Some attention is paid to the seafarers' perception of themselves and how they were viewed and treated by others ashore. This is where comparative analysis of the British and North American data is most minute. There follows a perusal of recreational pastimes and active genres of folklore among merchant seamen succeeded and supported by a look at terminology and nicknames, which is the last of the sections dependent on the fieldwork collection. The researcher's conclusions form the bulk of the last chapter. The body of the text is followed by appendices, which include a bibliography, a list of informants, and some examples of typical convoy plans.

## CHAPTER 3

### THE HISTORY AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS OF CONVOYS

The convoy system has been used for several centuries as a means of protecting vital merchant shipping from attack, either by enemy forces during periods of war or by pirates and other such antagonists. Owen Rutter has written the definitive work on the history of British use of the convoy system up to and including the Second World War.<sup>190</sup> According to him, the system was initiated *circa* 1336, when convoys ranging from ten to two hundred vessels and comprised primarily of wine ships were formed against sea-borne predation.<sup>191</sup> Collier convoys from the Tyne to the Thames, returning in ballast, existed in dangerous periods from the Elizabethan era through to the twentieth century.<sup>192</sup> During the reign of the Stuarts, it became compulsory for shipping to sail in convoy in time of war.<sup>193</sup> Many shipping losses, even in those earliest days, were attributed to merchant captains disregarding the orders of escort officers while sailing in convoy.<sup>194</sup>

The circumstances of the merchant mariner have always been hazardous. Ronald Hope surmises that the Elizabethan seaman's chances of returning from an ocean voyage at all would have been no more than one in five, and reminds us that the military navy exists only to protect seaborne commerce and that Drake himself was a merchant seaman first and foremost.<sup>195</sup> The necessity for such a tactic as convoy, then, must have been recognised even during periods when the system was not in use.

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<sup>190</sup> . Owen Rutter, *Red Ensign: A History of Convoy*, (London: Robert Hale Ltd., 1942).

<sup>191</sup> . Rutter, 12-13.

<sup>192</sup> . Rutter, 34-36.

<sup>193</sup> . Rutter, 58.

<sup>194</sup> . Rutter, 66.

<sup>195</sup> . Hope, *The Merchant Navy*, 13.

During the Napoleonic era, convoys increased in size until they were far too large, unwieldy and dangerous to be viable. One such was recorded which numbered six hundred merchantmen and thirty-four escorts. This would have been far larger than even the most massive of twentieth-century convoys.<sup>196</sup> Convoys were unpopular with merchants of that generation as well, since the arrival of many vessels in any given port at one time produced an immediate glut on the market. Patrols were therefore assigned to the regular trade routes and sailing independently once more became not only feasible but desirable.<sup>197</sup>

During the late nineteenth century the convoy system all but disappeared from use, reviving only briefly during the Crimean conflict, but not coming back in full strength until World War I, when the modern form began whose subsequent development resulted in what is now envisioned when the word “convoy” is mentioned, and with which we are here concerned. The only significant advance of that interim period pertinent to the modern convoy of the twentieth century was that the Confederate ship *Alabama* during the United States Civil War revealed how effective a steam commerce raider<sup>198</sup> could be against merchant shipping and led to further research and development of similar vessels first by Imperial Germany and later by Hitler’s Third Reich.<sup>199</sup>

In February of 1917, an unrestricted submarine campaign was begun by the Kaiser’s forces, inflicting tremendous losses on the British -- both their

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<sup>196</sup> . Jim Cunningham, (HMC 90-10, TTC p. 1), reported that he was in one of the largest, comprising two hundred sixty-eight freighters, less than half the number listed from the earlier convoy. Other informants, however, have made less realistic estimates. See further below in later segments of this chapter. Also see Vice-Admiral Sir Peter Gretton, *Crisis Convoy: The Story of HX231*, (London: Peter Davies, 1974), 25, regarding sizes and shapes of convoys.

<sup>197</sup> . Rutter, 88.

<sup>198</sup> . The term “commerce raider” is commonly used by maritime historians to mean a vessel, usually but not exclusively a surface vessel, on detached military service whose main operational target is seaborne commerce during wartime.

<sup>199</sup> . Rutter, 120.

merchant and military fleets. Within a week Lloyd George was considering the reintroduction of convoys. Among other twentieth-century maritime defence strategies initiated at this time, paravanes were employed against mines<sup>200</sup>, and both torpedo nets<sup>201</sup> and hydrophones<sup>202</sup> were brought into use. The results of exploiting these devices were favourable at first, but the physical and mental strain on escort crews, both officers and ratings, was appalling.<sup>203</sup> Camouflage or “dazzle painting” and zigzagging tactics were employed for the first time, along with “Q” ships which, guns concealed, masqueraded as decoy merchant stragglers to attract enemy attention. The depth charge, however, was discovered to be the most effective anti-submarine device. Submarine vessels were emphatically not effective against each other.<sup>204</sup> Airships were being used as escorts and Scandinavian convoys of six to forty vessels were common.<sup>205</sup> “[B]y the end of 1917 it was clear that the convoy system had justified its purposes, and large concentrations of ships had been proven to be little more liable to detection than single vessels.”<sup>206</sup> Passengers took their turns on lookout duty and radio silence was observed.<sup>207</sup>

The Liverpool and New York Convoy Committees had been formed by the end of 1917, and “A general speeding-up in turnround and in grouping ships by speed helped to compensate for the loss of cargo tonnage.”<sup>208</sup> Ninety percent of Allied and neutral shipping in World War I sailed in convoy and the Kaiser’s forces, even augmented by U-boats, failed as had Napoleon’s before

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<sup>200</sup>. Paravanes are small, torpedo-shaped floatation devices “streamed” from arms extending out from the ship’s side by thin, strong wires, and intended to catch floating mines by their anchoring cables, sever these cables, and explode the mines in a single operation.

<sup>201</sup>. These are metal nets which were also “streamed” from arms extending out from the ship’s side. They hung well below the water line and were intended to deflect or ensnare torpedoes before these came into actual contact with the vessel.

<sup>202</sup>. Hydrophones were a pre-ASDIC and therefore pre-SONAR warning device whereby a waterproof microphone was depended beneath a ship to pick up the sounds of a submerged submarine’s engines, or of the crew within her talking and moving about, and transmit those sounds to a headset worn by the operator.

<sup>203</sup>. Rutter, 131-138.

<sup>204</sup>. Rutter, 139-140.

<sup>205</sup>. Rutter, 139-140.

<sup>206</sup>. Rutter, 143.

<sup>207</sup>. Rutter, 145.

<sup>208</sup>. Rutter, 147.

them, to destroy sea-borne commerce. “Had it not been for the introduction of the convoys system...the history of the world would have been changed, since it was only the preservation of the British mercantile marine which saved Great Britain and the Allies from defeat.”<sup>209</sup>

It is worth noting in comparison to the statistics of World War II that, during the First World War human casualties were proportionally greatest amongst the mercantile mariners when contrasted with the Royal Navy and similar figures appertain to the comparison between United States Merchant Marine and United States Navy casualty figures. Rutter cites losses of five and one-half percent of the total personnel of the Merchant Navy in the Great War, as opposed to four percent of the Royal Navy killed or died of wounds during that conflict.<sup>210</sup>

At the beginning of the Second World War, naval authorities and shipping companies were fully co-operative, which was an incalculable boon to the merchant marine, despite the fact that the Admiralty had turned against the convoy system in 1935, maintaining it presented great disadvantages.<sup>211</sup> All the tactical devices and designs were ready to set in operation. Armaments had been set aside for installation on merchant ships and some officers of the Merchant Service already had the training necessary to implement the use of such weaponry in defence of their vessels.<sup>212</sup> It was not long after this that the English Channel convoys were afforded the sobriquet “Churchill’s Armada”.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>209</sup>. Both this quotation and the paraphrases immediately preceding it are culled from Rutter, 149.

<sup>210</sup>. Rutter, 149. These figures are relatively comparable to the casualty figures for the Second World War as well. See Chapter Six and Appendix B for further comparisons.

<sup>211</sup>. Rutter, 153.

<sup>212</sup>. Rutter, 154.

<sup>213</sup>. Rutter, 190. It is interesting to note also in this instance that a photocopied cartoon from the *Daily Express* 14 November 1942, obtained for me by my friend and colleague Prof. Paul Smith, shows Winston Churchill dressed as the Pied Piper, piping “The Convoy System” and drawing U-boats, rat-like, in his wake. See Appendix B for a copy of this cartoon.

Travelling in convoy was safer than it had ever been. The hydrophone of World War I had been replaced by ASDIC,<sup>214</sup> a forerunner of today's SONAR equipment, H/F D/F<sup>215</sup> was being used by a large number of military vessels, radar was rapidly developing, and aircraft were consistently utilised to protect convoys at sea.<sup>216</sup> This continuing development of more and more sophisticated defence technology was imperative, due to the vast range of enemy warships and weaponry against which merchant shipping had to be protected. Aircraft, surface warships, and armed raiders had to be engaged in addition to U-boats, but the efficiency of the raiders declined as the war progressed, despite their early successes, and the only German aircraft carrier, *Graf Zeppelin*, never saw active service. German submarine power alone, however, became so advanced during the course of the war that it was nearly able to overcome the Allies before its eventual defeat at their hands.<sup>217</sup>

Before the development of degaussing, one of the most clear and present dangers to merchant shipping at the onset of the war was from magnetic mines.<sup>218</sup> Later in the conflict there was the peril of acoustic weapons, both mines and torpedoes,<sup>219</sup> and on the home front there were stories of legendary and fictional weapons, both comic and tragic.<sup>220</sup> The Allied shortage of both escort vessels and rescue ships throughout the war was as serious a predicament as it had been in World War I. Large convoys were still

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<sup>214</sup> . An acronym derived from Anti-Submarine Detection Investigation Committee.

<sup>215</sup> . High Frequency Direction Finding equipment, manned by radiosignalmen, and nicknamed "Huff-Duff" by its British operators on the grounds of the acronym.

<sup>216</sup> . Rutter, 155.

<sup>217</sup> . Martin Middlebrook, *Convoy* (London: Allan Lane/Penguin, 1976), 2.

<sup>218</sup> . Rutter, 156.

<sup>219</sup> . The antidote for acoustic torpedoes and mines was a device sometimes called a "rattler" or "foxer gear" made of metal bars which, towed behind a vessel in its wash (the water agitated by the propellers or "screws" -- only the visible surface area of this is called the "wake"), hopefully made sufficient noise to draw the acoustic weapon away from the vessel herself.

<sup>220</sup> . As an example of the comic, my exceptionally helpful friend, Peter Crowther, relayed the story of the apocryphal "Gesundheit" mine, as originally told by his paternal grandfather. The mine, triggered acoustically, supposedly rises to the surface beside its target vessel and releases a massive charge of ground pepper. If the response to the resultant sneezes is "God bless you," the mine sinks back to the sea floor, but if it is "Gesundheit," the explosives are detonated and the vessel destroyed.

imperative, but they were more troublesome to handle at sea, more vulnerable to attack, and more delaying and obstructive in port.<sup>221</sup>

It must be emphasised that one of the reasons convoys to and from Britain are historically notable is that her position in the battle for merchant shipping was crucial. She was mistress of the vast majority of working bottoms<sup>222</sup> and her vulnerable island position “meant that all of her oil, most of her raw materials and much of her food had to be imported.”<sup>223</sup>

It is now evident that the war at sea between merchantmen and U-boats was essentially one of attrition of shipping tonnage, as German naval power was not sufficient to impose a complete blockade on Britain.<sup>224</sup>

When a German U-boat captain torpedoed and sank an Allied merchant ship, he had not only destroyed that ship, the cargo it carried and probably some of its crew -- the British Empire and America had more than enough men, war material and civilian supplies to crush Germany. What the U-boat captain had achieved was to deny the Allies the opportunity of transporting many more cargoes to the vital war theatres in that vessel on later voyages. The Germans called it ‘The Tonnage War’. If more ships could be sunk than the Allied shipyards could replace with new construction, the Germans would inevitably achieve a tightening stranglehold on Britain’s supplies.<sup>225</sup>

If Britain had been successfully blockaded and “strangled” before Pearl Harbor, she would have fallen despite the courage and tenacity of her people. If the same had occurred in 1942 or 1943, the Allied invasion of Europe in 1944 would have had no base for departure and supply. “In either instance the history of our times would have been immeasurably altered.”<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>221</sup>. Rutter, 157-158.

<sup>222</sup>. This is the proper nautical term for commercial ships in active use.

<sup>223</sup>. Middlebrook, 2.

<sup>224</sup>. Middlebrook, 2.

<sup>225</sup>. Middlebrook, 2.

<sup>226</sup>. Middlebrook, 2.

Most prewar cargo liners and tramps were slow, their speed being determined by financial constraints such as fuel consumption.<sup>227</sup> The resultant sluggish rate of most convoys was as uneconomic in wartime as nonessential speed had been in peace. At seven knots or less, ships were easier targets for the enemy and heavier burdens on the escorts. Longer passages made for a fundamental waste of tonnage. Even the replacement ships built by British and North American shipbuilders to a wartime standard of nine knots could be criticised for their lack of speed, but the response was that “speed and economy of construction are essential; the hulls of the standard ship can be built in about three months, but the engines not so quickly; and there is a shortage of skilled artificers, thousands of whom have been conscripted into the Army.”<sup>228</sup>

Not all convoys were slow, however, and ships were grouped so far as possible in accordance with their speed. Fast convoys were particularly necessary for sending troops and consignments of military stores to Malta and the Middle East, and they required strong covering forces in addition to their escort, particularly when passing through the Mediterranean....<sup>229</sup>

Capt. Vincent Finan once arrived last at a convoy conference and was therefore made Commodore. His ship was the *Creighton Victory*, which he took out of the shipyard in Portland, Oregon in April of 1945 carrying incendiary bombs to the U.S. Air Force in the Philippines via Palao. There were about fifteen ships in three five-ship columns sailing at fourteen knots, although his own vessel could make eighteen. In the convoy there was only one navigational marker to make. God was on Capt. Finan’s shoulder, he said, as the buoy had been moved four miles without notifying the convoy and they just missed running on the beach. He also laughingly said they had zigzagged

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<sup>227</sup>. Fuel consumption varies with the cube of the speed of the engine, and every knot of increased speed greatly increases the cost of production: the problem is to get the maximum cargo capacity for the minimum expenditure of fuel. Eight hundredweight of coal may give a ship a speed of ten knots, but over three and a half tons are required to drive the same ship twenty knots. (Rutter, 158).

<sup>228</sup>. Rutter, 158.

<sup>229</sup>. Rutter, 158.



for sixty-five days and he could not walk a straight line for a week afterward.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3)

A U.S. Navy Armed Guard interviewed during the fieldwork recalled zigzagging with a tow in a fourteen-ship convoy to Hawaii; a fast convoy to the Marshall Islands for the Kwajalein invasion; a sixty-ship convoy, where the Armed Guard had to act as signalmen on the commodore ship to send instructions; and an “insider” submarine attack. On the last occasion, a destroyer shot off two flares, which means “alert”, and roared down between the lanes of the convoy, dropping depth charges which shook the ships and “rattled” the people.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 1)

One of the most frightening descriptions of a Second World War convoy, in my personal opinion, came from Thomas Burton, a Newfoundland informant, who described some twenty-five fully loaded troopships, all of which had, before the war, been luxury liners<sup>230</sup> with fairly high speeds<sup>231</sup>. In his own transcribed words:

And of course now you wanted to know about convoys -- how they sailed together -- which is a big outfit. Now we happened to, because the *Empress of Britain* was a large ship and a well-known ship, she was the commodore ship. We had all the brains that be, I suppose, on our ship. We were the ones that had to give the orders if anything went wrong and to put it right. So we all assembled outside. You didn't stop, but you slowed, for to get the convoy into position. And all liners, if they're over twenty thousand tons, they must sail a half a mile apart in case of something going wrong. And you got to zigzag.

We had to zigzag, which you went port five minutes, starboard five minutes, and five minutes straight course -- that's how they did it. And all ships had to do it the same time. And if anyone did a wrong one you'd probably be right up against someone before you knew it. We were a twenty-four knot convoy.<sup>232</sup>

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<sup>230</sup>. He specified the *Queen Mary*, the *Aquitania*, and the *Empress of Britain*, as well as mentioning “P-and-O boats”.

<sup>231</sup>. He says his own ship, the *Empress of Britain*, could do twenty-eight knots and the *Queen Mary* about thirty-one, but they had to maintain the same speed as the rest of the convoy.

<sup>232</sup>. Thomas E. Burton, MUN 91-393, C14435, (HMC 91-7, TTC p. 4), near No. 148, Side B, recorded 16/X-1991, transcribed by Cindy Turpin, pp. 21-22.

So they virtually flew through the North Atlantic in convoy formation at twenty-three to twenty-five knots of speed, zigzagging the while. The mere concept of the extreme hazards involved in such an action is breathtaking. The cargoes of these vessels were human beings; in the event of either an accidental collision or an enemy “hammering,” not all would have escaped with their lives. Safety devices and procedures, however well-considered and technologically advanced would be insufficient in the event of such a catastrophe, and the mere act of pursuing a zigzag course in convoy formation at such a phenomenal rate of speed was courting disaster. Apparently luck was with them, however, for Burton did not recount a catastrophic outcome to the episode. In fact in his entire convoy career, he said he only saw one incident where something went wrong in the navigation and even that time disaster was averted.

But I only saw one in the convoys I was in -- and I was in a few -- that some ship did something wrong. And b’gosh there was no liner hit, but it was just clearing her. It went on the wrong course. And before they could stop it it was off it. But that was lucky, there was no ship hit, but it could have been. I don’t know now, I can’t recall which ship, but it was a bad do anyway.<sup>233</sup>

Close quarters were commonplace in convoy, whatever the speed. “Murph” Murphy swears that he was once in a convoy where ships were so close to one another that the Armed Guard were throwing potatoes back and forth between the vessels.<sup>234</sup> Murph did not like the outside rows, though, as he was an Engineer on tankers and being in the most precarious spot on a highly vulnerable type of vessel was bad enough, without being placed in an exposed position as well.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3) Yet despite the proximity of the other vessels, every ship was “a town of its own”.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 8)

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<sup>233</sup> . Thomas E. Burton, MUN 91-393, C14435, (HMC 91-7, TTC p. 4), near No. 167, Side B, recorded 16/X-1991, transcribed by Cindy Turpin, p. 23.

<sup>234</sup> . Compare this with later testimony in Chapter Five about firing potatoes from the mortar-like “Holman projector”.

As the war progressed, so, too, did safety and survival precautions and facilities for torpedoed seamen. More and better lifeboats, including the requirement of at least one motor lifeboat on every deep-water vessel, with further standard lifeboat equipment specifically designed to increase the chances of survival were provided.<sup>235</sup>

Some merchant seafarers who came through the war unscathed voiced superficial feelings of envy for their less fortunate comrades. Harry Kilmon was often close to action and considers it “tough” that he was never actually in it. More than once he went to sleep with a hundred ships in his convoy and woke up with ninety-six. It could as easily have been him, but he was protected by a “guardian angel”.(HMC 90-73, TTC p. 2) Capt. Frank Waters, whose convoys suffered no losses, had friends on the perilous Murmansk run and told me he was “kind of sorry he missed it”.<sup>236</sup> In *Unsung Sailors*, this “run”, closely paralleled by the run to Malta for both danger and apprehension, is described with eloquence:

What was the dread “Murmansk run?” It was one of only two practical deep-water routes available to carry vital supplies to Russia, in order to keep it in the war. It involved a 4,500-mile voyage from New York, through the dangerous waters of the North Atlantic and Barents Sea to the north Russian ports of Murmansk, Molotovsk, and Archangel, the latter two in the White Sea. It was the preferred route because the other terminated in rickety ports in the Persian Gulf, soon hopelessly overcrowded and under-equipped. Vessels had to wait weeks, and sometimes months, in blistering heat to unload their cargoes, and the antique railroad and so-called roads to Russia could not begin to handle the flood of munitions, materiel, food, and other supplies coming in from around the world.<sup>237</sup>

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<sup>235</sup>. Rutter, 165. Among the additional equipment were an automatic wireless set capable of transmitting signals over an eighty-mile radius, improved lifejackets, bright yellow weatherproof suits, special fire protection for tanker crews, lights on lifejackets and attached to rafts, more adequate stocks of food in the lifeboats, and enough water to maintain thirty-four persons for a fortnight. Massage-oil was added to the first-aid outfit and each boat carried blankets, smoke flares, and electric signalling torch and a complete tool kit for repairs.

<sup>236</sup>. Frank Waters, HMC 90-1, TTC p. 1.

<sup>237</sup>. Gleichauf, 170-171.

Although he considered the run to Murmansk the worst, William Finch was always sent to southern ports during the war and did not reach northern climes until after hostilities had ended.(HMC 90-27, TTC p. 2)

Like at least one other author<sup>238</sup>, I have been unable properly to consider ships and crews of nations other than those of my immediate concern (The United Kingdom, The United States of America, the [then] Dominion of Canada, and the [then] Crown Colony of Newfoundland). Ships and crews of other Allied nations and Commonwealth members were involved in convoys and the general war effort in all theatres and it is regrettable that the limitations of human frailty have made it necessary to pass over their considerable and commendable contributions. Ships of the Axis powers underwent experiences that paralleled those of Allied and neutral vessels and the lives of the seamen aboard were not dissimilar or less worthy of study. It is to be hoped and desired that these tasks will be undertaken by other hands with some immediacy, that the stories of both friendly and inimical associations with those described here not be lost to future generations.

Convoy conferences were official in character, but unceremonious. No formalities were observed and the shipmasters and their subordinates who attended were of a variety of types. Some wore uniform, but more dressed in business suits. Chief Engineers and First Officers (Chief Mates/Chief Officers/First Mates) were usually welcome to attend these conferences if they chose and the Master often requested that the Chief Radio/Wireless Officer attend as well, although this was more common at British conferences than at those in North America. It was at convoy conferences that the Masters met the Commodore and the senior escort officers for the convoy. Secret orders or confidential books were issued; positions, stations, and general instructions were established; warnings were given against dangerous practices, such as

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<sup>238</sup>. Slader, 11.

showing of lights or emission of smoke. To the Wireless Operators who attended were distributed schedules of signalling and the appropriate codes to accompany them.<sup>239</sup> This was one of the Radio/Wireless Officer's primary duties in most convoys, as use of wireless telegraphy or radio transmission was permissible only in an emergency situation. Although the convoy's course was fixed, positions and progress had to be established by dead reckoning for similar reasons.<sup>240</sup>

In the United States, the convoy conference was often replaced by a face-to-face meeting between the merchant Master and the Commander of the Naval Port Authority, during which similar details were discussed and sealed orders received by the departing skipper. In this case, the Master of the merchant vessel was allowed to reveal the details of the meeting only to his Chief Mate, and even Radio Officers were not privy to the Navy codes in which they received messages. This seems to have been a more secure arrangement, but perhaps less expedient in operation, as more time would have been expended in decoding and carrying out orders if only one, or at most two, men were sanctioned to handle classified information.<sup>241</sup> In cases such as this, convoy classes for merchant officers were frequently scheduled at various Navy yards, and followed periodically by upgrading conferences incorporating "book-sized memoranda" of "nautical homework" on tactical problems.<sup>242</sup>

Most outbound British and Canadian convoys assembled in a given anchorage and sailed en masse, while ships often sailed individually or in very small groups from United States ports and "made up"<sup>243</sup> at a rendezvous point

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<sup>239</sup> . Rutter, 175-177. According to Capt. R.A. Simpson, then an Apprentice, signalling "came into its own" at that time. Despite the primitive nature of many communication and navigational aids, "secrecy was a fetish" and many normal practices were forbidden on security grounds.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3)

<sup>240</sup> . Rutter, 178.

<sup>241</sup> . Palmer, 256-257.

<sup>242</sup> . Palmer, 260.

<sup>243</sup> . It was common usage to say that ships "made up," meaning they came together to form a convoy at a specified point, whether actually in port or at a fixed co-ordinate at sea. The latter was the slightly more usual meaning.

offshore, although some convoys out of Halifax, Nova Scotia did the latter as shown by the following example:

The ship went to Halifax to pick up the first large contingents of Canadian troops. Several small contingents had already gone, both from Canada and from Newfoundland, which was not yet part of Canada. They anchored in Bedford Basin, as it took some time to get the troops assembled in the one port, then they lay there for a couple more days until all the troops were boarded, and they sailed. "Now that was something else when we sailed." They got about forty miles outside Halifax "and the ships were coming from everywhere," St. John's, Halifax, Quebec, Boston, New York, making up the convoy at sea. There were twenty-five ships, all large liners, which assembled outside Halifax, not stopping, but slowing to get the convoy into position. As they were all liners, they had to sail a half-mile apart in case of trouble and they had to zigzag as well. There were specialised instruments on the bridge -- "zigzag clocks" that rang a bell to indicate when to start and stop zigzagging and when to change course. He only saw one instance where something "went the wrong way". There was no collision, but the ships just missed each other. It was a lucky break.(HMC 91-7, TTC pp. 3-4) Besides avoiding collisions within a given convoy, one of the most serious considerations for convoys leaving the British Isles, especially before the United States entered the war, was the meeting of outbound and inbound convoys and the synchronisation of the escort groups, which took one convoy out through the Western Approaches and brought another back on their return.<sup>244</sup>

All the coasting trade around the British Isles during the Second World War sailed in convoy, but these convoys were administered in a somewhat different manner from the trans-Atlantic variety. As Liverpool was the major convoy assembly point for those groups outward bound to the west, so Newcastle-upon-Tyne, with its history of collier convoys, was one of the primary staging points for the coastal trades, but such convoys could be made up at any of a number of important coastal towns. Two of the major marshalling areas during the Second World War were Methil, on the Firth of Forth, for northeastern convoys and Loch Ewe for northwestern, as well as for ocean convoys bound across the North Atlantic and to North Russia. The trans-Atlantic convoys went by the Minches. Coming from London one would go up the East Coast, being joined by ships from Hull (the Tees and the Tyne

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<sup>244</sup> . Rutter, 178.

as well), get to Methil, and make up to go round Pentland Firth to Loch Ewe to join an ocean convoy.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 5)

Coastal convoy conferences were less formal and the convoy formats were narrower, usually only two lanes, with those vessels which would be leaving the convoy first at the back, so that they could drop off easily and with gaps for those who would “button on”<sup>245</sup> later. Like the larger convoys, however, coastal traffic was warned against straggling and informed of the most effective defensive measures available.<sup>246</sup> Convoys in English Channel waters were more heavily escorted because of the more severe hazard presented by both the proximity of the enemy coastal positions and the likelihood of encounters with E-boats.<sup>247</sup>

Capt. Vincent Finan was with one convoy homeward bound across the Atlantic from Port Said to the U.S., picking up ships all along the way. When they cleared Gibraltar, they had about seventy ships to take to Baltimore at a speed of eight knots. He also was in several coastal convoys up and down from Panama and one round-the-world from New York, which included Abadan.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3)

Some British East Coast convoys, especially those out of the Humber Estuary, were destined eventually for the Murmansk Run to North Russia. The point of embarkation was never directly mentioned, but “an East Coast port” usually meant Hull. Since the Humber was also a direct air route, almost an air highway leading to the major industrial centres of Liverpool, Manchester, and Birmingham from military airfields in Germany and Central Europe,

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<sup>245</sup>. The term “to button on” for the action of a ship joining a coastal convoy was common usage. Its derivation should be apparent.

<sup>246</sup>. Rutter, 179-181.

<sup>247</sup>. As noted earlier in this chapter, it was this fact that earned them the sobriquet of “Churchill’s Armada.” Rutter, 190.

bombs were often dropped there by enemy planes either coming or going.<sup>248</sup>  
Even fishing vessels in that area sailed in convoy and had their own layout.<sup>249</sup>

There were far fewer organised convoys in the Pacific than in the Atlantic, virtually none from the United States to Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea. Whether there was a convoy or not depended to a great extent on the ultimate destination point and the number of ships bound there. Sometimes a Pacific convoy would consist of ten or twelve merchant vessels with no escorts at all and there were seldom more than fifteen ships in the largest. This was the antithesis of the situation in the Atlantic where most vessels sailed in convoy and there was always a convoy to join,<sup>250</sup> where convoys consisting of forty to sixty ships were commonplace, and where they were sometimes much larger.

Throughout the fieldwork for this enterprise, information was offered me regarding the technical aspects of convoys -- how the vessels were numbered and arranged, what comprised the chain of command, etc. These data were not considered pertinent to the ethnographic aspect of the convoy experience, and so have not been examined in any great depth. It is necessary, however, for the non-initiate to know something of these details in order to better comprehend those aspects of the experience which are investigated in this study. Therefore a brief overview has been provided here.

Merchant vessels in a convoy situation were set up in columns. These columns were numbered from one upward left to right (or port to starboard) in

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<sup>248</sup> . Information about Hull was obtained from Arthur Credland, curator/archivist of the Town Docks Museum, Hull, Humberside, during my visit there in December 1993. It was of particular interest in this respect to learn that the fishing fleet from Grimsby included vessels named for Football League clubs and that therefore, despite some rivalry between the ports, the *Hull City* was a Grimsby-based boat. Later, on 15 January, 1994, in a personal conversation with Nicholas White, I was informed that the *Sheffield United*, the namesake of the side I support, was refitted as an Armed Merchant Trawler and sunk on escort duty, probably around 1941.

<sup>249</sup> . As illustrated by the plans shown in Appendix B, courtesy of Arthur Credland, curator/archivist of the Town Docks Museum, Hull, Humberside, December 1993.

<sup>250</sup> . Robert Hiller, HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1.



an overhead view, front being up. Each column was also numbered from one upward front to rear. The number of any individual vessel was a two- or three-digit number indicating column number first and position in the column second. For example: In a convoy consisting of five columns of five vessels each, the first (leftmost or portside) column of vessels would be numbered eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, and fifteen. The second column would be numbered twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, and so on. An example can be seen in the two plans of convoy SC42 shown in Appendix B. Compare also the locations of the commodore's and vice-commodore's ships as well as "coffin corner" at the left rear or after portside corner.<sup>251</sup>

The convoy commodore, usually a merchant seafarer with an unlimited master's certificate, who frequently held a commission in the Naval Reserve<sup>252</sup> as well, would choose a vessel as his flagship. That vessel would then most likely be placed at the head of the centre column; in our theoretical convoy the commodore ship would thus be number thirty-one, and on the SC42 diagrams, it is the *S/S Everleigh*, number seventy-one. It was the commodore's responsibility to chart the basic course for the entire convoy, including zigzagging and other defensive manoeuvres and to convey such intelligence to the other merchant masters, first at the convoy conference ashore and later, while under way, by means of ship-to-ship signals. The entire convoy was run by the Commodore. Military gunners and escorts also had representatives on the Commodore's ship.(HMC 90-65, TTC pp. 1-2) As one man put it, "The commodore controlled the whole shebang."(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 8)

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<sup>251</sup>. See the two accompanying plans for convoy SC42 in Appendix B. The handwritten one is a photocopy obtained courtesy of Ian Millar, a private researcher from Kernersville NC, and the other is photocopied from David A. Thomas, *The Atlantic Star 1939-45*, (London: W.H. Allen, 1990), 93.

<sup>252</sup>. This might be the RNR (Royal Navy Reserve), USNR (United States Naval Reserve), or RCNR (Royal Canadian Naval Reserve).

There was usually a vice-commodore of similar capabilities aboard another vessel in the convoy, in case the flagship was disabled or destroyed or the commodore himself incapacitated or killed. The vice-commodore's ship was generally one in a position adjacent to that of the flagship, but there was no set regular position. In our theoretical convoy he would probably be on number twenty-one, twenty-two, thirty-two, forty-one, or forty-two. The vice-commodore on SC42 was the master of the s/s *Thistle Glen*, number ninety-one, also in the front rank, but one ship removed from the commodore ship.

Military vessels acting as escorts might be placed within the convoy structure itself or might more often be in constant motion outside the set pattern of the convoy, patrolling its perimeters. They would be under the command of a Senior Escort Officer who hypothetically outranked the Commodore, but seldom overruled him in actual fact unless in very extreme circumstances.

"Fighting subs," I was told, "is like swatting bees," (HMC 90-70, TTC p. 8) and various escort vessels, their differences and their purposes were described to me in fairly minute detail. Many of the men interviewed specifically mentioned naval escort officers, especially the famous "Johnny" Walker of HMS *Kite*. They explained armaments and tactics, systems used to entrap the enemy, and the strategic positions in which escort vessels were stationed relative to the convoy generally. One thing was made abundantly clear -- it was acceptable for an escort vessel to waste time on the chase, but only for a short while. She could not sit over a submarine's suspected submerged position for four or five hours, as she had to remain on station with the convoy. (HMC 90-70, TTC p. 8)

Capt. R.A. Simpson was in both coastal and oceanic convoys with sizes that varied from as few as twenty or thirty ships to as many as a hundred.

Usually the oceanic ones were five to eight lanes across and five to ten columns in length. He explained the system of numbering and said the Commodore normally took the head of the middle column with the Vice-Commodore located elsewhere. The Commodore was in charge, but the senior officer was the senior officer of the escort, when there was one.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 5)

Among the duties of the Commodore were setting the speed of the convoy, establishing its position, and telling it when and where to change course for general purposes or for zigzagging. He was also responsible for informing and correcting those who were out of position or who were making smoke, showing lights, or otherwise jeopardising the group's security. If a Master discovered his vessel was unable to keep position for a valid reason, to the Commodore fell the obligation of considering the options available and choosing that which would be most efficacious for the group as a whole. The efficiency and discipline of the entire convoy rested upon his shoulders.

If rescue ships were involved in a convoy, they were inevitably stationed at the rear, so they might pick up survivors from lifeboats or from the water without obstructing other vessels. Exceptionally vulnerable vessels, such as ammunition ships or tankers with particularly volatile or inflammable cargoes might be placed in the rear, where their destruction would present less of a hazard to the others, or in the centre, where they would present more difficult targets.<sup>253</sup> The after portside corner of the convoy formation became known as "coffin corner" because of its vulnerability.

Convoy experiences could vary widely. Jim Cunningham reported that he was in one of the largest, comprising two hundred sixty-eight freighters, as

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<sup>253</sup> . Richard Aldhelm-White (HMC 90-70, TTC p. 8), who sailed on RCN escort corvettes, said that they tried to protect the tankers especially, always putting them in the centre. This was not only because they were carrying fuel, but also because they would light up the sky if they were hit.

well as perhaps the smallest, a Pacific “island hopper” consisting of the Liberty ship *Sara Teasdale* and four navy destroyers.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 1)

Irishman Bill Fortune reported that his ship was re-routed to Glasgow the week before the war. Forces personnel and stores were loaded and they sailed just as war was declared, in what was perhaps the first convoy to sail from the Clyde in World War II.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 1)

The magnitude of one of the large Atlantic convoys can be visualised from this passage from *Crisis Convoy* by Vice-Admiral Sir Peter Gretton, a Senior Escort Officer:

Early in 1943, Professor Blackett, the brilliant Head of Naval Operational Research, had shown that owing to the shape of these convoys -- they were wide but had no great depth -- the number of ships included could be increased considerably, with only a small increase in the perimeter and hence in the number of escorts required. This self-evident truth had not been well received by the Naval Staff which argued that an increase in size led to difficulties in station-keeping and in manoeuvring and control, and any change was resisted. But these disadvantages were imaginary and by the spring of 1943, the Naval Staff agreed reluctantly to increase the fast convoys to sixty ships while keeping the SC and ONS [slow] convoys to forty. Results were to show that Blackett was right and later on, convoys with as many as 150 ships sailed safely across the sea.

HX231, as one of the first sixty-ship convoys, was six sea miles across and two sea miles in depth. (There were thirteen columns, each containing four or five ships; the columns were 1,000 yards apart and ships in column were 400 yards apart.)<sup>254</sup>

A one-hundred-ship convoy is so huge the edges may be five or six miles away from your vessel and there is no inter-ship “grapevine” or means of communication other than visual or direct voice. The informant was in two separate convoys in which vessels were lost without either he or his shipmates being aware of the fact.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 1) But convoys for tankers in the Atlantic were smaller than those involving cargo ships, as tankers were almost always faster, especially the modern standard T-2s. There were usually six to

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<sup>254</sup>. Vice-Admiral Sir Peter Gretton, *Crisis Convoy: The Story of HX231*, (London: Peter Davies, 1974), 25.

nine ships in any given tanker convoy and they were seldom escorted, but depended on their companions to see them through, apparently relying on the theory that “there’s safety in numbers”.(HMC 90-36, TTC p. 1)

Convoys were quite an experience. Eight hundred ships went to Gourock for the Normandy invasions; that was the largest convoy ever.<sup>255</sup>(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 2) Convoy in the Pacific was scarier, as Japanese tactics tended to affect men’s nerves more than those of the Germans. The latter would simply shoot at you, where the former would stalk you and try to unnerve you first.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)

Capt. Dick Britton was never in the Pacific during the war. He was primarily in North Atlantic and Channel convoys, but got into the Mediterranean a few times. He was lucky, shot at, but never hit.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1) His major contribution was the datum that “FLAK ships” were used prior to “baby aircraft carriers” and may not have carried cargo, but were bristling with anti-aircraft guns. Positioned in the centre of the convoy, they were a tremendous help. They had one on his convoy to Russia -- PQ15. Britton was on the same ship from February 1942 until late July of that year. It took so long because they had to wait in each port for a convoy to form. They were among the last to unload in Russia, so missed the first returning convoy and returned on QP13. He does not know the reason for the number discrepancy, but believes the returning convoys were larger and, of course, there were fewer ships to go back.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 3)

As Capt. Ed March remembers it, there were about thirty-five ships to a convoy in the fast ones. Some, but not all, of the slow trans-Atlantic convoys of Liberty ships and the like in the latter part of the war were huge.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 5) In fast convoys there were some well-known ships,

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<sup>255</sup>. See earlier in this chapter, where the participants’ views of convoy sizes are discussed.

like the *Empress of Australia*, but T-2 tankers still predominated with some British refrigerator ships. They were all first-class ships in the fast convoys.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 6)

Admiral King of the United States rejected the convoy system for quite some time at the beginning of American involvement in the war. Capt. Earl Wagner thinks this was very wrong. Not all the convoys in which he eventually sailed were small -- some were twenty or thirty ships. They disbanded as they went, but were unlike the tiny Pacific island-hoppers.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 8)

## **A. THE INDIVIDUAL'S VIEW OF THE CONVOY EXPERIENCE**

Throughout the remainder of this study, the personal testimony of the men interviewed forms the main bulk of the text. The sheer volume of the material, however, would have made extensive verbatim quotes impracticable to present in every case. It was therefore decided the best policy was to distil encapsulated versions of selected relevant transcripts to give the fullest possible information in the most concise form possible, whilst still preserving the language and spirit of the original. The nature of encapsulation is such that in order to retain as much of the character of the actual speaker as possible, sentences are shorter and sometimes more disconnected than in most academic writing -- more like conversation -- thereby preserving some of the flavour of the original interview.

Individual informants gave a widely diversified range of accounts of their personal insights on the convoy experience. As an Assistant Engineer and a watchstander directly involved with convoy operations, John Pottinger, at the “crotchety and creepy” age of seventy-six and with almost sixty years of nautical background, still considered his convoy experience “limited”.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1) Certain topics, however, recurred in the fieldwork data with relative frequency. One was the vastness of the larger North Atlantic convoys and the fact that communication while maintaining radio silence was so limited, even within the same convoy, that several vessels might be destroyed and the crews of others nearby still remain ignorant of the fact. The immensity

of North Atlantic convoys was so impressive to many that memory exaggerated the enormous groups even beyond their actual magnitude.<sup>256</sup>

Despite the vast size of the North Atlantic convoys, it was possible in thick fog to lose track of one's sailing companions entirely. Capt. Frank Waters, an American, described having once been in a forty-ship convoy in the North Atlantic, running into fog during the night, and finding his ship alone the following morning. Capt. Waters, then sailing as Chief Mate, reported that the "“Old Man”<sup>257</sup> was ‘drunk in his bunk’” at the time. Earlier in the interview, he said he had liked the North Atlantic. He had never sailed in a Halifax convoy; all of his formed in New York out and Belfast home. He described his wartime service as “uneventful”, saying it had no effect on his life and that he has enjoyed consistent good health.(HMC 90-1, TTC pp. 2-3)

Perhaps the most frequently mentioned problem was position-keeping within the convoy,<sup>258</sup> as it was a major concern of both Deck and Engine Departments.<sup>259</sup> A subsection of this chapter has been devoted to its consideration. The difficulties of zigzagging in large convoys and the danger of collision were related subjects found worthy of discussion as well. A number of men also mentioned the spectacular demise of certain types of

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<sup>256</sup>. One informant recalled that in the North Atlantic convoys there were about forty ships in a row. This is larger than any modern convoy recorded in fact. However, he clearly recollected the ammunition ships being placed in the centre while those carrying food, and other such commodities were stationed on the outside, and this was factually accurate in many cases.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 1) Another respondent detailed the making up of a convoy in New York and said there were up to 125-150 ships, which may well be an exaggeration. But he also explained how the convoys were organised; what the vessels' speeds were; how far apart they were placed and how convoys were numbered.(HMC 90-65, TTC pp. 1-2)

<sup>257</sup>. The term “Old Man” or simply “O.M.” is a generally accepted and fully approved method of referring to a ship's Master in the third person. It has no pejorative context nor does it imply actual age. The “Old Man” may be under the age of thirty, in fact, and may even be younger than the person who so describes him.

<sup>258</sup>. Even one of my earliest correspondents, John B. Wilson, in a letter dated 9 February 1990, said: “The worst problem was station keeping.”

<sup>259</sup>. Throughout this work, in order to provide a distinction and avoid confusion, I have used upper case initial letters for the names of all shipboard departments, although this is not always standard practice.



ships, such as ammunition carriers, pyrotechnic ships, and tankers with volatile and explosive cargoes.<sup>260</sup>

Robby Owen felt that by 1943 the Merchant Marine was safer than the German submarine service and that, once the convoy system and air cover were established, “the U-boats hadn’t a prayer”. “Convoys will probably never happen again,” he said, “but they were a tribute to man’s ingenuity.” He recalled how they looked and said he, as an Engineering Officer, was amazed at the intricate manoeuvres effected in convoy by Deck Officers, navigators and wheelmen. In the two years he sailed in convoy, Owen never saw a collision.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 1)

Quite a few of those interviewed expressed concern and regret at regulations which forbade their vessels to rescue survivors of stricken craft nearby. They repeatedly recapitulated the rationalisations for such action (or lack of it) which they had been given at the time. Bob Imbeau, for example, said his vessels had never picked anyone up from a ship that had been hit.

Ships were not allowed to stop. It was the escorts’ job to pick up survivors, as the convoy cannot be broken or collisions will result. In addition, stopping might jeopardise essential cargo and other men; you might lose other ships. He hated to leave them behind, but knew the escorts would do their best; he hated it, but it was justified.(HMC 89-5B, TTC pp. 6-7)

Veteran mariners also emphasised their distress at seeing men struggling in the water, hearing their cries, and being powerless to assist them. George Goldman, in October Films’ video documentary “Forgotten Heroes”, said, “...we could hear people in the water blowing whistles, the whistles that were attached to the life jackets. But we couldn’t find them. ... And you

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<sup>260</sup>. Robert Imbeau said it was really a shocking sight. One minute the ship was there, the next there was nothing.(HMC 89-5B, TTC pp. 6-7)

could hear those whistles blowing and blowing. And I can still hear them today.”<sup>261</sup> John Manning said:

“The whole of the water was alight while we was trying to get away. And all we could hear was screams on the ship that was going down, and screams all on the water that we was in. And the poor buggers was thick with oil and some of them was...burning while they were in the water or trying to swim through the water that was lit. ... Even the strongest man alive’d get frightened to hear the sound. Screams of big men screaming and bawling and, ‘help -- help me, help me,’ they were shouting.”<sup>262</sup> And another man in the same BBC production added, “...the sort of thing that you could hear was the sort of thing you -- you don’t want to hear again in the rest of your life. I don’t anyway.”<sup>263</sup>

Many recalled, with a mixture of sorrow and self-reproach, the face of some single individual to whose loss they had been eyewitness. The fact that the ability to save the victim may have been entirely outside their own capabilities and control made little difference to their feelings.

There was one of the ships torpedoed, and people were swimming towards us. And at one time there was just this one young lad, about 18[sic] or 19[sic] trying to get to us, trying like hell to get to us. And, er, the tide just whipped him away down the side of the ship and we tried to throw, I tried personally to throw a line to him, and he -- he was -- he was so frozen or so cold that he couldn’t grab the rope and I kept shouting to him and shouting to him, ‘pick it up, pick it up,’ you know. Then all of a sudden he just vanished beneath the surface of the sea. I did see him, and I could see him go down for four or five feet or more out of sight.”<sup>264</sup>

Some were more phlegmatic, like Cliff Rehkopf, who almost casually mentioned having seen corpses floating in the water, but appeared to have been far less severely affected by the sight than most others. He seemed more impressed that the convoys were so successful in synchronising their zigzagging. He also cited “more than one old-timer” as having said, “If we win this war, it’ll be in spite of ourself,” and opined that such “old-timers”

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<sup>261</sup>. *TimeWatch*: “Forgotten Heroes”, London: October Films for BBC2, 12 January 1994. Post Production Script, p. 24.

<sup>262</sup>. *TimeWatch* script, p. 24-25.

<sup>263</sup>. *TimeWatch* script, p. 25.

<sup>264</sup>. *TimeWatch* script, p. 29.

came up the hard way.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 2.) Liberty ships had younger officers as well as crew, according to Donald Gibbs, who recalls that an officer on a Liberty was usually the bottom of the barrel; more experienced men got the T-2 tankers and such.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3) The tankers “Murph” Murphy served in regularly carried up to six Cadets any given time, getting in their sea time. Three would be Deck Cadets and three Engine Cadets; there was one of each on each of the three watches. The Deck Cadets handled the telephone to the destroyer, which had radar, on the way to Iceland in the fog.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3) Capt. Paul Brick felt the convoy system was very difficult and the Navy were as “green” as were the merchant marine. The Naval Control Board of Shipping included older, very senior merchant seamen willing to sail as convoy commodores. Many were retired naval officers as well. Capt. Brick defined the difference between the Navy and the merchant marine by saying “when you have bacon and eggs, the chicken was involved, but the pig was committed. We [merchant seamen] were the pig.” It is not derogatory, he insisted, but common sense.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 2)

Almost without exception those interviewed contended one of the most distinctive aspects of the convoy experience was protracted periods of boredom interspersed with much shorter and less frequent incidences of high excitement and “adrenaline rush” and that, throughout it all, they, as individuals, considered merely that they were doing their job, performing as usual, if in somewhat strained and irregular circumstances.<sup>265</sup> Reese Wolfe, writing of this latter circumstance, noted that “officers and crewmen who manned the merchant fleet were doing a professional job under war conditions.”<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Jim Cunningham and Bob Leach -- both American deckhands, HMC 90-10, TTC p. 3, “Basically you just kept doing your job.” Peter Rogers -- English rating, speaking of Engine Room, HMC 92-49, TTC p. 5, “We’d just carry on our normal duties, usual procedures -- greasin’ and oilin’.”

<sup>266</sup> Reese Wolfe, *Yankee Ships: An Informal History of the American Merchant Marine*, (New York/Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1953), 253.

A few simply recalled that standing watch at night was boring.(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1)<sup>267</sup> Some, on the other hand, remarked that convoys put everybody on edge, because everyone knew they were in a submarine raider zone. There were long watches in blackout conditions and no smoking on deck. Bob Imbeau did not remember it as “that bad” although occasionally ships from his convoys were lost. He found it an eerie thing to run at night or in fog surrounded by other ships one could not see and said “everyone but the captain panics” in such a situation.(HMC 89-5B, TTC p. 3) “Del” Alley said, “The worst part was the apprehension, especially at night.”(HMC 90-45, TTC p. 1) The only time it was boring was waiting for a convoy to form.(HMC 89-5B, TTC p. 6) Some few interviewees remembered both these sensations in opposition to one another. Capt. Richard Connelly, who was only an Ordinary<sup>268</sup> Seaman then, held the main thing about the convoys was “the boredom of day-to-day routine and the fearful anticipation of disaster”. All Capt. Connelly’s convoys were between 1941 and 1945 in the North Atlantic with one exception which went to the East Coast of Africa. His “fondest” memories, he said, were of cold and miserable weather. “There were days of routine, and then attack and fifteen minutes of sheer fright.” He was too young at the time to realise the situation, but there was always the anticipation of getting into port and meeting girls.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1) Some felt not much happened during the war years, but that afterward there was lots of interesting action in European ports. Today’s container ships, unfortunately, have too short a turnaround<sup>269</sup> for any fun in port.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 3)

Other men, as might be expected mentioned fear as well. “Well, yeah, you were worried, you’re constantly worried about it -- about U-boats and all

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<sup>267</sup>. But see the section below on “Favourite Watches” for those who preferred watchkeeping at night.

<sup>268</sup>. Throughout this work, to provide a distinction and avoid confusion, I have used upper case initial letters for all ranks and ratings, although this is not standard practice.

<sup>269</sup>. The term “turnaround” or “turnround” refers to the time spent unloading and reloading in port from time of arrival to time of departure.

y'know, but, no, with bein' in a convoy everyone's got a chance haven' they, that's gonna happen. So we're all in line and you're that young at the time you don' appreciate the fear early. I'd be more scared now than what I was then, lookin' back now.”(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 5) The feeling down below in the Engine Room<sup>270</sup> was often fear when depth charges were heard nearby, but for one informant it was not fear of being killed but of being in the water with sharks. In all his time at sea, his major fear was sharks; he was not worried about the war, just sharks.(HMC 92-58, TTC p. 5)

One man observed that during wartime the bridge watch had to keep position by observing the blue stern light on the vessel ahead and this tired one more than peacetime duties.<sup>271</sup> One was glad to get into one's bunk at the end of a watch. Crews were also awakened often in the middle of the night by alarm, attack, and so on, so tried to rest up enough to be prepared for emergencies.(HMC 90-53, TTC p. 1)

And then there was the waiting. On John Klocko's second convoy, to Havana, they had to wait at anchor in Key West for two days.

The convoy consisted of four barges, their ship, and two U.S. Navy tugs for escort, across sixty or seventy miles of water at four knots. They were sitting ducks. This was his first “asinine Navy convoy”. When he returned to New York in the latter part of August, he went to United Fruit Company and asked to be taken off the foreign flag (Honduran) ship. He then joined a U.S.-flag combination ship, carrying twelve passengers and general cargo. U.S. Navy Armed Guard were being assigned to the ship, which was also being fitted with 20-mm. anti-aircraft guns on each side of the bridge and a four or five-inch cannon aft. It was his first sailing with the Armed Guard.(HMC 90-63, TTC p. 2)

Others expressed similar sentiments, saying the long, long wait, either for unloading or for convoys to form, was one of the hardest things to

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<sup>270</sup>. Throughout this work, to provide a distinction and avoid confusion, I have used upper case initial letters when referring to the Engine Room, although this is not always standard usage.

<sup>271</sup>. See the section on position-keeping.

bear.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 1) When the U-boat menace was over and the merchant marine “re-neglected” by the government at the end of the war, the convoy system was once more abandoned and all ships once again ran independently.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 2)

Even at sea, the arduous and traumatic waiting was a matter of consequence, especially to communications ratings aboard the escort vessels. The most deadly, long-wearing situation was the Atlantic. Worst were the foul weather and living conditions. Hundreds of convoys got through where nothing happened. It was like a chess game. The continual watching, “pinging”,<sup>272</sup> standing by waiting for something to happen was the worst -- Richard Aldhelm-White would rather be in action. It took a lot out of you. They were fourteen days at sea, seven in, and then another convoy run -- and they were slow convoys, too.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 6)

Harry Kilmon once experienced a minor catastrophe in New York Harbour, where huge numbers of ships were anchored, massing for a convoy. His vessel let out too much chain on the anchor and swung toward another ship. When the engine is shut down, you cannot fire it up and move immediately; they bumped into the other ship before they could fire up the engine; it was not severe damage. They then went Very Slow Ahead and bumped another vessel. After that they had to leave the area and anchor with less chain to swing on -- he explained how ships swing on their anchor chains with tidal changes.(HMC 90-73, TTC p. 2)

Gunners did not escape the nerve-shattering tedium. How could it be simultaneously boring and desperate? Fred Lavis, a Maritime Regiment<sup>273</sup> volunteer from the Territorial Army, said his convoy was consistently under attack while in Malta. Gunners were not allowed to leave the gun deck unless

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<sup>272</sup>. This refers to the sound of the electronic direction-finding equipment.

<sup>273</sup>. These informants so described themselves, although the government booklet, *British Coaster 1939-1945: The Official Story* (London: HMSO, 1947), 35, says they were originally called the A.A. Guard and later the Maritime Royal Artillery.

they had an urgent need for the toilet. They made water<sup>274</sup> over the side.(HMC 92-13, TTC p. 1) When asked what convoys were like, Mr. Lavis replied that one had to keep one's eyes open every second. They were monotonous, but you had to stay alert.(HMC 92-13, TTC p. 3) The only time it was boring for Bob Imbeau, in the Army Transport Service, however, was when his ship was waiting for a convoy to form, which could take up to two weeks. They lay in places like Key West, Florida, in sweltering heat, but could not go ashore and were on call twenty-four hours a day.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 6.) Thus the waiting was repeatedly emphasised.

Most British convoy crews were young and inexperienced. They did not realise that convoy was anything special. Then they suddenly realised how apprehensive the more experienced men were, sailing in such close proximity to other ships. There was always the danger of collision, especially if the weather was bad.(HMC 92-25, TTC p. 1) No trip in convoy was "uneventful"; there were always problems.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 5) Experience in convoys was always impressive. You had always to be alert, because of the uncertainty. "In the Engine Room you can hear mines scraping the sides of the ship and hope you don't hit the detonator. There's constant tension."(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3) Normal submarine attacks were either at dusk or dawn. At those times men off duty, who had previously been torpedoed, could not sleep, but would walk the decks, pacing up and down, for an hour or an hour and a half. Capt. R.A. Simpson, then an Apprentice, remembered this well and believed it was probably the time of day when these men's ships had been torpedoed.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>274</sup>. This is Mr. Lavis's own term for urination, despite the fact that in "the Queen's English" the usage would more commonly be to "pass" water. In nautical terms, however, if a vessel "makes water" she leaks, so perhaps it extends to "taking a leak" or urinating. An oft-cited message from the Dunkirk evacuation, sent by a sinking holiday steamer involved, which carried the name of a contemporary celebrity ran something like: "*Gracie Fields* making water badly. Requires immediate assistance." Although a serious situation (the steamer sank and lives were lost) this quote has nonetheless provoked chuckles for half a century due to the *double entendre* involved.

One British respondent who shipped mostly on tankers said all his service in the Pacific was sailing independently, except the first time they left San Francisco with a drydock in tow. There were three other tankers, also with tows, and they formed a convoy, but broke up after the first day, as they realised they could not keep station with tows under the conditions. (HMC 92-41, TTC p. 3) Another said, "Well of course you're in, you were in the company of other ships, which is, that itself was unusual, eh, for a merchant ship which ran, run for days or weeks without seeing another ship and yet here you were in, in company with all these other ships -- zigzagging, and with the escorts, of course, eh, y'know, like sheepdogs keeping control of the flock almost. And, uh, of course, signals backwards and forwards to the, from the naval escorts and so on, all very intriguing...." (HMC 92-63, TTC p. 4) The presence of escorts and even just the other merchantmen in a convoy situation was sometimes comforting, but there was always the unfortunate experience of seeing a companion sunk:

Well, uh, I s'pose you did get a feel, a feelin' of, some feeling of security, of course. The black flag was flown when an attack was imminent or in progress. Then you got the "crump" of the depth charges.

The respondent crossed the North Atlantic in midsummer and the weather was quite good, but on one particular day, at evening, "there was an oily swell, but it was like a millpond". They were in convoy and one of the ships -- not leading, a couple of rows down, but one of the leading ships -- "about three o'clock in the afternoon, a beautiful summer's day, not a ripple on the water, but the swell was there" -- was torpedoed as she was breasting the swell and she must have been carrying iron ore, because "there was the explosion -- a cloud of cocoa, like cocoa dust would be the iron ore and she dipped once I think and then rose, and when she dipped a second time she put her bow down and carried on going and as her stern came out of the water, the propeller was still turnin'." He believes three survived, probably on the bridge wings. Iron ore, because it is not bulk, but sheer weight -- "when the torpedo struck, there was a big hole and nothing to stop the water. ... And that's all she did. She may have breasted two swells, takin' water massively, and down she went, and the screws.... And in the Engine Room they wouldn't have had, apart from hearing the bang, they wouldn't know anything at all that had happened. Down, too." (HMC 92-61, TTC p. 4)



Certain ships carried anti-aircraft [barrage] balloons. "They formed protection, not only for the ship, but for the convoy, of course. A barrage balloon, the aircraft didn't like it, would they?" Of course, homeward bound they did not have gas for the balloon, so they flew a box kite. One of the RAF Coastal Command circling the convoy got careless and hit the kite wire running up from the foremast -- a four-engine Lancaster or something. He had about four hundred feet to spare before the wire broke, and could have lost the plane "by not appreciatin' that's a kite and there's the ship and between them there is a.... And he was our, uh, one of our escorts." German Focke-Wulf Condors circled outside range and were not even fired at.

I s'pose it [convoy] was some comfort. The escorts, especially these, the corvettes which were, which were turned out weren't they, purely for convoy duty. Y'know in, in a bad North Atlantic gale, they suffered. ... The engines.... They were lucky if they did fourteen knots or so. ... But the uncomfortable conditions, aw, it was bad enough for us, but uh.... At least, the only -- th' part about it, is they could do something about it. Y'know they could, uh, they could ... drop depth charges and they felt they were doin' something. It's when y' have to sit there....(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 4)

The Engine Room was not always a frightening place to be, however:

As far as we were concerned, we just used to carry on our own routine of watch-keeping, and although you knew that you were in a very vulnerable position and possibly twenty feet or more below sea level, after a while you never used to think about it. ... If you did think about it, it would worry you considerably, but we never used to think about it and in those early years ... we always got the impression she [the *King Lud*] was a lucky ship. You say, 'Well this is a lucky ship; and she's escaped up to now.' and you just didn' used to think about it. You used to carry on your normal routine. ... Fr'instance we didn' used to take our lifejackets down the Engine Room in case you gotta make a quick getaway or an'thin' like that. We just used to carry on at our usual job.

Apart from hearing sounds of attack, there was not much to remind those in the Engine Room of the war situation. There was so much noise with a diesel that you could only hear depth charges -- a huge clang on the side of the ship "as if somebody's whopping it with a hammer." -- that and possibly

manoeuvres on the Engine Room telegraph (shifting speed or position) were all they knew. They just carried on with their normal work. Deck work would have made you more constantly aware of the wartime situation. The Engine Room kept on with their usual jobs, oiling, greasing, cleaning....(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 2) When the lights went out in the boiler room after two or three depth charges were fired, the pressure and water gauges on the boiler were illuminated by "little pit lamps" for emergency purposes. This simile was apropos, because the informant's shoreside peacetime job was that of a colliery worker.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 5)

Many North American informants, as well as a few of the British, recalled the decimation of the United States tanker fleet on the Atlantic coast by Operation Paukenschlag (Drumbeat), which resulted in "the greatest oil spill of all time". Of seventeen tankers torpedoed, Capt. Frank Waters had previously sailed on three.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 2)

Stories of collisions and near misses in convoy are anything but scarce. Jim Cunningham's former shipmate, Bob Ross, was on an American President Lines C-2, running alone, which had to pass through the middle of a large convoy headed in the opposite direction. "This was scary -- too close for comfort." Cunningham himself was never in a convoy where ships rammed one another, but he once saw a rammed ship arrive in port.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 4) At least Ross's experience was intentional; not all were, and considering the qualifications of some people who were navigating ships during the war, it is not entirely surprising. In the last year of the war, 1944-1945, Capt. E.S. Wagner was Chief Officer on a small tanker, but held a "Home Trades Certificate".<sup>275</sup> Wartime makes differences. He left as Second Mate, but was

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<sup>275</sup> . A Canadian shipmaster's ticket which qualifies the holder to be the Master of a coastwise ship, but not to command one running on trans-oceanic routes. A holder of such a certificate might be addressed socially as "Captain" when ashore or when in command of a ship in Home Trade, but would not be allowed legally to sail above the rank of Chief Mate on a foreign-going vessel.

Chief Officer before he returned. When they left New York for Panama, he discovered he was the only one navigating. He had only just turned twenty.<sup>276</sup> It was a convoy of about twenty ships and their small Canadian tanker was at the tail end. The Captain, who was from the Great Lakes, took sights, but never recorded them. Wagner was the only real, trained navigator aboard. The Third Mate had no certificate. The Chief Mate, in his fifties, had never done any navigating. There were opportunities to grab. You grow up quickly.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 3)

Convoy procedures such as zigzagging were “really a screwed up mess most of the time. Anything that can go wrong on a ship will -- multiplied by two or three sometimes.” A ship moving correctly can run into one making mistakes. Mates often stood on the wing of the bridge, cussing each other out. One never knew if more ships would have been lost with or without convoys. A lone vessel could at least take evasive action if a torpedo was sighted.(HMC 90-17, TTC p. 1)

“The biggest thrill of my life” was how Max O’Starr described it when, in the North Atlantic, in January, he was standing at the rail and saw a wake in the water, which he thought was caused by a U-boat’s periscope. He had actually started for the alarm when he realised it was the “log”<sup>277</sup> of the preceding ship in the column. He claimed it was more of a “start” than an actual attack would have been,(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2) and it certainly must have been significant in his life, as he has retained the memory vividly for fifty years. And Charlie Baca, a U.S. Navy Armed Guard, remembered one occasion when the merchantman on which he served only just avoided firing upon an American submarine, mistaking it for an enemy vessel.(HMC 90-23, TTC p. 1) But Capt. R.A. Simpson told of being in a coastal two-lane convoy which was suddenly bombarded by huge shells. It transpired that a “friendly” battleship, either HMS *Rodney* or HMS *Nelson*, was having target practice. The battleship was out of sight and the target was being towed near the convoy.

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<sup>276</sup>. His birthday is on Christmas Day.

<sup>277</sup>. A device for measuring the ship’s speed.

Luckily, there was no accident, but it caused a panic and the Commodore was “quite steamed up”.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 5)

The *Empire Stewart*'s maiden voyage was to Saint John, New Brunswick and she returned in convoy. There was bad weather and many American ships were in the convoy. At night -- about half past eleven, the helmsman said she would not steer. The Third Mate, Tony Wrench, checked and she would not answer the helm. They were in the middle of the convoy and she started to turn in a circle, so he quickly put up two red lights for “not under command” (i.e. out of control) on the “Christmas tree” signalling support device. American ships were great on repeating messages before they were read and understood, so several of them repeated “not under command”. “The Commodore must've had a baby!” They had a lot of close shaves and once abandoned the Engine Room out of fear that they would be rammed by a tanker, but she missed them. They eventually came to a halt and were passed by the convoy. One of the cylinders controlling the quadrant that works the rudder had fractured and could not be repaired, so they had to jury-rig one with the warping winch across the after end of the ship. Meantime daylight had arrived. A corvette escort had stayed with them for protection, but the weather was so bad they had to make a lee to protect her, and they were only 5500 tons themselves. They got going with the jury-rigged rudder and headed straight for the Clyde. It took them only three days and they beat the convoy.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 1)

Another convoy in that ship went to India after the Normandy landings, training troops in Bombay Harbour -- Indian Engineers. They were judged unsuitable for the Burmese landings, however, and so were sent to South Africa and then South America, eventually joining a homeward bound convoy from Freetown, West Africa, in March of 1945. The war at sea was virtually over, but there were still a few subs about. The *Empire Stewart* had torpedo nets on sixty-foot booms and was sometimes ordered to “stream” them in convoy, so she was always placed on the outside row. The Captain did not like streaming the nets. It was a lot of work and made the ship hard to handle - a general pain in the neck -- so he always made excuses (the winches are broken, etc.) They were never streamed but once, on a convoy across the Bay of Biscay to the English Channel. They were ordered to stream them and the skipper refused. The Commodore replied that according to his records they had never streamed their nets and he became adamant -- so they streamed the

nets. It was not that bad. The convoy entered the Channel in two columns and the *Empire Stewart* was in the northerly column, nearest the English coast.

Tony Wrench was the Third Mate on the 8-12 watch. The Second Mate had just come up to relieve him and they were in fog, so were following the fog buoy of the ship ahead, as they had no radar at that time. Wrench had just turned in when he heard the Second on the bridge shout "Hard aport!" and the ship heeled over. Since Wrench had never been in a ship that had been hit, he thought that was what had happened, but...what happened was that their convoy up-Channel had met a down-Channel convoy in the middle of the night. Their starboard booms had swept the decks of a Liberty ship going in the opposite direction, taking his Oerlikon guns, rafts -- everything was either on the decks of the *Empire Stewart* or had fallen into the water. Their forward boom had broken off the samson post and gone into the water, although it was still attached to the ship by the net -- in effect they were "at anchor". The impact had caused all the "Curley" lifebuoys to fall into the sea and their carbide lamps had ignited on hitting the water, so although it was foggy and black, the ship was surrounded by sort of floating fairy lights which cleared the fog somewhat, making her visible to both convoys and preventing collisions. Eventually, approached by a destroyer which had radar, they cut themselves free of the net, and were given a course to steer through the Straits of Dover to London. The whole point is that the first convoy, when the steering gear went, was 1 April 1944 -- it created havoc! And the second one, when the torpedo nets were lost was 1 April 1945! So it was April Fool! But neither occurrence was a prank. Wrench decided not to sign on for April of 1946, as it was too much of a coincidence. It was enough to build superstition -- don't sail with Tony Wrench on 1 April. They were a very young group -- Wrench was twenty-two at the time, the Second was twenty-three, and the Mate, himself, was only twenty-five.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 2)

During the Normandy invasion, the Merchant Navy did not know where they were going. They signed special Articles undertaking to do any job on any ship if they lost their own (not through enemy action). It was a very quick turnaround. Just before sailing, a van would come round with replacements, and if the necessary rating or rank was not available, they would have to take potluck -- a man with a Master's ticket might end up sailing as an Ordinary Seaman. Luckily this never happened to Tony Wrench. It is a good thing, really. The invasion was "great fun" convoy-wise. They came out past Ventnor on the Isle of Wight. Just off shore there, was "Z-Buoy",<sup>278</sup> where the first and second columns of the convoys would turn to cross the Channel for the Normandy beaches. If you were lucky enough to be in the column heading for the buoy, you had to make a ninety-degree turn. Most navigators and steersmen tried to imagine the buoy was a mine and avoid it at the last moment. Eventually this practice wore all the paint off the buoy. Talking after the event, seamen always asked one another, "Did you ever go to Z-Buoy?" (HMC 92-26, TTC p. 3)

The war started when Tom Brunskill's ship was in Port Said and they sailed in convoy. They had never been in convoy before, but had to be trained by the Royal Navy. The Commodore was on the leading ship and they were told if they heard "so many" blows on the whistle they were to turn "so many" degrees to port, "so many" to starboard, etc. Mr. Brunskill came off watch after the 4-8 watch and got into bed. He heard a whistle, then a terrible crash, and thought they had been torpedoed already. The door opened, and there stood the Chief Engineer with his "panic bag"<sup>279</sup> and said, "We've had it." Brunskill asked how they were "down below" (i.e., in the Engine Room). The Chief answered that he did not know, but was going to the lifeboats. Brunskill

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<sup>278</sup> . This (pronounced Zed-buoy, in the English fashion) was probably the same locus others have nicknamed "Piccadilly Circus", but there seems to be no way of readily verifying the supposition.

<sup>279</sup> . See the Glossary in Chapter Eight for a full description of this item.

went to the Engine Room telegraph and whistled down. The Fourth Engineer there was a man who never went ashore unless in uniform. They called him "The Admiral". Brunskill asked if all was okay, and he said yes, they were not shipping water, but wanted to know what had happened. The Chief had gone to the lifeboat, and Mr. Brunskill himself did not know, so he went to see the Captain on the bridge to find out what had happened. The Old Man said some ship had made a wrong turn and they had collided; everything else was okay. Brunskill took the word back and assured those in the Engine Room that he would not abandon them if anything else happened, but would see them right before he left. He could not understand the attitude of the Chief, who was standing by the lifeboat, fully dressed, and all ready to get in.(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 2)

Some respondents had memories specific to the Arctic or Malta convoys. James North, who sailed on the ill-fated PQ17, recalled that in the early convoys from Halifax, Nova Scotia to Greenock, Scotland, and thence to Iceland and Archangel, there were large losses every day and every night. When an older ship was hit, it just went down; it did not float for long. Tankers broke in half, not so much from torpedoes, as from fighting the seas to stay in position in convoy. People on the stern and perhaps the lookout on the bow might survive. There were three old coal-burners on PQ17 -- the *Ironclad*, *Silver Sword* and *Troubador*. North often wonders what happened to the other two on the way back, as his ship, the *Troubador*, made it through.(HMC 90-17, TTC p. 1) There were whalers in convoy, which had been converted into tankers, but still had a huge bridge. The Mate on "Murph" Murphy's ship was frightened when a whaler got astern of them, because of the way it loomed out of the fog.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 2) But on long convoy routes the first enemy was the U-boat, the second the weather. In the South, the greatest problem was the heat. No vessels were air-conditioned and few

even had fans.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 1)<sup>280</sup> If rough weather and fog were combined, the convoy might be forced to scatter. They then had to find a rendezvous point and re-form. The masters were given rendezvous points for every couple of days with just such a contingency in mind.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) Convoys were all similar, but some ships only had magnetic compasses, whereas the British had gyros<sup>281</sup> and once, in fog, William Dennis's ship sailed for five days without anyone in the convoy being able to take a sight.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 1)

Frank Niedermeier was extremely articulate, with only a slight tendency to hyperbole. Shipping from the Port of Embarkation at the Army base near Battery Park in New York, he was in a convoy of more than fifty ships with a blimp escort<sup>282</sup> and LSTs<sup>283</sup> on each side of the ship. They were attacked in the middle of the night and as they neared Cuba, the crew was informed two tankers had been sunk. Although they never saw the actual victims or debris, they saw the oil slick the following day "for hours and hours". Later, after passing through the Panama Canal and getting about twenty nautical miles into the Pacific, they were told that the commodore ship of their convoy had been torpedoed coming out of the canal. A United States Navy PBY airplane came by, blinking, "Change course. Subs ahead." Niedermeier's ship then left the convoy and proceeded independently to New Caledonia, where they were asked to join a convoy for Guadalcanal, but the Captain refused. It took a month to unload in New Caledonia, as they repeatedly had to move away from the docks to allow troopships to offload.(HMC 90-19, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>280</sup>. See further under "Conditions Aboard" in this chapter and note the story of how James McCaffrey combatted heat problems amongst his bakehouse crew.

<sup>281</sup>. Gyro-compasses.

<sup>282</sup>. The use of dirigibles as an aircraft escort for convoys has been corroborated by printed sources, but appears only rarely in the interview data. I have been told that the term "blimp" for such airships arose from designating the earliest of them "A. Rigid" or "B. Limp", the former having a rigid outer framework.

<sup>283</sup>. LST = Landing Ship Tank, a vessel similar in function to the amphibious DUK, used for ferrying troops and materiel ashore from a ship at anchor.



More than one man was in a ship which became a “straggler” but wound up beating the convoy to port sailing independently. The return convoy Clinton Johnson was in from Liverpool to New York in early 1945 was a fast, fourteen-knot convoy of fifty or sixty ships; no slow Liberties were involved. His ship developed engine trouble after the first day out and had to drop out of convoy for repairs, during which time they were temporarily “sitting ducks” with no power at all and could not even call for help, but eventually, the defect repaired, they ran independently to New York at sixteen and a half knots, beating the convoy they had lost. They had difficulty identifying themselves when they reached New York, because a lone “straggler” from a not-yet-arrived convoy was incredible. It was comical, but only because the confusion was eventually resolved.(HMC 90-24, TTC p. 1)

The straggling of other vessels was a fore-ordained conclusion. Stanley Hoskins was on a ship which joined a convoy out of Halifax, bound for the U.S. border, but was so slow the convoy left her and she had to proceed independently. When the escort commander originally asked her speed, the Old Man had said eight knots, and a group of crewmen standing at the rail could not help laughing. The statement was ridiculous; they were lucky to get four.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 1)

Most published compilations of PENs (Personal Experience Narratives) from merchant seafarers of the Second World War, comprise mainly “horror stories” of being sunk and spending time adrift before rescue. I did not elicit such stories and what few I did get were lacking in detail. A typical example of such a narrative was collected by Mike Gillen from Rexford Dickey in 1981 and is held in the archives of the SIU Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship in Piney Point, Maryland. Here is a synopsis:

Dickey, an AB,<sup>284</sup> picked up the *Wade Hampton* in Baltimore and went to New York to load, mostly foodstuffs. They laid in New York about a week when the captain asked if they wanted to stay with the ship for a trip to Russia. They could leave before the Articles were signed; some left. They sailed in a big convoy.

There were ice fields and a “big blow”, as well. Dickey, at the wheel, thought the weather too heavy for attack, but they were torpedoed at eight that February night. They abandoned ship, Dickey and the Bosun lowering the lifeboats, then grabbing a raft for themselves; by then it was two or three in the morning. The ship did not sink rapidly, but had to be sunk by Allied destroyers. The torpedo had hit aft between No. 4 and No. 5 hatch on the port side. The actual impact was not memorable, although it blew the after end of the ship away -- from No. 4 hatch back. The gun crew were lost immediately, with their quarters.

The visibility in convoy was bad. Conditions were not too bad, although there was a good [heavy, big] sea running. Dickey and the Bosun had launched a box-type raft. The Bosun missed the raft and fell in, but Dickey pulled him out; only Dickey’s feet were wet, but the Bosun was wet all over. Dickey was fully dressed and wearing a cap.

Most of the survivors were picked up by a destroyer in about an hour, but Dickey and the Bosun were overlooked. They turned on a flashlight to show their position for the rescuers and were told, “Turn that out or we’ll shoot it out!” and with daylight they found themselves abandoned. They had been yelling and whistling to show their position. They had just been left, lost. Spray came over the raft, but not the seas themselves. When daylight came there was no one around.

Dickey dreamed a convoy came, and hailed them, but found ... he was hallucinating. In the next twenty-four hours two ships passed by, but did not notice them. The raft was like a flat platform with a one-foot canvas wall around it and not too easily visible. Dickey then saw a convoy and thought it a mirage, but when he looked again, he saw that it was real. He thought he had been left behind again, when someone behind him said, “We see you.” He was picked up by a Canadian destroyer -- an old U.S. trade four-stacker -- which came alongside and took him aboard. “What about the Bosun?” “He’s gone.” Dickey is unsure whether the Bosun died of exposure or a broken heart; he believes it was the latter. He thinks the Bosun’s heart was broken by being twice abandoned by vessels which passed so very close.

Dickey himself was transferred to a hospital ship in the westbound convoy, which was headed for Newfoundland. The Australian doctor had Dickey walking aboard ship, although he amputated his toe[s?]. He was put ashore in Halifax, after a stop in St. John’s. In the shoreside hospital, Dickey was not

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<sup>284</sup>. The term “AB” for Able[-Bodied] Seaman is standard maritime usage and prevails throughout this work.

allowed to put his feet down for several weeks, after the ship's doctor had allowed him to walk. Finally he was put on a train for New York, then Baltimore. He paid off in New York.

Mike Gillen, the interviewer, asked if the Bosun was buried at sea, but Dickey did not know and could not remember his name. He was younger than Dickey, and also from Baltimore. "He just didn't make it. He must have given up when they passed by for the second time. He wouldn't talk, move, or try from that time on." Dickey was affected by the experience and could not go back to sea soon, as he was under treatment by a Baltimore hospital. Eventually he went back to union work, but did not ship out again and never made it to Murmansk. (SHLSS #5 (19 August 1981), HMC TTC p. 2)

A more typical narrative from the informants with whom I worked came from Alan Kingdom, a Radio Officer at the time, who now lives in Southampton. It is evident from the text that the speaker was distancing himself from the event. Personal glimpses came far more often from the lighter side of the informants' memories than from the more intense situations. Here is Mr. Kingdom's report of the two ships he lost:

The *Ashantian* left Liverpool for Freetown in convoy. On the third night out, Alan Kingdom was going to relieve the watch at midnight, when the Second Mate pointed out to him a torpedoed tanker afire on the port side. Mr. Kingdom said, "We're next!" And they were. They were struck about two-thirty in the morning. The torpedo struck in the Engine Room, killing about five of the crew, but the ship remained afloat. The rest of the crew abandoned ship, but stayed nearby in the boats until daylight, when they re-boarded and got help. In the morning, a Sunderland flying boat went over and spotted them. Later the corvette, *Gloxinia*, came and transferred the crew to Belfast. The ship, meanwhile, was towed to Glasgow, where she was repaired. She was torpedoed again on her next voyage and most of the crew were lost that time. This shows the rationale of the American belief that a second voyage on the same vessel could be chancy. It did not apply to Mr. Kingdom, of course, but the Master of the *Ashantian* and many crewmembers known to Mr. Kingdom were lost.

That ship was very slow. She was built around 1935 and was coal-fired. She was a straggler on the night of the attack and had been spotted by an escort who signalled her (with a lamp): "Keep on course. Will reach convoy by daylight." This signal was seen by a U-boat which then took a bearing. The signal message was actually unnecessary and the escort must have known submarines were about because of the tanker which had been hit earlier. It was like being third on a match. It was very odd for the escort to break the blackout. A few weeks later, the Admiralty send a message to all merchant

ships, saying that in almost every case when a ship had been hit at night, lights had been shown.

Mr. Kingdom's next ship was the *Derwent Hall*, from Liverpool to Capetown, taking stores to the Eighth Army in the Mid-East by a roundabout route. This was in October 1940, when convoys were getting better organised, but radar was still not invented until 1941. They left Liverpool going northabouts with a convoy bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. Later two or three ships all bound for Capetown broke off the convoy and headed south, all on the same course, but independent. ... They had a few distress messages in the next couple of days, but by the time they reached the Canaries, all was quiet. There was a small convoy from Aden in the Red Sea when they arrived there. The Italians were still there at that time. They loaded cotton in Alexandria and started back, but struck a mine while passing through the Suez Canal. They had nearly got through. It was an acoustic mine, which was a brand new weapon at the time, and was intended to block the canal. The *Derwent Hall* was a diesel ship and vibrated a lot. She was also deeply loaded and almost directly over the mine, which was placed on the bottom of the Canal, when she hit it. Her after end was damaged. There were no casualties among the crew and very little damage to the hull, but the engine would not operate properly. They were laid up for about a year before she was repaired. It was not a bent shaft, but the stern tube was out of alignment. The *Derwent Hall* was owned by West Hartlepool Steam Navigation Company, and the *Ashantian* sailed for the United Africa company, part of the Lever Group. All Mr. Kingdom's ships were tramps.(HMC 92-15, TTC pp. 3-4)

Bill Fortune was never in any "exciting convoys" like those to North Russia. There was the odd U-boat scare or air attack, but luckily he was never "bumped" and never lost a ship. He did, however, leave his discharge book at the Liverpool customshouse, where it was lost when the building was bombed. At that time, when you signed on a ship's Articles, your book was taken until you signed off again. Because of the lost book, no discharges are shown in his present book between 1936 and 1941.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 2)

Interviewees discussed with me the actual formation of convoys and how to make them uniform. There was radar and the lookouts were always alert. Escorts and Armed Guard fought off attacks.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 1)

Russian convoys were mostly attacked by aircraft. "Fish" Ramsey's Russian run was in September of 1942. It may have been PQ18. They lost thirteen ships, having started with forty-three; thirty got through -- the escort was good.

They went to Archangel, although it was called a Murmansk convoy. It was like heading for New York and branching off to Philadelphia. “Fish” was never torpedoed or mined in convoy, but he was aboard vessels damaged by shrapnel. He was at a dock in Algeria when his ship was shelled and bombed. Some lifeboats were holed and had to be repaired, but no men were lost. (HMC 90-49, TTC pp. 1-2)

Whenever the escort were uncertain, they would drop a depth-charge. American escorts would take a convoy to a certain point where the English would come out, pick them up, and split them according to their destinations. It took timing to switch with the returning vessels. The United States and the United Kingdom worked together to make convoys safer, including air cover, blimps,<sup>285</sup> and the like. It was hard to convoy ships to go to all destinations. Pacific convoys were “island-hoppers”. There was more air support in the Pacific than in the Atlantic.(HMC 90-65, TTC pp. 1-2)

Richard Aldhelm-White (RCN) discussed major convoy ports. Most loading was done in the States, after which ships sat by the hundreds in Bedford Basin, Halifax, Nova Scotia, but no seamen were allowed ashore. Halifax was a marshalling area -- as was Sydney, Cape Breton, Nova Scotia -- not a loading port. They seldom went to Reykjavik, Iceland, but usually travelled straight across from Halifax. Reykjavik was mostly another base for escorts, only used for refuelling and such. Mr. Aldhelm-White not only discussed convoy organisation and rest camps organised for the Royal Canadian Navy, but also described how Canadians with relatives in the United Kingdom could go ashore and obtain passes to visit them, and outlined the difficulties involved in this operation.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 4)

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<sup>285</sup>. Blimp, as has been noted, is a common name for a manned dirigible-type airship without a rigid internal frame, although in England, it is often applied to unmanned barrage balloons, as well.

Between 1940 and 1944, when Alan Kingdom was on the Indian Coast, there were no convoys there. In 1940 and at the end of the war, his experience was mostly with British coastal convoys, which were more simply organised than the trans-oceanic ones -- a single or double file of ships protected by escorts fore and aft -- more to protect the vessels against natural hazards, such as sandbanks, than against the enemy. This type of convoy went round the coasts of the United Kingdom and across the Channel to France, Belgium, and Holland after their liberation.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 3) Convoys on the Indian Coast were very irregularly scheduled. "Sometimes you had them and sometimes you didn't." One ship Mr. Kingdom sailed on might never have been in a convoy, and the next might have sailed in them occasionally, but spent more time sailing independently.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 3) Mr. Kingdom also sailed in convoy through the Persian Gulf, where convoys were not vital, as they were in the North Atlantic. German and Japanese attacks were irregular in the East. They came in spurts and when they were heavy, convoys were organised. Mr. Kingdom was not on many convoys until he returned home from India, and by that time the campaign in the Atlantic was nearly over. There were still attacks in the Caribbean and "they had got the wind up<sup>286</sup> about the Indian Ocean". Escorts were few as well. Once, in the autumn of 1943, a Royal Indian Navy Armed Trawler escort could not keep up with the merchantmen in the convoy, and had to keep asking them to slow down. At the end of the voyage, she used her signal lamp to apologise for her lack of speed.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 3)

In those days there were open bridges on naval escort vessels. Depth charge sentry on the bridge was a good, easy job. Roy Williams only fired one depth charge and that was to try to catch fish. "You got wet on that job, but could hear what the officers said and knew what was going on. Some of the officers would tell you. If the First Lieutenant was on, you could sometimes have a go at steering. He was keen to teach ordinary seamen and pass them on to AB quickly. Any afternoon he was on, he would put someone else on your job

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<sup>286</sup>. "To get the wind up" is "Britspeak" for "to become alarmed".

and let you steer for half an hour. If you were below, it probably seemed rougher than usual with different people on the wheel making snake-trails”, but HMS *Loch Dunvegan* was a very steady ship, carrying so much fuel, and the quarters were palatial compared to most others.(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 3)

Hank Adams and his shipmates, when in combat areas and short-handed, were often required to stand a double watch. On his first voyage as an ordinary, Hank was at the wheel under these conditions, and fell asleep while the Second Mate was down in his cabin, shaving. The Captain felt the difference in movement and came to the bridge, only to find that they had performed a U-turn and gone back through the whole convoy. The Captain was reprimanded for losing position, but all he said to Hank was: “I don’t mind if you write your name in the ocean; I just don’t want you going back to dot the i’s.”(HMC 90-15, p. 1)

By 1943 the Merchant Marine was safer than the German submarine service. Once the convoy system, and air cover were established, “the U-boats hadn’t a prayer.” In 1941 and 1942, however, these U-boats “put a mortal hurtin’ on the U.S. Merchant Marine.” Robby Owen, as an Engineer, was impressed that the Mate on every new ship built a “monkey island” above the flying bridge with a plywood housing to protect the helmsman. The Mate and the lookouts stood watches on that bridge in the weather, “which was a pain in the neck in the North Atlantic.” When the war ended they came back inside to the chartroom. Owen believes World War II to have been the finest hour in U.S. History.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 1-3.)

Capt. George W. Jahn<sup>287</sup> did not pay much attention to the official numbers given convoys, but noted that those scheduled to sail from “Glasgow” actually made up in Loch Ewe. He had his Chief Mate’s papers at the

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<sup>287</sup>. Capt. Jahn is (in 1995) the official Master of the *Jeremiah O’Brien*, the preserved Liberty ship mentioned in Chapter Two, and was in command when she sailed from her museum mooring in San Francisco to participate in the fifty-year commemorations of the D-Day Landings on the Normandy beaches in 1994.

beginning of the war, but was sailing as a Second Mate and got his Master's licence about six months later. He lost only one vessel, in the Pacific, and before they were "hammered", they were a hundred miles off Hawaii en route to New Zealand, having arrived the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor. They spent ten days in a lifeboat, and were picked up five miles off Kauai, but only two crew members were lost.(HMC 89-5A, TTC p. 1)

I was occasionally reminded by my informants that in the Merchant Service one always said "Hard left, hard right" never "port or starboard". There were so many newcomers and different nationalities you could not take chances on misunderstanding. The United States Navy, said Jim Higman, started the "indirect orders". They used to "port the helm" to go right on sailing ships and old-time pilots could give confusing orders to the steersmen. Steering in convoy was most often done off the "monkey bridge".<sup>288</sup> One should be able to see everything from there. Anti-submarine devices on the ships included paravanes with nets attached and degaussing gear. Jim North said more people probably were killed rigging the devices than by the torpedoes themselves. They could not be rigged at eight to ten knots. It was one of the most dangerous jobs. After a while they just stopped using them.(HMC 90-17, TTC pp. 1-4)

John Pottinger's convoy experience was limited, as he spent the first part of the war in the Pacific where there were fewer convoys and his ships mostly sailed independently. He was, however, in a couple of large Atlantic convoys. Convoys made it a lot safer, but were more difficult. East Coast sailings were almost always in convoy, because combined submarine and various air attacks made passages very difficult and caused many losses. It was best not to be at sea at all, but safer in the Pacific.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>288</sup>. Actually "monkey island", the topmost bridge, with no housing.



Dick Playfer was once in a ship where the Old Man claimed they were faster than they really were to avoid the slow convoys. The crew suspected it was because the slow convoys were *infra dig*<sup>289</sup> and also because he did not want to waste time. He would elect to go with a convoy a bit faster than the actual speed of his ship, so they were always straggling and getting signalled by the Commodore. The Old Man would then ring the Engine Room, asking for “the extra rev” and saying it was vital. They eventually fell behind at night, and in the morning there would be no sign of the convoy. Mr. Playfer feels the Old Man was ambivalent -- worried about his vulnerability, but preferring to be alone. Slow convoys were, after all, very tedious. On another occasion, when Playfer was crossing the South Atlantic solo with an “anxious” skipper -- not a coward, but a worrier -- a ship was sighted on the horizon, obviously quite a large naval vessel. She was flying the United States flag, but the Old Man did not trust her. One of the officers thought he recognised her -- still the skipper had his doubts. The warship sent up a code flag signal, but the Old Man was still suspicious. When he did not answer the signal, the warship fired a shot across their bows and when they hove to, sent a boarding party aboard to inspect. Playfer himself was then told by the skipper to stand on the wing of the bridge with the confidential papers and to sink them if the boarding party turned out to be the enemy. He does not know what happened in the Captain’s dayroom, but the Yanks eventually left. When they did, the Old Man told him, “Americans are very strange people”, and they then continued on their way. That is how Playfer was nearly sunk by a friendly power. Otherwise, he “had a very lucky war”.(HMC 92-25, TTC p. 2)

Most convoys in the Gulf of Mexico went from Houston or New Orleans to New York, where they formed up and then moved by “puddle-jumping” and laying over in various ports. There was not much in the way of

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<sup>289</sup>. A rather dated British term, culled from schoolboy Latin, for beneath one’s dignity.

escorts.(HMC 90-65, TTC pp. 1-2) They used numbers to communicate with flag hoists and the like. Radio was only used in case of emergency. They tried not to use their blinkers at night, but used a “blue rifle shot” instead.(HMC 90-65, TTC pp. 1-2) Capt. Ed March sailed in convoy in the Caribbean, the North Atlantic, and the Mediterranean. These were fast convoys running at fifteen knots. There were no “Christmas tree lights” for signalling. Instead they used “TBY”<sup>290</sup> voice radios. At night there were no signals, as the TBY range was too great at night. The Commodore gave night orders at sundown and after that there was nothing until sunrise unless an emergency arose. All signals except those for turning, which were whistle blasts, were sent by radio.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 5) Special signals, code names, and station numbers were important; if a ship did not give the correct responses, she could be fired upon. The only time Bob Imbeau was ever on a ship that was hit, it was by an Allied plane who raked them across the bow when they did not answer his signal quickly enough.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 6.) Communication and navigation aids were primitive in those days. There was no radar, so signalling came into its own. Secrecy was a fetish and many common practices were forbidden on security grounds.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3)

Leading Radio Mechanic Roy Williams went to Russia in HMS *Loch Dunvegan* in convoy JW59 and returned in convoy RA59a. It was good weather -- August. It was a relatively uneventful convoy, except that acoustic torpedoes were used by the Germans and HMS *Kite*<sup>291</sup> was blown up, because she had no “rattler” as Williams’s ship did. They had used up two and installed a third, but *Kite*’s group did not carry them. Aside from that, it was really a very easy convoy, quite like a holiday.(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>290</sup> . I do not know what the initials represent, but this was a standard short-range radio in common use for such purposes at the time.

<sup>291</sup> . Previously the flagship of the famous British escort commander “Johnny” Walker.

There were innumerable narratives of station-keeping in convoy and, attendant to that subject, were those of convoy speed and maintaining secrecy through blackout, avoidance of making smoke, judicious disposal of waste, etc. These are covered in the section immediately following.

## B. POSITION-KEEPING

Apparently, from the data gathered in fieldwork for this study, one of the most memorable aspects of convoy experience for both Deck and Engine crew was position-keeping[station-keeping] within the overall convoy pattern. Those who were Junior Deck Officers, wheelmen, or lookouts at the time of the war, remember the endless difficulties of trying to navigate and to position the vessel with only the inconsequential aid of the fog buoys<sup>292</sup> or blue stern lights<sup>293</sup> of other ships to assist them. Handling a ship in convoy in bad weather was a singular experience, unlike any on shore. It is quite different from handling a car in traffic, as there are no brakes<sup>294</sup> and conditions are far more fluid (no pun intended). Engineers recall the problems of trying to regulate the engines by one or two revolutions per minute to co-ordinate with directives from the bridge, a task which proved just as harrowing as the navigation, dealing, as it did, with painstaking adjustment of massive machines never intended for such delicate manipulation. Other memorable aspects of convoy experience which consistently recurred in the interviews include safety regulations, and attempts to keep blackout, avoid making smoke, and dispose of rubbish in such a way that enemy attention would not be attracted.

...[N]o two ships seemed to travel at the same speed, no matter how they tried to adjust the ... revolutions of the propellers. ... [S]o you'd turn around and ... here comes another ship slowly moving up on you. ...[A] ship damn near rammed us this one time. Where the hell that ship came from I don't know, but first thing you know she was all right up on top of us. Coming from behind or a little off to the side.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup>. The fog buoy was constructed so as to throw up a "rooster tail" of water and was towed behind the vessel on a line the length of which was supposed to ensure the lookout on the bow of the vessel next in line could see this "rooster tail" even in dense fog.

<sup>293</sup>. These were designed to be seen at night by the vessel immediately following, but not to be visible at any distance.

<sup>294</sup>. The only way to check a vessel's progress is to shift the engines from "ahead" to "astern", in effect "throwing her into reverse". It is clear that this manoeuvre would not achieve its ends very quickly in an emergency situation.

<sup>295</sup>. *TimeWatch* script, 13. [Minor corrections made].

Capt. Emerson Chodzko informed me that when coal-burning vessels “pulled their fires” at the change of watches, they had to be alert not to hit the ship ahead. He also said position-keeping in the Mediterranean was more difficult than elsewhere, because the sea itself was so much more limited in area than the North Atlantic and most other waters.(HMC 89-1, TTC pp. 2-3)

On one occasion, when his ship had taken over the commodore ship position in a convoy, they “cheated” on taking their navigational “sun sights” at noon. All sun sights taken aboard a given vessel were supposed to agree and all in a convoy were supposed to agree with those from the commodore ship. What Capt. Chodzko’s group did was to either average the sights taken by all the Deck Officers, or to throw out any that significantly differed from the others. As commodore ship, they often finagled things so that they were actually using the sun sights taken by another vessel. When they were not commodore ship, they tried to get the commodore ship’s bearing and feed it back to her.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 4 and HMC 89-2, TTC p. 1.)

Ernest Tunnicliffe, when discussing using the engines’ RPM<sup>296</sup> to keep position, cited an incident when his vessel kept dropping back and falling out of position, even at full speed. They should have been making eleven-and-a-half or twelve knots, and it was only a ten-knot convoy. It transpired that the Engineers had changed the burners in order to conserve fuel and could not maintain a full head of steam. They had to drop out of convoy, taking an escort with them, change back to the larger burners, and then catch up again, which took several hours. After that, whenever he rang the Engine Room for more speed, Mr. Tunnicliffe asked for tens of ‘revs’ instead of two or three. He could always slow down again.(HMC 92-40, TTC pp. 4-5)

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<sup>296</sup>. Revolutions per minute.

Capt. Tom Goodyear, then a junior Deck officer, began his tape-recorded interview session by reading from a personal manuscript prepared for his great-grandchildren:

From September 1943 to the end of the war in Europe on May the 15th, 1945, we were to operate between St. John's, Newfoundland and New York. Now the ship I was on then was the *S/S Fort Amherst*. She belonged to ... Furness Withy and Company and was ... registered in London, England. ...we were carrying supplies for civilians and military population of Newfoundland. Passenger traffic was down as most preferred the passage to Canada, ... or the U.S. by way of ... the Newfoundland Railway and a six-hour crossing of the Gulf. Can't say I blame them as we were losing many ships, often with large loss of life through the increase of submarine activity on this side of the Atlantic. A further hazard was the laying of mines off St. John's and Halifax.... On a typical run from St. John's to New York we would depart usually in the daylight ... After threading our way through the three torpedo nets in the Narrows of St. John's, we would follow naval instructions which took us ... due east of the Narrows, through a channel which had been swept for mines following daybreak, to a point thirty miles offshore where a buoy was positioned. From there we would generally form a small convoy of fast ships and proceed, escorted by two corvettes or mine-sweepers, to Halifax. This was fine as we would be travelling fast on a zigzag course and would be in Halifax in two or three days. On other occasions we would be ordered, after clearing the swept channel, to proceed south and east some several hundred miles to a position where we would join a slow convoy bound from the U.K. to North America. This was a pain in the ass. There might be fifty or more ships in the convoy. They were invariably slow, six or seven knots, and they were in ballast condition and difficult to handle in bad weather, and it was ... nerve-wracking to keep station on a dark stormy night. It was fine when Captain Kane[Kean?] was on the bridge. The burden was always his, but at the end of forty-eight or so hours, he was at the end of his endurance and would crash on the chartroom settee, cover himself with his salt-stained duffle coat; it would then take a depth charge to awaken him. (Now I must interject here that at the time I was a junior officer on this ship. ... Now this is the first ship I joined as a ship's officer, junior officer, and here we are now just after joining a convoy, bound to North America.) One such night in January 1945, I went to the bridge to relieve Chief Officer John O'Hara for dinner, a thirty- or forty-minute affair. He told me that the Old Man was ... passed out on the settee and if I had trouble to call him [O'Hara]. We were heading into a strong headwind. He waited for five or ten minutes until I had my eyes accustomed to the gloom. Now this was the customary thing. ... Coming out of the ... lighted interior it would take you some time...anyhow, accustomed to the gloom.... No lights, no lights at all. ... That's it, that is, when I could see the form of the ship ahead, about half a mile away and the ship on each side about two hundred, two thousand feet. He gave me the course steered and the engine

speed and departed. Shortly thereafter I lost sight of the ship ahead, as did the lookout. I increased speed three revolutions per minute, thinking we were dropping behind. After an eternity (i.e. five or six minutes) I increased three more RPM and altered course two degrees to port of our base course to correct what I perceived to be an out-of-line position. By this time I was in a state of near panic, 'fraid to call the Old Man from his state of exhaustion and too proud to send for John O'Hara, and I was in a sweat. What to do? I had lost sight of the ship ahead and also those on the beam; we were going faster than the convoy speed and were steering two degrees to the left of the convoy course. There were fifty or more ships within several miles and I couldn't see one. In a flash it occurred to me -- fog! -- reduce speed six RPM to the convoy speed and come back to convoy course. This I did with a sense of satisfaction. Almost immediately there boomed out on our starboard side two numerals sounding on the ship's whistle. This was in the Morse Code. It was the number of the ship ahead. God, what a relief! By the time John O'Hara came back to the bridge, I had the ship back in position and the patch of fog had lifted. When he had his eyes, he could see the ship ahead and those abeam and I turned the ship over to him as though nothing had happened. Deep inside I knew this as one of the worst experiences of six years at sea -- of war at sea. A valuable lesson to me, if I was to learn the importance of: (1) don't panic, (2) analyse the situation and (3) act in a responsible and reasonable manner.<HMC 91-4, from TR/TTC p. 1>

In addition to describing this incident, Capt. Goodyear discussed a regular small convoy involving the same ships each time, and how methods of station-keeping were devised which were based on familiarity with the other vessels:

Ah, frequently we would form a small convoy of *Fort Amherst* ... the S/S *Lady Rodney*, and the S/S *Cabot Strait*. It was a pleasure to be in such a convoy. We knew the ships and their people. In time we devised a number of tactics to assist in station-keeping such as, knowing the length of the *Lady Rodney* ... we found that when standing at the engine-room telegraph on the bridge, she was just framed in the window of the bridge cab. ... You're standing there ... at this distance from the window, if she fitted in the window, you were in the right position. ... Now, if she did not fit into the frame we were too close and if she fitted the frame with space to spare we were too far apart, minor course adjustments were accordingly made.<HMC 91-4, TR and TTC p. 1>

It was Capt. Goodyear's contention that Navy navigators were professionals, but merchant navigators were not. "Professional seamen, but

not professional station-keepers. It was an acquired skill. Many merchant ships were sunk by collision with others.”(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 6)

Even the best training in navigational skills was not always sufficient. Inattention or even mere chance could make for a serious situation. As an Ordinary Seaman just come on watch, Ed March, now a retired Master, noted his vessel was approaching the large Field Bank Buoy, just out of Galveston. Although he rang the bell and notified the Mate several times, getting a response of, “Very good” each time, there was no course change. By the time he was frantically yelling, “We’re gonna hit that buoy!” it was a certainty and the last minute attempt to avoid it failed. Perhaps, he said, the man was preoccupied, but the Old Man was “not happy” and they replaced the chief Mate soon afterward.(HMC 90-68, TTC p. 5) On another occasion, he himself was keeping position when the telemotor gears were accidentally jammed by a seaman’s sweater. The helmsman said the ship would not steer just as the Commodore blew a turning blast. They were on the port side of the (fast) convoy, which was turning left -- to port. The convoys turned and they did not. Somehow they managed to cross the entire convoy without hitting anything -- or seeing anything in the thick fog -- while the TBY radio screamed “Three-two, what are you doing?” But there was nothing to be done until they could get the wool out of the telemotor and get the “trick wheel” aft functioning. When they got back on course and the fog lifted, they found themselves on the starboard side of the convoy. Capt. March’s only remark was, “That’s all we needed with a tanker full of gas[gasoline/petrol]!”(HMC 90-68, TTC p. 2)

One wartime Apprentice recalled an occasion when, in convoy on dark nights, the navigation aids of the ship ahead of his were obscured by a bulky deck cargo of timber. As the general dogsbody by virtue of his low position in the hierarchy (he described the position of an Apprentice as “lower than the



ship's cat") he was required to leave his position as lookout on the wing of the bridge and clamber over the cargo, which was secured to the deck by wire buckles, in order to see the signals from the ship ahead, and then climb back to relay them to the officer on watch.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3 and 6)

John Pottinger, a Chief Engineer who was in a couple of large Atlantic convoys, did not like convoys; nobody did, because of the difficulty of maintaining position.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1) Another Chief Engineer described early British convoys at ten-knot speed, including fog and whistle signals, and underlined the problem of position-keeping.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 1) Masters, Mates, wheelmen, Quartermasters, lookouts, and Chief Engineers seem to have been the ones most concerned with position-keeping, but even Firemen spoke of the "races" in the Engine Room to see who could get the most RPM out of a three-cylinder [triple expansion] engine, and told how to do so, as well as how to stop the engine from smoking.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 2)

Capt. Stephen F. Browne, now a docking pilot, discussed convoy technicalities and the difficulties of maintaining position. A stadimeter might be used in clear weather, but other practices, such as fog buoys and whistle signals would replace it if vision was obscured by fog or darkness. Oblique turns were made on signal, rather like a drill team. It was easy (and embarrassing) to botch things up. They were like the "Blue Angels".<sup>297</sup> Most of them were too young to fully realise the hazards of manoeuvring. It seemed exciting, not dangerous. Browne was too late for the Murmansk convoys, which were more hazardous. He was sixty-five at the time of his interview.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 1)

Capt. John Klocko (HMC 90-64, TTC p. 3), Capt. Ed March (HMC 90-68, TTC p. 2), and, in fact, most of the Deck Officers interviewed, recalled in detail

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<sup>297</sup> . The aeronautical drill team of the United States Air Force. The Royal Air Force "Red Arrows" are similar in character.

the difficulties of position-keeping in convoy and the use of fog-buoys. As a lowly deckhand, though, Bob Parr (HMC 92-2, TTC p. 4) found no difficulties in keeping position. That was a problem for the officers. Ed Richards (HMC 90-61, TTC p. 4) was a deckhand as well, but he was an AB and Quartermaster, rather than just an Ordinary Seaman. He recalls that, when in convoy, the ship “worked him to death keeping position”. The Chief Mate told him he had done a good job, and that gave Richards a big lift -- nothing bothered him from that time onward.

Capt. Emerson Chodzko remembered a ninety-ship international convoy through the Mediterranean as very hectic. High risk ships were placed on the inside; barrage balloon and submarine net defences were employed; there were ninety-degree course changes; they were bombed and strafed by Stukas. “Believe it or not there were still fishing boats off the coast of Spain.” They encountered some of these in the middle of the night. He emphasised the tension of being on watch in blackout at night trying to keep position. There followed a North Atlantic convoy description and he said it was hard to keep course when the ship was light[empty]. There were special signals for “out of command”. Sometimes convoys dispersed because of weather and reformed later.<sup>298</sup> One is in tight quarters in convoys with the Navy bawling people out when they are out of position, and the problems with engines and with ships which “straggle” do nothing to help matters.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 3)

A great deal of manoeuvrability was dependent on the cargo officers and the way the ship was loaded. On this depended her stability to a very great extent. Capt. R.A. Simpson stressed the point that there was a lack of cargo from the United Kingdom, other than war materiel. Cargoes in British bottoms were mainly imports, and station-keeping in outward bound convoys was particularly difficult for empty ships in ballast, in bad weather. Stability

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<sup>298</sup>. The fog buoy was erroneously described here as a “paravane”.

in heavy seas is best achieved by the weight of a well-proportioned cargo, properly stowed. It was difficult for overly light vessels to maintain course and they sometimes had to heave to. On the other hand, an overload could be even more dangerous, especially when ice was involved. We discussed the picture of a heavily laden, heavily iced vessel; she looks as if she is sinking and one would swear she had been torpedoed, but she is only wallowing. Capt. Simpson said that even huge post-war container ships in the St. Lawrence could be endangered if they became heavily iced.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 7)

One ship loaded a mixed cargo, but with a lot of “weight cargo”, probably ingots of zinc, and the Second had given the ship too much stability. They had to rendezvous with a convoy in mid-Atlantic and she was rolling terribly, because she was so stable she was stiff, like dolls with weighted bottoms, or pop-up clowns. As they approached the convoy, there was quite a sea running, and the Old Man got worried. Keith Marshall was on watch at the time. A destroyer came out and signalled them to join the convoy. Marshall said yes, using the Aldis lamp. They were rolling so much that the lashings let go on the deck cargo, which was drums of peppermint and they rolled about all over the deck and some fell into the sea. The ship could not turn round. The destroyer signalled them, “do not jettison cargo”, but it was unintentional. They finally warned the escort and tried to turn round and did it successfully. “Whew!” It often happened that you rendezvoused at sea, especially if you were a fast ship and went part way “on your tod”<sup>299</sup> and then joined a convoy.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 3)

Alan Peter said one might hear a bang and see a black cloud of smoke on the other side of the convoy, but not know what ship had gone. If visibility was bad, one would hardly know anything had happened at all. It was the same in bad weather when ships were lost through stress or capsizing. During

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<sup>299</sup>. Alone, on your own -- a British idiom.

the war, ships tended to be overloaded, poorly loaded, and to carry large deck cargoes. They were not quite unstable, but somewhat so, and many were lost in convoy through stress or weather. The convoy Commodore told when to stream fog buoys. The ship behind could see the buoy instead of the ship ahead of it, but there was no control over the ships abeam and there were collisions.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7)

Bob Imbeau noticed that, when sailing in convoy at night, a marker with a light was towed. These were little blue convoy lights, because blue was only visible for short distances, and they were different from paravanes.<sup>300</sup> The towed marker was an arrow shape with a blue light that shone straight aft, and on the stern just below the railing there was another such light just above the waterline. The side running lights were also blue, but very small and only visible for very limited distances. John Lappin said they used to tow a small plank that threw up a “rooster tail” of water like a speedboat does. Bob Imbeau added, “We called it an anchor, because it was shaped similarly and the water shot up through the fluke part. A lot of times the ship behind could not see the light, but the water was white, especially in the Pacific where they threw up a long, luminescent wake which could be seen for nearly a mile.”(HMC 89-5B, TTC p. 4) It was eerie running at night or in fog, surrounded by other ships you could not see. Trailing a marker and with blue lights and frequent relocation of positions, it sometimes got a little scary.(HMC 89-5B, TTC p. 3)

It was nerve-wracking in convoy because of the necessity of maintaining position by minutely adjusting revolutions over a period perhaps as long as two weeks. At night blue lights were towed. Paravanes<sup>301</sup> were

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<sup>300</sup>. Several men, thinking back fifty years, confused the convoy fog buoy markers sometimes called “little anchors” or “sleds” with the anti-mine device, the paravane, described earlier in this chapter.

<sup>301</sup>. Actually he meant fog buoys, see previous footnote.

towed during the day in fog. One also had to keep the ship from smoking.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 3) Doyle Bales, one of the “black gang”, recalled how the boilers had to be "blown" with a steam hose daily, but could only be blown under cover of darkness during wartime, to prevent the enemy from locating the vessel or vessels involved. When Bales sees smoking diesel trucks/lorries on the highway today, he remembers that if a ship at sea made smoke, it got sunk! Garbage was also dumped after dark to avoid being tracked by enemy submarines.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 2.) Another man, now a retired ship's Captain, who had sailed as an Ordinary Seaman on the ill-fated PQ17 to Murmansk, knew well why garbage was dumped a half-hour after dark -- to keep the ship's course and location secret. This was even more essential in convoy than for a ship running alone.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3) Another respondent, then sixteen, was dumping leftover food over the side without realising. They were the commodore ship and he was told the Commodore wanted him on the bridge -- not the Captain, the Commodore. He got a dressing down: “You could've put thousands of men's lives at stake.” Discarded lettuce leaves could float on the water and betray their location to a submarine.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 5)

Bill Kirby, a shipmate of my stepfather's, recalled the safety precautions incorporated in the daily work routine almost as vividly as he did the dramatic *kamikaze* attack which won their ship, the *S/S Marcus Daly*, the first Gallant Ship Award presented by the United States Government to a merchant vessel sailing in the Pacific. He described the practice just mentioned of dumping the garbage about a half-hour after sundown to avoid submarines tracking them, and minutely detailed the method by which watchstanders accustomed their eyes to the dark before going from lighted cabins to stand watch on deck in blackout conditions.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 2) On Liberty ships the Engine Crew often left the steel door open and used the

blackout curtain only, even though the heat was “killing” the others on that deck. There was also discussion of methods of blacking-out and of ventilating blacked-out ships at night.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 2)

The British fired rockets when James Murphy's Malta convoy had trouble. It lit the whole place up and “Murph” considered it foolish. He gave detailed descriptions of escort vessels and their differences, and also the use of spar decks on tankers to carry fighter planes.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 2 )

With respect to blackouts, Harry Kilmon knew only too well that mistakes could happen. In the dark, just after dinner on the first or second day out of New York in a convoy of about a hundred ships in the North Atlantic, heading for England, they needed electricity on deck for shoring up the deckload. Kilmon could not recall which of his first three vessels it was, but they had power running to the deck, so they had a deckhand go into the masthouse and throw the switch to turn it on -- but on leaving port they always turned off the electricity from the Engine Room, and when the hand went to get power, he did not succeed, so Kilmon was told to go turn on the power. He went to the Engine Room and turned on the power to the proper masthouse, but the deckhand had already turned on more switches than were needed, when the first one did not work, and had not turned them off. Some of these were for the cargo lights in the rigging, which were floodlights and lit up the ship “like the sun came up”. Kilmon hit the circuit breaker and everyone hit the panic button. The convoy commodore was right next them and the “TBX” [actually TBY, short-range radio] went on, “Get that light out or we’re gonna shoot it out right now!” “And,” said Harry, “he wasn't kidding.” All this time Kilmon, blissfully unaware, was down in the Engine Room. They radioed down, “Get those switches off!” and he turned them off right away. It was not very long, but for two to four minutes in the middle of a convoy the ship had her cargo lights on. If there had been a sub, they would have been

sitting ducks. The Chief Engineer later investigated and all was explained. Kilmon was off the hook, but it was a harrowing experience.(HMC 90-72, TTC pp. 2-3)

There was about six hundred feet of space between vessels, and it was easy in daytime, but at night they were often out of position.(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1) It was not unknown for a ship to be in the proper position in convoy at sundown and at sunrise to be someplace entirely different. It was worst in fog, when you had to stream fog buoys.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 3) One of the major worries for any deck officer in convoy was keeping position at night,(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 2) but there was likewise a lot of trouble keeping position in a large convoy in fog, and great danger of collision under such conditions. The engine room had to maintain strict control, such as increasing or decreasing engine speed by one or two revolutions per minute. Vessels also dragged fog buoys, which threw up a rooster-tail of water that could be followed by the ship behind.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1.)

Allan Rynberg (HMC 90-6, TTC p. 1) and John Pottinger (HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1), both of whom retired as Chief Engineers, agreed it was particularly difficult for Engine Room staff to maintain position as the navigating officers desired when in the close confines of a convoy. Pottinger added that position-keeping in convoy was difficult because there was no tachometer on Liberty ships and the engine's revolutions had to be counted by the clock. Hank Adams said, "When you sail on deck and you're lookout and you're up in the bow, trying to hold position, you have to notify the bridge whether you're gaining or losing on the ship ahead just by looking at the little blue light on their stern."(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 1) And that sums everyone's station-keeping problems up in a nutshell.

Another Engineer, Clinton Johnson, agreed that the problem in convoy is holding position. The Engine Crew had to bring the engine speed up or down one revolution at a time by the analog speedometer. The submarine-type throttle with notches every three revolutions was not accurate, so a wooden wedge had to be made to hold the throttle between the notches. Then they started calling for one-half or even one-quarter revolution variations, and finally the Engine Crew had to make a mark on the shaft and time it visually. This made for banter between Departments, usually on the same relative level of rank (Second Assistant Engineer *vs.* Second Mate, etc.)(HMC 90-24, TTC p. 1)

Jim Cunningham, a Deckhand, recalled that the water spraying through the fog buoy could be heard as well as seen. He also said position-keeping in a big convoy was easier if you were in the middle.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 4) “Murph” Murphy, surprisingly for an Engineer, described the use of the “sled” (fog buoy) for position-keeping and added detail of what it was like to run alone, how one got one’s orders in convoy, etc., all of which information would seem to have been the province of the Deck Department.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3)

Most of the discussion of position-keeping centred on the delicate manoeuvring necessary, but a few men spoke of convoy speeds and the reasons for them. Bob Hiller remembered escort vessels had to be twice as fast as the slowest ship in a convoy,(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1) because it was sometimes necessary for an escort to charge rapidly from the rear of the convoy to the front in order to discharge her protective duties. David Leary recalled that at normal convoy speed it took fifteen days to steam from Norfolk, Virginia to Gibraltar,(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 2) and “Del” Alley reminded me that the speed of the convoy was determined by the speed of the slowest ship. Many times, he said, pre-World War II “C” type ships would mysteriously “disappear” from convoys because their captains chose to run alone and take their own chances; most made out all right. Alley’s own ship



was much faster. In a very slow convoy of six to eight knots, vessels such as his could make sixteen to eighteen.(HMC 90-45, TTC pp. 2-3) Convoys took almost two weeks to cross the North Atlantic from New York to Bristol. James Higman, interviewed jointly with Jim North, volunteered the information that smaller convoys could be arranged with the faster ships, but, of course, no convoy could go faster than its slowest ship.

Weather could be a problem, too.(HMC 90-17, TTC p. 1) Many convoys became dispersed and the escorts had to rush about and herd them back together. Ship's speeds varied such a lot. They were not fast in the early days of the war. Tramps had top speeds of eight, nine, or possibly ten knots with a fair wind. Most were coal-burners and another sin at sea was making smoke. They were always getting scolded. The cardinal sins were smoke-making, not keeping position, and dumping rubbish illicitly.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 5) When they were not actively involved in the operation of the convoy itself, or the vessel in which they were serving, men's attention quite naturally focused on the conditions under which they lived and worked. The final section of this chapter deals with that area of shipboard life.

## C. CONDITIONS ABOARD

Many of those interviewed during the English fieldwork spoke of vilely unpleasant conditions aboard ship, both before and during the war. Some had even found it necessary to provide themselves with a “donkey’s breakfast”, a straw-filled ticking mattress or palliasse, as many vessels provided no bedding whatsoever for the crews. This sort of treatment had been unknown in the United States for some time previous, even during the Great Depression. British ships also tended still to have a communal “gloryhole” forecabin for ratings, or at best a few rooms with several men bunking in each. American ships were usually set up with a maximum of three to a room, as three was the usual complement comprising one watch; thus men already asleep were not disturbed by the comings and goings when the watches between their own changed, and mass-produced standard ships, such as the American Liberty ships<sup>302</sup> had much improved standards of living for the crews.

Gone forever is the miserable fo’c’sle. Officers get private staterooms with desks, wardrobe and shower, but even seamen bunk only two to an outside room. Berths are comfortable[sic] wide and standard equipment includes lockers, hot and cold running water, mirrors and reading lights. Separate mess and recreation rooms with comfortable sofas, writing desks and books are provided for crew and petty officers. All rooms are air-cooled. And when a man comes off duty at noon or four A.M., he finds the steward’s pantry open to serve him hot coffee, soft drinks and sandwiches. Remembering the awful food sailors used to eat and how much a good meal means on a monotonous voyage, the [Maritime] Commission insisted that all meals should be balanced and well cooked.<sup>303</sup>

In contrast, Irishman Bill Fortune, now of Merseyside, said:

Crews did not count for much then. They did not have single-berth accommodation, showers, and the like. They had not a forecabin, but an aftercabin with eleven men to a single room. The Firemen lived on one side and the deckhands

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<sup>302</sup> These were commonly called “*Sam* boats” in Great Britain, as those given her under the “Lend-Lease” Act were named or renamed, every name beginning with the letters SAM. I have not verified the reason for this procedure, but have been told casually both that it stood for “Uncle Sam”, the mascot of the United States and also that it was an acronym for Standard American Merchant [Ship].

<sup>303</sup> Palmer, 50. Note the earlier description of the meal I ate aboard the *Lane Victory* in Chapter Two.

(Fortune used the word “sailors” -- this is a common distinction) on the other. English ships had no iceboxes or night lunches. There was nothing for keeping food in the accommodation. Some did not even have a messroom for the crew. In the *Themistocles*,<sup>304</sup> a big, coal-burner passenger boat, there was no messroom for the crew. They lived forward, with the Firemen on one side and the Sailors (deckhands) on the other -- three Seamen (ABs) and an Ordinary (seaman) in each room with a table in the centre, about eighteen by twenty-four inches square, and no other messroom. Not only that, you were lucky if you got anything to eat in her. She was a hungry ship. Shaw Savill’s was also a hungry company, which is how they got the nickname “Slow Starvation and Agony”. As for Cunard, Fortune was only on one Cunard boat and does not know how some men stood them all their lives, as they were awful. In the old days there were no showers or single-bed cabins. When a ship left port, each man was issued a bucket in which to bathe and wash his clothes, and some ships locked the fresh water pumps except for one hour a day.(HMC 92-32, TTC pp. 4-6)<sup>305</sup>

A number of ships and companies on both sides of the Atlantic were known as “bad feeders”<sup>306</sup> and several were mentioned as having been run on the “pound and pint” system, whereby a certain amount of food, inventoried in pound and/or pints, depending on the commodity, was allotted to each individual and such items as tinned milk, sugar, and tea were not set out on a communal table, but kept separately in each man’s locker and shared only by express consent within a specific group. It is certain that the “night lunch” of sandwiches or leftovers regularly supplied to United States seafarers on the late watches was not a common feature of British ships, although a custom known as the “black pan”<sup>307</sup> acted as a viable alternative under certain circumstances. Cockroaches, weevils, maggots and rats were also common features of life at sea at the end of the 1930s and a number of interviewees told of clever methods of combatting these vermin, from sealing the small holes in

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<sup>304</sup> . He pronounced this in the standard English manner (th’-MIST-o-cleese) once, but at this juncture he pronounced the name “themmy-STOCKLES”. See Chapter Eight for unique nautical pronunciations.

<sup>305</sup> . See also the section on Ethnic Relations in Chapter Five.

<sup>306</sup> . A term in common usage amongst merchant mariners, meaning that the ship or company involved provided scant food or food of poor quality, or possibly both. Sometimes a ship or company with this problem is called “hungry”. One English shipping company was nicknamed “Hungry Harrison’s”, another “Hungry Hogarth’s”. But a ship which provides good and plentiful victuals is always a “good feeder”. “She fed well,” is a classic compliment for the quality and quantity of food aboard.

<sup>307</sup> . See Chapter Seven for further detail on this custom.

the milk tin with matchsticks<sup>308</sup> to cementing a cut loaf back together with leftover porridge.<sup>309</sup> Despite these data, most North American seamen recall that merchant ships generally “fed well”.

With regard to vermin, a British respondent was impressed by the efficiency of the maritime pest control system in Los Angeles Harbour. The man in charge told them, after the spraying, to leave the powder down for twenty-four hours and then do what they liked. They never saw another cockroach. The Port Authority rat man told them “You have so many rats aboard; so many males and so many females.” The interviewee does not know how he knew this, but they caught well over 150 rats.<sup>310</sup> You would see the rats at night, but not in the daytime. They used rat guards on every line ashore, so he does not know where they came aboard, but they can multiply very quickly.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 2)

“Johnny” Johnston, a strong trade union man, said conditions were very bad before the unions achieved prominence. Only key men (Bosun, [Chief] Steward, Deck Engineer/Donkeyman) had rooms to themselves. The rest lived in a common forecabin with bunk-over-bunk and a single overhead light. Rousing a watch roused everybody. The bunks were in bad condition with a straw mattress, often terrible. Not until the union got into power did things improve. Water was rationed. After each watch the water pump was unlocked for so many hours.<sup>311</sup> It all changed in later years, but at that time nobody looked after the seamen. On the Ship’s Articles they had “whack”.<sup>312</sup> There was chicken or pork chops on Sunday -- the rest of the week there was

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<sup>308</sup>. Peter Rogers, HMC 92-49, and Tom Thornton, HMC 92-56.

<sup>309</sup>. Capt. Tom Goodyear, HMC 91-4, TTC p. 6 and HMC 91-5, TTC p. 1.

<sup>310</sup>. My stepfather, Capt. Fred Steele, and several of his maritime acquaintances, some twenty years later were likewise impressed by a similar demonstration of specialised knowledge by rat-catchers in the same harbour. Apparently the detailed information is acquired by examining the vermin’s droppings.

<sup>311</sup>. Note Bill Fortune’s testimony a few pages above.

<sup>312</sup>. The rations which must, legally, be given a seaman -- so many pounds of meat a month, etc. -- compare with British “pound and pint” system.

curry-and-rice or the like.<sup>313</sup> Fried eggs were unheard of; instead there were powdered eggs or occasionally scrambled eggs -- and a lot of salt meat -- fried. Some shipping lines made an effort to feed well, but others were not good. Johnston never sailed on Isbrandtsen Lines so could not verify Capt. John Klocko's assertion that everything on their ships was fish-oiled and slippery, but he described differences in conditions between coastwise and foreign-going ships and told how much coastwise shipping there used to be. He also spoke of cleanliness and general health problems on sulphur and bauxite carriers, and the problems inherent in Alcoa's passenger ships hauling bauxite on their return runs, which finally put a stop to their passenger trade. He detailed loading and unloading processes with their shortcomings, and told how the line was forced to close down.(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 1)

Except for Mr. Johnston's testimony, no description given of conditions aboard any United States- or Canadian-flag ship was bad enough to warrant my recollection. This was emphatically not the situation as regarded British-flag vessels of the early war years. Many British informants were almost fulsome in their praise of the '*Sam*' boats, those United States-built Liberty ships which had come to England via the Lend-Lease Agreement and thus brought the conditions described above by Palmer within reach of the British seafarer as well as his North American counterpart. Most comments on shipboard conditions were positive, however, except where troopships were involved, and even then the negative remarks were directed primarily at the troops' quarters and victualling, not at those of the crew.

A few disparaging remarks about shipboard conditions during the pre-war and early war years were made by informants from Newfoundland.

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<sup>313</sup>. Peter Rogers (HMC 92-49) calls this meal "hailstones and duck shite."

Despite the apparent ignorance of some of today's authors,<sup>314</sup> it is to be noted again that, during the Second World War, Newfoundland was a self-governing member of the British Commonwealth, not -- as it is today -- a Province of Canada. One of the favourite descriptions given their home by Newfoundlanders is "England's oldest colony; Canada's newest Province". The island's ties with England during the Second World War were strong and its traditions more similar to those of the British Isles than to the North American mainland. Therefore it is altogether reasonable to link the material gathered there to that amassed in the United Kingdom, rather than to the North American data.

According to Capt. Ed March, T-2 tankers were not the first to cut down forecastles to two-man size. They had "watch forecastles" of three men each, the same as a Liberty or Victory ship, and carried fewer people than the old shipping board ships, which had a black gang forecastle and a sailors' forecastle, but even some of these latter had been "fixed up with watch forecastles".(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 6) There were also the Canadian-built *Park* standard ships, the basic concept of which was similar to the Liberty ships, but with some differences in design. They were about 10,000 tons, and about the same speed and length as the Liberties, but the United States accommodation spaces were better, the crew's quarters being all above decks. The Canadian vessels had the quarters below the main decks, presumably with the perspective that people are dispensable. As young boys, Cadets and first-trippers took this in their stride, along with the hardship and the loneliness. It could have been a lot worse slugging it out on the battlefields in Europe and the Pacific.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 2) United States Navy men were often surprised at the roomy quarters enjoyed by the merchant marine, with a forecastle for

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<sup>314</sup> Several authors of recent books regarding the war at sea have described them as "Canadians", and so they are today, although Newfoundland did not join in Confederation with Canada until 1949, well after the end of the war.

each watch. “Tex” English explained the reasons for this setup<sup>315</sup> and described the quarters, saying, “The Navy would’ve had fifteen men in the same quarters.” That was probably an exaggeration, but he is quite right in saying that the Navy would have put far more men on the same size vessel.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5) In CPR [Canadian Pacific Railroad] boats the Catering staff had good bedding, but in Shaw Savill<sup>316</sup> they were housed in a “gloryhole”<sup>317</sup> up forward with a “donkey’s breakfast”<sup>318</sup> for a bed.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 1)

Like “Johnny” Johnston, Jack Sharrock talked about his union affiliation and how unions had made a tremendous difference to conditions. As a boy he sailed with twenty-five or thirty crewmen to a room. Now each has his own. He described the luxury aboard his last ship and said he was awfully proud that the owners and the union brothers had cut out all unnecessary paperwork. This is an attitude typical of the capacity in which he was sailing at his retirement -- that of Purser -- since the Purser does much of the ship’s paperwork.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 6)

Conditions were usually far worse for crews aboard the escort vessels than they were for the merchant mariners. Once, at sea, the breakwater ripped off HMS *Middleton*’s forecastle and she shipped a lot of water. It was shored up, and she managed to get safely back to Scapa Flow for repairs. It did not take long to repair, and only leaked a bit more afterward, but the forecastle had always leaked on that ship. There was nearly always water washing around

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<sup>315</sup>. As has been said, this was so that the occupants could be roused for their watch, or prepare for bed afterward, without disturbing others who were sleeping.

<sup>316</sup>. Shaw Savill and Albion Lines were nicknamed “Slow Starvation and Agony” for their initial letters and a reputation for bad shipboard conditions on their vessels.

<sup>317</sup>. A “gloryhole” is a communal dormitory-type forecastle in which, traditionally, all departments, or at least the entirety of one, doss down together in tiered bunks or swung hammocks and this accommodation serves as a messroom as well.

<sup>318</sup>. A “donkey’s breakfast” is a mattress consisting of a ticking bag filled with straw. and is so-called because donkeys eat straw, and not because of any similarity of phraseology to the British term “dog’s breakfast”, a definite pejorative. Usually, in the days of sail, and often, until the Second World War, seafarers were required to provide their own such bedding when they came aboard.

your feet on the mess deck.<sup>319</sup> The breakwater had been ripped off the ship when she was nearly new, before Roy Williams joined her, and although it had been repaired, it had never been the same. Conditions on HMS *Middleton* were atrocious, especially for seamen and their living quarters.(HMC 92-18, TTC pp. 1 and 3) It is notable that men of the United States Navy seem not to have experienced quite such a hard lot -- or if they did, it is seldom mentioned. Perhaps this is because so few served on small vessels in the telling conditions of the North Atlantic and Arctic waters.

Certainly the living conditions of ordinary merchant ratings were much better on United States-flag ships. Officers on British-flag vessels did pretty well with accommodation and food, but ratings did not. Dick Playfer remembers the first ship he sailed on, where the unlicensed crew still shared a common forecandle. He seldom had occasion to enter, but when he did, he wondered how they could live that way; it was like the nineteenth century. Such practices had nearly disappeared by then, and by the 1940s most crew accommodation was in the stern rather than a forecandle and had become a two- to four-man room, rather than the crew living all together in one communal space.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 2)<sup>320</sup>

It was a pretty tough life at times in convoy in the North Atlantic. Once you got into the Pacific it was like being on a cruise, but you still could not afford to be frivolous. There were no problems with people at sea; all were friendly.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2) It was a rougher life for some, however. Ed Stanko showed me photographs of himself and his shipmates sleeping in all their clothes while in convoy off the Atlantic coastline of North America.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 1) Ed Richards never undressed to sleep for the

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<sup>319</sup> Joe Bennett agreed that: "Destroyers ... were notorious for water on the messdecks."(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 3)

<sup>320</sup> It is interesting to note that crew accommodations are often even now called "forecandles", despite the fact that they are no longer in that part of the ship.



entire voyage to the Sicilian landings, even in harbour at Palermo, and elsewhere, because of magnetic mines and the like.(HMC 90-61, TTC p. 5) Hank Adams was “bothered a lot” by the idea of serving aboard an ammunition ship, because if you were under attack and a neighbouring vessel was blown up “an ammunition carrier just exploded and was no more.” On one such ship, the skipper insisted that the crew be at their emergency stations within thirty seconds and made them practice four and five times in an evening. He swore if they had a fire they would fight it, and not just abandon ship. They slept with their clothes on.(HMC 90-14, TTC pp. 1 and 3) Bob Parr recalled that there were blackouts and you had to sleep with all your clothes on -- it was not an order, but just common sense.(HMC 92-2, TTC p. 1-2) Capt. Emerson Chodzko likewise remembered that in such hazardous conditions as convoy one is obliged to take precautions -- sleeping fully dressed, observing blackouts with deadlights down so they provide no ventilation, maintaining one’s seaman’s papers in a special folder chained to one’s person, carefully maintaining all safety gear.... And they were constantly reminded that: “A slip of the lip can sink a ship.”<sup>321</sup>(HMC 89-2, TTC pp. 3-4)

In the North Atlantic in gale weather, Capt. Frank Waters slept on deck in a life preserver because of the ship’s rolling,(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 1) and while steaming in the Indian Ocean, “Pig-Eye” Watson, rigged a bunk swung under a lifeboat on deck, where it was cool. The Captain put a stop to it and made him return to his forecabin.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 1) Bill Fortune, finding his quarters like a steambath, made himself a hammock and slept on deck.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 6) The most pathetic of these creative types, whose creativity “backfired”, was Bob Hiller. He resourcefully slept on deck because of the extreme heat, but was driven by rainy weather to move his cot into the back of an Army truck in the deck cargo. Waking in the middle of the night, he found himself

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<sup>321</sup>. Further details of the tendency to extreme security-consciousness in the U.S. during World War II are found in Chapter Six.

violently seasick from the altered motion of his resourcefully invented accommodation.(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1)

It was not, however, the sleeping and living accommodations which made the most vivid impression on the seafarer. It was the food. The desirability of a particular Captain, Chief Steward or individual ship was often linked to his or her reputation as a good or bad “feeder” and a ship rated as a “hungry” vessel was the worst. Even entire companies achieved notoriety for the quality of their victualling and Thomas and James Harrison of Liverpool acquired the dubious distinction of being labelled “Hungry Harrisons”, while “Hungry Hogarth’s” was likewise stigmatised. Harrisons’ funnel [smokestack] logo of two broad white bands on either side of a narrow red one earned them the additional indignity of the unofficial motto: “Two of fat and one of lean.”<sup>322</sup> Alfred Holt’s “Blue Funnel” Line fed well and was renowned for providing excellent accommodation for crew as well as passengers -- and even Cadets,(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 2) but a Newfoundland respondent flatly asserted that in the Merchant Navy you were never hungry -- one benefit of being a sailor on a ship was there was never a food shortage. He often thought the Armed Forces suffered many hardships in comparison; the Merchant Navy always had clean beds to go to and always plenty of good substantial food every day.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 3)

Capt. Frank Waters said the merchant marine always ate well,(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 3) but Norman Law was reminded that after three or four months at sea, one made a regular habit of checking the macaroni on one’s plate “to see if it had a hole”, as worms were often found inside the tubes. One also checked the bread by holding it up to the light and flicking out the dark spots which resulted from bugs in the flour. Once they loaded meat in Egypt and were told it was beef, but Law knew better, having worked in a butcher’s

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<sup>322</sup>. HMC 92-56, TTC p. 2 and HMC 92-58, TTC p. 4, among others.

shop.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 1) Roy Williams remembered life on a naval escort vessel anchored in the Kola Inlet, not so different from the merchant marine survivors' there. At Archangel, supplies were reduced to black bread, corned beef, and boiled rice. They had very little else -- no white bread -- although they did have a little butter, which did not last long. Even these meagre victuals were rationed. That was why they ate at the International Club when they could. There, they had American tinned ham, black bread, and "Kompot" (a hot drink made from stewed dried fruit). There was not much else. On Sundays, the Russians gave them yak meat, which was purplish and covered in big flies. It was delivered in an open yak-pulled cart by a man with a crutch. Despite the fact that it was 65° F. in August, all this meat was cooked and eaten.(HMC 92-17, TTC pp. 4, 2, and 6)

Donald Gibbs's first ship was so old that the refrigeration unit went bad and they lost all their fresh meat, eggs, milk, and produce. They picked up fresh supplies in both Trinidad and Georgetown, but there were no facilities to provide meat or fresh produce other than fruit. When a Canadian tanker pulled into Trinidad, they got about ten halves of pork -- whole smoked sides. All had to help load them, but they were good meat.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3) There were similar problems replenishing victual stores in the Pacific during the war. Meal after meal consisted of turnip greens and boiled barley -- and SPAM! A trip ashore for provisions in New Guinea resulted in cured meat so unpleasant it was nicknamed "Soogee<sup>323</sup> beef" or "Soogeeyaki". Steve Browne was a non-swimmer, but was so hungry for meat that when a large piece of this

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<sup>323</sup> "Soogee" is the name commonly attached by seafarers to a cleansing compound [I believe it is caustic soda and lye soap] used for such grimy tasks as swabbing the decks. Apparently they felt this meat tasted as if it had been marinated in the stuff.

unpalatable stuff was dropped over the side during loading, he actually dived after it, thus acquiring the nickname of “Meathook”.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 1)<sup>324</sup>

Capt. R.A. Simpson remembers conditions in the South Atlantic in 1938-1940. There was no refrigeration, only iceboxes. Fresh food lasted no more than ten days after they had left England, and even a normal, non-wartime trip to South America lasted three weeks. Everything was a problem. Fresh water was a problem. When he was an Apprentice, a tramp carried two ten-ton water tanks for all purposes, operated with a hand-pump.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 7) With regard to the lack of refrigeration, Capt. Simpson said a few days after leaving port, they were always on hardtack, salt fish, and similar “horrible” stuff. And often water was a problem: Once, coming around South Africa solo, they had to take the water stores out of the lifeboats to survive, as hot weather and wartime re-routing had rendered the ship’s stores inadequate.(HMC 92-6, TTC pp. 1-2)

Apprentices were most concerned about finding something to eat.<sup>325</sup> They were watch-keeping all night, young, and working hard in the open air, so were always starving. They got “dry stores” -- one tin of Nestlé’s milk between the four of them per week -- which did not last long, coffee and tea, cheese, pickles, jam, but not much bread, as that was made every day. Two loaves between four lads did not go far. They also got their meals, but any hassles they had were associated with “pinching” food from the Engineers’ Mess, the Stewards’ Pantry, etc. It was always food.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 3) There was so much marmalade and peanut butter aboard one informant’s ships, however, that they often jettisoned full cans, just to get rid of them. He

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<sup>324</sup> See also Robert Carse, *The Long Haul: The United States Merchant Service in World War II*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 1965), 186-187. A ship’s supplies are replenished by the Army with tinned SPAM, which is prepared in every possible way. Upon reaching a port where more extensive victualling is possible, the crew jettison the remainder of the SPAM in disgust.

<sup>325</sup> Compare this with some of the remarks in Chapter Five concerning the United States Navy Armed Guard and their eating habits aboard.

has finally begun to eat peanut butter again, almost fifty years later, but not marmalade. He thinks there has to be a better use for sour oranges.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1)<sup>326</sup>

As the war progressed conditions aboard ship improved, the “gut-robbers” were overcome, and merchant seamen finally got a decent meal at least once a day.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 1) Harry Kilmon, Jr. said there was no problem with food aboard. There were always two choices of entree. It might make one feel guilty, because in places like India the longshoremen fought over the garbage as if it were a feast. One of his most vivid memories was of being unloaded by “the human mules of Basra” who made a continuous chain, hour after hour, carrying refrigerators on their backs in the heat of the Persian Gulf.(HMC 90-73, TTC p. 1)

Dockers, like the U.S. Navy Armed Guard or the British Apprentices, would not forebear to “liberate” a few desired items of food, especially under the privations of the wartime rationing system. Keith Marshall was relief Mate on the *Port Sydney* in Liverpool, when she had a cargo of fresh eggs. Dockers were breaking into the cases and boiling the eggs up a dozen at a time, wrapped in muslin, in their water heaters. Marshall, being young, told the Mate to stop this behaviour. The Mate asked him how, nonchalantly expecting that would be an end to it. Instead of accepting defeat gracefully, however, Marshall summoned the police himself. After that, whenever they saw Marshall going ashore, the dockers would call, “Are you going to get the police?” I was surprised he had not got a nickname out of that incident, rather like “One-Egg” Turner.<sup>327</sup> Marshall, himself, was reminded of a joke about a Chief Steward who used to say, “Give them plenty; give them one apiece.” Mr. Marshall and his shipmates were fortunate, as, running to Australasia, they

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<sup>326</sup>. It is curious to note in this instance that the word marmalade derives from the Portuguese for “seasickness” as the conserve was originally thought to prevent this complaint.

<sup>327</sup>. See Chapter Eight, under Nicknames.

could get enough fresh food there to last them the rest of the trip. After the war, Mr. Marshall was in the North Sea trade, running from Great Britain to Antwerp and Hamburg. The Germans in Hamburg, living in worse conditions even than the wartime dockers in Great Britain, broke into tins of butter and ate it by the handfuls, as they were starving. The Army guards aboard would call out, “Kalaboosh!”, meaning they would take them to jail, which most of those German dockers would have preferred, as they would have been better fed there. “It was amusing.”(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 5)

The food varied, but was more good than bad. Bob Parr was never on a bad feeding ship and always had enough to eat.(HMC 92-2, TTC pp. 1-2) “Tex” English, likewise, was never on a “hungry” ship, but always on “good feeders”. On one, however, they had a bad Cook. The Captain fired him because he had “messed up” quite badly. “He couldn’t boil water,” said Tex, in describing the Cook’s shortcomings, and maintained that his replacement was much better.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5)<sup>328</sup>

The calibre of the cookery was easily as important to the men aboard as the quality of the food itself, and the job was not always easy. Rex Rothwell was on a Dutch expatriate ship as a passenger, *en route* to join a ship in Hong Kong for his company. The Dutch vessel was carrying many merchant seamen to join ships elsewhere, and the food was dreadful. On Christmas Day, 1940, they were going down the coast of South Africa and there was no enemy activity at the time. The Christmas dinner was so appalling that it provoked an incident. The Merchant Navy passengers walked past the Chef and one after the other threw their dinners at him to demonstrate their dissatisfaction. It caused “a heck of a row”.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 4)

Capt. J.K. Gorrie told of another galley-related incident:

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<sup>328</sup>. See Chapter Five in the Ethnic Relations section for the tale of another Cook who suffered for his shortcomings.

Once, in Lourenço Marques, the Cook and Second Cook were arrested and detained ashore. When it came time to sail, the crew refused to go without a Cook, but the Chief Steward produced a Cook's "ticket" and they sailed. After three days, however, he had heat prostration, and again there was no Cook. The Captain then approached the informant and asked, "Gorrie, can you bake bread?" He replied in the negative, but the helmsman broke in, saying he had been a Cook in a trawler and could bake bread. "So forthwith we got the Articles and signed him off as a Quartermaster and signed him on as Cook. And we suffered with him for six months. And he cooked all right - as long as you didn't go near the galley and look at it!" The whole crew<sup>329</sup> were Hull trawlermen, "who are not sailors in the accepted sense". As soon as you hit port, they go ashore, no matter what is still to be done. They are typical fishermen and do not fit on deep-sea ships -- at all -- where you must have some continuity of work to deal with cargo, beams, hatches, decks, and all in port. "So we had quite a lively time with 'em - good sailors, though, when you'd sober them up." (HMC 92-51, TTC pp. 7-8)

The war came when retired Chief Baker and Confectioner James McCaffrey was *en route* to Montreal in a passenger liner. There were more passengers than he had ever seen, all trying to get home to North America. A ship ahead of them had been late sailing, so the *Montrose* took her passengers as well. There were two ships' worth of passengers and only three Bakers. The Second Baker, the Chief Baker's brother-in-law, had simply changed his clothes and walked off the ship while lunch was being prepared immediately before sailing, and they were stuck. They had thought they would get relief Bakers because of another delayed sailing, but this was not the case. McCaffrey was given the task of doing all the confectionery work and the Chief Baker and the "night man" would do all the heavy work.

They were late getting into port that night, about midnight, but decided to finish as there was no night man now -- the Third Baker was usually the night man, but he was now in the Second Baker's place. They went from Liverpool to Greenock, Tail of the Bank. About 3:30 a.m. they took a break and McCaffrey was in the "gloryhole"<sup>330</sup> when he was told the ferry [pilot

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<sup>329</sup>. All the unlicensed personnel.

<sup>330</sup>. This is an old-fashioned communal forecandle or crew accommodation.

boat?] was in and was asked to put on a clean white coat and go to the Purser's Office to see if any Bakers were available. He recognised a printer but no Bakers. He and the Third Baker were going to leave the ship as well, but the *Kosher* Cook overheard them and told the Chef who promised them two more Bakers. When McCaffrey went back to work in the "fecky"<sup>331</sup> shop, he found a tall, young Porter had just arrived to help out. McCaffrey showed him how to make ice cream and told him he would be all right as long as he did what he was told and if he got confused, to ask. They did pretty well then, getting a Steward to help the other Bakers. The helpers were given ice cream and other treats for helping out. On leaving Greenock all were promoted -- the Third Baker became the Second Baker and McCaffrey became Third Baker.

Halfway across the Atlantic the ship was ordered to turn back. There was a double load of passengers, sleeping wherever they could, and most of them panicked. After steaming back for about twelve hours, the ship was allowed to turn again and resume her original course, but it made an extra day's work. When they saw the coastline of the St. Lawrence all aboard were happy. McCaffrey does not know how they knew there was a war on, but they did and, on reaching Montreal, the passengers were off the ship "in a blink". There was plenty of cleaning to be done then. The night before docking used to be called "galley sports night" and involved a major cleanup, but without a full crew there were not sufficient people to accomplish this. The men got cleaned up in their white jackets and went to the Neptune Pub on the dock road, but the Bakers were delayed, as they were understaffed. The Chef came into the kitchen and asked where the lads were. "In the Neppy." "Go get them. We sail in ten minutes. The whistle will blow in five minutes. You have fifteen minutes." The Bakers dashed over in their singlets, as they had no time to dress. At first they were not believed, but when the ship's whistle

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<sup>331</sup>. "Fecky" is short for "confectionery".



blew, the others knew it was true and just made it back in time. They sailed for home “empty” [with no passengers]. The cooking staff still had work to do, but the rest of the crew, Stewards and such, painted the ship’s superstructure “battleship grey” during the return voyage. They sailed independently and were lucky, as when they landed they found the *Athenia* had been “bumped off” whilst on the same course. On arrival in Glasgow they were asked if they would stay on, under T124 articles.<sup>332</sup> McCaffrey agreed, and after home leave stayed “in digs” in Glasgow while the ship was refitted. She became HMS *Forfar* and from then until Dunkirk patrolled from Iceland to the Faeroes to her base in Greenock. It was very cold. “There was two inches of ice inside the ship and everything was very slippery.”(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 2-4)

A British informant was sent to join a vessel in the Manchester Ship Canal, but found conditions aboard so appalling that he refused to sail if his cabin was not cleaned. “During the war this was heresy.” The cabin was cleaned, and he did sail; the ship, however, was dogged by misfortune. She got as far as Liverpool Bay and broke down. When repaired, she went to Loch Ewe to join a convoy, which she then lost, arriving twenty-eight days later in New York where she loaded for Halifax, but ran aground on Chebucto Head before making Bedford Basin.(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 3)<sup>333</sup>

Cliff Rehkopf was only seventeen and had come from a clean home. His first ship, the *Robin Grey*, was thirty years old and had been in the Mediterranean and been hit before he joined her. He described the filthy conditions in the forecastles. He went back ashore and said she was too dirty, but was told if he “didn’t go he would wish he had”. He went back aboard.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 2) Herbert Taylor, a Scot, said most conditions aboard were terrible, especially in the Engine Room and galleys. “Shipowners

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<sup>332</sup>. See Chapter Five, Section A, for a more complete explanation of the T124 and T124X schemes.

<sup>333</sup>. There was even a local pilot aboard at the time.

are funny people;" he said, "If they can save money, they will." There were few oil-fired engines at that time -- they were mostly coal.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 7)

James McCaffrey remembered that one ship in which he served had coke-fired ovens and not much space in the bakehouse. One had to stoke the ovens over one's shoulder with a scoop made from a bent pie plate.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 1) This coal-fired vessel also took on bunkers through the bakehouse, and it was filthy. In Durban, African prisoners "dressed like the Liverpool football team in white shorts and red jerseys" carried the coal aboard in wicker baskets, and the dust even penetrated the muslin beef wrappers which were put over the portholes to keep it -- and insects -- out. You could not get the bakehouse properly clean and do your regular job. McCaffrey was delighted when he arrived back in London to find a telegram asking him to rejoin his previous ship in Liverpool.(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 1-2)

In the CPR [Canadian Pacific Railroad] boats the Catering staff had fed themselves from the kitchen and stores, but McCaffrey expounded at length on the poor feeding aboard a Shaw Savill<sup>334</sup> vessel. He told how he, as a young Third Baker, had balked the system, angering the Chef and the Butcher, but getting better food for himself and his mates, and how he was applauded for so doing. The Chefs on that boat were "gentlemen" who left all the work to subordinates. Mr. McCaffrey signed off that ship at the end of the trip.(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 1-2)

Joseph Elms, in the Catering Department of a trooper, discussed the high quality of food on prewar and postwar cruise ships and said they took almost as much care with the food for the troops. He discussed the routine of boiling eggs two thousand at a time, making soup, and serving meals to the

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<sup>334</sup>. Shaw Savill and Albion Lines were nicknamed "Slow Starvation and Agony" for their initial letters and a reputation for bad shipboard conditions.

troops when five thousand was not an uncommonly large shipload.(HMC 92-1, TTC p. 2)

Memories of blackout on Liberty ships, as cited earlier in this chapter, included the information that the Engine crew often left the steel door open and used the blackout curtain only, even though the heat was “killing” the others on that deck, and that blacking ships out at night led to problems of ventilation in tropical waters.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 2) A number of interviewees lamented the linked difficulties in torrid climes of maintaining blackout and allowing for adequate ventilation simultaneously. Several spoke of being unable to indulge in such recreational pursuits as reading or card-playing because of these exigencies. When “trooping”<sup>335</sup> out to the tropics in vessels built for the North Atlantic run, the heat was unbearable, especially in the bakehouse, and it was even worse before sunrise, when Cooks and Bakers were locked in for blackout. All had prickly heat and the thirst was terrible. Stale water was awful, but it could be mixed with juice from the tinned fruits. They had to take quinine tablets, as well, which puckered the mouth and had a terrible taste, so they had to have juice. The sweating was terrible; the sweat ran into their boots so they could actually pour the water out, and they could not wear trousers at work because they caused “prickly heat” with a rash or even blisters in genital areas. There was no fresh water for bathing, so they had to use salt water.

Chief Baker and Confectioner James McCaffrey made his crew “kilts” from white 200-lb. flour sacks, and gave them each a daily tablespoonful of salted salad oil, which helped somewhat, then he set about finding a solution to the sweat rash problem. He asked his girlfriend<sup>336</sup> to purchase three dozen

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<sup>335</sup>. “Trooping” in this context means carrying troops aboard a passenger vessel or a cargo ship refitted for the purpose.

<sup>336</sup>. They later married, and, as his wife, she verified this at the time of the interview.

menstrual pads<sup>337</sup> for him. When she asked why, he replied, “We’re going to wear them.” She was flabbergasted, but did as he asked. He then gave each of his men three pads. One was worn at work to soak up the sweat and combat the prickly heat. Each man had a one-gallon tin of fresh water to wash in daily, and in which the pad last used was soaked to extract the perspiration it had absorbed the previous day. It was hung to dry after this soaking, and would dry within a day -- “one wearing, one soaking, one drying”. He chuckled as he told me that most of his crew wore them and were no longer troubled by prickly heat, but that they had had to endure a fair amount of harassment from the rest of the ship’s company who made ribald remarks about “those queers in the bakehouse”.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 5)

Alfred Holt’s Blue Funnel Line insisted their Cadets and Apprentices wear a clean white suit every day in the tropics, and had a Chinese laundry -- the Catering Department was staffed by Chinese -- aboard for that very purpose. The suits were very uncomfortable, though.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 2) A Second Radio Officer, whose Superior was a very meticulous individual, wonders to this day how he made his white uniforms so white -- and so stiff, as there was no instant starch in those days and one had to do all one’s own laundry aboard, but the Chief Radio Operator always had immaculate tropical gear.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 2)

Two Leading Telegraphists, both of whom served on Royal Navy escort vessels, were charged for not being in “rig of the day”.<sup>338</sup> One described his misconduct as a “private mutiny” and “a little victory over the unpleasant coxswain”. He was wearing overalls. This never mattered at sea, where they were his usual dress and, according to a shipmate, were “welded to him”. It

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<sup>337</sup>. Sanitary napkins[sanitary towels], which in those days were made of heavy cotton batting wrapped in fairly substantial gauze.

<sup>338</sup>. The officially prescribed uniform.

was really wrong to wear them in harbour during “rounds”,<sup>339</sup> but he was a “barrack room lawyer”<sup>340</sup> and had seen a notice on the board with a typographical error which omitted the word “not”. Strictly speaking it gave permission to wear whatever one liked in harbour during “rounds”, but this was not its intention. The notice was read aloud when he was brought to task and he was finally charged with “serious quibbling” and was punished.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 2)

The other naval Telegraphist was rescued from an accident at sea, and taken aboard a naval vessel not his own. He had only the clothes he had been rescued in, and these had been cut off him. He was also barefoot, as he had kicked his seaboots off. Nonetheless, he was logged almost daily for “being out of the rig of the day” and was put on staff and forced to keep watches.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 2)

One escort sailor said most days one did not wash at all, and one never takes one’s clothes off at sea -- or one’s lifebelt. There was a punishment for being caught without either. When the ship went to sea, you never took your clothes off until you were back in harbour. A ship’s company, excluding officers, comprised about 600 men, all of whom used one bathroom with eight washbasins and three showers, which was open daily for half an hour in the morning and one hour in the evening. During that period one not only had to make one’s ablutions, but collect enough water in a bucket to do one’s dhobying<sup>341</sup> as well. One did use to change clothes, of course, in a rush, but had immediately to get one’s clean clothes on. “But you don’t undress. You

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<sup>339</sup> An official inspection.

<sup>340</sup> Considering the implications of the terms “barrack room lawyer” and “sea lawyer”, both of which almost synonymous terms refer to someone who bends the rules by interpreting them literally, it is ironic that the informant subsequently read law at King’s College, London.

<sup>341</sup> A term for personal hand laundry, used by most British seafarers and perhaps traceable to an Asian origin from the Victorian period of the British Empire.

stink.” It really annoys this informant “when you see ‘Jolly Jack’<sup>342</sup> ashore all lookin’ clean and smart....” When he was in a flagship cruiser, they had “Sunday Divisions” [an inspection] and got dressed up smartly. “And there were six of us who washed and shaved in a cup o’ tea[teacup]. Now, that is the honest-to-God truth!” What annoys him is that bathrooms were never open at sea. Officers could have a “slipper bath” each, if they wished, but 600 men shared those eight basins and three showers.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 6)

On destroyers, fresh water was extracted from sea water, but nearly all of it was used for the boilers and they chained up the pumps so no water was available outside set times, as previously stated. Stokers were lucky; they were where the water was produced and could get plenty straight out of the evaporator.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 6) Stokers’ messdecks were always the cleanest in the ship. They took pride in being clean as they had dirtiest job. “No! It goes back further than that. When Stokers were hand-stokers it was the hardest work in the ship. And it rubbed off on these blokes and they kept their messes clean, whereas the communication, er, wireless and signals, we were always the scruffy sods -- ’cause we were too flippin’ idle.” As a Telegraphist, he joined the Navy at nineteen, having been an apprentice electrician who had worked on building sites and was slim and reasonably fit. He then spent thirty-five weeks sitting on stools learning radio theory and Morse. He immediately went fat from lack of exercise and has never lost that fat.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 5)

When R.A. Simpson, now a Captain, was an Apprentice, a tramp carried two ten-ton water tanks for all purposes, operated with a hand-pump. He had to climb inside and clean them. During the war there was no such thing as hot running water, either. If you came off the afternoon watch -- the

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<sup>342</sup>. “Jolly Jack Tar”, a term accepted throughout the United Kingdom as a nickname for the Royal Navy sailor.

12-4, and wanted a wash, you would get a bucket -- or two, if you were lucky. Then you had to go to the Engine Room and put them under the condenser, which spit hot water. It took half an hour to get a bucketful. Then you had to climb back up to your quarters to wash. As a Cadet, Capt. Simpson had a cabin just behind the Engine Room skylight. He put his bucket on the skylight, and when he came off watch, the bucket had disappeared.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 7) There were preventative measures for this sort of thing, however. The average seaman was neat and workmanlike, although there were some bad ones. On old ships, right through the war, there were no showers. There was, however, a keg with a steam pipe in it to boil workclothes before scrubbing them on a bench. One brought (or bought from the slop chest)<sup>343</sup> a two-and-a-half-gallon bucket which was used for washing, bathing, and laundry. Each had the owner's name on it; some got stolen; one fellow punched a hole in the bottom of his and bought a cork which he carried in his pocket when working or sleeping, so he would not lose his bucket by theft.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 6)

The custom of thus washing one's clothing resulted in one seaman's not realising his vessel was under attack.

We were on the way up from Aruba and I had finished all my work as the Gunners' Messboy, and I was down below reading a book in my bunk. I heard a lot of noise. In those days we use to wash our clothes by putting a bucket full of water on the end of a steam line and turning on the steam and it -- the bucket would bounce around on these concrete decks and brrr-bang, bang, rattle, rattle, and er, my room was right next to that laundry room where the crew used to wash their clothes. God-damn, that [thing] is making an awful lot of noise in there. And I went in to turn down the steam and there was nothing there. And as I turned around to go back into my fo'c'sle, my cabin, a shell went right through the forward end of the alleyway, down by the entrance to the engine room near the [fiddley.] And I said, 'gee, something must have happened in the engine room.' And then I remembered there was a war on.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> . The slop chest is a shipboard canteen from which the basic necessities as well as a few luxuries such as tobacco and sweets may be purchased, usually by a chit which is drawn against the purchaser's accrued wages when the ship pays off.

<sup>344</sup> . *TimeWatch* script, 16-17.

It was not uncommon for the Engine Room crew to devise “contraptions” to be used as washing machines for dirty laundry. These usually consisted of a metal drum or bucket with some sort of plunger or agitator connected to the ship’s machinery in such a way that it moved up and down like a churn. Often the Engine Room, because of its warmth, was also strung with lines for drying clothing as well. Sometimes the “black gang” extracted payment for doing others’ laundry either in hard cash or in small items from the ship’s slop chest, such as tobacco, cigarettes, or sweets. Doyle Bales described in detail how such a laundry was constructed aboard the *Francis Asbury*, incorporating the idling link, and asserted that the “black gang” had extracted a quarter [twenty-five cents] from the Deck Crew to do their washing.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1) Capt. Steve Browne said one of the biggest forms of recreation was “trying to invent ways of washing clothes without a washing machine”. He then described a washing machine built on a walking beam by an ex-policeman from Jackson, Mississippi, who washed clothes for a small fee and made a deal with the Captain to keep the ship supplied with fresh linen. Such deals only held good whilst underway, though -- in port, they could forget it, as he was on the town.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 2) Such deals were not limited to North American seamen. Pete Rogers, a Liverpool native, did “dhobyng”<sup>345</sup> for the officers with the steam from the Engine Room, in return for which they bought items for him when ashore.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)

Sporadically one encountered tales of using the vessel’s “prop wash” for similar purposes, especially for heavily begrimed dungarees or other such sturdy items. The clothing in question was trailed behind the ship on a line in such a way that it was agitated, churned and beaten by the action of the screw. A few anecdotes have filtered down to us of misfortunes resulting from such actions, usually the loss or destruction of the garments so handled. These

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<sup>345</sup>. The reader is reminded that “dhobyng” is a British seaman's term for hand laundry.



mishaps came about because the men involved did not completely understand the power of the agitated water and either made the line too short or left the clothing there too long. In consequence the garments were destroyed. Sometimes the person would haul in the line to discover only a ragged waistband where there had been a pair of denim trousers. Once in a while, having left the dungarees for an extended period, such as overnight, on the discovery that they had disappeared completely, the victim would complain either that they had been stolen by other crew members or eaten by fish.<sup>346</sup> Such allegations inevitably generated a harvest of mirth amongst the victim's shipmates at the time and an amusing memory which was recounted with relish in later days.<sup>347</sup> Pat Brinkley described "washing machines" constructed on ships -- deck construction. Clothes were thrown overboard tied in a bundle and allowed to spin. One has to know when to pull them back in or they will be ruined; that is how Brinkley lost his first pair of dungarees.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 2)

Before these shipboard and convoy circumstances could be experienced, however, one must first go to sea. Chapter Four tells why men went to sea, continued at sea, and left the sea, as well as some of their major impressions of convoys, the war, and life at sea.

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<sup>346</sup>. The turbulence behind a ship is great, especially that of a tug. One Messboy left his dungarees in this prop wash overnight on a 100-foot long line. In the morning there was nothing left but a waistband and the poor victim exclaimed, "Look what the fish done to 'em!" Had he only left them there for about twenty minutes, they would have been fine.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1)

<sup>347</sup>. These stories of ignorance and gullibility are paralleled by the "fools' errands" cited in Chapter Six.

## CHAPTER 4

### GOING TO SEA, LIFE AT SEA, AND LEAVING THE SEA: AN ANALYTICAL COMMENTARY

#### A. REASONS FOR GOING TO SEA

There have been merchant mariners since the first trading vessel large enough to be called “ship” was launched, but it is often difficult for those without seafaring connections to comprehend the reasons which draw an individual to a seafaring vocation or the possible reasons for leaving such a career, once it has been chosen. As one might suspect, there were both similarities and differences between the North American and the British fieldwork samples in this respect, and the fact that it was wartime presented additional complications. John Gorley Bunker noted two truisms regarding the Merchant Service in wartime: “People who had never seen a ship could be trained to make the pieces with which to build one, but once the ship was in the water, loaded with ten thousand tons of cargo, and ordered half around the world, it took men with experience to get her there.” “Without crews, the ships would have been absolutely useless.”<sup>348</sup> It was the importance of considerations such as these which made this chapter and its contents crucial.

In *Shipping Out* five reasons were given by contemporary American seamen for preferring to sail deep-sea. These were: a chance to understand and appreciate other cultures, time to do a great deal of thinking, “one can really get away from everything”, superior wages, and better companionship in

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<sup>348</sup> John Gorley Bunker, *Liberty Ships: The Ugly Ducklings of World War II* (Salem NH: Ayer Company, Publishers, Inc., rpt. ed. 1988, c 1972), 19. Despite the fact that the latter quote is almost crass in its transparency, I felt it should be emphasised in this context.

foreign ports.<sup>349</sup> Both the British and the North Americans interviewed for this study substantially echoed these reasons.

Fieldwork disclosed that many seamen I interviewed had made their first voyages well before the war, and a sizeable number had taken this career option at quite an early age.<sup>350</sup> British seamen tended most frequently to have taken up seafaring in pursuit of a familial tradition or to have been apprenticed, sometimes from orphanages, whereas North Americans were rather more likely to have been influenced by the aura of romance and adventure which has always surrounded the occupation, whether in literature or in the stories of friends and neighbours who were already “shipping out”.<sup>351</sup> These leanings were trends, however, not inevitabilities. In consequence of the great range of motivating influences discovered by the fieldwork, it was decided that one avenue of enquiry should investigate the reasons impelling men to adopt the sea as a career and that similar enquiry should be made into their reasons for leaving the occupation. The area between the two within this chapter is dedicated to the examination of major impressions of shipboard life, convoys, and/or the war in general, with special attention to the preference for certain “watches” or work hours.

Why do men become seafarers? “Gone are the days of adventure, when young boys ran away to sea for the thrill of it.”<sup>352</sup> This assertion appeared in a sociological study of modern American merchant mariners in 1973, but its accuracy is debatable relative to the testimonies of those who went to sea immediately before and during the Second World War. A goodly number cited that very thrill of adventure as their reason for shipping out

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<sup>349</sup> Sherar, 7.

<sup>350</sup> The personal testimonies of military personnel have been excluded from this chapter for reasons of space. For similar reasons few Radio/Wireless Operators have been cited. The statements of all, however, will be found in the tape-recorded materials of the Halley Maritime Collection.

<sup>351</sup> A term synonymous with “going to sea” and commonly used in that context.

<sup>352</sup> Sherar, 14.

initially, and at least two specifically said they had “run away to sea” as a result. It is, of course, possible that they soon became disenchanted with their initial rosy view of the seafarer’s life, but the vast majority interviewed seem to have retained a youthful outlook and a sense of adventure well into maturity and even advanced age. It may, indeed, be this aspect of the seaman’s general character which causes him in his advanced years to become such a romantic figure in the eyes of those, usually much younger, who listen raptly to his tales of life at sea, whether those tales be factual or fictive. Dr. Ronald Hope, Director of the Marine Society, begins his book, *The Merchant Navy*, with the suggestion that the average British seaman is motivated by a desire “to see strange places and new things” and by a “yearning for high adventure.”<sup>353</sup>

Again, as regards the possibility of disenchantment, Hope notes:

However old and however experienced the seafarer, the land that rises above the horizon retains its magic; and the moods of the sea and the climates of the world are such that there is always something to look forward to even on those occasions when the present is not immediately enjoyable.<sup>354</sup>

He does concede that “life in the Merchant Navy is not all honey”, but also indicates that the man who regrets his time at sea in the Merchant Navy is rare.<sup>355</sup> These assertions were confirmed by a number of respondents, one of whom, an Englishman, said that life at sea was very good, he enjoyed it very much indeed, and would not have changed his life for anything. (HMC 92-67, TTC p. 2) A Newfoundlander simply said, “The sea was always my first love, really.” (HMC 91-12, TTC p. 2)

Apropos North American seafarers during the period under investigation, Bunker observes:

Wartime merchant seamen came from all parts of the United States and from some Allied nations. Boys too young to

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<sup>353</sup> Ronald Hope, *The Merchant Navy* (London: Stanford Maritime, 1980), 7.

<sup>354</sup> Hope, 33.

<sup>355</sup> Hope, 33.

be drafted joined the merchant marine. Men too old for the draft, or who for one reason or another were not accepted by the armed forces, found in the merchant marine an opportunity to take an active part in the war effort.

Some few men went to sea for what in those days was good pay and some did so to escape military service, but these were not the overriding attractions for most wartime volunteers. A man could make good pay in shipyards and war plants without any of the risks of seafaring. And as for escaping the draft, many thousands of young men who were attracted to sea by wartime recruiting posters had little if any concept of what life in the merchant marine was like -- or what pay or danger was involved.<sup>356</sup>

The mercantile marine demands an odd mixture of qualities in its adherents. Most mariners must first and foremost have independence, yet *interdependence* at sea is absolutely essential for survival. Many seafarers are loners, who might be described as “odd men out” among their contemporaries ashore, yet they seem to share between themselves, at least to some degree, the same eccentricities. It is often difficult, from childhood, for them to integrate fully into shoreside society, yet they live and work together for extended periods in close proximity, both physical and social, with few if any occasions of major discord except in port, and that usually occasioned by overindulgence in drink.

Much of this overall shipboard harmony results from the fact that the sea places constant demands on the attention and respect of those who sail upon her, but the situation ashore is altogether different. A shore job indeed may have moments when the individual's immediate attention is vital, but these are interspersed with long periods of leisure, far less structured than those aboard. At sea one cannot stroll in the park during lunchtime, take in a show with a date in the evening, or spend “coffee-break” time with all one's workmates.<sup>357</sup> Even the available food, although it may be plentiful, has limits

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<sup>356</sup> Bunker, *Liberty*, 19-20.

<sup>357</sup> “One cannot walk down to the corner bar for a drink, or walk in the woods, or shop at the local stores.”(Sherar, 9).

to its variety, a seeming inconsistency when one considers the taste for things exotic and unfamiliar with which the average seafarer appears imbued.

Workers ashore must interact with a much wider spectrum of people on a regular basis and make far more personal decisions in a given space of time than seamen. Aboard ship, food and living space are provided and entertainment, even with today's technological advances, is limited. The seafarer is aware of the company available and may mingle sociably or not as fancy dictates. Ashore one chooses companions and recreational pursuits as well as food and lodging from a far greater selection and the necessity for such apparently trivial decisions may prove extremely irritating to the sort of person fitted to the seafaring life, especially when such decisions are required repeatedly over lengthy periods of time. Once the novelty of being ashore has worn off, the seaman without a ship can be more susceptible both to temptations and to his own frailties than the landsman who habitually deals with such things on a daily basis.

These annoyances can occasionally chafe the susceptible into domestic violence when there is no regular escape to the routine of the workplace. Like those made redundant in large numbers with the demise of such large-scale shoreside industries as mining, the land-bound sailor finds himself shorter-tempered than he is at sea after only a short term of leave. Not only has his income and thus the ability to support his dependants been suspended, but he has also lost the security of his familiar working and living environment, in which minor decisions are few and he can be more single-minded. Even when the period of inactivity is limited, things can become distinctly unpleasant.

Becker has noted in this regard:

Most provisional roles conferred by society -- like that of the student or conscripted soldier, for example -- include some kind of terminal ceremony to mark the individual's movement back out of the role once its temporary advantages have been

exhausted. But the roles allotted to the deviant seldom make allowance for this type of passage.

And as a result, the deviant often returns home with no proper license to resume a normal life in the community. Nothing has happened to cancel out the stigmas imposed upon him by earlier commitment ceremonies; from a formal point of view, the original verdict or diagnosis is still in effect. It should not be surprising, then, that the members of the community seem reluctant to accept the returning deviant on an entirely equal footing. In a very real sense, they do not know who he is.<sup>358</sup>

Merchant shipping during the Second World War, of course, differed from peacetime commerce in a number of ways which will become apparent in the development of this work, but Chapter Six in particular will demonstrate the applicability of Becker's concept of "deviance" as "failure to obey group rules"<sup>359</sup> to this occupation, one of whose most significant features is enforced isolation from the larger portion of society for extended periods of time.

Becker remarks that: "...agencies of control provide aid and shelter to a large number of deviant persons, sometimes enhancing their survival chances in the world as a whole ... gather marginal people into tightly segregated groups, give them an opportunity to teach one another the skills and attitudes of a deviant career, and often provoke them into employing these skills by reinforcing their sense of alienation from the rest of society. ...this process is found not only in the institutions which actually confine the deviant, but throughout the general community as well."<sup>360</sup> If we concede that a shipboard apprenticeship or cadetship programme as well as the confines of a nautical academy or an orphanage can be designated an "agency of control", then the perception of seafaring as a marginal or "deviant" occupation becomes all the more readily acceptable, since, although most of these institutions were developed to provide young men with limited prospects an opportunity for economic advancement and thus for social acceptability, "[i]t is by now a

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<sup>358</sup> Becker (1964), 16-17.

<sup>359</sup> (i.e., norms), Becker (1963), 7-8.

<sup>360</sup> Becker (1964), 16.

thoroughly familiar argument that many of the institutions built to inhibit deviation actually operate in such a way as to perpetuate it.”<sup>361</sup> Perhaps even the tutelage of a promising but “green” young first-tripper by an old Bosun, skilled in seamanship, might fall under such a heading. The system of taking apprentices to sea in training to become ratings or officers certainly would do so. It began in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and those accepted into such training schemes were often orphans or paupers on the parish roles. The repute of the system at that time was that it constituted virtual slavery and was continued as a ready means of disposing of superfluous and unwanted male children at a fairly early age.<sup>362</sup>

The first orphanage sailor interviewed during the fieldwork actually went to sea before the war, in December 1938, from an institution which specialised in sending boys either to the hotel industry as bellboys or to sea as Apprentices.<sup>363</sup> He had no choice but was told to sign various documents, given a “medical” [US = “physical”], eyesight test, and so on, and then sent to Cardiff docks to join a tramp steamer. He had signed indentures at the “princely sum” of sixty pounds for four years! This worked out to about five shillings a week; it was cheap hard labour in return for training. To sit the upgrading exams one must have three years and six months sea time in the space of four years. This lad was fifteen when he first went to sea and had been at sea for nine months when the war broke out; already on his second voyage, he was not yet sixteen.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 1) The next orphanage sailor interviewed may have been in the same institution, as he said he had been sent to sea from a National Children’s Home in Penarth, which is “near Cardiff”. It was all male and set up like a nautical school, with uniforms and a band. He was taken to Cardiff docks by the person in charge of the Home.

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<sup>361</sup>. Becker (1964), 15.

<sup>362</sup>. Hope, 17.

<sup>363</sup>. As has been noted, all ranks and ratings throughout this work will have their initial letters capitalised in order to make a distinction and avoid confusion.



There was an ordinary ladder balanced against the side of the ship, up which he had to carry his “donkey’s breakfast” -- a palliasse of straw for his bed. That ship also required each crewman to provide his own eating utensils, and soap for washing both his person and his clothes. As a “Boy”,<sup>364</sup> he was subordinate to the Cook, but fortunately this Cook was a good man, who treated him well. He decided not to stay in Catering,<sup>365</sup> as the Deck Department interested him, and the Captain was agreeable. As a Boy, he was not housed in the forecabin with the rest of the crew, but had his own room amidships like a Cadet and could do things such as helping the officers with various jobs. Essentially the Captain had offered him the chance to become a Cadet, but he wanted to be free, so he found himself another ship. He wanted to be a sailor, but had to start as an Ordinary Seaman. It was probably fortunate that he left, as the ship was sunk by the *Graf Spee*. He always regretted that, and the loss of her kindly Captain, but he himself had escaped.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 7)

Another lad’s parents died in 1932, and he was sent for four years to an orphanage where he was trained for the sea. The orphanage was supported by wealthy merchants who dealt with the shipping companies, and each section of the institution wore the “colours” of a particular sponsor. This man’s brother, with whom he now shares a home, went to sea with him as a Bellboy, but only did three or four return[round] trips to New York before health problems forced his retirement.(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 2 and 5)

A fourth orphan went to sea as a Cabin Boy in 1940 when he was fifteen years and five months old. He had been to the orphans’ training school for (primarily) Catering ratings aboard the old sailing ship *Vindicatrix* in Sharpness, Gloucestershire,<sup>366</sup> which only trained “Boys”. He does not know if the sea was a family tradition, as he was an orphan. He only stayed in the Catering Department until December of 1941, and then went to the Deck Department as an Ordinary Seaman and sailed Deck until retiring as a Petty Officer Quartermaster in 1972 after thirty-two years of seafaring. The *Vindicatrix* was well run, with a very disciplined regime, even though in the early part of the war merchant seamen did not come under the Essential Works Order and were entirely civilians. Later the Ministry of War Transport brought them under this Order. Thenceforth, once in the Merchant Navy, if you left voluntarily, were

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<sup>364</sup>. “Boy”, as in Cabin Boy, Bellboy, Galley Boy, Messboy is part of an actual job description, and not simply an indication of youth, although in the earliest days the tender age of most people in these positions gave the job its title. Today, however, a “Boy” may, in fact, be almost superannuated. It is for this reason that I have chosen to use upper case letters to distinguish such ratings and ranks.

<sup>365</sup>. As has been previously mentioned, the names of the three shipboard Departments -- Deck, Engine, and Stewards’ (or Catering) -- will be capitalised throughout this work to provide distinction and avoid confusion.

<sup>366</sup>. It had originally been the Gravesend Sea School in the Thames.

discharged for misbehaviour, or were no longer required in the Merchant Navy, you would automatically be called up for military service upon coming ashore. Under the Essential Works Order you were under the direct control of the Ministry of War Transport, basically organised by the Merchant Navy Pool itself. This informant stayed at sea after the war because, as an orphan, he had no home, he was not trained for any other job, and it suited him. "The fact [is?] that I was a trained seaman, and the fact is that I was much of a lone wanderer. I was happy with the seafarin' life; I just more or less decided to carry on." By that time he was an AB<sup>367</sup> and the sea had become his home.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 1 and 7)

It appears that fifteen, going on sixteen, was the age at which orphans were usually sent to sea, because the last of this group to be interviewed sailed at that age as well. It was July 1942 and he sailed as a Deck Boy, staying in the Deck Department throughout his seafaring career. Continuing at sea for a time after the war, he then came ashore and went into the shipyards as Rigger and Quartermaster for a time, before returning to sea. While not actively sailing during the majority of his working life, he remained associated with the sea throughout. Before shipping out the first time, he attended the Navy League School in Wallasey, a shore establishment which was the equivalent of the training ship, *Indefatigable*. Originally from the Liverpool area, he came to the Navy League from a boarding school in Lancaster as his mother had died and his sister could not cope with the family. There was no alternative for the lad, who was sent to sea as an orphan. He believed that, just prior to the war, most first-trippers came from the navy schools rather than straight off the streets. It was a better, more modern system to train them first.

"I met these young fellas, they used to -- very -- whatchacall -- too sensitive and ... homesick, aren't they? But comin' out of the trainin' school, you're hardened, aren't you, really, to what's gonna happen?" Those who went to sea without the benefit of a training school often had an uncle or a father to assist them. "Families stuck together." But he does not believe the "family way" superior to training school, because the school taught its trainees all the necessary signals, etc. In convoy an

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<sup>367</sup>. As has been previously noted, the term "AB" is universally accepted in nautical parlance to refer to an Able (or Able-Bodied) Seaman and will be so used throughout this work.

untrained Deck Boy was just a “gopher”,<sup>368</sup> but a school-trained lad could be used on the bridge, be more useful, more like a Cadet or an Apprentice. On his very first trip, the respondent actually was a Cadet. In convoy everything was controlled by signals from the commodore ship and he had been trained to read the international flag code. An ordinary AB could not have done it but he had been taught.

Some from his school went into the Royal Navy. He intended at first to do so himself, but chose the Merchant Navy in preference halfway through as they were better paid and “more colourful”. The Royal Navy was too strict, as well. He now regrets his choice as Royal Navy retirees receive a pension and often left the service with a trade. They used to put Royal Navy seamen into the Customs Service when they retired. One of his neighbours had the same school-leaving qualifications, but joined the Royal Navy, finished as a Chief Petty Officer, and became a high officer in Customs. He was very comfortable in his old age, having both a Navy pension and a Customs pension. Asked why a man goes to sea, the interviewee replied, “I think it’s just to get away from something, to be honest, goin’ to sea.” On looking back, he believes it to be mostly escapism. If he had the opportunity, he would do it again, but just for the comradeship and having a good time -- adventure in foreign ports, and the like. He would never have had an opportunity to travel otherwise, and experience with languages and with handling foreign currencies has been handy. Even now, when he goes on holiday with his wife, he can speak a little Spanish, a little Portuguese.... He was also taken under the wing of two separate Bosuns who gave him the benefit of their years of experience in seafaring.(HMC 92-57, TTC pp. 1-3)

There was more of a chance for an orphaned pauper to make a success of himself in merchant shipping than in almost any other trade. Once he had signed Ship’s Articles on his first vessel, there was scarcely a limit as to how high he might go by diligence and application. In those early days a ship’s Captain (Master), and sometimes the Mate (Chief Officer) as well, had usually the prospect of sharing in the ownership of at least a portion of the cargo if not of the vessel herself, so the opportunity was available of eventually retiring from the sea as a reputable shipowner with a steady stream of small profits which functioned as a pension in his later years. Despite all this, we are told:

No young person runs away to sea now; but when anyone joins the modern Merchant Navy he or she does not require...luck or genius to make good. Down the centuries the sea has not

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<sup>368</sup>. “Gopher” is a slang term for a general dogsbody, derived from the fact that s/he must repeatedly “gopher” = “go for” various articles, errands, etc.

changed. The conditions of the seafarer's life and his opportunities for advancement, on the other hand, have changed beyond all recognition.<sup>369</sup>

At one time it was normal for those wishing to pursue a career at sea, particularly as a deck officer, to embark upon nautical training at an early age. This is no longer necessary, but in Hull and London there are day secondary schools with a nautical bias for boys who are ATTRACTED to such schooling.<sup>370</sup>

and again:

Any seafarer with ability and a willingness to work can go far, far ahead. There is no bar to advancement in any branch of the Merchant Navy.<sup>371</sup>

It is not entirely accurate to say that no one ran away to sea in the period under discussion. One Norwegian lad ran away to sea in 1915, when he was only fourteen, and eventually obtained his Master's papers under the aegis of the U.S. Army Transport System.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 1) A British youngster of the same age, disenchanted with his wartime apprenticeship ashore, got a job as a Deck Boy on a riverboat, where, while larking about with a pal on fire watch, he saw a deep-sea rescue tug. On going aboard the following day and asking for a job, he was told to get his gear, as she was sailing at noon on a two-month run, towing "Mulberry Harbours"<sup>372</sup> to Scotland for testing. He went home, packed, and left a note -- and a distracted mother, who tried everything to get him back, including the police, but to no avail. He joined the Merchant Navy Pool<sup>373</sup> the following year, launching a career at sea which lasted off and on until well after the war's end and his subsequent marriage.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 1)

The romantic aspect of seafaring might strike a man at any time and for the oddest of reasons. Thomas Goodyear, now a retired Master, began his

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<sup>369</sup>. Hope, 27.

<sup>370</sup>. Hope, 72. Emphasis his.

<sup>371</sup>. Hope, 64.

<sup>372</sup>. Concrete caissons, see Glossary in Chapter Eight.

<sup>373</sup>. The Pool was the Ministry of War Transport's method of assigning seamen to vessels. In the U.S., the War Shipping Administration simply utilised the trade unions' hiring systems which were already in operation. The American system was universally known as shipping or sailing "out of the halls".

career in sailing vessels around the Newfoundland Coast, and later joined the *Fort Amherst*. After a few months sailing, they met the *Queen of Bermuda* in New York. She was the biggest thing Goodyear had ever seen and classy -- the crew all wore uniforms. He went aboard and from her bridge could look down into the funnel of the *Fort Amherst*. On the same day the *Queen Mary* came in two piers further on and from her bridge, you could look down the funnel of the *Queen of Bermuda*. It was this ever-expanding perspective and the accompanying impression of magnificence that influenced him to further his own career at sea, during which he later sailed on the *Queen of Bermuda* herself.(HMC 91-4, TTC pp. 2-3)

Before proceeding to further exempla from the fieldwork, a quick survey of general data is advisable. Those interviewed were roughly divisible into two basic groups. The first consisted of men who had been interested in merchant shipping from an early age; many of these began their careers well prior to their countries' involvement in World War II. The second was made up of men who would probably not have gone to sea but for the war. A large number of the former group intended from the outset to become ship's officers and began by attending maritime academies or nautical schools, by entering cadetship or apprenticeship programmes run by shipping companies<sup>374</sup>, or by a combination of the two. A significant proportion of such men continued their seafaring careers after the war, many until they reached retirement age. A sizeable number, however, concluded their active sailing careers relatively early, but took up posts ashore in fields closely allied to merchant shipping, thus avoiding complete dissociation from their original objectives.

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<sup>374</sup>. Although virtually synonymous in North America, "Cadet" and "Apprentice" (and "Midshipman") were distinct in the United Kingdom, despite having almost identical duties. British Cadets signed on ships' Articles as crew members and sometimes had to pay a fee for their training, while Apprentices were indentured to the shipping company for a specified period and were waged, though barely so, and Midshipmen were always in some way connected to the military. Both Deck Officers and Engineers could be trained as Cadets in North America, while in Great Britain the latter most often took their apprenticeship and training ashore. Most, if not all, U.S. Cadets were trained in maritime academies or "schoolships" before actively going to sea.

Capt. W. L. Ashton, an Englishman, went to sea 7 January 1931, as a sixteen-year-old Cadet. Under the British system, an Apprentice is indentured, while a Cadet signs on and pays a premium of fifty pounds in case he runs away or misbehaves. On reaching the age of twenty or so, a Cadet can take a short course at a Nautical School and get a Second Mate's ticket. If he returns to the firm and they have an opening, he can then have a Third Officer's job. Capt. Harold Skelly, a little older than Capt. Ashton, had to sail as Quartermaster for two or three years after getting his ticket before a Fourth Officer's job was available and it took him nearly eight years in one ship to upgrade through Third to Second Mate. Capt. Ashton was lucky and immediately got a job as a Third. You generally spent about two years on one ship and then were promoted to a bigger and better one.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 1)

An Apprentice or Cadet was like one of the crew, but with special status, in that he had his own cabin, which was unheard of for a rating in those days. He was not allowed into the officers' accommodation except to clean or do other work, even though he was technically an apprentice officer. Apprentices had also to pass a minor examination ("kid stuff") annually to prove they were still on the ship and working. On the whole, the training was good. Capt. R.A. Simpson learnt the business that way. He did not learn much academically, but received good training in seamanship.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 1)

"Fish" Ramsey, an American who retired as a Chief Engineer, said that in those days, one first signed on as a Wiper, Ordinary Seaman, or Messboy,<sup>375</sup> but subsequently was called a "Cadet" if one had a sponsor within the company as he did. He was twenty or twenty-one at the time and was already licensed by the time the United States entered the war, having obtained his

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<sup>375</sup>. These are the lowest ratings in Engine, Deck, and Stewards'/Catering Departments respectively. In the United Kingdom the terms may differ slightly.

ticket in 1939. He did not get his Chief Engineer's licence until 1952, well after the war, but held a First Assistant's certificate during the hostilities. The seafaring trade was in his family; his father had worked on sailing vessels and as a docker in Savannah, Georgia, and his nephew presently works on the docks.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 1 and p. 3)

Clinton Johnson attended Officer Candidate School in Alameda, California, where there was one school for the basic Third Assistant Engineer's licence, with a four-month-long course and one of thirty days to upgrade further. The Maritime Administration (and United States Maritime Service) ran these schools simultaneously, but completely separately from the California Maritime Academy (California Nautical School) at that time. CMA (CNS) accepted students who had never before been to sea. The course originally took four years, and was then cut to three, but some people got by with even shorter periods of study during the war, as the need for ships' personnel was great. OCS was a four-month course which counted as "sea time". Before the war it was necessary to put in three years of sea time to qualify for a licence, either as a Fireman/Oiler for Engine crew or as an AB/Bosun for the Deck Department. This was halved to eighteen months during the war and the actual time ashore at OCS was counted as sea time as well. Johnson's time was close and depended on whether one counted it in days or in months. He was eighteen years old, and the law said one must be nineteen to hold a licence. The recruiting station in Los Angeles said he was too young, but his birthday, which was also the day of graduation, was 15 January, so he squeaked by. There was no law that said you could not go to the school before you were nineteen. Many of his classmates were much older, of course, still the classroom part "was a snap for a kid who still knew how to study". There were crash courses in subjects such as mathematics. Students at the school only had to stand duty every four days, so he brought his car up from Los Angeles with special "C" stamps for gasoline; it was very pleasurable. That year January 15th fell on a Saturday, so he actually graduated and got his licence on the Friday, while he was still under age. Still, he did not attempt to use the licence until after his birthday, so he "slipped through the cracks".

A second Englishman, Capt. Derek Belk, went to sea at the age of sixteen on 17 February 1944, but laughingly added, "I can't remember the time of day." He was an Apprentice for Blue Funnel (Alfred Holt Lines). The Admiralty had given Blue Funnel permission to call their Apprentices "Midshipmen" because of services rendered in World War I.(HMC 92-52, TTC p.

1) Some British shipping companies, such as Shaw Savill, New Zealand

Shipping Company, and Blue Funnel, had special ships designated for training Cadets. With other companies a beginner was pretty much on his own and depended a great deal on the kindness of the other officers on the ship to help him or not as they chose.(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 2) One lad rose from this latter rather haphazard system to obtain his original Master's ticket in 1943, thence sailing as Chief Officer and on an occasional voyage in the capacity of Master, although not confirmed as such. He had a Master's ticket at the top of which it said: "To which he appears to be entitled", because early in the war he had lost the original and asked for another. As the Customshouse in Liverpool had also been bombed, few records survived, so they had to take his word for it.(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 1)

A dozen or so of those interviewed had shipped out before 1930 -- one as early as 1902 -- and most of this earliest group were quite young when they sailed initially, usually between the ages of fourteen and seventeen. One admitted, "I was late going to sea", as he did not launch his seafaring career until the ripe old age of nineteen, when, in 1926, he became a Cadet with Elder Dempster Lines. His father was from Bristol, where most people were, he said, "either seafarers or pirates", but there were no seafarers on his mother's side, although he grew up in Devon where there is a lot of seafaring as well. "It was a seafaring Captain who put me to sea in the first place down there." He was impelled to go to sea by the influence of attending the British Empire Exhibition, which gave him an overwhelming interest in West Africa. Elder Dempster traded around the West African coast. He had his Mate's ticket by the time the war started, and acquired his Master's papers during the war, although he did not yet have a command by its end.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 1)



Most of the earliest group of interviewees to sail either shipped before the mast and “came up through the hawsepipe”<sup>376</sup> or went through a Cadetship or Apprenticeship, but because their careers began so long before the outbreak of the Second World War, nearly all were licensed by that time, and some even had their own commands. One typical example, having gone to sea in 1925 as a sixteen-year-old Apprentice, had his Master’s certificate before the war started in 1939 and was by then already a valuable member of the seafaring profession with long experience of watch-keeping, knowing men who had been at sea in World War I and could train others for the World War II convoys.(HMC 92-38, TTC p. 1)

Just four of this segment of the men interviewed remained unlicensed; all were in the Catering Department and only one reached the zenith of that Department, eventually becoming Chief Steward.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 1) Another who had only sailed on coastal boats and cross-Channel ferries to Ireland took a wartime job on a large liner which sailed independently, with passengers and evacuees, from Liverpool to Capetown in ten and a half days non-stop full speed. It was an experience for him, as he had never “done deep sea”<sup>377</sup> before. He really enjoyed it and thought deep sea sailing was marvellous. On the return trip, which took eleven days, all crewmembers stood daily submarine watches for an hour or so.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 2)

Almost triple the total of the foregoing group belonged to a second pre-war segment, beginning their seafaring careers during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Those who started during the first half of that decade, like those who began prior to 1930, were often licensed by the war’s onset, but those

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<sup>376</sup>. This term is universally accepted amongst Anglophone seafarers to indicate a person has risen through the ranks, upgrading from one of the lowest ratings to officer status -- often to the highest rank in his Department, Chief Engineer or Master Mariner. Cadets, Apprentices, Midshipmen, and those who have begun their training in Maritime Academies or Nautical Colleges do not fall under this rubric.

<sup>377</sup>. To “go” or “do” deep sea is one accepted term for sailing on trans-oceanic voyages rather than coastally, on inland waterways, or on ferries with limited itineraries. An alternative term, equally acceptable, is to “ship” or “go” foreign.

who set forth in the late 1930s or early 1940s found the rapid upgrading processes during the war years worked greatly to their career advantage.<sup>378</sup> Again, a large number of the British interviewees undertook cadetship and apprenticeship programmes, while many from North America attended maritime academies which provided similar training. Others, yet again like the group which started before 1930, took the route “through the hawsepipe”. North American seamen’s unions also initiated upgrading programmes for their members during this decade, but a man who attended one of the latter said that during his four-month training course, the “union stiff” rebelled against the school’s regimentation, going on strike before being eventually forced to submit to the requisite discipline.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 1)

An example of the difficulty of meeting entrance requirements for North American, state-run academies is the story of a lad who applied for the “schoolship” in Pennsylvania. There was a two-day written examination, which was very competitive -- out of three hundred applicants they were accepting only twenty-six. The letter he received with his marks regretfully informed him he had ranked twenty-seventh. Shortly thereafter he was at home between voyages<sup>379</sup> and was asked if he were the kid who had applied for the schoolship. The questioner was a new neighbour, a politician, who asserted, “You don’t get on the schoolship by taking an exam! Put your application in next year and you’re in!” But the following year, the prospective Cadet was aboard a ship abroad when the time came to apply. Furthermore it was too late, because by then he was too old. He eventually attended Officer Candidate School at Fort Trumbull in New London, Connecticut, instead, because many of his friends had already got their tickets

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<sup>378</sup>. One, who shipped as an Ordinary Seaman in 1937 at the age of sixteen, and now has his twelfth issue Master’s papers, said he felt no incentive to sit for a licence until the war had actually started. This may not be entirely accurate, however, as he also states that he attempted to gain entry to the Pennsylvania Maritime Academy before ever going to sea, since he came from a merchant marine family.(HMC 90-67, TTC pp. 1 ff.)

<sup>379</sup>. He had shipped as regular crew.

and the course there was shorter.(HMC 90-67, TTC pp. 3-5)<sup>380</sup> A boy from Virginia, given an appointment by his State Senator, went through the Maritime Commission Cadetship programme, and was in Portugal in his first licensed job aboard an American Export Lines passenger ship when the war started, but was captured on his next voyage, and spent the rest of the war in a Japanese prison camp.(HMC 90-58, TTC p. 1)

The British Cadetship programme, in contrast, was described thus by a Newfoundlander:

Most officers got their papers because their parents had enough money to pay for their training. You had to have four years at sea before you could sit your Second Mate's examinations. Your parents would pay the company to take you to sea as a Cadet<sup>381</sup> during which time you were trained by the ship's officers, starting with deck work and gradually progressing to work on the bridge while constantly studying navigation, often facilitated by a correspondence course. After four years you would go ashore to a nautical school for a few months' final tuition before examinations. This was the normal procedure. I was in a different situation as I had no one to sponsor me. I went to sea before the mast and had to come up through the hawsepipe.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 4)

The overwhelming majority of the group who began their careers in the interwar period started sailing before the age of seventeen, while several began at twenty-one or over, and there is a distinct gap at the ages of nineteen and twenty in which no representative was found. It is reasonable to assume, therefore, that this group was composed primarily of youngsters just entering the workforce, who perceived merchant shipping to present opportunities both for travel and adventure and for a secure occupational future. Another rational assumption is that the older segment had spent a considerable amount of time, perhaps as much as two or three years, in pursuit of viable shoreside

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<sup>380</sup> Like Clint Johnson's course in California, it was only four months.

<sup>381</sup> This differed from a British apprenticeship programme, in which the Apprentice was directly indentured to the shipping company and did not sign on Ship's Articles, nor was sponsorship required.

employment and only embraced seafaring as an alternative when other paths remained closed.

One apparent exception had been an Engineering student at the University of California, Los Angeles, for three years, and was in severe financial difficulties when a Scottish-born professor who had been to sea in his own youth convinced him to do likewise and helped him get his first maritime job in 1935. By the time the States entered the war he was twenty-seven and had his Second Assistant Engineer's ticket.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 1) It is remarkable that this is the only man of the entire group interviewed who even partially acquired a formal university-level academic education before going to sea. Maritime Academies closely approached, but did not actually achieve, this level of higher education.

One of the youngest and most typical of the Depression-era ratings was regularly hitch-hiking to the harbour to look at the ships by the time he was thirteen. Shortly thereafter, he and a friend tried to stow away, but were caught by the Mate. At about fourteen he signed on a coastal tanker. He worked ashore for an interval because of labour disputes and strikes, but went immediately back to sea at the outbreak of war. He said he had no real desire to be a seaman, but wished to travel and had no money, so he worked. At the beginning of the war, like many others who sailed only "before the mast"<sup>382</sup> he also worked at a shipyard on a "shakedown"<sup>383</sup> crew.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 1) Another man, who became a Master and then went into maritime labour relations for the U.S. Government, started to work "on anything that floats" in the summer of 1935, when he was only fourteen. As he worked in and out of New York Harbour, he saw the ship and steamboat traffic and "got the urge." Graduating from high school at sixteen, too young to legally get seaman's papers, he obtained them as soon as he turned seventeen, and became a "House Cadet" with United States Lines. He was on the last American passenger vessel out of Hamburg before the war started in 1939 and with rapid advancement acquired his Master's papers by the age of twenty-three.(HMC 90-59, TTC pp. 1-2)

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<sup>382</sup> . To "sail before the mast" means to ship as a rating rather than as an officer. The term arises from the ratings' accommodations in sailing ships, which were in a communal forecabin in the bow of the ship in front of ("before") the mast.

<sup>383</sup> . Before being released as seaworthy vessels by the shipyard which produced them, ships were commonly sent on a "shakedown run" or trial, crewed by shipyard workers qualified not only to sail them, but also to make any necessary modifications on the spot, or at least to contrive some temporary expedient when necessity demanded.

One British respondent, who first went to sea in 1935 as an Ordinary Seaman, had started an Apprenticeship, but failed the eyesight test and, since his parents could not afford to send him to London, went into the shipping office instead. One day, on the ferry home from work, he met an old pal who had just left a ship and signed on in his place. He was fifteen and a half or sixteen at that time.(TTC 92-34, TTC p. 1) Another, from an estate in a Liverpool dock area where everyone went to sea, sailed first in 1933 at the age of sixteen. It was only a seasonal job, but when he had his discharge papers, he applied for and obtained a regular job as a Deck Boy. At the end of that job he paid half a crown and got a proper discharge book. He went from one Department to another, because “you took anything them days,” but preferred the Engine Room.<sup>384</sup> Many shipping lines were “family concerns” at that time and if you had a job with the company you could obtain one for a relative.(HMC 92-49, TTC pp. 1-2) A third typical British seafarer went through a sea school first, in Gravesend, outside London, in May of 1936. They had an old vessel in the Thames, but it was a shore establishment. He had three months there under the Shipping Federation, then sailed as Deck Boy. He was seventeen.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 1)

As a brief aside regarding the progress of Deck ratings, before the war, one would normally do two trips (or twelve months) as a Deck Boy or “Peggy”<sup>385</sup> and then become an Ordinary Seaman. It required three years actual sea time -- not just three years from the day you first signed on -- before your discharge book would be stamped as AB. Some latitude was given after two years; you could take the position of an Able Seaman, but were signed on simply as “Sailor” There is no discharge of that name today. After about two

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<sup>384</sup> . As has been previously stated, the term Engine Room will be capitalised throughout this work.

<sup>385</sup> . Capt. A.G. Course’s *Dictionary of Nautical Terms* (London: Arco Publications, 1962) on page 146 defines a peggy as an “apprentice, boy or ordinary seaman, who acts as unpaid steward to the other apprentices or seamen. Weekly turns are usually taken in the case of apprentices. He keeps the halfdeck ... clean and fetches the meals from the galley. In some ships he also washed the dishes.”

years, you had proven your efficiency, but it was up to the Chief Officer or the Captain. A ship was required by law to carry a specified number of ABs. If they had this number, they could then carry three or four “Sailors” at the same pay. The actual Deck complement consisted of Deck Boy/Peggy, Ordinary Seaman, (there could be “Sailor”), and AB -- you could have four different ratings on Deck. Later “Sailor” disappeared completely and they introduced “EDH” -- Efficient Deck Hand. The rating was similar to “Sailor” -- you must have two years sea time and were almost equivalent to an AB -- but for EDH rating you had to sit a small test ashore, while “Sailor” rating was conferred entirely aboard ship at the discretion of the officer in charge.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 1)

1) Another respondent, discussing the “Sailor” rating during the war said that there were no “Electric Deckhands” or DHUs<sup>386</sup> at that time. A person upgraded from Deck Boy to Ordinary Seaman to AB.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 1)

A third respondent added that you had to stay on your first ship for more than one trip or forfeit the “passport” to another job. If only one voyage appeared in your discharge book, prospective employers would assume you were not much good and pass you by.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 1)

A British rating clearly stated in an interview that the thing he liked best about seafaring was job security during the Depression, and added that some companies had House Pools.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4)

Another further discussed the seafarers' lot during the interwar years:

“The seaman was the lowest of the low. The sad part about it was, also, unemployment at that time, in the '30s, was so bad....” He was sailing out of London at the time -- Ashburton House -- Missions to Seamen. Young boys would come round saying which ships were in and what rates were needed to sign on. Then all the men dashed down to show their discharge books with only two or three discharges. Many from the

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<sup>386</sup> . “Electric Deckhand” was his humorous terminology for EDH, as explained above, and DHU, stands for “Deck Hand Uncertificated”, the current usage equivalent to the older “Ordinary Seaman” rating. However one still upgrades to “AB”, or Able(-Bodied) Seaman.

Hebrides would take a chance and even stow away.<sup>387</sup> Men thirty or forty years old were taking jobs as Ordinary Seamen, because jobs were so scarce. There were ships where even skippers, men with Master's tickets, were taking AB's jobs, or even Ordinaries' -- this is not an exaggeration. You could not blame them, as they had to live. "That was the sad thing about it, y'know, that ABs, men of ability, y'know, experienced ABs doing Ordinary Seamen's jobs, or even Deck Boys' jobs. Masters of a ship takin' an AB's job and prob'ly taking orders from a skipper or a Mate who hadn't got his qualifications. ... On general terms it's like every job, whether you're ashore or afloat, y'know, and the echelon, y'know, the more ambitious they had to show results. Because let's face it, in those years, I'm talkin' about pre-war, their job was as much, y'know, at risk, whether it was the skipper or the Mate, or the Second Mate, because there were so many people waitin' to step into their shoes." (HMC 92-56, TTC p. 3)

An Irishman, who later settled in Liverpool, first went to sea because fishing was the family trade and he was brought up on it. His wife's family were all seafarers as well; the Welsh are all seafaring, too. He went foreign-going<sup>388</sup> in the '30s because fish were scarce and pay poor as a result. Other deep-water sailors from his village suggested it to him. He had already done his time as a Deck Boy, so he started as an Ordinary Seaman for four pounds and a half-crown per month, no more than a bare living wage. He could just manage on it. He did two trips as an Ordinary Seaman and got promoted, and his pay rose to nine pounds a month. There was no place to go but up. An AB's wages were nine pound, twelve and six,<sup>389</sup> so as a Sailor he was only twelve shillings sixpence short of an AB's pay. Like many others he was too fond of "bending the elbow" to study for a higher ticket, so never rose higher than Bosun. (HMC 92-32, TTC p. 7)

Two of the men interviewed, who had sailed in the period just before the war, gave fairly detailed descriptions of the British wartime employment

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<sup>387</sup>. A few further brief remarks about stowaways will be found in

Chapter Six.

<sup>388</sup>. In British and Canadian maritime licensing terminology, Home Trades refers to coastal waters and Foreign-Going to the broader seas and oceans of the world. "Foreign-going" is thus here equivalent to "deep sea" or "deep water" and is commonly so used. (See Glossary in Chapter Eight for full definition of British meanings of "Home Trades" and "Foreign-Going".)

<sup>389</sup>. See below.

schemes known as T124 and T124X. The one who actually sailed under T124X Articles said this system provided that merchant seafarers could remain aboard their vessels, which had been commandeered as troopers, Armed Merchant Cruisers, and the like. They were under naval discipline and had a naval commander aboard, but continued to receive pay on a merchant seaman's scale and could not be posted to any war zone other than the North Atlantic.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 1) The other respondent, who had been encouraged to do likewise, but had demurred, added that his projected pay would have been £9 12s 6d per month,<sup>390</sup> plus a ten pound monthly war bonus. He would have been in the Royal Navy and under Navy regulations, but under these Articles would have the option of leaving after six months while others had to remain for the duration of the war. The Royal Navy people coming aboard to man the ship would be largely recruits, he said, and the reason Merchant Navy personnel were so heartily encouraged to sign on T124X was to teach these newcomers how to handle their highly sophisticated vessel.(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 3)

A unique case was that of a man who sailed before the mast in the Merchant Service in 1937, then joined the Royal Navy Reserve and went to *Pompey* for training in August of 1938. He had tried to join the Royal Navy outright, but was refused because he was in a "reserve occupation"<sup>391</sup> and so had to join the RNR. An AB<sup>392</sup> in the Merchant Navy at that time, he was only classified as an "acting" AB at *Pompey*, although his discharge book had been stamped by the Board of Trade. Three months later, however he got his first stripe, became a three-badge Petty Officer, and continued to rise through commissions as he got further Merchant Navy tickets -- Sub-Lieutenant,

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<sup>390</sup>. See immediately above, where this was the normal pay for an AB.

<sup>391</sup>. This meant any job which later fell under the Essential Works Order. Men in such employment could join the Reserve branches of the Armed Forces, but not the regular services.

<sup>392</sup>. Able or Able-Bodied Seaman. This is the highest of the regular ratings in the Deck Department, equivalent to Oiler[U.S.]/Greaser[U.K.] in the Engine Department. Higher grades would fall into the Petty Officer category, such as Quartermaster, Bosun, Donkeyman, Deck Engineer, Pumpman, etc. and then go up to licensed or officers' ranks.



Lieutenant, etc. He got his Master's ticket in October of 1945 and came out of the RNR in 1965 with its equivalent naval rank of Lieutenant-Commander.<sup>393</sup>(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 1)

The second major division of respondents, as has been implied, entered the Merchant Service during the war. Their reasons for espousing this career option vary and a fairly significant number left the sea immediately at the close of the war or fairly soon afterward. The notion that the sea “gets into one's blood” however, is borne out by the fact that many such veterans said they would have preferred to continue seafaring, but their eventual decision to “swallow the anchor”<sup>394</sup> had resulted from consideration for wives and/or families, who preferred them to remain ashore. Several stated that they would have continued to ship out but for the fact that they were missing familial contact with their children. This was especially true of those with young families.<sup>395</sup> A few of this second group sought advancement “through the hawsepipe” and, like many others who achieved officer status, later became Pilots, company Port Captains, Marine Superintendents or Marine Surveyors, and other such maritime-connected, though shore-based elite.<sup>396</sup>

The majority of the apparently more transient “Hostilities Only”<sup>397</sup> sailors emerged from the North American sampling,<sup>398</sup> while those from Great Britain and Northern Ireland appeared more commonly to have begun before the war and remained in a sea-connected capacity until the age of retirement, many following family traditions or considering the sea the only career in

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<sup>393</sup> . This is roughly equivalent to the system in the United States, where my stepfather, who held a Chief Mate's ticket at the time, was afforded the titular rank of Lieutenant Commander in the United States Naval Reserve. See Chapter Six, however with regards to veteran's status.

<sup>394</sup> . A common nautical idiom for leaving the sea permanently.

<sup>395</sup> . See Section C of this Chapter, where the subject of leaving the sea is covered in more detail.

<sup>396</sup> . See previous footnote.

<sup>397</sup> . This was a term used officially by the British Armed Forces to indicate, as might be expected, those who had signed up for the duration of the war only.

<sup>398</sup> . Nearly half the North American mainland sampling fell into this general group, while a markedly smaller proportion of the British sample did so.

which they had any interest or prospects. This was most likely the result of several determinant factors. A substantial majority of British respondents were following a family calling, and the war was on their doorsteps. There were other ways of assisting the war effort; shipyards were so severely curtailed by the Blitz that few crews for newly-built vessels were immediately required; and the conditions under which the Merchant Service worked and suffered were more conspicuous to the general public in this smaller nation which was almost entirely dependent on her Mercantile Marine for survival. A goodly number seem to have accepted the sea as the only viable career option they knew, despite other opportunities. It does not seem surprising that men of this period were concerned with job security, having intimately experienced the Depression years of the 1930s whilst approaching the start of their working lives.

One, who was an eighteen-year-old American Deck Cadet in 1943-1944, described his preparation as “a good hard apprenticeship. There was good training, but little other experience; that came after the war.” He was a Cadet for the duration and still maintains contact with a fellow Cadet, who suffered from chronic seasickness.<sup>399</sup> Like many ostensibly retired ships’ officers, he still maintains a valid Master’s licence, although, at the age of sixty-four, he is unlikely to use it further.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 1)

A very few of those officers who came up “through the hawsepipes” have been scornful of those who were more formally trained and the same might be said in reverse, although Archie Green cites a woman seafarer who shipped in the 1980s as having heard shipmates describe federal and state maritime academies in the United States as “fink factories”.<sup>400</sup>

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<sup>399</sup>. Compare with other testimony in Section B of this chapter, regarding seasickness.

<sup>400</sup>. Fink is a word commonly used amongst North American labour activists, especially trade unionists, to indicate those under the control of the company hierarchy, the bosses.

“...[S]he contrasted academy graduates with officers who had ‘come up through the hawse pipes’ -- sailors advancing by dint of hard work and acceptance of rank-and-file traditions. Her vernacular phrase served to distinguish real salts from imitations, those seasoned at sea from those trained in ‘fink factories.’ [She] touched on the long-standing distinctions internalized by working people familiar with the labels *old hand/greenhorn* or *real McCoy/phony*.”<sup>401</sup>

Reinforcing this assertion to some extent, an informant from Delaware said that until the last ten or fifteen years, most officers came up through the hawsepipe. The unions now provide good pensions, and opportunities for officers are no longer as profitable as they once were. He said that just after the war, a Weyerhaeuser *Victory* ship had a couple of “academy boys” (meaning the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York) aboard. The Senior Master (Commodore) of the company was in charge of that ship and found them inadequate to the job; after that voyage no further academy boys were hired. The schoolships run by individual states turned out good officers though. (HMC 90-67, TTC p. 3)

During the war, attitudes such as these seem more frequently to have attached to the “ninety-day wonders” turned out by rapidly-established training schools, principally in North America. Such trainees were more often ratings than officers, except in certain branches of the military Navy. One British officer, nonetheless, disclosed that the navigational skills of newly qualified Mates from the United States were often called into question and that it was maintained they had so little experience that in convoy they often ordered the wheelsman simply to “follow that [British] ship ahead”, as they were unsure of where they were going or how to get there.<sup>402</sup> This is not as blatant a case of prejudice as it might seem, as, in September of 1943, a twenty-five-year-old who was separated from his wife signed up for the Merchant Marine in Kansas City, Missouri, and was sent to the Sheepshead Bay Training School in New

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<sup>401</sup>. Green, 165. The emphasis is Green’s.

<sup>402</sup>. Graeme Cubbin, personal conversation, Liverpool, 23/IV-1992, reinforced by several later contacts who agreed.

York to train for the Engine Department. He was preparing to sit for his licence as an Engineer when the war ended and he went into a shore job. On signing off his first vessel, he discovered the skipper had only a riverboat pilot's licence, and it was sheer luck that the Mate was sea-licensed Foreign-Going.(HMC 90-34, TTC p. 1) In New York City, when Hank Adams, a Bosun, and his best mate were the only ones aboard who had ever been to sea before, he picked his six ABs by simply designating the first six over the side from the United States Maritime Service school in Sheepshead Bay, New York. He then split up the crew to cast off, but one lad assigned to the stern went to the bow, because the ship was being towed out stern first by the tugs and he had gone to the "back end".(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 1)

In Canada, and more especially in the United States, vast programmes were underway during the Second World War to mass-produce standardised vessels for countries whose mercantile marine resources had heretofore been relatively limited and where they were also less necessary in peacetime, since both nations had extensive farmlands and natural resources together with highly developed industry, including shipbuilding itself. There was an almost infinite demand for new crews to man these newly-built vessels, and the USMS (United States Maritime Service) set up training schools at several venues to "mass-produce" seafarers in the same way that Kaiser Permanente and Bethlehem Steel were mass-producing their ships.<sup>403</sup> In addition, there were vast numbers of boys and men who wanted to assist the war effort, but who found themselves ineligible to serve in the military forces for any of a multitude of reasons, the most widespread of which was extreme youth. Innumerable youngsters from inland areas lied about their ages or obtained falsified papers in order to enter the less punctilious merchant marine when

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<sup>403</sup> The most prominent USMS recruitment and training schools were on Catalina Island off the California coast and in Sheepshead Bay in New York Harbour, but there were a number of others.

they found they could not deceive the recruitment and conscription officers of the Armed Forces.<sup>404</sup> Other reasons for Armed Forces ineligibility might be physical handicaps, such as vision or hearing defects, lost limbs, and the like, or advanced age. Of course convicted felons were also ineligible to join the Armed Services, but the percentage of these “moral defectives” who signed on merchant ships as an alternative contribution to the war effort was minuscule compared to those with clean records who were eager and ready to serve their country regardless of any handicaps of age or physical condition. More than a few men actually continued to sail or returned to the sea when far past the age of comfortable retirement, but in those days, even during peacetime, it was not uncommon for healthy types to continue working as long as they were physically capable.<sup>405</sup>

Most of those interviewed who attended the official USMS training facilities did so either at Catalina Island, in California, or at either Sheepshead Bay or Hoffman Island in New York Harbor. The training was briefly described by a man who attended the latter. He was from Pennsylvania and had signed up with a group of his mates in Pittsburgh in March of 1942. Their training included gunnery instruction and the original enrolment was listed as 18 March, while “graduation” from the facility was dated 28 July, and they officially “joined” the merchant marine on 29 July 1942. Before obtaining proficiency certificates, or “tickets”, they underwent aptitude tests given by the U.S. Coast Guard. The informant qualified as a Fireman/Watertender with a “lifeboat ticket”<sup>406</sup> separately dated at 25 June. All the graduates were then quartered at the Seamen’s Church Institute in New York City to await

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<sup>404</sup>. Frank Power (HMC 91-10) alleged that false papers were easy to obtain, at least in Atlantic Canada, and he had several sets in different names and with different home addresses. Compare with data in Chapter Six.

<sup>405</sup>. In today’s shipping industry, the climate is vastly different from that of the ’30s and ’40s. Albert Precious retired at the age of sixty-eight, but implied in his interview that thirty might be considered “over the hill” for a ship’s officer today. (HMC 90-36, TTC p. 1)

<sup>406</sup>. This was not, as might be supposed, a ticket entitling the bearer to space in a lifeboat, but a certificate of proficiency in seamanship to prove the bearer was capable of being a useful member of a lifeboat’s crew in the event of emergency.

assignment to their first ships.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 1) Not all those who trained at USMS facilities did so before their first trip to sea. One went on his first convoy as a Cabin Boy aboard a Norwegian ship in the summer of 1944, when he had just turned twenty-three. He paid off after fourteen months aboard and then went to New Orleans, where he attended the USMS school and got basic cook's training.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 1)

Yet another training scheme and upgrading system in the States was run by the Army Transport Service, sometimes called "The Army's Navy".<sup>407</sup> It was through this system that the fourteen-year-old Norwegian runaway mentioned earlier eventually attained his Master's certificate. Another officer, this one an Engineer, started by attending the USMS facility in St. Petersburg, Florida, in August of 1943, then upgraded from a black gang rating to a licensed Engineering Officer through ATS. When he finished at the USMS school, he started as what he called a "cadre"<sup>408</sup> at Transportation Officers' Cadet School. His application was rejected by the psychologist, as he was twenty-one and had no high school education. He remained as "cadre" until he reapplied in the Engineering Department. It was about a three-month course, which he left for an additional three to three and a half months at the New Orleans upgrading school at a small Army base on the shores of Lake Ponchartrain. Everyone who passed the second phase was supposed to get a commission in the Army Transport Corps, but that practice ceased early in 1944, as there were too many officers and the war was almost over. Those remaining were given the choice of becoming ship's officers on ATS vessels wherever they were, or being drafted. He chose the former and sailed with ATS/MSTS/MS until his retirement.(HMC 90-57, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>407</sup>. The ATS of the World Wars was twice superseded, first by MSTS (Military Sea Transport Service) and later by MSC (Military Sealift Command), by which name it is presently known.

<sup>408</sup>. He repeated this several times and either meant a member of some sort of cadre or, which seems more likely, he was misremembering a term used for some sort of sub-cadet.

The majority of British seafarers who first shipped out during the war went through training schemes as well. Either they came out of the nautical training schools or entered the Merchant Service through cadetship or apprenticeship programmes. Two British respondents, neither of whom was an orphan, attended a sea school for Deck ratings in Wallasey, Merseyside.<sup>409</sup> Both had previously been Sea Cadets. One, who trained there for three months before shipping out as a sixteen-year-old Ordinary Seaman in 1944, said they learned lifeboat drill, gunnery, and seamanship and were given a kit consisting of a “sort of uniform” of black trousers, seaman’s sweater, belt, knife, and “frogs”.<sup>410</sup> The knife, he said, was one of the most important things in one’s possession as a seafarer. (HMC 92-48, TTC pp. 1 and 7) The other man, a Glaswegian Scot by birth, trained and shipped out in 1945, at the age of nineteen and was in continuous service in the Deck Department from that time until his last discharge in 1960. He further enlarged upon the course of training, saying they also learned knots and how to “box” a compass.<sup>411</sup> He did not actually learn to steer a ship at the school, however, and was forced to acquire that knowledge from watchmates on his first ship and take a lot of fairly serious “ribbing” about his incompetence as well. He said that when he first sailed, late in the war, the nautical schools not catering to orphans were where the “bad lads” were sent, and that at that time the British Merchant Navy had many ships, but were short on crews. It seemed ideal then to draw them from these schools, where boys were trained in the naval tradition. He had been given a choice of being sent into the mines or to sea and he preferred the latter. He is glad of his decision, as the experience broadened his outlook in ways the mines probably would not have done. He said the reasons impelling men to sea were many and varied and that those who came from the

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<sup>409</sup>. Similar schools existed for Engine and Catering personnel.

<sup>410</sup>. A sort of scabbard to hold fids and marlinespikes, which are mariners’ tools used for splicing ropes, lines, and cables. A fid is similar to a marlinespike, but is made of wood, rather than metal.

<sup>411</sup>. See Glossary, Chapter Eight, “boxing the compass”.

orphanages were often “deep”, perhaps because they had no family life as children.(HMC 92-11, TTC pp. 1, 2, and 6; HMC 92-12, TTC pp. 1-2)

Of the North American sampling, about a fifth were twenty-one or older when they first went to sea. Almost a like number were seventeen. Just under half the group were between seventeen and twenty-one, but it is easy to see, even from these rough figures, that the number of recruits aged sixteen or younger was not inconsequential. The vast majority of the very youngest from both North American and British samples first sailed before the war. Most of those who passed themselves off as older during the war or chose the Merchant Service because they were too young for the Armed Forces were approaching the statutory age of recruitment, but seem to have lacked the patience to wait until they attained it.<sup>412</sup> One of the exceptions started in the United States Navy at the age of fifteen, having lied about his age, was medically surveyed out at the war’s end, and joined the merchant marine shortly thereafter, in 1946, because life at home in Arkansas was “dull”.(HMC 89-3, TTC p. 1) Another lied about his age and started on North Atlantic convoys when he was only fifteen or sixteen because he was very patriotic and a war was on. Everybody from his hometown joined the merchant marine because “they were considered big heroes”.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1)<sup>413</sup>

Others were just leaving school at seventeen or eighteen, and immediately signed on. Men were so desperately needed by the mercantile marine that few Mates, Masters, Marine Superintendents, or other responsible

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<sup>412</sup>. This appears to be the circumstance, despite the fact that Capt. Emerson Chodzko (HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3) and several others, themselves over the age acceptable for both conscription and willing enlistment, stated that “really young kids joined the merchant marine because they were too young to join the services.”

<sup>413</sup>. Compare this attitude toward the merchant marine with Chapter Six, Section B, on Shoreside Attitudes.



parties would question a lad whose appearance was not itself dubious. Even those who might be likely to be lenient.<sup>414</sup>

The British sample who went to sea during the war seemed to differ little from those who had first shipped out in peacetime, except in age range. Most were nineteen or under, the dominant age being sixteen, only three being below that, and two of those were sent out from orphanages. Only one of the British wartime group was over twenty-one. The wartime sailings from Canada and Newfoundland mirrored the British sample, with four respondents sailing at sixteen and one each at seventeen, eighteen, and over twenty-one. Those from the United States who first sailed at that time, however, appeared to have either done so as an alternative to joining the Armed Services to which they were unsuited for one reason or another, as a result of outside influences, or a combination of the two. The ages of this sample fell noticeably into two major areas, seventeen and twenty-one-or-over, with only two below seventeen. It is interesting to note the difference in the ages at which the British and American groups felt the Merchant Service was a viable alternative to the Armed Forces as a means of making a significant contribution to the war effort.<sup>415</sup>

Some typical and atypical responses to the question “How and when did you first go to sea?” have been selected from the database, as have some dealing with the reasons which would impel a person to go to sea. These are organised according to general theme, but the chronological order in which the interviews were conducted sometimes makes its weight felt as well. The selection, which follows, is made up of material intended to exemplify the

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<sup>414</sup>. See Capt. George Jahn's comments in Chapter Six, Section A, from (HMC 89-5A, TTC p. 2).

<sup>415</sup>. Since my familial religious background is in the Religious Society of Friends, it is somewhat unfortunate that none of those who responded to my inquiries on either side of the Atlantic had chosen the Merchant Service as conscientious objectors to active participation in armed conflict.

generalisations made above. Military seafarers, both escort sailors and military gunners stationed aboard merchant ships, as well as all but two or three of the Radio/Wireless Operators interviewed have been excluded from this selection because of the need to limit the number of selections from the vast corpus of data and because they are of less central importance to the focus of the study.

In the Introduction it was mentioned that some men were influenced to go to sea by reading adventure stories. One American who went to sea in about 1919 at the age of seventeen said his family did not live close to the sea or have boats, but he read sea stories.(SHLSS #5 (19 August 1981), HMC TTC p. 1) Like him, another, who was seventeen when he first went to sea more than twenty years later in May or June of 1942, was heavily influenced by the writings of Howard Pease. Before the war, however, shipping out was a “Catch 22”<sup>416</sup> -- you could not get a job unless you were in the union, but you could not join the union without the promise of a job.<sup>417</sup>(HMC 90-24, TTC pp. 1-2) Two of the British sample cited Percy F. Westerman’s adventure books for juvenile males as having provided the lure of the romantic adventurous aspect of seafaring,(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-31, TTC p. 5) and a third did not feel he was influenced to sea by Percy Westerman, but possibly by Jules Verne. In those days, he said, people, especially boys, “read a lot of World War I stuff, like Biggles”,<sup>418</sup> and “naturally it made you feel as though you'd like to imitate them as a youngster”.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 1) Others were influenced by tales of the sea which were orally transmitted, rather than literary in nature. One said he believed his brother-in-law influenced his interest in the merchant marine with “sea tales” which augmented his innate desire to travel.(HMC 90-74, TTC p.

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<sup>416</sup>. This is a reference to the popular novel by Joseph Heller, and indicates a “no win” situation where no matter what one does, one cannot succeed, but is beset by obstacles at every turn.

<sup>417</sup>. This was true in the 1960s as well. One could not get a job without a “Z” card, but one could not get a “Z” card unless one had a job in the offing. I learned of this through the personal experiences of family and friends.

<sup>418</sup>. A fictional British “air ace” of World War I.

6) Another said he was not really from a seafaring family. The only other seafarer was his uncle-by-marriage, a Yorkshireman. “But I never wanted to do anything else except go to sea.” “I really don’t know, I think probably my aunt told me a lot of tales. I used to go round the docks with a camera, photographing things here and there. I wasn’t a particularly good scholar. The headmaster of the Liverpool Institute, which was a rather classical school here in Liverpool, told my father to put me in the Air Force or send me to sea, which was just up my street. ... So I ended up at sea.”(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 4)

When the war started, the American lad who was influenced by Pease saw the situation had changed and people were needed at sea. He rather coerced his mother, a divorcee raising two children, into writing a note giving him permission to join the Merchant Service.<sup>419</sup> Officials wondered if the note was forged, but gave him the benefit of the doubt. He was instructed to “report to Mr. Fish”. The following evening he had a telephone call at the drugstore where he worked as a “soda jerk”, telling him to report the following morning for a Messboy’s job aboard “an old rust bucket of a tanker” built in 1912. That first voyage was to Portland, Oregon, with three old tankers in convoy. Only one had a gun. At San Francisco, they split up and only his ship continued to Portland. He was seasick all the way. The rest of the crew was “old salts”, but he barely made it through each day until they reached the Columbia River. There were three Messmen -- one for the officers and two for the crew; he was finally put on dishwashing and the other lad did all the serving. Once they reached the Columbia it was calm and he felt great. Fortunately, he did not get sick on the way back.<sup>420</sup> The trip took three weeks and he made “big bucks”. Ashore he had made thirty-five cents an hour, but as a seaman he got sixty dollars a month. When he paid off he went back to

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<sup>419</sup> Cf. Capt. George Bryson’s testimony below in this section at footnote <sup>100</sup>.

<sup>420</sup> Compare with other testimony in Section B of this chapter, regarding seasickness.

his school to show off and then caught another ship and got into the Engine Department, where he stayed for the rest of his seafaring life, progressing rapidly through the upgrading process to the eventual rank of Chief Engineer. He signed on as a Wiper;<sup>421</sup> they sailed for two weeks and were in the shipyards for a further two weeks. The Fireman on the 12-4<sup>422</sup> watch missed the ship, so at midnight our man became acting Fireman and two weeks later became an Oiler under similar circumstances. The Third Engineer would not take on his watch an Oiler with so little experience, so he changed watches, but stayed on the ship for fourteen months, sufficient sea time to qualify him for OTS (Officer Training School), and he then left the ship to get his licence.(HMC 90-24, TTC p. 2)

Some of the older group in North America had served in the military before joining the merchant marine. One man had retired from the United States Navy, but immediately associated himself with the merchant marine as they were “better fed and better paid”. Starting the war with a Chief Mate’s papers, he soon upgraded to Master and was sailing in that capacity at the time of his first convoy.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 1) Another joined the Merchant Service in his late twenties after six years in the U.S. Navy, sailing first as ship’s Carpenter, then upgrading, but never progressing beyond the rank of Second Mate.(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 1) A third, amusingly enough, never sailed unlicensed in the merchant marine. He had been in the U.S. Navy and it was his intention to rejoin when the war started, but when he located the recruiting officer at the Battery in New York City, he accidentally signed up for the Maritime Service Officer Candidate School instead. He was twenty-five then, in 1942, at the beginning of the States’ involvement in the war.(HMC 90-36, TTC p. 1) Yet another had been in the U.S. Navy for six years, starting in 1927 at

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<sup>421</sup>. As has been noted previously, all ranks and ratings have been capitalised.

<sup>422</sup>. To lessen confusion and conserve space, all watch times will be rendered in numerals separated by a hyphen, rather than written out in full.

about seventeen, and considered re-enlisting, but joined the Merchant Marine instead. Because of his Navy training, he did not have to serve three years as an Ordinary Seaman before sitting for his AB's papers -- as would have been necessary before the war -- but was allowed to take the examination immediately on joining the Merchant Service. The only man with similar experience from the British sample began his career in the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve during the Spanish Civil War, about 1926, and saw action in that capacity before becoming a merchant mariner about eighteen months before England entered World War II.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 1) Another who served in both the Merchant Service and the Armed Forces, sailed from 1936 until 1939 and when the war started left the sea to join the Kent Shropshire Light Infantry. He served in the Army during the Battle of Britain, went with the British Expeditionary Forces to France, and was evacuated from Dunkirk. Assigned to the East Coast of England for anti-invasion work, in 1940 he was transferred by the War Office to the Merchant Service, as heavy losses of ships and personnel had created a need for experienced seafarers.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 1)

The last man interviewed in the course of the research reversed the experiences of the foregoing men. In 1940, at the age of seventeen, he first sailed as an Apprentice in "Ropner's Navy".<sup>423</sup> When asked his reasons for going to sea, he replied, "Of course it must sound very stupid now, but I didn't want to miss the war. Being a complete young idiot, in those days I was frightened of missing the war and at the same time I've always been fond of the sea, I've liked to be near the sea, young people enjoy adventure and all those reasons, I suppose." On finishing his four years' indenture with the Merchant Navy, he transferred to the Royal Navy with the rank of Petty Officer and never again sailed as a civilian. In the Royal Navy he had to do

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<sup>423</sup> . The shipping firm Sir Robert Ropner's was so nicknamed.

two months' disciplinary training at HMS *Raleigh* in Plymouth, which consisted of "square-bashing" and general training. "The Royal Navy always think that the Merchant Navy's very undisciplined, and so they need disciplinary training." He then volunteered for combined operations and served on LCIs [Landing Craft Infantry] including the D-Day landings, eventually ending up in the Far East before his eventual demobilisation.(HMC 92-71, TTC pp. 1-2) In contrast, having joined the United States Naval Reserve in 1939, one recruit was called to active duty when America entered the war, but in June of 1942 he left the Navy to attend the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at King's Point, New York. His first convoy experience was in 1942, when he was still under twenty and a Cadet.(HMC 90-45, TTC pp. 1-2)

One of the youngest of the North American sample to ship out did so at fifteen, but this was well before the war and he "retired" three and a half years later, at the advanced age of eighteen, in 1935. By the time the war started he was married and working ashore, but the idea of the draft and its associated regimentation did not appeal to him, so he decided to return to sea. Enrolling in the United States Maritime Service school at Sheepshead Bay, New York, he discovered all he would get there was a "lifeboat ticket",<sup>424</sup> which he already had, so he cut short his course, and went straight to sea.(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 1) Another similarly disliked the unnecessary regimentation of the Armed Services. He had worked at Fort Eustis in Newport News, Virginia, and seen soldiers drilling in a downpour, "policing" an area, etc. Their colonel had told him, "It's part of the training." "Nonsense!" said he, "It was foolish!" And he went into the merchant marine instead.(HMC 90-57, TTC p. 1) A like-minded Englishman chose the Merchant Navy in 1940, at the age of twenty-one, because the alternative was the Services or certain trades.<sup>425</sup> He wanted something worthwhile to do and a friend who was a seaman encouraged him. He was "cheeky"<sup>426</sup> enough to sign on as an AB on his first voyage and stayed with the Deck Department throughout his seagoing career.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1)

A twenty-six-year-old Californian, having been in his family's cattle business, had a 1-A deferment releasing him from conscription, but nonetheless joined the Merchant Marine in 1944, as his war service. He had friends in the Merchant Marine and trained at the United States Maritime Service

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<sup>424</sup>. See footnote <sup>53</sup>, this chapter.

<sup>425</sup>. He must have been nineteen, rather than twenty-one, as registration for conscription was compulsory at age twenty and he was not yet old enough to register.

<sup>426</sup>. Impudent or shamelessly presumptuous. This term is more common in British parlance. The corresponding North American usage would probably be "fresh".

school on Catalina Island, California.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 2)  
Describing himself as “a rank farm boy”<sup>427</sup> having no experience at all, another, who was nineteen at the time, actually paid twenty-five dollars for a job when he got his first papers on 25 March 1942 and signed on a Panamanian ship the following day, to go to Archangelsk on what turned out to be the infamous PQ17. Before leaving, he telephoned his father, who subsequently sold off his farm equipment and joined the Merchant Marine as well. There was only one other American aboard the son’s ship, an AB who was an ex-convict.(HMC 90-16, TTC pp. 1-2)

A twenty-two-year-old Philadelphia native took the Engine course at the USMS Training Center at Sheepshead Bay, New York, in 1943, because he had always wanted to work in a ship’s Engine Room. He had previously worked in a shipyard as a shipfitter’s helper, building T-2 tankers, which was a noisy job and one had to be outside in all weathers, even in winter.(HMC 90-26, TTC pp. 1-2) Like him, another worked in a shipyard and was Apprentice Machinist on a trial crew where he received much valuable advice about the trade from older men before following his older brother to sea.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 1) A significant number of respondents went into shipyard work and onto trial crews when they left the sea at the cessation of hostilities.<sup>428</sup>

Young boys long for adventure and are subject to peer pressure, so one Canadian boy quit school in 1939 to join the Royal Canadian Navy, but was rejected, as he was only sixteen. A few months later, just turned seventeen, he decided to join the Merchant Navy instead. It was 12 February 1941, and he started as an Ordinary Seaman at forty-five dollars a month plus a thirty-five percent bonus for being in the war zone. After about a year’s sea time he upgraded and sailed as AB<sup>429</sup> until, when he had about twenty-six months’ service, he went to a federally-owned navigation school in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, where he obtained the first of his officer’s papers at the age of

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<sup>427</sup>. Cf. footnote <sup>84</sup>, Derek Belk (HMC 92-52, TTC pp. 1-2), who came to sea “straight off the farm.”

<sup>428</sup>. See Section C, this chapter.

<sup>429</sup>. As previously stated, the term AB, universally accepted in nautical language to refer to an Able[-Bodied] Seaman, will be used throughout this work.

nineteen, qualifying as Third Mate Foreign-Going.<sup>430</sup> His first vessel was a Canadian tanker with a Canadian crew. It was a different way of life from that on shore and you had to adapt. There was a lot of camaraderie. The group in the forecastle mostly wanted to become officers, which gave them an incentive to be professional about their work. They also took books; he learned more algebra in the forecastle of that tanker than he had in school, but he was on his own. He travelled a great deal, and besides his twenty years at sea, spent a total of forty-eight years in the maritime profession in one way or another.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 1 and 6) His story is typical of many other respondents who made a lifetime career in merchant shipping after a wartime beginning. A second Canadian followed an almost identical route to his Master's certificate, the only difference being that he went to a different sea training school where he, in his own words "became a ninety-day wonder" and followed this academic training with a cadetship at sea. During the war this second man sailed not only on Canadian-registered, but also on British- and Free French-flag ships.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 2)

Another sixteen-year-old Canadian shipped out in September of 1941, as soon as he had finished high school. Most of his friends were joining the Services and he was too young for the Navy, but merchant ships were available. He also went to Navigation School but rose no higher than a Second Mate's Foreign-going certificate endorsed for Mate Home-trade.<sup>431</sup> Like the two Captains just mentioned, he always sailed in the Deck Department, starting as an Ordinary Seaman and working his way up through the hawsepipe to his ticket. He was originally from a seafaring area of Nova Scotia, but said that many men from inland areas of Canada went to sea as well.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 1)

Cashiered out of the Canadian Army in June of 1942, at the tender age of eighteen and a half, when he was found to be below their legal enlistment age, an American respondent enlisted in the US Maritime Service in January

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<sup>430</sup>. See previous notes on the term Foreign-Going, as well as descriptive passage in Section C, this chapter, and Glossary in Chapter Eight.

<sup>431</sup>. This means he could sail internationally on any ship as a Second Mate or on domestic coasting vessels as a Chief Officer.



of 1943, and attended the Hoffman Island, New York, Training School that April. He then sailed as an Engine Room rating, crossing the North Atlantic twice and the South Atlantic twice as well. Luckily he got the southern run in the winter and the northern in the summer. The convoy previous to his first voyage was attacked, but he was quite fortunate in that all his own sea time was virtually uneventful. Amazingly enough for the time and situation, he had a camera and took many pictures, which were not confiscated until the ship docked where a spy ring had recently been apprehended.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 1)

For the most part, mail was heavily censored,<sup>432</sup> and both the taking of photographs and the keeping of diaries forbidden during the war years, even in the Merchant Service. One respondent mentioned that he had never kept a diary in wartime because he was not supposed to, so there is no record of his activities at this time.(HMC 90-63, TTC p. 1)

Having been “ramrodded out” of the Sheepshead Bay training facility onto a coastal collier because he “was a husky kid and had got into trouble”,<sup>433</sup> one nineteen-year-old made his first voyage in 1943. When the ship got in and paid off, he left her, however, as she was an old 1910 “bucket of bolts” whose best speed was only six or seven knots and she could not keep up with a convoy. “The U-boats were afraid she’d sink on top of them, and considered her too far gone to waste a torpedo.” Coming home in February of 1946, he entered Officer Candidate School, but developed a medical problem and when, after hospitalisation, he was told his previous fourteen weeks of study did not count and he would have to start the sixteen-week course again from scratch, he left the school and went home without obtaining an Engineer’s licence.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1)

Early in 1943, an older man, almost thirty, went to Hoffman Island (New York) Training Center, where the training programme had been shortened because of the desperate need for seamen. On arrival aboard his first ship, he was immediately promoted from Fireman to Oiler and went to the Engine Room early, to learn his new job. The bells ring ten minutes before the watch changes in order to give the oncoming watch time to check things before the switchover. He relieved the other Oiler fifteen minutes early and was told never to do so again. “If you get killed, do it on your own watch -- not on mine.” The next morning he woke, ate, (he was on the 8-12

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<sup>432</sup> See Chapter Seven on recreation.

<sup>433</sup> He was never more specific about this, but compare this testimony with that of the Scot who said “bad boys” were sent to nautical schools.

watch) and went to the afterdeck to wait on the No. 4<sup>434</sup> hatch. At twelve minutes before eight a torpedo hit the Engine Room and cut the ship in half. That other Oiler died, but my informant, his opposite, survived to be interviewed.(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 1)

Some Americans first shipped on the Great Lakes, like one sixteen-year-old Coal-passer in 1943, who spent seven or eight months there before going to the coast, becoming a Wiper, and working his way up to the position of Fireman/Oiler. He attended none of the USMS schools, but learned on the job, a somewhat unusual case for the time, according to him. He had sailed on the Great Lakes and both coasts before obtaining his discharge in 1945, after which he was drafted.<sup>435</sup> When he moved from the Lakes to the Coast, his papers were invalidated and replaced by a small card, “Captain of the Port...”,<sup>436</sup> stamped “Expires at termination of war”. He quit the sea entirely in 1946, at which time the bureaucrats would not accept the Merchant Marine as having been his livelihood. He later had problems with his discharge papers since, well after his war service had officially terminated, he was still “scooting between mines” in the Adriatic.<sup>437</sup> Even his seaman’s passport was seized, leaving him with only one card. He regained the passport eventually, but had to surrender it when he applied for a civilian passport for a trip with his wife, well after the war.<sup>438</sup>(HMC 90-44, TTC pp. 1 and 4)

One Master had worked shoreside in the steamship business since his high school graduation in June of 1941. Faced with the draft in December of 1942, he went to the U.S. Maritime Service school in St. Petersburg, Florida, for three months and then on to the Academy at King’s Point, New York. There were also two “basic schools” in Pass Christian, Mississippi, and San

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<sup>434</sup>. The reader is reminded that all watch times are to be rendered in numerals separated by a hyphen. Also, hatch numbers will be designated No. and a numeral, rather than being written out in full.

<sup>435</sup>. It was not uncommon in the States for a young seaman who had served throughout the war to come ashore at its end only to be conscripted.

<sup>436</sup>. See Chapter Seven for the use of such cards to hoodwink young women ashore.

<sup>437</sup>. Even then a special pilot was needed to get through the minefields.

<sup>438</sup>. His civilian passport arrived about a week later, but his wife’s took nearly four months to process.

Mateo, California. The “basic school” curriculum was three months of school then six months at sea as a Cadet/Midshipman before transferring to King’s Point, sitting for a licence and, if physically qualified, being simultaneously commissioned by the United States Maritime Service as a Junior Officer and by the U.S. Naval Reserve as an Ensign. During his sea time, he became disenchanted with academics, so he resigned, then shipped out, first as AB and then as Bosun. He later went to an independent navigating school in New Orleans where he obtained his licence in about the same length of time as he would have under the “basic school” curriculum, but he later regretted not having gone through the better educational system. Originally from New Orleans, he was nineteen when he first went to sea, and acquired his first licence at the minimum age of twenty in May 1945.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 1)

A group of five friends signed up for the U.S. Maritime Service on New Year's Eve, 31 December 1942, in Philadelphia and two eventually were accepted. After a physical examination which took the entire day, they were told to go home and they would eventually be called. Perhaps the administrators were just killing time, as only the five applicants were there. On 2 February, my respondent got a letter telling him to come to be rechecked and sworn in. This time the place was packed with what he thought must have been draft dodgers, and he could not even get inside the building. When his enquiries met with a chilly reception, he came home and returned the following day, telling a “chief” he had been summoned for the previous day, but had been unable to get in. He was then given a quick recheck and sent home for recall once again, to finally leave on 7 April. He felt it was “a bad scene with a lot of politics. It was all screwed up. The entire United States Merchant Marine set-up was fouled up from the beginning.”

He had turned eighteen the previous August, and in November had tried to join the tank corps, but his father, whose notarised permission was required, lived and worked away from where the boy lived with his mother. Neither son nor father was prepared to travel so far, so they attempted to do the whole thing by mail, but a few nights after the boy had seen the recruiters, President Roosevelt suspended all voluntary enlistment and one could no longer select his preferred branch of service -- this infuriated the youth. Meanwhile, in December, his father died. The son was now driving an oil truck and hated his job. One day a car pulled up with four of his buddies inside. “We’re gonna join the merchant marine tomorrow. Wanna go?” “Count me in!” He was the only one of the group who cleared all his papers at the original interview.

Another, who had problems with an incorrect name on his birth certificate, got them cleared up and left the week before our man did, but took longer actually getting to sea as, having a high school education, he took a Purser's course which required some medical training. This informant was a "depression boy" who had quit school at sixteen and had not had much education. He thought Cook/Baker would be a good job, but they eliminated all inexperienced trainees from the course and he became a Messman. Forty from the training school were shipped to San Francisco and were there for about ten days with no money or anything. It is not a good town for sailors when they are broke. They were billeted in an old auto showroom with bunks on the second floor, and each got a fifty-cent chit for food every day, but even back then it did not buy much. The chits were good in two nearby places, but all the fellows were young and hungry, and the café staff ignored them, knowing there would be no tips. The game was to see how much you could get for fifty cents and then snatch the other fellows' food when their backs were turned. (HMC 90-74, TTC pp. 1-2)

More of the British sample than the North American were inclined to answer the question, "What impels a man to go to sea in the first place?" by saying they had never considered any other career options, but had known from the first that seafaring was to be their life's work. Many of the North Americans, conversely, saw the Merchant Service as a means of fulfilling their obligations to the war effort while simultaneously enjoying romance and adventure. Radio/Wireless operators, however, had the additional incentive of a real interest in telegraphy. One, from Brooklyn, New York, went to sea in 1928, when he was about seventeen, acquired his Radio Operator's licence by joining the Army and taking his training there, and had been at sea for well over ten years when the war started, even considering that he had taken one year out to attend a Polytechnic Institute. (HMC 90-31, TTC p. 1) Another's whole family were seafaring people. His father and grandfather were on ships before the war. "I suppose the sea was in my blood and I always had an interest in radio communications," he said. The best way to break into both seemed to be getting a job aboard a ship. At sixteen, in 1940, too young for the Services, he managed to get a job on a ship just arrived from England, in the lowest, most menial position -- Pantry Boy. He had to do all the scullery work and wash the

pots and pans, but was quite happy, knowing he had got his chance to go to sea. For a couple of days after they left port, he was pretty seasick, but finally overcame his nausea and became accepted as a member of the crew.<sup>439</sup> He liked the job and his shipmates and got on well, but knew he wanted more for his future. After about six months sea time he had saved some money, so he came ashore and took a course in Radio Communications. After a winter of night school he passed his examinations and got his radio licence. His first ship in his new capacity was an old tramp whose previous Radio Operator became ill, making a replacement necessary.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 1) A British respondent had a similar overriding interest in the radio aspect of the job, but in his case it far outweighed the seafaring aspect. “With me it was the wireless operating bit in the first place, because my uncle was a telegraphist with the Liverpool Scottish -- he and I had spent a lot of time together. He had taught me the Morse code.” His very first job, before ever shipping out, was as a telegraph boy and he learned to read the messages from the paper tape. He loved Morse, but in the early days of the war Radio Officers were signals officers as well as radiomen and had to learn semaphore and flag signals in addition. Most nautical signalling was done with flags.(HMC 92-63, TTC pp. 4-5) He first went to sea about a week after his sixteenth birthday, signing on a banana boat 23 April 1940 as Second Radio Operator, having trained at the Liverpool Wireless College and qualified with a “special ticket”, for the duration of the war only. The authorities must have realised they would need extra Radio Officers and did not want them to take the time to qualify for First- and Second-Class certificates. A Special did not require much mathematical knowledge, but depended more on the practical aspects of the job. The convoy was lined up in the Mersey Estuary, ready to sail. Two words gave the cue to sail or not to sail -- just one code word would be sent to

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<sup>439</sup>. Compare with other testimony in Section B of this chapter, regarding seasickness.

the entire convoy -- either “Nuts” or “Bolts”. The job of receiving the code word was his first shipboard assignment. He had to be on the ball to get it right. They sailed that afternoon.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 1)

After saying he did not know what impelled him to go to sea, one Master said he had always wanted to do so from boyhood. His father was a ship’s Master, but died the year his son was born, and they never knew one another, but his uncle was a Marine Engineer, one cousin was a Second Mate, and another cousin a Cadet like himself, all with the same company, so it was still a family affair. As for how one might perceive the sea as a career, having suggestions of just a job, travel opportunity, romance and adventure, he said when you are sixteen years old you probably want “all of the above”. He has always been interested in everything pertaining to ships. The practical solution was to go and work in them.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 1)

Asked what draws a man to the sea, a former Wireless Operator said everyone is different. Many, at least in England, go to sea because it is a traditional occupation in their home area, such as Hull or South Shields. Every family in such communities had someone at sea, and during the war every family had lost someone. He was born in Hull, but raised in Devon, and his family tradition, though similar, was less mercantile marine and more naval. For him, it was an extended family tradition, as both his grandfathers had been seafarers; one was a trawler skipper, and the other had a Humber keel; his uncle also went to sea, as an AB, in the early 1930s. Nowadays the old traditions have disappeared, as has seafaring.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 2)

A Liverpool informant attributed the impulse toward seafaring to men’s backgrounds and upbringing. He said his friends all went to sea and the Mersey at that time was “like a bus station”. Going to sea was the appropriate job for a “man”. One did see the world then. There was a slower turnaround.

There are not “ships” or “shipping” any more. There are only floating boxes.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 4) A fellow Liverpudlian supported this perspective of seafaring as a family and community tradition by saying his father ran away to sea in trawlers from Grimsby and his grandfather was in the United States Navy during the American Civil War.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 1)

One early rating came ashore with the intention of retaking the eye test and making another attempt at a ticket, but went instead into the offices of a shipping and forwarding agent, as a dock representative, clearing cargoes off docks and shipping them around England. After about a year there, he could see the war was on its way and decided to join the Army or the RAF, as his shore pals were doing. When he tried, he was asked what he had done for the last five or six years. He said it was the Merchant Navy, and was told he must go into the Navy Reserve. He did not really want to be in the Royal Navy, but was told he now held a conscription card (like a United States draft card), which kept the Army from taking him, but could return to the Merchant Navy if he chose. War was imminent and the last week in August he decided to go back to sea. His boss said, “Good luck; see you when the war is over!” The respondent went to the Shipping Office and signed on Ship’s Articles on 4 August 1939, the day war broke out. Actually he had signed before that to join at midnight on the third, a Sunday.(TTC 92-34, TTC pp. 1-2)

One lad’s first week aboard was a blur, as he had come “straight off the farm”<sup>440</sup> and the time was taken up with getting himself organised. “...[I]t was bloody cold that first morning.” On his first voyage it was cold and he was heaving up<sup>441</sup> seven-flag signal hoists. He did not understand the job, but was told what to do and did it. His fingers “were frozen stiff, good Lord. But we learnt the hard way, I suppose.”(HMC 92-52, TTC pp. 1-2) He said he did not know why a man goes to sea. After retirement he traced his family name back to 1734, hoping to find a seafaring connection, but could find nothing but farmers. “I was the first ... in my line not to be a farmer. So where did it come from? ... Oh, right from a very early age, ships were all I.... Even though I’d never seen a ship.” He did not foster a love of the sea in his children, but tried to discourage them. He was successful in dissuading his son, who at first wanted to follow in his footsteps, but his daughter was more persistent and “followed it farther than I ever did”, getting a degree in Nautical Studies with First Class Honours.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 6) She later married a ship’s Engineer, producing a completely seafaring family. When she left the sea she went into Marine Insurance.(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>440</sup>. Cf. footnote <sup>72</sup>. Jim North, (HMC 90-16, TTC pp. 1-2), “a rank farm boy”.

<sup>441</sup>. He was raising them on a mast, not vomiting.

One American interviewee told how, in his first job as an Ordinary Seaman, he had to learn by example -- “monkey see, monkey do”. To learn to steer, he went to the bridge on Sunday, when he only had to stand watch, to see if they would let him take a turn at the wheel. After three months’ sea time, he sat an AB examination.<sup>442</sup> There was no limit to upward progress as long as one could pass the examinations, which were “stiff” in peacetime, but in wartime men were desperately needed and a skipper was lucky if he had a good Bosun and two or three good ABs. The informant shipped as a Wiper on his final voyage, so he shipped all three Departments, as well as all three coasts of the United States.<sup>443</sup> The temperature was comfortably high in the Engine Room, where he had been accustomed to ‘hang out’ when off watch on previous voyages. He had longed to work there, but he was upgrading constantly and did not want to start from bottom again.<sup>444</sup> During the war many landsmen asked, “Why are they paying these guys so much? Why can’t the Navy do it?” They needed three times the men to do it the Navy way. At night on a Liberty ship or a comparable vessel, there would be three men on watch. On a Navy ship, they would use fifteen to twenty men for the same purposes. The complement required for a T-2 tanker run “the Navy way” would have been 280-320 men. The Merchant Service employed thirty or forty plus about twenty Navy Armed Guard, and today they use even fewer.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 3)<sup>445</sup>

The most voluble and articulate of the British ratings interviewed, Barney Lafferty, had been raised in the dock area of Liverpool, and brought up among ships. You could hear the ship movements and smell the different cargoes from his home. He lived in Dublin Street, which was all dockers and

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<sup>442</sup>. Before the war, two to three years had been required.

<sup>443</sup>. These would be the Pacific, Atlantic, and Gulf [of Mexico] Coasts.

<sup>444</sup>. The upgrading process in the Engine Department proceeded from Wiper to Fireman/Watertender and thence to Oiler[Greaser].

<sup>445</sup>. Further elaboration on such points will be found in Chapter Five, Section A, and in Chapter Six.



seamen. There was some overlap; some dockers went to sea and some seamen left the sea and became dockers. He never thought of doing anything else but went straight to sea.

“You were brought up, you were educated before you went to sea, in the sea. You were listenin’ to your father; you were listenin’ to your men; you were listenin’ to your brothers, and [like] I say, the ships passed the dock. And as kids we had a better playground than the average kid today. We had better ways to entertain ourselves and we had no money, as you know about them days, but we could go round the docks and we’d see all the different ships.... By the time I was twelve I could tell you all the different funnels<sup>446</sup> and where they actually sailed. And of course we fed ourselves off the docks. I never had to buy an orange or anything like that, ‘cause ... all that stuff came into Liverpool, y’see, and it was a treasure chest for us, the docks. And of course we used to have to watch the police and run around ... but we never did nothing serious. ... But we believed if oranges grew, they were for everyone.” There was an abundance of stuff lying around; they were not criminals; the waste was amazing. They were brought up listening to it. His father and grandfather went to sea. “You’d hear men -- that’s all they talked about. So it never entered your head to do anything else.” Not every boy in the street went to sea, but most did. Even those who did not went to work on the docks. They were all involved in the shipping industry. It was a little easier to go as a Fireman than as a Sailor. “So that’s the reason I would say we went to sea.... I’m sure this would happen in minin’ villages.”(HMC 92-54, TTC pp. 1 and 6-7)

When asked what had impelled him to go to sea, Capt. Michael Curtis said, “Ask my wife.” I did so, and she laughingly said he had been “indoctrinated”. His father, in his own youth, had wanted to go to sea, but was thwarted by his father, and thus was always keen that his son should adopt a seafaring career. The son was keen as well; always encouraged to go to sea, he “didn’t need much encouragement”. Capt. Curtis was one of the men who said Percy F. Westerman’s romantic and adventurous juvenile fiction had been a further influence in his choice of careers.(HMC 92-31, TTC pp. 4 and 5)

Within six months after the start of the war there were neither enough ships nor enough seamen to man them, so the Merchant Navy increased by

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<sup>446</sup>. Each shipping company traditionally has a unique design or logo painted on the funnels (smokestacks) of the vessels it operates.

about a hundred percent -- both vessels and personnel, and the latter were from diverse backgrounds. People volunteered to go to sea as a choice between that and the Army. A lot of local lads from port towns opted for the sea because they knew more about it -- nearly every family had someone at sea -- but they were not necessarily suited to the life. Men who went to sea before the war went because they were attracted to the sea, sometimes following in the family footsteps, but during the war you got people who had never seen a ship before -- from Birmingham. "With this influx of men who weren't gonna be there for the rest of their lives, discipline did break down." Some forget to mention that the Merchant Navy lost a large number of men at the start of the war to the Royal Navy Reserve. It was common practice before the war for both officers and ABs to join the RNR. The big attraction was that you got a little "bounty" (a retainer of about ten pounds) every year as well as free oilskins and seaboots. In return you did "so many weeks" training each year, called back into the Navy. Barney Lafferty was surprised that this is so seldom mentioned in reference to World War II and that there are no books about it. The RNVR was different, less geared to professional seamen. The RNR seemed to appeal most to seafarers from certain parts of the country; there were more men from Ireland, Scotland, and especially Stornoway, than there were English. When some people complain about the Irish, they forget that Irish people played a big part in the war. Half the seamen in the British Merchant Navy were Irish when the war started. During the war people from any part of England joined. "That's where the discipline broke down. Same with the officers. You had officers who weren't dedicated people, who weren't career people." The informant sailed with Fourth Officers who were only there because their parents did not want them to be in the Army. This was possible because a valid ticket was not required for a Fourth or even for a Third Officer then. They were probably adequately educated to keep watch or lookout or to write a log. There is where the discipline broke down; before the war it was pretty

consistent and there was little trouble on most ships.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 4-5)

“Mates were old. There were no youngsters them days. You had to be very old to get a skipper’s job.”(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 4)

Lafferty married during the war, probably about 1941; he was quite young, twenty-one, and it was early in the war. It was nerve-wracking for his wife, but all the country was geared to war by then. Most wives and mothers “realised the danger of the Merchant Navy and the Army was a toss-up”.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 6)

The vast majority of the British sampling mentioned family connections and, with or without such connections, stated they had always wanted to go to sea and had never considered any other options. There were, of course, the orphans mentioned previously, who were given little choice in the matter, and a few, as I have said, who bluntly submitted that the basic reason for going to sea was “escapism”.(HMC 92-57. TTC p. 2) Supporting this, an informant agreed that men go to sea because they are escapists who cannot face up to reality. He could never stay in good jobs, because he could not stand being bossed around. You like to be your own man. “Where at sea, you had a job, you done it, nobody said anything to you. Then there was the solitude. If you got fed up with everybody you could go and lie on your bunk and read, all night if you wanted to. You do what you like, y’know.”(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 6)

Here is a verbatim example typical of the majority of the British respondents:

“It’s just in me blood, because me father went away to sea and five of me uncles went away to sea. Me mother’s oldest brother ... went down on the *Lusitania* -- First World War -- he was ’s Quartermaster. ... But I was from a seafarin’ family, y’see. ’Twas in my blood, y’see, ... because before I went away to sea, I worked in the Albert Dock in a tea warehouse, fixin’ teachests before the war. And every day in my dinner hour, I went across to the pierhead in Liverpool, y’know, ... to buy two

pen'th o' chips in a little fish cart there and I'd sit there and I'd be lookin' at all the ships goin' to West Africa and I'd say, 'Oh, I wanna go on that one, oh, I'd love to go on that one, I'd love to go on that one.' and that was me. And I used to go into Elder Dempster's office -- Elder Dempster Shipping Line -- and I'd walk in and there's a big fat fella with a beard and plus fours and he's just sitting in the office and I'd say 'Good afternoon, Sir. Have you any vacancies for a Deckboy, Sir?' y'know, and he'd look at me and he went 'You're very small, son' he said, 'to go away to sea.' I was only small. But I said, 'Sir', I said, 'My father went away to sea and my five uncles went away to sea.' He said 'Whereabout do you live in Liverpool?' I said 'I live right by the ships. Liverpool Head.' 'Hmm...all right' he said, 'Come and see me' he said 'in three weeks' time.'”(HMC 92-58, TTC pp. 1-2)

A Welsh respondent had always wanted to travel and the opportunity to do so meant a great deal to him. Swansea, his hometown, is a port and in those days going to sea was a reasonable job; his father went to sea in sail when a lad and was in an Armed Merchant Cruiser during World War I, so it was a natural progression, and going to sea in those days you travelled as you would not have done otherwise. People travel casually now, but they did not do so then. The only people who travelled at that time were the “jet set” of the period and they only went by train to the South of France. Everything was unspoiled then, as well.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 1)

Another, who was sixteen when he signed as an indentured Apprentice in November of 1941, intended to make a career at sea, war or no war. His father had been at sea, and although he came ashore before his son was born, was Dockmaster of Bromborough Dock, the Lever's dock at Port Sunlight, Merseyside. The boy went with him when ships were docking, which probably gave the lad the idea of going to sea. Although his father died when the boy was only ten, by the time he left school at sixteen, his one ambition was to go to sea, even though there was a war on. When he first said he wanted to go to sea, he had to get parental permission,<sup>447</sup> because he was under age and it was wartime. You also had to get the local church minister to sign

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<sup>447</sup>. Cf. the experience of Clinton Johnson, above this section at footnote <sup>72</sup>.

agreeing that parental permission had been obtained. He remembers going to the Congregational minister and asking him to sign the form. The minister agreed, but first went to see the lad's widowed mother to make sure that her permission had actually been obtained, since he did not fully trust the boy. In fact his mother did try to persuade him not to go, primarily because of the war, but she was unsuccessful in her efforts. He recalls her telling him that there was no back door<sup>448</sup> at sea and that once he had sailed he could not change his mind. He always remembered her saying that, because the first week at sea he really wished there had been a back door. He was "seasick, homesick, and every other kind of sick all at once."<sup>449</sup> The first voyage was two years, four months, and twenty-five days. "That was it. I was a seaman from then on." After the first week he grew rapidly to like the life, but the first week he emphatically did not. It is hard to say what drew him to the sea; he had always liked it. He had heard his father talk about foreign places and after that first week he rapidly got used to the life. It was freedom, exceptionally hard work, but freedom and the eventual chance to become a ship's Captain. Afterward, the main thing was progress through the ranks, upgrading, and finally gaining a command, which was everyone's ultimate ambition.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 1)

Yet another Merseyside lad, this one from Birkenhead, first went to sea because he had "always wanted to" do so. His father was a seaman and had died at sea, and nine family members (uncles, cousins, and the like) were seafarers; it was a family tradition. "I knew I was goin' to sea sometime, yeah."(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 1)

Newfoundlanders, like Merseysiders, are born to the sea. A typical interviewee had a father who went to sea before him, prior to his marriage.

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<sup>448</sup>. Cf. HMC 92-33, p. 4. This is a frequently used phrase, especially amongst British seafarers.

<sup>449</sup>. Compare with other testimony in Section B of this chapter, regarding seasickness.

His late brother sailed for eleven years, and he himself spent twelve years at sea. It is in the blood. The main thing in Newfoundland is “going on the water”, although not so much now as it used to be. Many think no one from St. John’s proper went to sea, but there are many sailors and captains who are St. Johnsmen.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4) When he went to sea in August, 1941, he was in his mid-twenties, and had served five years’ engineering apprenticeship in a machine shop for the Newfoundland Railway. When the war started, he volunteered for the Royal Navy, but they had their quota for that month and when he was asked if he would consider the Royal Artillery as an alternative, he agreed. At that point he still had one year left to go on his apprenticeship. Set to leave Newfoundland with the Sixth Draft of the Royal Artillery, he developed a perforated appendix and was hospitalised and subsequently invalided out on compassionate leave when his father suffered a stroke. He then returned to the machine shop and completed his apprenticeship. The Newfoundland Railway had two fleets of its own ships -- one which ran around the coast, and another of freighters to the West Indies. After the informant had returned to the machine shop, one of the coastal vessels needed a Fourth Engineer, so he took the job. He had upgraded to Second Engineer by October 14, 1943, when the Railway ferry, *Caribou*, was sunk by a Nazi U-boat. The informant’s wife’s sister was married to the Purser/Radio Officer aboard the stricken vessel and this brother-in-law was the only officer to survive the attack. The informant’s own vessel became the *Caribou*’s replacement.(HMC 91-12, TTC pp. 1-2) He averred that there were ten thousand Newfoundlanders at sea during World War II, but conceded that the total probably included fishermen and men who made only one voyage.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 7)

A “Liverpool Irishman” from a seafaring family tradition also served an apprenticeship ashore, but his was in a bakehouse, as he was a Catering

rating. In the early days, before the Pools, one got one's own jobs. He was never in the Seamen's Union, but has been a member of the Baker's Union since the age of sixteen. The Seamen's Union had no objection to people who belonged to other craft unions.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-9, TTC pp. 1 and 3)

Those who sailed because of family traditions were not restricted to British subjects, however. One American who had a seafaring background and had loved the sea from childhood onwards was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts,<sup>450</sup> a famous whaling town, and raised in San Pedro, California, the Port of Los Angeles. Although his father was a Master, he only passed his Second Mate's examinations, and left the sea soon after the war to become an insurance salesman.(HMC 90-12, TTC p. 3) Another must have been about thirty when he first went to sea. He could have done so earlier, but his boss's brother was on the draft board and kept him at home. He volunteered for the Merchant Marine because all his family were sailors and fishermen. One cousin was the Captain of a freighter in World War II.(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 1)

One British officer upheld the allegations of *The Merchant Navy*<sup>451</sup> by saying he has never regretted going to sea. He would have been a failure ashore as he is not parsimonious, does not love money, and will not backbite others to improve his own position. He could have gone farther than he did ashore, but could not handle company politics; and when criticised for what he considered proper behaviour, retorted that he would return to sea rather than "play games". There were, however, many Cadets at sea who would not have been there had the job market permitted them to leave. They had signed on with a fifty-pound premium -- more like five thousand pounds today -- and many would have left if they could, but money was their reason for staying. When one got into a hard trade and had stayed in it, one wanted to reap some

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<sup>450</sup>. Note in the Introduction that my family also had its seafaring roots in New Bedford.

<sup>451</sup>. See footnote <sup>7</sup>. above.

of the rewards. In a good firm, security of employment was guaranteed. You had a comfortable job and regular promotion -- and happiness, because you liked both the people you sailed with and those for whom you worked. Most shipping companies were very fair and very nice. The informant was never unhappy with his employers, always feeling he could talk to them, although he occasionally got a raw deal. A seaman had a lot of comfort aboard a ship at sea and a better job than a "little clerk in an office". He could make as much or better on his wages and had all his food and lodging paid for and a bit to spend when he came ashore, which helped the picture to level out and be worthwhile. If you stayed at sea until you were a Chief Officer, you were "too far gone for anything else". To go ashore even to a sea-connected job like a stevedore foreman would give irregular long hard hours; one would rather go to sea. Occasionally, though, someone would be found who would not fit in at sea because he wanted something that was not there or was tied to his mother's apron strings. With that sort, "if there's no one to remind him to wear his muffler ... he's lost...."(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 5)

A man who trained at the Sheepshead Bay facility in New York, was seventeen at the time of his first voyage, and said his youth and inexperience resulted in his being less frightened by the entire war than he would be today in similar circumstances. He sailed unlicensed in the Engine Room, finally working up to a petty officer position, Deck Engineer,<sup>452</sup> "the best job on the ship", and he spent most of his sea time in North Atlantic convoys.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 1) His story is proof that not all who chose the Merchant Service during the war did so for heroic motives. He had been a fireman on the Burlington Railroad before joining the merchant marine, and, although he knew nothing about it, was told he would make more than twenty-one dollars a month. On

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<sup>452</sup>. This position was known as Donkeyman on British ships and was equivalent to the position of Pumpman on a tanker.



arrival at Sheephead Bay, he was put on KP<sup>453</sup>, whereupon he stole a cook's jacket, donned it, and told the other new recruits they had to wash the pots and pans (which was his job). His history appeared to be a collection of similar exploits, and he described his final voyage, just after V-E Day, as "too much togetherness" for three and a half months.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 2)

In contrast, another joined the United States Maritime Service training scheme in October 1943, but did not actually ship out until February of 1944. First assigned to a training ship as part of a crew in active service, he only sailed up and down Long Island Sound, but wanted to get into the war, so he quit, joined the Seafarers' International Union, and sailed deep sea until the end of the war.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 1) A native of Wilmington, Delaware, he always shipped out of New York and considered it his home port. It is fortunate, therefore, that his mother, on her second marriage, moved to Staten Island and he always had a free bunk there, a place to spend the night after a day at the union hiring hall. This was important, as one did not get paid between ships and "freebies"<sup>454</sup> were always welcome.(HMC 90-73, TTC p. 2)<sup>455</sup>

Before examining the reasons why these same men abandoned seafaring as a career, it is well worth investigating some of the things that struck them most about their vocation.

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<sup>453</sup>. Usually known as "KP" for "Kitchen Patrol" from the Armed Forces slang, this means doing all the lowest kitchen jobs, usually peeling mountains of potatoes or washing mountains of filthy cooking utensils.

<sup>454</sup>. Gratuities or perquisites without encumbrance to the recipient.

<sup>455</sup>. See Chapter Six for a discussion of seamen's homes and missions as places to stay between voyages.

## **B. MAJOR IMPRESSIONS OF CONVOYS, THE WAR, AND SHIPBOARD LIFE**

In the course of the interviews, a number of respondents recalled significant facts about seafaring in the years during and surrounding the Second World War -- facts which fell into no previously specified category of inquiry, but which were well worth recording in an ethnography such as this. Some were memories of specific incidents or experiences, while others were merely general reactions to the overall situation. The former tended to be unique to the individuals involved, while the latter were sometimes shared sentiments or outlooks. This section therefore reports the most meaningful, representative, and eloquent of these memories, divided into broad subcategories.

The necessity to encapsulate much of the first-hand testimony has already been mentioned, and in such encapsulated reporting of the spoken data from the fieldwork interviews, the original material has frequently been paraphrased. At this point, it should be re-emphasised that the language of such paraphrase is inevitably characterised by the colloquial, and shortened sentences are often deliberately retained, in order to reflect the flavour of the original as closely as possible. Because I was present at the interviews and also listened repeatedly to the tape-recorded fieldwork, frequently scrutinising minute details, the actual vivid speech of the men interviewed remains readily accessible in my memory. Paraphrases and encapsulations thus, in most cases, remain very close to the original wording and delivery of the men's testimony.

### **1. general convoy and seafaring recollections**

One man's succinct summation of the attitude expressed by the overwhelming majority of subjects interviewed during the fieldwork was that, when one did consider the situation consciously, the time was spent, "worryin'

about your skin and a buck to buy a beer.”(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3) Remarks such as this were not uncommon, although the vast majority indicated that they seldom considered the insecurity of their situation except while actually in action or under direct threat of it. Even then they were usually too concerned with the routines and procedures necessary in such circumstances to give the hazards (or such abstract qualities as “heroism” or “cowardice”) much thought. They went about their duties almost automatically and when asked in later years what they recollected, found it was often those standard operational procedures which differentiated wartime seafaring from that in peacetime.

Men were required to sleep in their clothes while in convoy, although they could take their shoes off and cover themselves with a blanket. Cabin doors were always kept open on hooks, so they could not jam and prevent escape in case of emergency.(HMC 90-7, TTC p. 1) Because wooden doors easily jammed if a ship were hit, “kick panels” or “crash panels” were installed.<sup>456</sup> “They must have learnt the hard way.”(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 2) Sometimes these panels did not work, and men had to escape through the portholes.(HMC 90-7, TTC p. 1) No one ever went anywhere aboard without a lifejacket. There was a constant check on lights and batteries. Nobody slept very well.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 2) Dumping of refuse was also curtailed; empty tin cans were always “landed” on completion of short trips and anything dumped at sea was dumped at sunset, so the vessel would be far away by the time it was discovered -- a large passenger liner could be four hundred miles away by morning. “Finding out the hard way” included the discovery that raiders could follow trails of refuse to locate ships in slow convoys, but if the waste was jettisoned at dusk, it could not be detected until daylight, thus providing adequate time to elude pursuers. One major difference of opinion arose within the recorded

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<sup>456</sup> These were installed in the bottom sections of most doors aboard wartime ships and were easily released by a sharp blow, allowing the compartment’s occupants a ready means of escape if the door itself were jammed.

recollections. Most respondents recalled that when in convoy or in a danger area lifeboats were usually swung out, ready for launching, but in some vessels this was never done, because if a boat was over the side and the ship was hit, it could blow the bottom out of the boat. If the boat was inboard they had a fighting chance. There were different schools of thought even on simple things like that.(HMC 92-70, TTC pp. 2-3)

Many of the men interviewed during the fieldwork recalled painting ships grey for camouflage purposes, or having to observe stringent blackout regulations. One respondent had vivid memories of the first wartime voyage he made on a large passenger vessel. They had all blackout necessities aboard, to cover the large glass windows on the promenade deck, which had lights as well. It was an extremely difficult task, and there were beds for excess passengers located on the promenade deck then, in addition, since so many people were trying to get out of Europe at the time. Some of the less obvious areas were blacked out by painting, but that was “permanent” and could not be removed during the daylight hours. When they got “down Channel”,<sup>457</sup> they heard the *Athenia*, also bound for Quebec, had been sunk, but they were instructed to carry on and did so. After that voyage of evacuation, the ship was refitted and became a troopship.(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 3) Life aboard ship during the war was “a bit austere” by comparison with other times. Nighttime, of course, all outer doors had switches on top, so as soon as one was opened -- or as it was being opened -- the light went out. If you even lit a cigarette on deck “someone was down on you like a ton of bricks”, and rightly so, because even a match could be seen for miles around. Life was “a bit rigorous” compared with the postwar period, although the informant who told me this had no seafaring experience prior to the war.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 6)

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<sup>457</sup>. Standard nautical usage for moving up or down any channel, but specifically the English Channel in this instance. The article is omitted.

Although it was not mentioned by any of the British or Canadians surveyed, most of the Americans interviewed recalled carrying a large leather “seaman’s wallet” which contained all their working papers, such as their “tickets” and discharge books. This wallet was four and one half to five inches wide and six inches long. One made a large oilskin pouch to hold it and kept it near the lifejackets in case of emergency.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 1) The seaman’s wallet originally had a chain and was kept chained to the owner’s belt while ashore, like a modern “trucker’s wallet”. The contents were important, said “Tex” English, “...and if you lost ’em you were in deep doo-doo....” as it took forever to get duplicates. Among other things still in “Tex”’s wallet are early photographs of his wife.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 2)

Seamen on some runs were issued “exposure suits” -- like a boiler suit[overalls] with feet. These were issued with the lifejackets when one joined a ship. They were rather like a wetsuit, except they went over one’s other clothing. The suits did not belong to you, but were always handed in and reissued for each voyage. Often when one was opened, a nasty discovery was made -- the previous user had cut out the zip fasteners, as they were in short supply in the United Kingdom, and had then repacked the suit without them. In such an event, in an actual disaster, the second user would have had no protection. “That happened many times. In fact, it got so we inspected the suits before taking them. They were quite good metal zips. Just used to take ’em home. Wasn’t very nice, that.” Apart from that, the major problem was lack of information, which continued throughout the war. “We never knew anything and we were not told anything, probably out of necessity.” Sometimes by pure guesswork seamen knew as much as anyone else, but nothing was told them officially. They never knew convoy prefixes or numbers. “You’d just get there and get on -- see how you managed.” Vessels’ nameboards were invariably removed; finding the right one was sheer

guesswork. One informant said he never knew the numbers of the twenty-three convoys he was in -- he just happened to be there -- one of a number.(HMC 92-70, TTC pp. 2-3) Another respondent volunteered the curious information that, during the D-Day preparations, all ship's names and registration numbers were painted out, but two days later a crew of painters was sent to paint his ship's name in six-foot letters on her side, so Allied landing craft could recognise her.(HMC 92-34, TTC pp. 6-7)

Many respondents remarked on the conditions along the Eastern seaboard of North America in the early stages of the war, and how easy it was for merchantmen -- primarily tankers -- to be picked off by marauding U-boats, as they were often silhouetted against the lights of coastal resort towns not yet subject to blackouts. The period was known by the Axis as "the happy time".<sup>458</sup> When the convoy system was put into action there, the U-boats moved to the Caribbean; when Caribbean convoys were begun, they moved to the middle of the North Atlantic, into the "Air Gap". Allied bomber bases in Greenland and Iceland, plus improvements in radar and sonar, won the Battle of the North Atlantic.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) The area around the Florida Keys, the northern Caribbean, and the Eastern approaches to the Gulf of Mexico was known as "Torpedo Alley".(HMC 90-63, TTC p. 1) It was a "ticklish trip" for the usual tanker traffic -- no convoys, no patrols, no nothing. These vulnerable vessels were not even supplied with U.S. Navy Armed Guard until a good nine months after the States had entered the war, but the Germans were still out there. "If you didn't get one SOS during a watch, you got two." About three days before arriving in Portland, Maine, one informant advised his Swedish Captain he was quitting, being unwilling to continue at war in a tanker loaded with petroleum products. The Captain called him a "yellow-belly", but he said

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<sup>458</sup> . Another wry nickname for this period was "The Atlantic Turkey Shoot" and a second interval also called "happy time" occurred at a slightly later date. Also, HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1 lists a "Torpedo *Junction*" off the Dry Tortugas. This should not be confused with "Torpedo Alley".

no, he would not be hit on a tanker. He then joined United Fruit Company and went right back into "Torpedo Alley" for the next seven or eight months on banana boats with no protection at all. Instead of crossing the Gulf of Mexico from Yucatán to New Orleans, they went up the Florida coast, anchoring at night near the shore, shutting down completely, and walking about "in their stocking feet"<sup>459</sup> to prevent being heard by U-boats.(HMC 90-63, TTC p. 1) One Canadian respondent spent most of the war aboard ship, sometimes not getting ashore for two months at a time. He was mostly in the Atlantic, running from Canadian and U.S. East Coast ports to the Caribbean on tankers. When tankers first hit the coast in early January of 1942, there were frequent sinkings with less than a day between them. This was "Operation Drumbeat",<sup>460</sup> mostly covering the area from New York southward. In 1942 -- probably May -- somewhere near Chesapeake Bay, in one day he counted eighteen ships sunk during the daylight hours. Things were not very good because the United States still opposed the convoy system. There should have been convoys, but there were not; after the convoys came in, it was different.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 1)

The mid-Atlantic "Air Gap" was always a problem. In the early stages of the war, ships were escorted to a "reasonably safe area" and dispersed to proceed alone. Looking back, although one respondent sailed throughout the war and was in twenty-three separate convoys, he was mostly in vessels which sailed independently and he "never saw a thing". From what can be read today, one would think merchantmen in World War II always sailed in convoy and that unescorted ships were sitting ducks if they did not have the speed. Certainly they often were slow. Perhaps it was just sheer luck. About ninety-five per cent of the time at sea during the war they were unescorted, and even the convoys (except trooping convoys) were unescorted, except for the latter stages to get them home through the danger area. Rex Rothwell spent months and months just "chugging around" and saw no action except air raids in port. Probably most ships were the same -- fortunate. They had "a lot of blind faith." One early convoy from Halifax to the U.K. was a large convoy of forty or fifty ships fully loaded and homeward bound, but the only escort consisted of one AMC[Armed Merchant Cruiser] and a French submarine, "stuck right in the

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<sup>459</sup>. This would be the standard North American usage.

<sup>460</sup>. This is the English rendering of Paukensschlag, the German name for the submarine strategy in use during the "happy time", which caused so many casualties in Allied tanker fleets.

middle”. There were no safeguards on the periphery. Had they been attacked, Rothwell now believes this defence would have been completely useless and the entire convoy would have been “a wipeout”, especially if the wolfpacks<sup>461</sup> had been there at the time.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 2)

Like Rothwell, several other informants said nothing much happened in convoys,<sup>462</sup> although one who made this assertion was torpedoed while sailing independently, bombed while in harbour, and mined while in group manoeuvre. He maintained that the only thing of interest was the alteration of course if an enemy submarine was detected; the escorts went on and the merchantmen turned away. He felt safer in convoy than sailing alone, especially if there were submarines about but, although he saw some action in convoy, nothing involved either him or the vessel on which he was sailing and “nothing of interest” happened.(HMC 92-2, TTC p. 4)

#### **a) "liberty ships" and stress damage**

Some interviewees thought it surprising to see how many British “bottoms”<sup>463</sup> were sailing during the war, especially tramps; one respondent said he had seen plenty of ships in port, but never before in convoys of sixty or more vessels.(HMC 92-38, TTC p. 1) Many recollections revolved around the standard ships previously mentioned -- Liberty ships, known in England as “*Sam*” ships,<sup>464</sup> in particular. Liberty ships were impressive. Large convoys of thirty to forty ships formed right outside the Narrows of New York Harbour, escorted by corvettes, destroyers and blimps.<sup>465</sup> They often went from New York to Halifax, Nova Scotia, to form even larger North Atlantic

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<sup>461</sup>. During the Second World War, German U-boats which hunted in groups were known as “wolfpacks”.

<sup>462</sup>. See below for further remarks to this effect.

<sup>463</sup>. The reader is reminded that the term “bottoms” is universally understood by those associated with maritime trade to refer to working commercial ships.

<sup>464</sup>. They were so-called because all such standard ships transferred to the United Kingdom under the “Lend-Lease” system, were given names involving the prefix *Sam*-.

<sup>465</sup>. These were airships or dirigibles, manned and equipped to act as air cover for slow convoys over short distances. Enemy submarines were more easily detected from above and the range of vision was vastly extended. The term “blimp” itself supposedly originated during or shortly after World War I, when military airships and defensive balloons were designated as types “A. Rigid” or “B. Limp”.



convoys.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) Another convoy trouble, of course, was bad weather, especially with Liberty ships. They were very good ships but, when empty, were “like a balloon on the water, and you had to watch out when they ‘fell away’ to prevent them landing on top of you.” Fortunately, going across the Atlantic, the prevailing winds were generally in the same direction, but you still had to watch out all the time in bad weather. You could never relax.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 4)

An American informant from Delaware, after his first experience on a Liberty ship, swore he would never ship out on another. They were “lousy” ships; this one started to split in a storm and had to come back to port for repairs. The cracks were pretty big, between one and two-and-a-half inches.<sup>466</sup> It made the crew nervous. He will always remember the storm; it was February 1944; a big storm, but he does not know what convoy. He remembers standing on the lee deck and watching a deckload of crated aircraft falling off a tanker into the sea, while he thought of the taxpayers’ money going to waste.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 2) A British interviewee was conscious of similar concerns. One of the things that struck him particularly about wartime sailing was a ten-month voyage carrying only two cargoes. “What a waste!” They invariably went out empty, never had an outward cargo, but always had something coming back.<sup>467</sup> His last voyage was nearly ten months long. They went out in ballast to Chile; loaded nitrates for the Bitter Lakes; returned empty to Mauritius for sugar, and went back to the U.K. -- two cargoes. It seemed such a waste and must have been multiplied many times over. Even on a single voyage to Australia, a ship would go out empty and come back with grain, but there was nothing to export.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 4)

Liberty ships were sometimes credited with actually having won the war, since, according to one informant, they carried seventy-five percent of the essential cargoes. One Liberty could carry a load equal to four trainloads of seventy-five boxcars each. Liberties were no good in peacetime, however, as they were too slow.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) When the war started, the United States was not prepared to take care of her Merchant Fleet. She was just

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<sup>466</sup> In the Aleutian campaign: The Liberty ships were of welded construction and a number of them, due to faulty shipyard work and the rapid changes between air and sea temperatures, split in half. This usually happened at the Number Three hold bulkhead and almost invariably without warning.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 174)

<sup>467</sup> cf. R.A. Simpson, HMC 92-5/92-6.

starting to build new ships -- mostly Hog Islanders.<sup>468</sup> Then President Roosevelt passed a law to raise the Plimsoll mark.<sup>469</sup> A Liberty ship could thus be burdened above her normal 10,000-ton capacity to 12,000 or even 13,000 tons. It put them deeper in the water, but they were well-built and mostly safe. When they did crack under stress, toe-plates were welded into the bulwarks to inhibit further stress fractures.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 1) Some of the men interviewed gave very circumstantial data about standard ships, based on fact, but not fully accurate. One said Liberties were built in only fourteen days and used regularly to split in half amidships in heavy weather, because of bad welding. He said Henry Kaiser built them, all the welders were girls, and the vessels were built to last for only one trip to keep the war going.<sup>470</sup>(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 2)

Not all ships which suffered structurally from the rigours of the North Atlantic were standard ships; some were merely old and decrepit. The *Panchito* was in such bad shape she “buckled” in storms and set off the steam whistle. She would blow so badly that she would lose steam and the tide would carry her away at eight knots while her engine was only making six. She was going in reverse at about two knots toward a lee shore in a storm. The Mates, their faces grey and taut, were chewing their fingernails; nonetheless she survived. The crew were running up the bulkheads in their rubber boots to see how far they could get when she tipped. It was mad. The older ones had a harder time, as they were worrying about shipwreck. The

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<sup>468</sup>. These were a World War I style of standard ship, originally built at a shipyard on Hog Island in the harbour at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

<sup>469</sup>. A mark designed by Samuel Plimsoll in the nineteenth century and painted on the sides of ships to indicate when they were fully, but safely loaded.

<sup>470</sup>. Mass-production techniques reduced the necessary time for building one Liberty ship from nearly nine months to about sixteen days. The *Robert E. Peary*, was turned out in four days and fifteen hours as a result of competition and rivalry between shipyards.[Bunker, *Liberty Ships*, 12.] Kaiser was the primary, but not the sole builder. Many, but certainly not all shipyard personnel during the war, were women. The vessels were thought to have justified the effort put into their construction if they made one successful round trip. Although the number of Liberties which cracked under stress was large enough to be noted, it was still a small minority of the total number of such vessels produced.

informant, a self-styled “hero” and showoff, was working aloft throughout this episode.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 5) The *Lieutenant St.-Lubert Bie* also cracked in the North Atlantic and had to be bound with wires, leaving the convoy and sailing straight for the Clyde. Three ships were lost from that convoy through weather stress. In the middle of the night, when the ship cracked, the informant thought they had been torpedoed, but when the lights went on, he realised they had not. He was in charge of shoring her up. She was repaired and survived the entire war although she did crack a second time, across her beam. She was a seven-hatch ship -- quite large compared to the usual five-hatches of a Liberty ship or most other vessels of the period.(HMC 92-35, TTC pp. 2-3)

#### **b) navigation and signalling**

The Royal Navy’s idea of being in convoy was confined to Royal Navy ships, easier to keep on course in bad weather than merchantmen, which had added complications, such as shifting cargoes, that could make the situation even more perilous. In peacetime they would have “hove to”<sup>471</sup> and ridden the bad weather out for a while, but could not do so in a convoy situation, or even alter course to keep their cargo safe. Navy ships, on the contrary, could just drive right through. There were quite a few forces working simultaneously and the experience of World War I veterans was invaluable to their successors -- things like how to “bring a ship up short” when it was closing on the one ahead. Eventually merchant mariners became quite skilled at such manoeuvres, but some had no experience at all in convoy sailing when they started and “you learned all the time. The Merchant Navy was very raw in that respect.”(HMC 92-38, TTC pp. 1-2) A British informant said:

American merchant ships in convoy would wander over close to you. You would only alter course when you had to. When they would get close you would see an American skipper

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<sup>471</sup>. This would be the generally acceptable nautical usage. It is also standard nautical usage to say the vessel “laid up” in a port, rather than she “lay up” or she “was laid up”.

or Mate sitting in a chair on the monkey island<sup>472</sup> puffing a cigar. It was like a joke, but was not a joke, as they did not take it as seriously as we thought they should. Once you had lost a ship or seen many ships lost, you would realise the seriousness of the situation. You don't fool around.

He “got a kick out of the Americans with their cigars and things”, apparently not paying much attention, but toward the end they got as serious as the rest, and “you adopted a no-nonsense attitude -- if you survived.”(HMC 91-6, TTC p. 2) Another interviewee said young junior officers also used to observe various ships, and at night the ships in any given convoy all had different compass errors, so they would close in on each other and then slowly work back out again, almost as if the convoy were breathing. It depended on the weather. If it were rainy, bad weather, the first sign of an approaching ship would be the sound of its screws<sup>473</sup> and you had to take immediate evasive action. In one such circumstance -- luckily on a clear night -- the informant suddenly saw the stars begin to swing across the mast and realised they were out of control. Fortunately the Master was on the bridge talking to him at the time, and assumed command. Also, being a twin-screw, their ship was able to avoid the others, but the first thing the informant did was to switch on all the lights. The steersman “had been fiddling with the ship's wheel”, which had fallen off and had to be replaced. The following morning they received a message from the Commodore asking what the matter had been the night before. They said it had been a steering defect and nothing more was said, but “it was a nasty ten minutes”.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 3)

A Californian Deck Officer recalled a voyage from San Francisco to New Zealand and then on to the Persian Gulf with inadequate charts. They

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<sup>472</sup>. The “monkey island” was a small exposed platform bridge above the “flying bridge” atop the wheelhouse. The ship could be steered from the monkey island and it was at an excellent height for an observation station in a convoy situation. Its major disadvantage was that it was exposed to the weather.

<sup>473</sup>. “Screw” is the term usually used for the propeller *in situ*, as it were, while the word “propeller” is usually used only to designate the mechanical part, as on an invoice when a replacement is ordered. A “twin-screw” vessel has two propellers, one on each side of the rudder.

had to construct their own from Bowditch's Tables<sup>474</sup> and buy them in various ports. There was so much traffic congestion in the Gulf that it took nearly three months to discharge. From there they sailed independently to Bahía, where about a forty-ship convoy was assembled, and they started off with that, then were torpedoed and towed to Trinidad and on to New Orleans. That was the only dramatic incident during the war. They also went to Tarawa from Port Hueneme, California, and lay off the island while the United States Marines landed. They then brought the "Seabees"(U.S. Naval Construction Battalions)<sup>475</sup> in, once the island was secured. He did not consider this exactly scary, as "you've just got a job to do -- you do it". Recounting night bombings and searchlights, he said in his experience the planes never hit anything, but there was "so much light you could read a newspaper", and the phosphorus flares "lit up the area like a fairgrounds[sic]".(HMC 90-2, TTC pp. 1-2)

In his description of towing a large drydock independently in the Pacific, one British rating said only navigating officers understood the real dilemmas of discovering there were enemy submarines on their projected course -- the rest of the crew simply carried on and maintained a strict lookout. The main problem was worry, not knowing where the subs were, or if you would run into them. You felt much safer at night. With a tow as well as your own ship, there was no way you could survive an attack, even if you were armed. Approaching Eniwetok, the first sight was palm trees apparently growing out of the ocean. Several such atolls had been bypassed by the Allied Forces and were still in enemy hands. It was fairly well along in the war, about 1943. They arrived in a harbour where a motorboat came out and literally flung rolled-up charts aboard, after which they had to send a man aloft

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<sup>474</sup>. These mathematical aids to navigation, devised in the early nineteenth century by Nathaniel Bowditch, are still in use today, with only minor modification.

<sup>475</sup>. Although, undoubtedly, the term "Seabee" arose from the initials C.B., for Construction Battalion, the group is always so called and their insignia is that of a bee in a naval rating's white hat.

to the lookout to watch for the harbour entrances and then had to manoeuvre all the [shortened] tow into the harbour. They could see huge boulders on the coral below, which had to be avoided. The charts showed all the vital points for navigation, but also numbered circles as anchorages for every ship. There were probably sixty or seventy ships already inside, mainly merchantmen, as it was a central sorting basin for the Southwest Pacific war. Their British tanker was important to the war effort because she had aircraft on her decks, plus an oil cargo and a tow.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 1) Homeward bound, even after V-E Day, they had to be alert for German U-boats which had not yet surrendered. Coming up Channel,<sup>476</sup> the weather was very bad and they first narrowly missed a couple of mines and then began to see them everywhere. On calling the Dover pilot, they were informed that there was indeed a mine alert. The informant thought, “All this way and mines to contend with this close to home!” Fortunately they arrived safely in harbour.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 4)

Another interviewee recalled that, when in harbour at Gibraltar, his ship had to be “keelhauled” every two hours, by throwing a hawser over the bow, bringing it up on either side of the ship, and trawling it from forward right aft, to knock off any mines which might be attached to the hull. They felt uneasy laying<sup>477</sup> there. At least underway you can avoid some things.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 6)

Capt. Steve Browne elaborately detailed a trip to Poland immediately after the war, during which time he was navigational officer. He told how he managed to keep to the swept channels, and gave the course in detail. He might not be able to tell you what he had for breakfast yesterday, but he can

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<sup>476</sup> See footnote <sup>100</sup>, above.

<sup>477</sup> The reader is reminded that, although the word “lay” is here misused by the criteria of standard English usage, it is an acceptable form in nautical parlance.

remember that trip well -- the captain, he said, was “a real mothah”.<sup>478</sup> He also described the one-, two- and three-broom navigational buoys, which denoted the channels “swept” clear of mines. These buoys had actual brooms tied to them for rapid visual identification, in the same way that other buoys are frequently distinguished by brightly-painted markings. A photograph of these buoys-with-brooms is no longer in Capt. Browne’s possession,(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 2) so it was impossible for me to either describe them in detail or to insert an illustration; nevertheless the concept was so extraordinary it could not be disregarded.

One British merchant Wireless Operator said he did not recognise other operators’ “fists”<sup>479</sup> as one of the Americans did.<sup>480</sup> Because of radio silence, few signals were transmitted in wartime and there was little or no opportunity to become familiar with another’s style, due to the circumstances.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 2) Amusing incidents were not unknown, however. On one ship, soon after they had left convoy, and while the informant was on watch in the radio shack, the ship in front of them sent a “QQQQ”<sup>481</sup> message, meaning a suspicious vessel was following -- this was about a quarter to four in the afternoon. The watch started scrutinising the ship ahead, looking for the suspicious vessel, until eventually the Mate realised they were the “suspicious vessel”. As they were on the same course, they changed course at the same place as the vessel in front; they also had a deck cargo of boxed airplanes, which made their outline resemble that of an armed raider. The situation could have been dangerous for both vessels from U-boats as well as from their own forces, but as it was, it was amusing.(92-15, TTC p. 4)

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<sup>478</sup>. The term “mothah” is a North American dialect semi-euphemism for “mother-fucker”, an insult common to urban blacks and to the Southern “redneck”. The spelling reflects the prevalent pronunciation and is a common dialect rendering in North America itself.

<sup>479</sup>. The term “fist” in this context refers to the unique personal style of each Radio Operator in transmitting code. Like an individual’s voice or handwriting, each Wireless Operator’s “fist” would be easily recognisable to those with whom he had regular contact.

<sup>480</sup> Sam Hakam, HMC 90-31, 90-32, 90-33.

<sup>481</sup>. See immediately below for a discussion of these four-letter wartime emergency messages.

At the beginning of the war, normal radio practice was suspended. The Admiralty issued their own instructions, including new signals to be used in case of enemy action. Each of these signals was composed of four identical letters. “SSSS” used before a message meant that the ship was under attack by a submarine or had struck a mine (undersea threat). “AAAA” meant attack by aircraft. “RRRR” meant the merchant vessel was being attacked by a warship (surface raider). Those were the three originals. Then, during 1940, they added “QQQQ”, meaning they were threatened by an armed vessel disguised as a merchant ship -- what was called a “Q-ship” in World War I. The purpose of these signals was to indicate to the Admiralty the nature of the attack, so they could take effective action. The rest of the message after the code would give the nature of the attack and the position co-ordinates and was always very brief. At the beginning of the war, they were told to include the name of the ship sending the message, but later this practice was terminated. Ships’ nameboards were removed as well. Merchant ships were not supposed to go to anyone’s assistance on orders of the Admiralty; only escorts or other naval vessels were to do this. Merchantmen were under instructions to keep away. This created an unfortunate situation where some men were left to drown.(HMC 92-16, TTC p. 1) Another British Wireless Officer, who reinforced this information, said that at one point he had received four RRRR messages in the space of an hour. Although he did not know it at the time, it was the *Jervis Bay* convoy.<sup>482</sup> He considers the British stupid in the extreme to use large passenger vessels, such as the *Jervis Bay*, as auxiliary cruisers. They were huge, bulky, and not particularly fast. By comparison, German commerce raiders<sup>483</sup> were fast, small, and very efficient. The British could have used similar types.(HMC 92-6-2, TTC p. 5)

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<sup>482</sup>. The Armed Merchant Cruiser *Jervis Bay* was lost in an historically celebrated heroic action defending the convoy she escorted from a German surface raider.

<sup>483</sup>. The reader is reminded of the use of the term “commerce raider” to mean a vessel on detached military service whose main operational target is seaborne commerce during wartime.



## 2. general wartime memories

Most general positive comments about seafaring appear in other sections of this chapter, but Bob Imbeau, who sailed with the Army Transport Service, somewhat sheepishly admitted to having enjoyed the war itself -- parts of it. Although glad when it was over he met a lot of people, made a lot of friends, and saw a lot of places. He had the opportunity of visiting twenty-seven different countries, and became the youngest disbursing officer [paymaster] in the United States Treasury Department.(HMC 89-5B, TTC p. 7)

Other men interviewed during the fieldwork, who likewise experienced no direct enemy action, described their wartime sea experience as “smooth” or said they had “never got their feet wet”. One Maritime Regiment<sup>484</sup> gunner himself only lost one ship, the *Bolton Castle* on convoy PQ17, but had known men who lost as many as eight.(HMC 92-14, TTC pp. 2-3)

Tom Goodyear, now a retired Master, lost his job as Quartermaster,<sup>485</sup> but managed to stay with the same vessel by changing to the Engine Department. They put steel shutters on all the portholes and the bridge windows, painted her grey, and set forth to what Goodyear considered to be “the greatest adventure in the world. I was afraid the war’d be over before we could get over there.” On the third day out he was given the job of going into the back of one of the boilers for a maintenance job. Terrified and in a state of panic, as he is slightly claustrophobic by nature, he had not been inside long when the Leading Hand, an Irishman, came to the little manhole door and said, “Come out, Goodyear! The war’s started! Come out quick! We got to flash up this boiler!” Goodyear thought it was the end of the world and that he could not get out. He was absolutely terrified, but somehow managed to get out -- quickly.(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 3)

Apprehension and monotony were the two primary sensations the interviewees dredged out of their memories of convoy during the fieldwork. Other than that, it was just a case of doing the job for which they had been

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<sup>484</sup> . The reader is reminded that the official term was Maritime Royal Artillery, or M.R.A.

<sup>485</sup> . The job of a Quartermaster is to steer the ship, look after signals, and do gangway watches. This suited Goodyear to perfection, as he was on the bridge “where the action was” and was interested in the running of the ship.

hired. Asked what it was like for a young lad in a convoy situation, veteran seaman R. J. Warren replied:

As a personal opinion, for the first two years it was a novelty ... for the simple reason that it was an adventure until one or two things happened and I begin to realise that I was in a situation which could be very traumatic -- very frightening and also very destructive. It was when you'd been in a number of convoys which had been attacked by ... aircraft or had been attacked in a North Atlantic convoy by U-boats and had seen [???] blown up and ships goin' up all around you, but ... I would say for the first few voyages, not even a couple of years, I think it was, I think I didn't realise ... how serious the situation that I was in. It was a novelty until I ... got a bit older and I begin to realise that there was a lot more goin' on than what I'd originally realised. ... In fact, I suppose I begin to realise what could happen to me -- what was happenin' to other people.... It wasn't a situation that I worried about, because I believe I was too young to -- when you're that young you don't worry too much. I don't think you got the message. It was only when you got a little bit older and you saw things happenin' around you and especially attacks with aircraft that you could actually see, where you couldn't actually see a submarine, I mean ... if a ship was torpedoed there'd be one great big bang and that would be the end of that sort of thing." (HMC 92-50, TTC pp. 4-5)

Alan Peter was "not interested in being blown up". He was not really frightened, but occasionally scared, in action, but he "sort of dismissed anxious thoughts". You worked without allowing fears to upset you. Occasionally you thought you might be torpedoed, but you never thought you would die. There was more concern for others whom you saw die when other ships were hit. (HMC 92-34, TTC p. 5)

Rex Rothwell, likewise, was never really frightened. "You would get a bit of a start from crashes and depth charges", but he was never afraid to sail, probably because he was lucky, and it was a routine job. Many peacetime jobs were also dangerous. He can never recall anyone saying they had had enough and were going to quit. Opportunities opened up in North America, for shore jobs, but few if any took them. He, himself, never knew of any who did. "You always had the feeling that you were gonna get there, just the same." It was accepted. No one deserted. In the Engine Room there was always much hammering and banging in the normal course of work, though, and they stopped that. (Minor things were learnt by experience.) They also stopped striking bells for the end of watches. They must have found out the hard way that it was dangerous, as sound could carry under water. (HMC 92-70, TTC pp. 2-3)

Monotony was regularly cited in the fieldwork data as a major complication of convoy life. The main thing about the convoys, said one

respondent, was the boredom of day-to-day routine and the fearful anticipation of disaster. His “fondest” memories are of cold and miserable weather. There were days of routine and then attack and fifteen minutes of sheer fright. He was too young at the time to realise the situation. There was always the anticipation of getting into port and meeting girls.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1)

Another said he was thoroughly exhausted -- far too tired to be scared. There were never enough men to spread the load and the officers “double-watched” as much as possible when things were “hot” -- the Captain standing watch with the Second Mate and the Chief with the Third. Of course, double watches could not be maintained at all times....(HMC 92-38, TTC p. 1)

Another agreed about the boredom, then said one remedy was to keep an eye on the commodore ship and read the flag signals, attempting to react so quickly they could anticipate the message to relay it and fly their flags almost as the commodore’s went up. Under normal circumstances it would be about a ten-minute wait to read the signals and set up to relay them. When the Commodore lowered his flags, all other ships were to lower theirs -- that is how the manoeuvre ended -- then the order was carried out. At night coloured lights replaced the flags. These were located on a signal mast called a “Christmas tree” above the monkey island,<sup>486</sup> so they could not be mistaken for navigation lights, and were used mainly for urgent messages at night, such as when meeting another convoy going in the opposite direction, which required course alteration. Once there were problems with sea room when two convoys were meeting near Gibraltar, and it was decided to turn all the lights on in one convoy to prevent collisions. “There was bad communication somewhere. It was a terrifying experience.”(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 3)

Fieldwork also established a general agreement about the constant anxieties of wartime at sea. “I think one of the worst things was apprehension

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<sup>486</sup>. See footnote <sup>110</sup>. for a definition of “monkey island”.

-- apprehension of things that might happen and didn't happen, especially if you were sailing independently," said one Liverpudlian, "Every time Churchill spoke and said things were getting better, they seemed to get worse, and you were in each locality."(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 5) Another gave a graphic description of how this apprehension or "fearful anticipation", as the earlier interviewee put it, could affect even the most experienced and responsible seafarer. En route from London to the Firth of Forth, a big Harrison ship was in a small coastal convoy with ten or twelve little coasters. The Commodore aboard (RN retired) had been torpedoed more than once previously. The first night at teatime,<sup>487</sup> a steward came and rang a gong and the Commodore nearly jumped out of his skin -- he almost jumped over the side. They never rang the gong again after that.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 5) Likewise, one of Frank Power's shipmates, who had been torpedoed previously, panicked in an false alarm emergency situation, despite being an "old, cool guy" and chopped through the falls on a lifeboat, throwing its contents, including the supplies and himself, into the sea.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 2)

Another Newfoundland informant and a shipmate, however, escaped from another stricken vessel because they did not panic.(HMC 91-8, TTC p. 2) This was their second experience, as well. In the first, when the ship was hit and they got the lifeboat away, the informant, certain there were still men trapped aboard, was determined to return to the ship. Eighty-seven were found trapped near the fo'c'sle head, with all the smoke and flames aft and, having two seventy-five-man boats, one about half full (thirty-four) and the other nearly empty, they managed to rescue the trapped men, who were the last to leave the ship before she went down. All were later picked up by one of the escort destroyers.(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 6)

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<sup>487</sup>. "Tea" is the British term for the evening meal known as "supper" or "dinner" in most areas of North America.

Several members of the “black gang”<sup>488</sup> recalled that the Engine crew was pretty concerned about submarines. In the Engine Room, they could both hear and feel the impact of nearby depth charges and if ten exploded without hitting anything, men would begin to edge toward the ladders. The distance at which the explosions occurred was also significant.(HMC 90-26, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-44, TTC p. 1) One respondent described an incident while depth charges were being dropped, when the Engineer on watch became concerned for the man working in the shaft alley.<sup>489</sup> “The First Assistant went over and opened the door once to see where the guy was and the shaft alley was full of water.” Had the First opened the door all the way, he probably would never have got it closed again.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 2)<sup>490</sup> Another, however, recalled that “We’d just carry on our normal duties, usual procedures -- greasin’ and oilin’.”(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 5) A Deck Apprentice agreed, “You didn’t think of it really. It was a job and that was it; you just carried on doing the job.”(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 2) As for torpedoes, Capt. E.S. Wagner, a Canadian, said, “You’re young -- eighteen. You wouldn’t do this if you were fifty-eight. You’re ignorant. We were down below decks where the torpedoes would have struck, painting our own cabins. Youth is heedless. You think, ‘It won’t be me; it’ll be the other fellow.’”(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 1) An English rating attributed much jumping ship, bad reports, and the like to the fact that wartime crews were so young. Above all, he said, responsibility was shown aboard in wartime because it was necessary. How seamen “disported themselves” ashore should have been no matter if they behaved at sea. The main concern was winning the war and they made their contribution.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1) Despite being sunk and taken

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<sup>488</sup> . The reader is reminded that this term was, for nearly a century, an acceptable standard usage for Engine Room ratings.

<sup>489</sup> . The shaft alley is the housing through which the ship’s drive shaft passes from the Engine Room to the screws or propellers. It is equivalent in size to a narrow, cramped hallway, and one or more men can work there in reasonable comfort unless claustrophobic.

<sup>490</sup> Doyle Bales, HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1, endorsed the shaft alley’s reputation as a “death trap” and the dangerous conditions there are also corroborated in *Merchantmen at War*, 105.

prisoner, another interviewee said, “When you’re only twenty years old, you don’t worry too much.”(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 3)

### **a) memorable losses and rescues**

A number of PENs dealing with other, rather horrific reasons why men recalled the distress of their wartime service have been omitted from this work. They appear all too often in the collections of seafarers’ wartime reminiscences published at intervals since the war’s end, mostly in Great Britain. One brief example will be sufficient. The informant was aboard a vessel designated SOFB [Senior Officer Ferry Base], which was anchored at the entrance to the Caen Canal during the Normandy landings. They first landed 2500 commandos in small landing craft, and one went to silence a gunpit at Deauville, but when it turned to leave, a shell hit the messdeck, killing about fifty ratings. They returned to SOFB to clean up the mess. It was appalling. Three volunteered to do the job, and the informant, although not easily put off his food, was sickened to the point that he could not eat for two days. It was the worst he ever saw.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 3)

Others told PENs of themselves being casualties, most of which accounts, like the category exemplified above, have been excluded from this work. The following story is a model of the type:

When the *Gypsum Prince* was lost, about a quarter of the crew, six out of twenty-five, were casualties. They lost the Captain, the Mate, the Wireless Operator, the Cook, and two ABs. She went down in less than three minutes, mainly because she had a cargo of gypsum, i.e. rock. It was 4 March 1942, the U.S. had just entered the war, and there were many new recruits into the Coast Guard, which had a station a short distance away. They “tore out” when the alarm was raised, then thought it a practice drill, as they could not see a ship in trouble when they arrived -- she had already sunk. Not until they got further out did they see wreckage. The crew were on the liferaft only an hour or so before they were picked up by a small Coast Guard cutter. It could have been worse, but was still “plenty cold”. Their hair froze. Six made it to the liferaft without getting wet and they rubbed the others’ feet to keep them from

freezing. They put their hands inside their armpits to keep them from freezing. It was just getting daylight.

When they came ashore, they found what gear had been saved off the ship -- the total for all the survivors -- "you could pack it in an orange crate". The American Red Cross provided them with clothes, but these were of pre-World War I vintage. The shipping company then sent a bus to convey them to New York. "If you looked at us you'd think we were delegates to a hobo convention." The company gave each man a month's wages, fare home, and a hundred dollars for clothes, but these funds were not adequate to rekit them properly.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 4)

Newfoundlanders were considered British, and when they survived a sinking were classed as DBS[Distressed British Seaman]. One such, who had been on a troopship, was taken to Glasgow, where the crew and troops were billeted in the Grand Hotel, the largest place available. The vessel which rescued them had had no food aboard, so they were glad to see breakfast laid on when they arrived. The girl serving breakfast asked him if he liked porridge.<sup>491</sup> He said he loved it and was brought up on it. She said, "Thank God somebody likes it!" But he really did like it and did not complain as he was glad to be there. He was in the very last boat to be picked up and his name had been listed as "missing". As he was worried that something might go wrong, he immediately sent a message home to say he was all right. They got a message one day saying he was missing and received his reassuring counter-message the following day.(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 6)

When one Liverpudlian returned home and got in touch with Cunard after being shipwrecked, he was told they had heard he was dead. He went to the shipping office and was told he was dead. He said if he was a ghost he would haunt them if they did not return his discharge book. A similar thing happened to a friend of his as well.(HMC 92-46, TTC p. 2)

In one interview a veteran seaman described a Norwegian tanker which had been abeam of his ship in convoy. In peacetime, tankers would always

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<sup>491</sup>. According to him, British people, especially seafarers, call porridge "burgoo".

“blow” their empty tanks with air while still in port to clear any accumulated gasses, but there was insufficient time to get them gas-free in port during wartime with the quick turnaround. A vessel would have to get out to sea and blow the tanks off later while in convoy. “Although that ship [the Norwegian] was empty, she blew up just like a bomb -- in seconds she was gone, disappeared.” He said all ships had governors on them then, like today’s cars, but when their convoy ‘scarpered’, they took their governors off and “let her go”. They were making eighteen knots in a ship that would normally do only twelve. This may sound nothing to a landlubber, but it was very fast indeed. Arriving in New Jersey, they discovered that the vibration had loosened all the bolts holding the engine and they had to spend a week in port bolting it down securely once more.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 6)

Similarly vivid memories of losses of nearby vessels were retained by a man who was duty officer aboard in harbour in the Pacific, when there was a loud explosion about 0700. He dashed out and saw a brand-new Navy tanker, which had just arrived, being destroyed. Midget submarines had been towed into the harbour by “parent” submarines and were running amok, blowing everything in the atoll out of the water. His ship had American “walkie-talkies” aboard and could hear all the commotion. Depth charges were dropped so near that the steel in their tanks was sprung and they began to leak badly. They were also near a burning ship which was exploding a tank about every ten minutes. It was terrifying. He thought of the people aboard. There were about three hundred crew aboard, but 290-odd were saved by fire-fighting tugs. They did a good job saving the people, but the ship sank. The whole sky was black with smoke, as it was burning from the bottom of the atoll and it took a long time to extinguish it. He remembers seeing the last of the ship as she turned turtle with her phosphor-bronze screws shining brilliant in the sunlight. She had just come on her maiden voyage.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 3)



## **b) defensive devices and more rescues**

Some men remembered defensive devices. One ship that Gunner Frank Brown was on had a barrage balloon amongst its defences, and the gas was kept near his quarters. The ship was in the Mediterranean, and he was lying in the top bunk, reading, when a big grey thing suddenly went past the porthole. Thinking they had been in a collision, he ran out onto the deck, only to find it was the officers attempting to launch the barrage balloon. He yelled at them to leave it to the experts and due to his state of excitement, his regional accent was stronger than usual. His shipmates made a big joke of this, saying, “Brownie soon reverts to ‘Zummerzet’ when excited.”<sup>492</sup>(HMC 92-14, TTC pp. 2-3)

Torpedo nets were only used once on any ship in which “Tex” English sailed. That was in the Indian Ocean, just before arrival at the Persian Gulf via the Euphrates River, which was about forty feet wide and dark brown in colour.. He said, “Even then Iraq caused trouble, as she was friendly to the Germans.” The United States had built a large dock to act as the British “back door to Russia”, and the line-up of Liberty ships was continuous. “It was HOT!!!!”<sup>493</sup> It was 120° F. and only May or June, not even the hot season yet. It was so hot the Army “knocked off work” at noon and did not go back until dusk, but the merchant mariners were out scraping the decks. If you had on normal thin dress shoes and went ashore in the daytime, you could not stand still on the sand. There was nothing at all there but mud huts at that time, and the native workers were nomads who would not normally have been there at that time of year.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 3)

Large convoys travelled with shallow-draught rescue ships, which were hard to sink, as torpedoes went underneath them. They picked up survivors. If no rescue ships were attached to a convoy, the last ship in any column was

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<sup>492</sup>. He was born and bred in Bath, which was originally Somerset.

<sup>493</sup>. Bandar Shahpur ... “was the port that was famous among seamen for the ferocity of its heat. It was hotter than New Guinea, and for hours after darkness men still claimed that they could fry eggs on deck.”(Carse, *The Long Haul*, p. 186)

supposed to pick up survivors, but sometimes they would not do so, afraid of becoming targets themselves, because enemy submarines would pick off stragglers.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) When one American's ship broke down and was attacked, the British escorts left, but the Canadian corvettes stayed. Bill Krasnosky therefore, reasonably, has a fondness for Canadians. He was never in a convoy with a U.S. Navy escort.(HMC 90-7, TTC p. 1)

In a North Atlantic convoy darkness falls early in winter, about four o'clock P.M. One respondent's ship was detailed to pick up survivors of a sinking ship, so they dropped out of the convoy, but how were they to find people in lifeboats in the dark in dense fog? The Captain mustered the crew on the foredeck and told them to "imagine it was a football match and shout -- ROAR!!!!!" They began shouting and eventually heard answering voices; that is how the survivors were located, having very sensibly tied their lifeboats together, so they would not become separated. They were taken aboard and the ship immediately set off to catch the convoy, which by then was well ahead. Their ship barely missed hitting the sinking vessel as she left, but their troubles were not yet over. In the middle of the night "there was a terrible bump, which threw everyone out of their bunks". Arriving at boat stations, they discovered they had collided with another ship outward bound from Liverpool, which had just rounded the convoy and not yet straightened her course. She then began to sink. They already had one load of survivors and the weather was appallingly severe. They could hear screams and one lifeboat had capsized, so men were in the water. They picked up the Captain, frozen to a lifeboat; another boatload included the Commodore. They saw dead men in the water, frozen, one a sixteen-year-old boy who had been on his first trip. When daylight came, to their astonishment, they had the Captain and Commodore, but discovered the Mate and nine men were still aboard the other ship, so they sent one of their own boats to remove these last ten from the

stricken vessel. They themselves were holed badly -- “the size of this room” is how the hole was described -- and were thus compelled to return to Halifax, Nova Scotia, for repairs.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 5)

### **c) near misses and false alarms**

Near disasters or false alarms were no less dismaying than actual calamities, even if they might have been amusing at the same time. Some of these were related to the conflict at sea, and others to navigational problems inherent in the convoy situation. Once, when an informant’s ship was in a submarine area, they went to action stations and the supposed hostile vessel was a dead whale,(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 3) but on the 4-8 watch, as the sun was setting, Ernest Tunnickliffe picked up the glasses[binoculars] and saw a black spot on the horizon three or four miles astern. It appeared to be a submarine, so he signalled the escort and later received a recommendation from the Commodore for good watch-keeping.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 5) His other vivid recollection of convoy was as a junior officer on watch arriving in New York in “coffin corner”,<sup>494</sup> where his tanker had been placed primarily so it could refuel the escorts if necessary, even in bad weather. The seventy-odd ships of the convoy began to “pile up” on one another coming into the harbour and the Old Man was below with the other officers. Young Tunnickliffe steered his ship away to avoid the crush and the escort flashed a signal: “Where are you going?” He replied that he was slowing, as he did not intend to have a crash. He could probably have gone full speed astern, but this would have created havoc, so instead he turned the ship in a 360-degree circle before approaching the anchorage, and the manoeuvre worked beautifully. There was a great deal of wartime activity in New York harbour, especially at the loading docks, and ships had to be timed going in and out, passing the gate ship. Mr. Tunnickliffe

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<sup>494</sup> This is the furthest position on the starboard after side of the convoy, so-called because of its vulnerability. This informant said it was “where subs were most likely to pick on tankers”. See Chapters Three or Eight for further discussion.

said no wartime voyage could truly be described as “uneventful”, because there were always problems in convoy.(HMC 92-40, TTC pp. 4-5)

Some near-misses occurred under unusual circumstances. It is difficult to believe that two vessels, both at anchor, could narrowly escape collision, but it did happen. A British informant told of such an incident in Freetown harbour on his very first trip, when he was left alone on anchor watch one afternoon:

“I remember the tide turned at about three o’clock in the afternoon and we swung the opposite way to the ship next to us, which was an Italian cruiser that had surrendered. Half the Italian fleet were in the harbour.” He will never forget that cruiser’s name, *Immanuel Filiberto Duca de Ostre*. “And the damned thing swung the opposite way and I looked at this and I drew upon my vast experience of ten days at sea and thought we were going to miss. And we did -- just -- and we were almost stern to stern like that when the Mate ... came out of his cabin -- all the cabins opened up onto the deck, the officers’ cabins. He was sorta rubbin’ his eyes and looked and his hair stood on end and he took the bridge ladder in two strides -- ‘Why the bloody hell didn’t you call me?’ ‘But we missed!’ Well, he was speechless for a minute and then he let rip and said ‘Well you should’ve called somebody.’ So I was summoned to the Captain’s cabin when I was relieved at four o’clock, and he was very good -- Capt. Bligh, funnily enough. He was only a little fella. He was a big fella, though, was the Mate, about six foot three ... real hard case Welshman, but Capt. Bligh was a little fatherly type. ‘Now, Sonny’ he said, ‘Tell me how did you judge the distance?’ Well first he said I should’ve called somebody, which I already knew. And I said, ‘Well, uh, I don’t know,’ I said ‘I just looked at it and, uh, thought we were goin’ to miss’ and uh, he said [rapidly] ‘Well, what’s the length of a lifeboat?!’ I said ‘Twenty-six feet, Sir!’ ‘Good,’ he said, ‘That’s right.’ He said, ‘Well how many lifeboats, then?’ Well it’d be a bit of a squash to get one, y’know. We actually missed by about twenty feet, I think. But all the Captain was interested in was had I realised the seriousness of the situation, did I think about calling anybody, which I had, quite honestly, I had, but I decided not to because I knew they’d all been on double watches for ten days, all the officers, doing convoy work.... I made a decision. And it was a bit too big a decision for a first-trip midshipman, really. But it was all right, I wasn’t told off or anything, and we carried on our way.”(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 2)

Actual collisions with friendly vessels occurred more often than is usually reported in print and the near-misses, as we have seen, were even more

numerous. Even regular ferry sailings were not immune. After the disaster when the *Caribou* was torpedoed and sunk on the run between Argentina, Newfoundland and Sydney, Nova Scotia, one informant was an Engineer on the same run when the Mate came down for a cup of tea and told him they were lucky to be alive. An Allied destroyer had suddenly come out of the fog at full tilt so close “I could throw a biscuit aboard of her.”<sup>495</sup> The warship would have cut the ferry in two, had it hit her.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 3)

Several PENs concerned bombs which hit vessels but did not explode.

The troopship on which Newfoundlander Tom Burton sailed was “pretty lucky” on the North African trip until homeward bound not far off Land’s End, when it was bombed by aircraft. Three bombs were dropped, two going over the side and the other hitting, but not exploding. It went through an officer’s cabin on the upper deck, but he was asleep in another corner of the cabin and escaped with only minor injuries. It then went down another deck and lodged. Bomb experts among the troops aboard said it was a time bomb. They then evacuated the area, which was aft, got a piece of coconut matting around the bomb, dragged it to the shell door, and threw it out, still without an explosion. They were lucky.(HMC 91-8, TTC pp. 1-2)

Three bombs altogether were aimed at the vessel in which Merseyside native Alan Peter was serving. One fell on each side of the ship and the third hit near the informant’s cabin, striking and bending the eighteen-inch wooden deck beam, although the ship survived. The water tank forward of the funnel, however, was destroyed. The galley was midships and it was seven-thirty in the morning. The cook was taking out a tray of eggs when he was bombarded with soot from the funnel. The bomb demolished the ship’s water tank, “danced over” the lifeboat and thence over the side. “It just skittered off”, but its tailfins were left behind, as they had only been pop-riveted on. The label on the fins said it was a 500-kilogram bomb. The tailfins were landed in Buenos Aires, where they were auctioned off by the British community there to raise money for a Spitfire aircraft.(HMC 92-34, TTC pp. 3-4)

While anchored in Greenwich Reach, Wireless Officer, Roy Caine, in his bed aboard ship, heard a whistling noise. He was sleeping “all standing” in most of his clothes as was normal in that situation. He heard a sort of whistling, felt a rush of air, and felt a thud, but there was no explosion. Thinking they had been hit, he eventually went on deck, where he found a group of people clustered around No. 3 hold -- his accommodation was

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<sup>495</sup>. cf. Keith Marshall, HMC 92-30, TTC p. 7 for similar phraseology, “not a biscuit’s throw from shore”.

just abaft this hold. A bomb had hit the ship, but had struck one of the steel beams across the hatch. It hit on a slant and broke in two, the nose going down one part of the hold and the detonator down another. They took the nose part out, removed the explosives with steam, and he heard it was eventually used as a collecting box in one of the local hospitals.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 3)

One ship had recently been fitted with degaussing gear and was lying at anchor in Capetown with a full load of aviation spirit when a motorship moving into the anchorage headed straight for her. The officer on the bridge had rung “Full Astern”, but the engine had not gone astern, but continued ahead.<sup>496</sup> She collided with the tanker. Fortunately, she had slowed by the time she struck, but nevertheless bent the “fishplate”, the little section of plating that rises above the deck and behind which the degaussing gear was located. It was badly bent, and there had been power running to the gear at the time, but luckily there were no sparks. The motorship’s Chief Officer looked down and wondered why everyone aboard the tanker was panicking. He was told they were “not loaded with Coca-Cola!” Imagine what would have happened if a spark had reached that aviation spirit. “It would have been a bang!” The informant’s younger brother was aboard the tanker as well, and their mother had told the elder “You can look after him.” His reaction was, “But on a tanker loaded with spirit, how much looking-after can you do?”(HMC 92-61, TTC pp. 2-3)

An American Engine Room rating mentioned that he and his brother were not allowed to ship out together because of five brothers who had all been killed aboard the same ship in the Solomon Islands. This informant’s brother sailed as a Wiper on a World War I “Hog Islander”<sup>497</sup> which was subsequently used as part of a breakwater at Cherbourg. The informant himself was on another ship in the same convoy, “the largest to cross the

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<sup>496</sup> . Apparently motorships’ engines could lock in the ahead position, as cars, when they are running hot, sometimes cough and spit before actually turning off.

<sup>497</sup> . The reader is reminded that “Hog Islanders” were a sort of World War I standard ship originally built on Hog Island in the Port of Philadelphia.

Atlantic”<sup>498</sup> He said there were “ten thousand ships -- anything that could float”. It was his observation that men lost large amounts of weight on a hazardous voyage and that reactions, interactions, and conditions all change due to wartime and the presence aboard of gun crews.(HMC 90-41, TTC pp. 1 and 3)

#### **d) sensory recollections**

In the middle of the night, a tremendous thump on the deck would be a depth charge<sup>499</sup> from an escorting destroyer. In daylight, one would see a column of water rise.(HMC 92-38 , TTC p. 2) One interviewee sailed in a convoy which was attacked by a U-boat off the Portuguese coast -- after the war was “supposed” to be over. “There was a great shemozzle amongst the escorts and an ol’ ‘whoop-whoop-whoop-whoop’ as they went chasin’ after him and he ran himself aground on the Portuguese coast, so that was the end of him. Yes, we had quite a chase.”(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 5) Several other informants described escort vessels on submarine alert, circling around the convoy, dropping depth charges, with their sirens whooping. “And it’s such an exciting sound, like a pack of dogs, y’know?”(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 2)

One informant’s memories of sounds had nothing to do with sounds of combat. In the Indian Ocean, going from Durban to Port Tewfik, he had “one of the most delightful experiences of my life”. Big liners would bring troops to Durban, where they were discharged and put aboard smaller ships for shuttling to their final destination. These small troopers would leave Durban in a small, fast convoy of eight to ten, circled by six to eight escorts. In the middle there was always a battleship or heavy cruiser, and near the Equator on

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<sup>498</sup> . It is interesting to note the large number of informants who state that they have sailed in either the largest or the smallest convoy of the war. I am certain that all who made this statement believed it implicitly and that it was not a “sea story” made up for my benefit. However, it was not deemed necessary to extend the research to ascertain the factuality of each situation or the relative accuracy of any given statement.

<sup>499</sup> . The thump would be evidence of the depth charge exploding.

Sunday mornings, in good weather, she would steam up ahead and drop back between columns one and two and reduce speed; the columns were only 2000 yards apart. The Marine Band on her deck (“About eighty pieces? It seemed like an awful lot.”) would play English patriotic songs and the troops would cheer and sing along. “And boy, the most stirring event possible.” You could hear the troops cheering and singing “half over the Indian Ocean, amazing!” When she had dropped astern of the convoy, she would steam up between columns two and three, then drop back again between three and four, constantly playing martial airs. “Boy, ‘twas something to behold. I don’t know if I’ve ever heard, seen anything as, quite as stirring....”(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 6)

One of the most bizarre experiences relayed during the interviews was that of a Newfoundlander aboard a troopship. The main body of troops were not told their destination; only important officers knew, otherwise it was kept secret. Going through the Red Sea at night on the blacked-out ship, the informant could hear people talking and saying “yes, b’y, no b’y”.<sup>500</sup> “I thought golly, this fellow got to be from Newfoundland, no doubt about that.... ... So I listened for a time and I went over. ... I said, ‘You fellas gotta be from Newfoundland or you speak that Newfoundland lingo, y’know.’ ‘Yes, b’y!’” He discovered they were from near his home and knew his sister and her husband well. They chatted all the way through the Red Sea, but he never found out who they were. He never saw their faces because of the blackout and asking their names would have been a breach of security.(HMC 91-7, TTC pp. 5-6)<sup>501</sup>

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<sup>500</sup>. They were unmistakably using Newfoundland dialect; using the typical term of familiar address, “boy”, pronounced “b’y”.

<sup>501</sup>. Note also discussion on stringent security measures in North America and elsewhere in Chapter Six.



Despite the fact that the bulk of their data dealt with the North Atlantic runs, nearly all the men interviewed had, at some time or other, sailed elsewhere. Some, in fact, had never made either the “Western Ocean” or the North Russian runs at all. This led to insights about a number of other areas, which were so appealing as to warrant their inclusion. At least two of the interviewees who had been through the Suez Canal and the Red Sea, described the dust storms and sandstorms there as unforgettable, one said it had resembled a thick fog, and another said the sand was an eighth of an inch thick on the deck after the storm he experienced. The term “a sandstorm at sea” or “a duststorm at sea” was always used to characterise such a phenomenon.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-20, TTC p. 1) Ernest Tunnicliffe said there was so much sand in the air off the Sahara it produced false horizons and such, making strict accuracy in navigation impossible.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 5) Harvey Watson had never seen sandstorms at sea, but said the Suez Canal looked like ships steaming straight through the desert, as one could not see the water from any distance.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 3)

A Deck Officer recalled a trip in a Pacific island convoy which was “pretty fast”, travelling at perhaps sixteen knots. His ship, an old C-1 standard type, could only manage fourteen-and-a-half knots. As a result she was unable to zigzag and had to run the baseline course instead, with the entire crew crossing their fingers. At night, when the convoy was blacked out, nothing could be seen, but they could smell the islands, the earth and the vegetation.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 1)<sup>502</sup> When questioned in later interviews, few had experienced this phenomenon. One informant said it could probably be done if one were close enough, jestingly adding that it would be even more probable if the odour in question were that of copra.<sup>503</sup> The other informant in this joint

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<sup>502</sup>. Emerson Chodzko, HMC 89-1, TTC p. 1, verified by Capt. Fred A. Steele, my stepfather, who was also aboard this vessel.

<sup>503</sup>. Copra, a dried coconut product used in the manufacture of soaps and toiletries, is renowned for a powerful and unpleasant rancid odour.

interview situation said the wind would have to be blowing in the appropriate direction, but that he himself had never noticed any such olfactory phenomena.(HMC 89-5B, TTC p. 4) Another said that one of the fascinating things in the Pacific was the number of islands you passed. You could sail for days or weeks on end, but there was always an island to see.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 2)

One interviewee shipped on a passenger liner whose captain was chronically seasick. The Staff Captain had to take over for three or four days every time they left harbour.(HMC 90-58, TTC p. 3) This corresponds to information given me throughout my life by family and friends, most of whom, career seafarers, say that on their first day or two at sea after a period ashore they are always seasick to some extent.<sup>504</sup> A Royal Navy Wireless Operator interviewed evinced pleasure that his ship was with an escort force two-thirds of its time at sea, because with a convoy they did a gentle six or seven knots and rolled, but did not pitch much. Out with the fleet, they did fifteen or sixteen knots and it was Hell, especially in a rough sea. It damaged not only the ship, but the men's bodies as well; most destroyer men have internal problems to the present day because of the pounding and the frequency of vomiting -- this has been verified by medical personnel. The informant is always upset by people who claim to be "good sailors", because under the right (or wrong?) conditions anyone will be seasick. The difference between "men" and "boys" is that the latter "lie down and die", while the former simply keep going and ignore it. He does not believe people who say they are not affected by the sea, but agrees with others that seasickness is most often suffered at the beginning of a voyage. Once his ship, after being at sea for some time, struck a hurricane with winds of 104 MPH and no one was sick,

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<sup>504</sup> . Clint Johnson, Harold Squires, and Capt. George Bryson gave similar testimony, all of which is cited earlier in this chapter.(HMC 90-24, TTC p. 2; HMC 91-9, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-66, TTC p. 1)

although all were battered. There is no need to be a “bad sailor” though. One can do things to reduce the effects of seasickness, such as staying on the upper decks, watching the motion of the sea, and eating moderately.(HMC 92-20, TTC pp. 5-6)<sup>505</sup> Nearly anyone who has spent much time on the water, including yachtsmen and recreational divers agree that one should never sail with either a totally empty nor an overfull digestive tract<sup>506</sup> and the two most highly touted preventatives for *mal de mer* are dry crackers<sup>507</sup> and/or Jamaican ginger beer.<sup>508</sup> Nor is nausea a respecter of rank. The naval informant just quoted also told about King George VI using their vessel when inspecting the fleet. They tried to keep the motion gentle, but the King, who had been a midshipman during World War I, nevertheless had to call for the “Royal Gash<sup>509</sup> Bucket”(HMC 92-20, TTC pp. 5-6)

Wartime was very trying on all aspects of the health of professional seamen -- not only the physical, but the mental and emotional as well. After two years of war those who were qualified officers noted many regular crew had been lost and their ships were now manned by people who were not real sailors. The “new bods” were “cunning fellows” who had managed to keep out of the Army, not the good, able professional seamen to whom these officers were accustomed. There was “a lot of riff-raff” in crews toward the end of the war, but they simply had to be tolerated. Many proficient men were

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<sup>505</sup>. Beck, 307, notes that despite the fact that seasickness is almost always taken lightly, it is quite capable of being fatal. “Salt water, dry biscuits, tea, pickles and dried fish are all suggested remedies, and the sufferer is always advised to steer clear of sweets.” He remarks as well that beyond the truly helpful, there are always a few who make suggestions calculated to increase, rather than alleviate nausea.

<sup>506</sup>. Although one ship’s Cook said, “Don’t eat anything and you won’t get seasick.”(HMC 90-22, TTC p. 2)

<sup>507</sup>. Once on a destroyer in Havana at the dock and another time when he was bridge lookout, John Klocko was very seasick, but the officer in charge thought he was shamming. On Navy ships, saltine crackers come in boxes like egg crates. Klocko learned to eat saltines or hardtack to keep from getting seasick.(HMC 90-64, TTC p. 2)

<sup>508</sup>. These panaceas are generally accepted. My stepfather originally told me about the crackers, which I have tried and found efficacious. Personal friends of mine who have sailed or dived in the Caribbean say ginger in any form, but especially in the Jamaican ginger beer formula.(Various personal conversations with Kim Dyer, recreational diver, and Dr. Winifred Lloyd-Smith, diver, anaesthetist and specialist in diving medicine).

<sup>509</sup>. The term “gash” is universally accepted amongst British seafarers to refer generally to disposable garbage and specifically to vomit.

in the Royal Navy Reserve and had been taken off the merchant ships and replaced by uncertificated officers. Those with more skills had to “carry” the others who were less qualified, and it wore them down. It was not an easy job by any means. The RNR men had the best of it; they were taken into the Navy before the RNVR, who were usually bankers and the like, not seamen, having joined the Navy as a “hobby” during peacetime. All were eventually called up, however. You could walk off a cargo boat with a certificate and immediately become the navigator of a huge battleship. “The CO would be damned glad to get a professional who knew his job.” Most merchant marine officers were drafted into the Navy as navigators, since there was no easy electronic equipment in those days, and all was done with a magnetic compass. They did recruit “a lot of good people”, though. Merchant vessels got three Wireless Operators instead of one, and three signalmen, one for each watch, as well as lots more trained gunners. By the end of the war there were as many defence personnel aboard as there were working crew.(HMC 92-38, TTC p. 3)

### **e) storms at sea**

The magnificent primordial face of Nature herself seems to strike a responsive chord in the souls of many seafarers. In *Shipping Out* we are told, “It must be...that the vastness of sea and sky, the crowded or uncrowded conditions under which we live, the infinite concept of time and space, influences the way we think.”<sup>510</sup> This may well be the case, as several informants have averred that the most memorable thing about their seagoing lives was this very vastness of the sea, the sky, and Creation in general and the feelings of awe and human insignificance with which it left them. It is also notable that many of these same individuals mentioned the middle watch (12-4) as their favourite, citing the solitude and the feeling of being in complete control of the ship’s destiny and their own as being the definitive aspects of

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<sup>510</sup>. Sherar, 17.

that choice.<sup>511</sup> David Grover, not only seafarer, but academic and author as well,<sup>512</sup> said first that he was often in convoys which were dispersed by storms and that “storms seemed to be our worst enemy.” He tried to absorb culture wherever he went, but did not get into the really interesting European ports until after the war, although “when you’re eighteen and seeing the world for the first time, it’s all interesting.” The sea itself was a fascination in all its moods, especially when violent. He pronounced the North Atlantic gale “worst (or best)”, and followed a poetic description of the same by the factual information that under normal conditions the ship might be capable of 260 miles per day, but in some storms they could manage no more than about seventeen. The most memorable thing for him was the fury of the storms and the wild weather. Despite fright, discomfort and misery, it is awesome. Among memorable things, he listed: the first sight of land after a long crossing, aromas and other things that affect your sense organs, such as sights, sounds, smells, etc. These are experiences which cannot be duplicated, even by artistry.(HMC 90-3, TTC pp. 1 and 4)

An Armed Guard had similar recollections of storms. He felt that generally life in convoy was not too bad, except you had to be cautious; it was basically uneventful. They “listened to beautiful American music played by German radio” but he does not know if it was “Axis Sally”.<sup>513</sup> There was very rough weather in the North Atlantic, and attacks; submarines were sunk trying to get into the convoy, but the men aboard his ship did not know about the latter until they reached Baltimore, as they were in the centre of the formation. The worst thing was the storms which dispersed the convoy at night. They had to regroup the following day and it took until noon to get back to the full

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<sup>511</sup>. Favourite watches are the subject of the next section.

<sup>512</sup>. Capt. Grover for some years headed the California Maritime Academy and has written or co-authored at least two books on nautical topics, specifically dealing with the period here investigated.

<sup>513</sup>. Axis Sally, like Lord Haw-Haw and Tokyo Rose, was a radio “disk jockey” who interspersed music with propaganda. Hers was aimed primarily at young, vulnerable North American servicemen and merchant mariners.

cruising speed of seven knots, then at sunset it would begin all over again.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 2)

### **3. favourite watches**

Among the most notable memories of their lives at sea, most of the men interviewed during the fieldwork recalled what “watch” or work shift they preferred and for what reasons:

“The 8-12 were workin’ men; they were done by half past ten. The 12-4 could do no more; they packed their bags and went ashore. The 4-8 did their best; they were tough just like the rest.”(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 3)

The merchant seafarer in the Deck or Engine Department typically works on a three-watch system, often described as “four on and eight off”. This means the eight hours of the active working day are divided into two four-hour shifts, with eight hours of [nominally] leisure time between them. Each twelve-hour half-day period consists of a “twelve-to-four”, a “four-to-eight”, and an “eight-to-twelve” watch.<sup>514</sup> Those whose work time is eight in the morning to twelve noon have a second shift from eight in the evening to midnight, and so on.

The Catering Department did not employ the watch system, but were “day workers” whose hours of productivity sometimes exceeded the statutory eight. Bakers and Confectioners on troopships or passenger liners began their working day well before dawn, but usually finished in mid-afternoon. Cooks and Chefs, of course, worked around a regular schedule of mealtimes. Stewards and Waiters did likewise, but often began and ended work fairly late or had an hour or two of break time between meals. Catering Department

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<sup>514</sup>. This is the only place in this work where the watch times will be written out in full. Elsewhere they will appear in the form of numerals separated by hyphens.

“Boys”<sup>515</sup> (Galley Boy, Pantry Boy, Cabin Boy, Bellboy, etc.) and Utility Men could work to any schedule demanded by their superiors, but usually began a normal working day no earlier than five or six in the morning and finished no later than nine or ten at night, whatever they did in the interim. They then had all night off and started again in the morning.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 3)

Military seafarers, both gunners stationed aboard merchant ships and sailors on escort vessels sometimes had a slightly different schedule of watches, either “watch and watch” -- a much more active system of four hours on and four hours off round the clock, resulting in a twelve-hour day -- or a rotating “dogwatch” system whereby the 4-8 evening watch was divided into two halves and the men’s work hours changed daily, resulting in a ten-hour day and providing no chance to fully adapt to any given set of hours. Two respondents who volunteered for the Maritime Regiment<sup>516</sup> from the Territorial Army and served as military gunners aboard merchant vessels agreed gunners stood the same three watches as merchant seamen, but one mentioned that guns were manned twenty-four hours a day and the other added that in a particular trouble spot, they might stand four on and four off -- “watch and watch”. The only real difference was that gunners’ duties were the same for the entire four hours of their watch, while merchant seafarers’ would vary.(HMC 92-12, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-14, TTC p. 5) Both “watch and watch” and the revolving “dogwatch” system were extremely fatiguing, but both were standard practice in the Armed Services and were also frequently applied to youngsters in training for the Merchant Service through cadetship or apprenticeship programmes. If a convoy was under immediate threat or when necessity required maintaining “action stations” over lengthy periods the rest of the merchant crew were sometimes obliged to adopt these systems as well.

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<sup>515</sup>. As stated previously, the names of all three shipboard Departments and of all ranks and ratings will be capitalised in this work to provide definition and prevent confusion.

<sup>516</sup>. Properly Maritime Royal Artillery.

Some men go to sea who never should. This rating, however, loved to look out at an empty sea and a star-filled sky -- his favourite job was as lookout, because he was all alone and his only contacts were the Mate and the steersman. When asked his favourite watch, he replied that he was often “stuck with” the 12-4 as a late arrival signing on at the last minute and grew to like it; that the 4-8 was best, sometimes called the “Money Watch” with more overtime and less work. The 8-12 is not bad, either, but the 12-4 was rough.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3)

The attitude of cadets who stood such enervating watches was summed up thus:

Of course the first watch was the best one -- the 8-12, the Master's Watch, and that was the watch that I sailed on always as a Third Mate. That was the Third Mate's watch, so the Master could always come out, 'cause y'know, in case the Junior got a bit above himself or didn't quite know what to do, he was always on call. ... But when I was an apprentice, of course, we were four on and four off at sea, 'cause the apprentices did all the steering of the ship, and it was a question of the watches were changed over in the dogwatch, you know. So one day we'd be on the 4-8 in the morning; the next day we'd be on the 12-4 and so on, but we were never in our bunks for longer'n three and a half hours at a stretch. And, uh.... So we didn't get very much sleep as boys. I was always tired.(HMC 91-1, TTC pp. 2-3)

An Engineer, however, said on a diesel-powered vessel the atmosphere in the Engine Room, especially on the 8-12 watch, was bad, being heavy with fumes. This, at least was true of the two hospital ships in which he served, as they had no proper extractor fans, but had to depend upon the natural draught - - the ventilators turned with the wind, but if there was no wind it was suffocating. Men on the 8-12 watch were better off spending their afternoons on deck than getting a nap. At least this was true on a passenger ship. On cargo ships one did not disturb anyone's deck games. But fresh air was better than sleeping in most cases.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3)

Radio/Wireless Officers were the “odd ones out” because, at the outbreak of hostilities, ships were required to carry only one and they were “day workers”. Of course wartime regulations forbade radio transmission from vessels except in the direst of circumstances, but there was an urgent



need to monitor incoming broadcasts on a twenty-four hour schedule. Soon the complement was raised to two and they did a sort of “watch and watch”, slightly modified to suit their particular needs, but eventually three operators per ship became mandatory and from that time on for the duration they stood much the same watches as the rest of the crew -- four hours on and eight off. There was not really a rule as to which Radio Officers took which watch. A Senior R.O. would often take the 4-8, as it was the most dangerous. It did not matter very much about the other two, but he usually asked the more experienced of the two juniors to take the 12-4 and the least experienced was thus usually left with the 8-12, when the Senior was around to supervise his work. This was probably fairly standard procedure. This informant’s favourite watch was the 4-8, as he had developed a routine of sleep around that watch, although it did not really make much difference which one he had. (HMC 92-15, TTC p. 5)

Most seafarers on the three-watch system, however, had a distinct favourite and, although this was not one of the questions asked in the initial interviews, it became more and more seductive as the project went forward, because of the reasons given for the preferences. In the latter stages of the North American fieldwork and throughout the British research it became established as a routine inquiry -- “What was your favourite watch, and why?” Only a few said it did not matter. The junior watch-keeping Deck Officer, usually the Third Mate, relieved all the other watch-standing Deck Officers for meals, and so did more than his own 8-12 shift, which might make a choice of watch irrelevant. (HMC 92-41, TTC p. 6)

Those ten or fifteen men who said they favoured the 8-12 watch generally spoke as if they were the only ones with common sense, as this watch provided nearly a full night’s (eight hours’) sleep, from midnight to a little before eight in the morning. “If you came off at midnight, you could

generally go to sleep, just turn in after having a ‘lunch’[snack]. But if you came off at four in the mornin’, you’d be ‘chewing the rag’ with the rest of the crew and then suddenly it was eight o’clock and you’d have to go on watch again at four in the afternoon.”(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 5) One man chose the 8-12 for a decent night’s sleep, but said it could vary. He sometimes liked standing watch at night, because of the feeling of being completely on your own, but he did not like the 12-4.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 3) Another thought the best time at sea is when you are Third Mate and have the 8-12, although he enjoyed taking star sights on the 4-8. He found it difficult to sleep when on the 12-4, especially on ships with passengers. There was too much noise.(HMC 92-30, TTC pp. 1-2) Two others agreed with this opinion, one characterising the 8-12 as more “normal” and again, like most of this group, disliking the Second Mate’s watch, the 12-4. He said he used to leave his pyjamas on under his clothing when he went on late night watches in cold weather. That kept him nice and warm when returning to bed.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 6 and HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4)

The Junior watch is the 8-12. That's the “make-y’-learn” watch, and is given the junior officer (Cadet, Apprentice, or Midshipman) -- “It’s really the Captain’s watch, so if there’s any difficulties, the Captain’s there anyway.” The middle watch or graveyard watch is the Second Mate’s, as he is considered sufficiently experienced to handle it alone, and the Senior watch is the 4-8, which is the Mate’s.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 1)<sup>517</sup>

Herbert Taylor described the 8-12 as “the most natural watch for sleeping”, but said if you wanted to “get time in,” the 12-4 was good, because every other watch counted toward another day’s pay.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 1) One chap, who spent much of his sea time as Third Mate, found similar problems to those mentioned earlier in this section, although he did choose the Third

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<sup>517</sup>. The Chief Officer, First Officer, Chief Mate, or First Mate are all terms for the same rank, but casually, even when there are several grades of Mate aboard a vessel, only this rank is entitled to be called “Mate”.

Mate's watch, the 8-12, as his favourite, "because you got a night's sleep." The problem was that you also had to relieve everyone for meals, which meant you had to start by relieving the Mate at 0700 for breakfast and then the Second would relieve you. You would continue on your own watch until the Second had had his lunch -- about 1245 -- and then had to go and relieve the Mate on the 4-8 for dinner at night as well. Apart from that, he liked it. As apprentices they had a rotating watch, like seamen with a dog watch in the afternoon, and they also did "daywork" (chipping, scraping, etc.) and stood watches at night. The first watch was the dog watch, 4-6.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7) Another ex-Cadet agreed about the 8-12, again because of the regular sleeping hours, but echoed that on the coastal run his ship was on they spent a lot of time "four on-four off with a dog watch."(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 2)

Perhaps the most articulate of those who disliked the 12-4 was the man who described it as the "death watch", rather than the "graveyard watch". He said on the 4-8 "you're always under the Mate's eyes. That was the Chief Mate, y'know. On top o' that, it was early in the morning and it was in the break time, 4-8 at night, y'know. And you're betwixt and between. Whereas, like, when you come off the 8-12, you got all that afternoon, y'know what I mean, to.... I think the 8-12 was generally favourite of all watches. I didn't like the 12-4 at all.... Oh, there's some people, like they say, same's ashore here. I can't believe it, like I hate nights!"(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 4)

Most officers and a few ratings who preferred the 12-4 paeaned the peace, freedom, and solitude of the late-night period when they had no one to answer to but themselves, no one looking over their shoulders. They were alone and felt in sole control of both the ship's destiny and their own. John Dalglish expressed their collective opinion by saying that during the 12-4 you were on your own, the ship was at peace, and it was the most perfect time he can think of in his life.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2) Three others agreed, but

mentioned broken sleep patterns as a disadvantage. Capt. George Bryson summed it up, however, by stressing the freedom they felt. “You were there, you were in charge, you had the whole...it was all quiet and...mind you it was nearly as quiet in the afternoons as it was during the midnight to four A.M. watch. It was a hard watch, put it that way, but at the same time you, you never got a full eight hours’ sleep or anything like that, but it was probably the best watch, because of that.”(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-51, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-66, TTC p. 2)

Some ratings, however, had more mundane reasons for preferring the “graveyard” or “middle” watch. “Johnny” Johnston did not care much for the 4-8, “which was most people’s favourite”. He liked the 12-4, because he got plenty of sleep and plenty of overtime before noon.<sup>518</sup> “Nobody liked the 8-12.” Although the Engine Room differed from the Deck Department in preferences, the 8-12 was never popular, especially on tankers, as there was never time to go ashore in the evenings when in port.(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 1)

“Tex” English had labour-related concerns as well. His favourite watch was the 12-4, before “weekends off” were permitted at sea. On the 8-12 you had to work Saturday mornings.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 6) One staunch British trade unionist surprisingly said the 12-4 gave a superior sleep pattern. You came off at four A.M. and could sleep until called to eat lunch before going on watch at noon. You then finished at four P.M. and had a long break before midnight. You got unbroken sleep, mostly in the morning. You might catch an hour or so in the evening, but not often.(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 2)

Three other British ratings chose the 12-4 because of the custom, not universal, but fairly widespread amongst British ships, of providing that watch with the ingredients to cook their own breakfast.<sup>519</sup> Two of them, however,

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<sup>518</sup> Emphases mine.

<sup>519</sup>. See Chapter Seven for details of the “black pan” tradition and how it correlates to this custom.

mentioned the unpleasant system of “field days”<sup>520</sup> as well, whereby eight hours beyond the fifty-six of a seven-day week would be required of each seafarer.

Well, in my day, in the first couple of years as a Messroom Boy and Cabin Boy, I wasn't on watch. I was a day-worker, from six o'clock in the mornin' till about six o'clock at night. But when I went on Deck, I came under the three-watch system. ... But my favourite watch was the graveyard watch, as we used to call it -- the 12-4 watch. And the reason why it was my favourite watch is that we used to come off watch at four o'clock in the mornin' and instead of havin' to get up at eight o'clock in the mornin', we used to do a deal with the Cook on the ship and he used to leave our breakfast out in the galley. So when we came off watch we used to cook our breakfast at four o'clock, well, the standby man'd start cookin' it half past three in the mornin' and, when we came off watch at four o'clock, we used to sit down to our breakfast, which used to be anything he could lay his hands on. 'D be what was specifically issued by the ship's cook, or what we could lay our hands on. In other words we'd be fryin' chips and onions and what have you and.... All this was unofficial, actually. You were supposed to turn out at eight o'clock in the mornin' if you wanted your breakfast, but we used to have ours at four o'clock in the mornin' when we came off watch. It'd save us gettin' up at eight o'clock unless we were on what y' call 'field days' ... because there used to be two days a week in those days on Deck, in the Deck Department, where y' used to work four hours, that was from eight o'clock in the mornin' till twelve o'clock, what y' call 'field days'. Used to do that twice a week. Y' didn't get paid for it -- it was hours to be worked which y'd sign for when you'd sign the Ship's Articles.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 4)

“I liked the 12-4, strange enough”. There were two situations. On a passenger ship you finished your deck work, washing down, etc., about three [P.M.] and could go to the bakeshop and get goodies such as ice cream by “doing a little panhandling”. On a cargo boat, you were often allowed to cook your own breakfast -- not necessarily, but the Cook would leave something out and you could cook it and you tended to make a better breakfast -- sometimes stole a few spuds, etc. The 4-8 was called the graveyard watch and he always felt he had got up very early and was always tired. But the 12-4, although he would be in his bunk at eight P.M., he would know he would get some sleep when the other fellows got up. And things were more peaceful during the night. You were always opposite the Second Mate, who was more relaxed. The Chief Officer was your boss, the working boss on cargo boats, and the Captain, who was rather intimidating, came out on the Mate's watch. The 8-12 was always manned by the Third Officer, but he also

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<sup>520</sup> See below in this section for a further discussion of “field days”, “rope-yarn Sundays”, “housework”, and other such systems of extracting more work from seafarers than that for which they were actually paid.

had the Captain down his neck, so on the 12-4 it was peaceful during the night and seemed to be happier. It is hard to say why, it was just sort of built in, but many will agree. The Second Mate was always very popular on the ship, because he had less responsibility of working you. "When he became a Mate, he prob'ly changed; he'd be a son-of-a-bitch, but usually he was gen'ally a pleasanter fella and you got more leeway with him probably." He might even have a cup of tea and make you a sandwich. The Second was more relaxed. And of course, if on the 12-4, you would be on the 12-4 in the daytime. The Chief Officer would have gone to bed and you only had to worry about the Bosun. It was nicer. But when Barney Lafferty first started to sea, they were not on four on-eight off, but four on-four off. They used the dogwatch system then, which "revolved" the watches and broke them up a bit. Then everything revolved again, because in 1937-1938 they brought in the sixty-four-hour week. You did four on-eight off, but twice a week you had to do two twelve-hour days known as "field days". This lasted quite a long time -- through the war actually. They eventually got four on-eight off. That was the reason for one of the big strikes. Sixty-four hours work a week was ridiculous, but he can remember when you had to do even more than that. It lasted until, when most nations were doing four on-eight off, the U.K. was still on the sixty-four-hour week.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 8)<sup>521</sup>

"I used to like the 12-4, funny enough -- the middle watch, that's the worst one, but I used to like it. ... To be quite truthful the 8-12 you had to work on deck as you know, and the 4-8's daybreak and you had to start on deck, washin' down, so.... No, I'd never liked washin' down [...too much supervision...] Only in the afternoon, mebbe, it might be a nice, sunny...you get a bit of a tan while yer workin', but you only done a few hours 'fore you went on the wheel, see, so...12-4 at night, that was smashin'." On a very slow coal-burner from Capetown to Fremantle which spent five weeks at sea at one go, they came off the 12-4 and "someone'd get into the galley and we'd get all our own food and cook it and we used to have -- believe it or not weren't so bad at four in the mornin' -- eggs, bacon, chips ... I can't believe it now that I used to eat like that y'know. And you used to sleep yer head off till the next watch at twelve o'clock, y'know, what you call the seven bells watch -- twenty past eleven." It is different in the Merchant Navy. Seven bells is twenty past eleven, but in the Navy it is half eleven [11.30]. Strange.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 2)

The numbers of those questioned who preferred the 8-12 and the 12-4 were almost equal, but there was a very slight plurality who fancied the 4-8.

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<sup>521</sup>. Seafarers' International Union member, "Johnny" Johnston, told of a similar system among American companies. There was no such thing as overtime in those days. Homeward bound you were asked if you wanted to make another trip. If so, you had to do unpaid "rope-yarn Sundays". Also some ratings were not paid for Saturdays, but had Sundays off. Often these men were required to work two homeward-bound Sundays on maintenance. This was called "housework". If a rating told the Mate he did not want to work Sundays, he would be told not to bother signing on for the next trip.

Those who shared this predilection appeared to base their choice on the fact that they were often able to view both sunrises and sunsets and some who were bored with most watches noted that during the war this was the time when U-boats were most likely to attack, therefore providing more tension and excitement. One, for example, always tried to get the four-to-eight watch, which was sometimes called “torpedo time” or the “torpedo watch”.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3) Another stated that his favourite watch was the 4-8 in a manner that implied there could be no other. After some discussion he admitted the 8-12 might be all right as long as watches were “broken” in port.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 6) A third liked it because you could come off watch, have a smoke and a cup of tea or coffee, then turn in and get a good sleep between 2200 and 0330.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 4) A man who was then a junior Engineer, once more brought up the subject of “field days” and how they prevented you from getting a full six to eight hours’ sleep, by breaking it into two stages, but added that between two and four in the afternoon in such cases, “everything would stop” while the watchkeepers took a siesta. Also, the 4-8 watch officer, the Second Engineer, like his Deck Department counterparts, did not have to do meal reliefs, where the men on the other two watches did. As top man on watch he would get relief for his evening meal without having to give any. He says “field days” were nasty; they did not happen on a fixed schedule, but one could always be given such jobs on short notice.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3) Another said he liked them all. “I liked the 4-8 watch I guess as good as any one.” On the 4-8 you had the chance for evenings ashore in port and did not have to get up quite in the middle of the night.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 3) A Deck Officer attributed his fondness for his favourite watch to familiarity. “I think the 4-8, mebbe because I spent more time on it than any other watch. I got to be Mate and I stayed as Mate for thirteen years.”(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 1) A letter from my stepfather concurred:

My favourite watch was always the 4-8 -- sunrise -- sunset. Star sights morning and evening. Off all day -- 8A[sic] - 4PM - - chance for a nap and best of all a relief for supper. The third mates took turns doing the relief and made some \$20 for each one. When real young and needing the practice I liked the 8-12. I took evening star sights for practice and when I got better results than the 2nd[sic] Mate I made points.<sup>522</sup>

This was also the watch which drew the most poetic and artistic allusions; several of its proponents waxed quite lyrical about it. Alan Peter cited the Mate's Watch [4-8] because you saw the dawn and dusk and sunrises and sunsets at sea were beautiful, especially in the Tropics.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2) Rex Rothwell, a cadet most of the time, said you were on four on-four off when in action, so there was little time for anything. Officially it was four on-eight off, but watches were doubled on the Murmansk run and there were attacks in between them. He slept nearly seventeen hours straight on arrival in North Russia. He preferred the morning watch, the 4-8, not necessarily in Northern latitudes, but certainly in Southern, because you watched the dawn break over the sea and it was marvellous. The worst was the middle watch, the 12-4. He was surprised to hear some liked it, as it meant broken sleep. To watch the dawn break over the sea, especially in the Eastern hemisphere, "is really something marvellous" especially if it is flat calm and you are just cruising along, it makes you feel good. "Field days" or other extra day work depended. A Chinese crew was a good thing for an Apprentice in those days, as he would not be allowed to work under a Chinese Bosun. It would be different now, he supposes, but then an Apprentice was always glad to work with a "coloured" crew, because the Bosun was not allowed to boss him and he had a much easier time.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 2) One of the most lyrical plaudits for the 4-8 came from Capt. H.G. Skelly who glorified the dusk and dawn watch by saying "If anything can make you religious, it is to be in the South Atlantic and watch the dawn come in over a calm sea, without many clouds -- to watch the constellations going out and the sun coming up. All that

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<sup>522</sup>. Personal letter from Capt. Fred A. Steele, dated Monday, October 24, 1994.



did not just happen; it had to have been created by divine movement somewhere.”(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 5)

The most touchingly emotive statement, however, came from a tough hard-bitten old rating. Describing being on watch at night, when it was calm, he said, “It gives you a stupid spiritual feeling. Wonderful! You can’t explain the sensation with the bow wave in front and the wake behind. This is what draws a man back to the sea. It’s best at evening.”(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 2)

## C. REASONS FOR LEAVING THE SEA

As has been mentioned earlier in this chapter, two basic groups emerged from the sample interviewed during the research. The first was made up of career seafarers and the second, more transitory, sailed during the war, but ceased their seafaring careers at its close. Many of the former group began with formal training in academies or apprenticeship programmes.<sup>523</sup> The vast majority of these either remained at sea until retirement or left the sea in their middle years to embrace shoreside careers in callings related to merchant shipping, thus maintaining strong ties to their seagoing beginnings. The second group entered the Merchant Service “for the duration” (“Hostilities Only”) and left the sea at the war’s close or soon afterward, most taking up shoreside jobs completely unrelated to seafaring. A significant number of this group apparently would have preferred to continue sailing, but felt unable to do so because of consideration for family duties.<sup>524</sup> Many of these young men had only recently married and their new brides wished them to stay at home once the obligations of wartime service were no longer imperative. Others, especially those with young families, wished to maintain firmer familial contact during their children’s formative years. A few who might apparently have been destined to be simply “war-time sailors”, however, became so attached to the seafarer’s lifestyle that they advanced through the ranks and the conduct of their later occupational history tends to parallel that of the “intentional” career men, in that they either sailed until retirement or took up shoreside jobs in maritime-linked fields.

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<sup>523</sup>. See footnotes <sup>18</sup>, and <sup>20</sup>, and <sup>23</sup>, this chapter and pages 145-146 for further information on these terms.

<sup>524</sup>. “Tex” English intended to make the merchant marine his life’s career until he got married and had a child a year later. His wife did not want him to leave. He kept shipping out periodically, though, until he finally “swallowed the anchor.”(HMC 90-74, TTC pp. 1-2) His three sons all went into the U.S. Navy. Shipping after the war until about 1950 was very good. “You’d just walk up to the hall, throw in your cards, and get a ship.” This was especially true just after the war ended, as many men left the merchant marine at that time, and they were quite short-handed. Many said they would have stayed, were it not for wives and families. “Tex” would love to do another trip.(HMC 90-75, TTC pp. 3 and 6)

The British sampling seems to have produced the majority of career men, while the more transient segment appear to be part of the North American group. British seafarers tended predominantly to have followed in the footsteps of family or neighbours, to have considered the sea their only viable career option or interest, or to have been placed in a seagoing career from an orphanage or other public institution. A fairish proportion appear to have remained at sea until retirement because they felt they had nowhere else to turn, their training having been limited to seafaring and the security of a steady job being highly desirable, especially with the experience of the Great Depression ingrained in their memories. Licensed or certified Engineers were the most likely to simply walk away from the sea, as jobs ashore were not terribly difficult for them to find. This was also true of many of the trained Catering staff, who could find employment in hotels and restaurants ashore.

Three-fifths of the men interviewed gave full and detailed answers to the question "How and when did you leave the sea?" A third of these ended their seafaring careers because they wished to please wives and families,(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 1) slightly less than a third came ashore, but continued to work in fields related to the shipping industry, and somewhat more than a third continued to ship out until retirement. Less than ten percent gave up the sea because of illness,(HMC 90-57, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-62, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-45, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-63, TTC p. 1) half of these due to problems resulting from the hardships they had endured as prisoners-of-war.(HMC 90-58, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-23, TTC p. 1)

One interviewee who left the sea because of health problems said if he had not become ill he would still be sailing, but after twenty-three years at sea, he knew when he had had enough. His wife's attitude toward his sailing was that it was just another job. "When I married her she knew I was going to sea." She, herself, during the interview, said, "He was doing what he liked to

do and I was always on a honeymoon. ... It was when he retired that the honeymoon ended.”<sup>525</sup> They had been married forty-two years at the time.(HMC 90-62, TTC p. 1)

Most of those who had spent any lengthy time as prisoners-of-war, ceased sailing on their liberation, even if illness was not a factor.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 1) One who did not, on his release from prison camp at the end of the war, went back to sea until retiring in about 1987, although he did marry. He went back to sea for financial reasons -- getting the most money for doing the job. “If you were at sea after the war, and single, you were getting more pay than at any shore job. Then, once married, you could not afford to give it up.” Most who started their working life at sea learned one specific job, except Engineers, who could work anywhere ashore. Most of the others were not trained for shore work. Oh, a Purser could become an accountant.... Most stayed at sea because of the money, others because they were unskilled for any shore work; perhaps a few because they liked it. This respondent said he did not like it and would never want to be a yachtsman. Although he and his wife are both Liverpudlians, no one else in his family has any association with the sea. His father was a coal miner and later a college caretaker.(HMC 92-22, TTC pp. 1 and 4) His opinions were countered by another, who went to sea as a Junior Engineer in 1934 and continued in Marine Engineering until his retirement. He said at the time he went to sea you were lucky to get a job and you clung to it. An Engineer was not like a deckhand or Catering rating, who could go from ship to ship as they chose, although some companies kept regular men, but Deck Officers, Wireless Operators, and Engineers were hired by the company itself.(HMC 92-42, TTC pp. 1-2)

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<sup>525</sup> It is worth noting that my late mother similarly stressed the “unending honeymoon” aspect of her relationship with my seafaring stepfather. An echo of the same sentiment is found in Hope, *The Seaman’s World*, 90.

Only two interviewees from the Engineering Department came ashore and went into land-based engineering jobs, one with the California State Department of Transportation,(HMC 90-26, TTC p. 5) and one, after twelve years at sea, returned to a shore position with the Newfoundland Railway. This latter, however, remained in positions related to Marine Engineering for the rest of his working life, as the company ran a fleet of ships as well as its trains and the office job of Engineering Superintendent was the Engineers' equivalent of Port Captain or Marine Superintendent.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 2)

Those who left the sea for family reasons were outspoken on the subject. One, who had intended to make the sea his career, but got married and settled down instead, said, "It's no life for a married man, but some won't give up the money, others just love the sea."(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2) From the other side of the Atlantic came a similar response, from a man who, at the war's end, "came ashore, married, and lived happily ever after". He had decided if he married he would give seafaring, as he envisaged too many family problems if he continued to sail, but he enjoyed his time at sea and would encourage anyone to go -- for adventure and "The University of Life".(HMC 92-34, TTC p. 7) Another, who "swallowed the anchor"<sup>526</sup> in the mid-1950s said he had done so because "my kids didn't recognise me when I came home" and in addition he felt his prolonged absences were unfair to his wife.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 5) A third married in 1954, well after the war, when he was thirty-five, and came ashore in 1965 because his daughters were growing up. He was then forty-six and had spent nearly thirty years, most of his working life, at sea.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 1)

Several interviewees had "shifted from foot to foot" a bit on first forsaking the sea, before eventually settling to a life ashore. When the war was

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<sup>526</sup>. The reader is reminded that this is common usage for leaving the sea permanently.

over, one Wireless Operator took a job at Cabot Tower in St. John's, Newfoundland, with the old marine radio station, and stayed for nine months, but "the sea was in my blood" and he signed on for one more voyage. When he paid off<sup>527</sup> that one, he took a job with the Canadian Federal Unemployment Insurance Commission, where he spent thirty-eight years until his retirement. He basically came ashore because he had married and wanted to settle down. It was 1949 and Newfoundland was just becoming part of Canada through Confederation.<sup>528</sup> He was actually looking for the Department of Veterans' Affairs, to see if merchant seamen had any benefits due, when he got his first government job.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 2)

None of those interviewed who sailed as members of the United States Naval Armed Guard, DEMS (Defensive Equipment Merchant Ships) gunners, the Maritime Royal Artillery, or sailors aboard escort vessels continued at sea after their demobilisation at the end of the war or shortly thereafter, although most were required to be registered as members of Reserve Forces for a certain period thereafter. In the case of the Royal Navy Reserve this involved retaining a full kit and keeping the Admiralty advised of their current address and employer. Employers were required to sign a quarterly statement to verify that the individual was indeed working there and that they would release him if necessary to the national defence. The scheme also called for each man to return to his home depot for two weeks' training update each year, but in at least two cases this never occurred.(C. Fowler and J. Bennett, HMC 92-64, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>527</sup>. The term "to pay off", rather than "to be paid off", is the accepted nautical parlance. A ship "pays off" at the end of a voyage and each of her crew "pays off" as he signs off her Articles and walks ashore. For an officer, hired by the company, the term would usually indicate coming ashore permanently.

<sup>528</sup>. The reader is reminded that Newfoundland and Canada were different countries during the wartime period. When one Newfoundland respondent came back "across the Gulf" he had been ashore in North Sydney [Cape Breton] and spent almost two years in the Canadian Merchant Service, but: "They were lookin' all over town for me -- as a 'foreigner' -- I wasn't allowed in." For eighteen months he had regularly gone ashore from the coastal vessel on which he was working, but when he came off the Canadian Merchant Service, he was a "foreigner" and Customs was looking for him. He was given twenty-nine days to leave before facing imprisonment as an illegal alien.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 8)

One military interviewee, who paid off his last ship in August of 1945 and left the Navy in 1946, recalls most vividly his experiences on V-E Day, when his ship was in Rosyth, near Edinburgh. There were so many ships there that the Lord Provost demanded some put to sea, despite a howling gale, to avoid having too many sailors in town during the celebrations. Even now, when this sailor sees scenes of people rejoicing and dancing in the streets on V-E Day, he feels aggrieved.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)

Only one or two of the sample interviewed actually terminated their seafaring careers during the war by joining the Armed Services, and never returning to merchant shipping.(HMC 91-1, TTC pp. 1-2; HMC 92-10, TTC p. 2 and HMC 92-71, TTC p. 1) These, however, maintained an interest in the sea throughout their lives, one taking up sailing dinghies for some years as a hobby(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 2)<sup>529</sup> and another collecting ships' photographs and reading maritime literature to keep in touch. The latter's sons followed him to sea, and at least one is still an active seafarer.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 4) All of these were from the British sample. A few of the United States informants joined one of the Armed Services after the end of the war in order to realise the veterans' benefits which were then unavailable to merchant mariners(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 6)<sup>530</sup> and one made a career in the United States Coast Guard, which allowed his U.S. Navy and merchant marine (U.S. Naval Reserve) time to be counted toward his "longevity".(HMC 90-45, TTC p. 2)

Although one informant had trained between 1929 and 1932 as an officer in the Merchant Service, he joined the Army just prior to the outbreak of the war and never returned to merchant shipping. First he undertook celestial navigation in desert situations and then went back to sea with Special

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<sup>529</sup>. Cf, however, James Crewe, who was adamant that he would never espouse yachting as a hobby.(HMC 92-22 ,TTC p. 4 )

<sup>530</sup>. Marty T. Hrivnak, Sr. felt it probably would have meant good pay and good retirement to stay in the Merchant Service, but came ashore, did his Army time, and then got a shoreside job and spent seventeen years in the Army Reserve.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 4)

Operations Executive, first using MTBs (Motor Torpedo Boats)<sup>531</sup> to infiltrate agents into mainland Europe, then parachuting into France to work with the Maquis, and finally sailing a Tamil schooner as a “Q-ship”<sup>532</sup> until the atomic bomb was dropped and “spoilt my war completely”.(HMC 91-1, TTC pp. 1-2)

Surprisingly enough, two British respondents who left the sea at the war’s end or shortly thereafter finished their working lives as career members of Merseyside police forces.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-61, TTC p. 3) One, Welsh by birth, felt he coped with the strain of coming ashore by handling dockside matters in the police force, thereby retaining contact with his former life.(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 3)<sup>533</sup> Another surprise was that two informants left the sea to go into teaching. One, a Senior Radio Officer, “swallowed the anchor in 1945-46, but coughed it back up again in 1974”, sailing on and off for about eight years more. When he came ashore in March of 1946, he took a teacher training course and taught for twenty-five years, then left the educational profession and went back to sea, feeling he “couldn’t take teaching any more”.(HMC 92-16, TTC p. 4) The other spent about a year at sea as a Cadet, but abandoned the programme and sailed a further four years as a rating in the Deck Department. He came ashore immediately at the end of the war, married, trained as a teacher, and made that his life’s work.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 1)

Of those informants who remained in merchant shipping until retirement, most of those with officers’ rank stayed with one company throughout. In the case of the Merseyside group, this was usually either Blue Funnel Line (Alfred Holt and Company) or Thomas and James Harrison, as those were the two leading companies still operating out of Liverpool at the

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<sup>531</sup>. The British Royal Navy’s equivalent of the United States Navy’s “PT Boat” and the German Kriegsmarin’s “E-Boat”.

<sup>532</sup>. “Q-ships” were armed military vessels disguised as harmless merchant craft and, according to Mr. Arnold, sometimes used for intelligence purposes.

<sup>533</sup>. See full quote in Chapter Six, Section A.



end of the war. Speaking of the ubiquitous nature of the Harrisons' firm in the Liverpool area, one ex-Master said, "Put a ship in any road in Wallasey and blow a whistle -- she'd be manned inside a day. Every other person had someone at sea." (HMC 92-38, TTC p. 1) At least one Liverpool respondent, however, was with Elder Dempster throughout his career. (HMC 92-68, TTC p. 1) Typical of those who left the sea, but continued in associated fields, was another ex-Master, who said he had always intended to make a career of the sea, war or no war. That was the original intention and he was at sea for thirty-nine years, so he believes he achieved that objective. In 1980 he came ashore as Marine Pollution Control Officer with the Department of Trade, then became a Nautical Surveyor in 1981 until he retired in 1990 at the age of sixty-five. (HMC 92-66, TTC p. 1) A third did not retire until he was seventy-two, but did some night-mating<sup>534</sup> immediately after he came ashore, although he had completely severed all ties with the sea by the time of the interview. (HMC 90-1, TTC p. 1) One Chief Engineer married late in life at age forty-five, but did not quit the sea until he was sixty-five. He could not quit, he said with a grin, because his wife did not make enough money. (HMC 90-49, TTC p. 3) Yet another ex-Master, who had retired approximately fifteen years prior to the interview, described the differences in retirement regulations between the Masters', Mates' and Pilots' Union<sup>535</sup> and the companies. As he received a company pension, he did not know if he could have sailed "out of the union hall"<sup>536</sup> after his official retirement. He then discussed the decline of the

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<sup>534</sup>. A North American idiom for what the English call "relief-mating", the term indicates that the job is equivalent to a sort of executive night watchman, although the hours of employment may occur during the day. In home ports regular officers come ashore and this temporary authority is hired by the company and placed aboard to act in their stead while the vessel is tied up.

<sup>535</sup>. Masters', Mates', and Pilots' is the guild for Deck Officers in the United States. The British equivalent is NUMAST, the National Union of Masters.

<sup>536</sup>. Like the British Merchant Navy "Pool", the American union hall served as a seafarers' hiring office. Officer or rating went to his own union hall, where available ships and berths (jobs) were posted or announced, handed in his discharge book, and was assigned, in order of seniority and of registration, to the next available vessel. Ratings were hired by the individual vessel, certificated personnel by the shipping company. This was known as sailing or shipping "out of the Pool" or "out of the union hall".

United States Merchant Marine and expressed the hope that the pension fund would prove sufficient.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 3)

A Liverpool man, who served aboard ship as a Baker, likewise had a financial concern. He came ashore for nine postwar years, as the result of a labour dispute. When he returned to sea he sailed for several different companies before leaving the sea completely. Asked to take voluntary redundancy,<sup>537</sup> he at first refused, but assented to a second request. He received five hundred pounds redundancy pay for twenty-nine years at sea, when dockers and miners were getting £1800 to £2200 for a much shorter working life.(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 2)

It is worth briefly noting the upgrading system for Deck Officers. Newfoundlander, Capt. Tom Goodyear, upgraded on the British system, studying for a British ticket, but finally taking Canadian examinations. The only difference he could see was that one set of examinations used pounds, shillings, and pence as its monetary standard, while the other used dollars and cents. The British and Canadian Shipping Acts were virtually the same. His goal was always to get a Master's certificate, Foreign-going. In the United States it is called "Unlimited". In the British system, once you obtain the certificate, you have it forever unless it is revoked for a serious cause, such as incompetence or malfeasance. Up until the present, "Once you got a Master's ticket, that entitled you to take any ship, British ship, any part of the world. It's equivalent to your Unlimited Master's licence." At the time of the interview it was not necessary to renew the certificate once you had it, but Capt. Goodyear said a law requiring regular renewal was "in the works", which he considered a sensible precaution. Some of his friends once held British or Canadian certificates and later had to get United States licences

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<sup>537</sup>. "Redundancy" is the British term for what North Americans would call "being laid off".

which are renewable every five years, often requiring a brief period at an upgrading school to ensure that one's knowledge and skills are "state of the art". Capt. Goodyear considers this a good idea.(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 5)

Typical cases of "lifetime" officers who finished their careers in shore jobs associated with seafaring included one who came ashore briefly on his marriage in 1947, again when his first child was born in 1952, and finally, in 1954, became a tugboat captain and docking pilot in Savannah, Georgia.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 1). Another came ashore immediately after the war, to avoid uncertain scheduling, and discovered there was not much demand for his skills. He resigned, retrained, and went into Industrial Relations and now works for the Federal Government on the Maritime Labor[sic] Relations Board, specialising in maritime health and safety.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 2) A third spent five postwar years as a pier loading superintendent. About 1950 he was offered a job as a ship's captain, but turned it down, and the company terminated his contract. He then spent a year in marine insurance until the Korean War started and he "got itchy feet" and went back to sea.(HMC 90-63, TTC p. 5) His last trip to sea was a four-and-a-half-month "round-the-world", in 1959, which he is glad to have made. He finished up with two other informants in the Maritime Safety Program of the U.S. Bureau of Labor[sic] Standards.(HMC 90-64, TTC p. 4)

Another Captain came ashore in the late 1950s, when he took a trip off to get his Delaware River pilotage licence and was thereupon offered a job as a ferry captain, which he took, piloting a 1300-passenger capacity ferry between Chester, Pennsylvania, and Bridgeport, New Jersey, where there is now a bridge. He also spent some time piloting ships in the Delaware for the Sword Line with a Reading Railroad tug. Then he went back aboard a Liberty ship in Seattle. The Maritime Service next asked if he would come and teach in the Maritime Service Institute, but then Eisenhower closed all the Maritime

Service except “The Point”<sup>538</sup> and the mariner returned to the sea. He believes the President should have closed the Point and kept the rest.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 7) A Canadian ex-Master set up his own Marine Surveying firm.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 1) One Newfoundlander left the sea in late 1952. He was thirty-two, had been married six or eight years, and the ship on which he was Chief Officer and Relieving Captain was running regularly into St. John’s every fortnight, when he was transferred to a luxury liner to obtain big ship experience. He sold his house in Newfoundland and made arrangements for his wife and two sons to move to New York. When he sailed, they were all set to make the move. The ship arrived in New York, and he, his bags packed and at the gangway, was having breakfast, when a messenger boy appeared with a letter from the St. John’s Harbour and Pilotage Commission, appointing him as a pilot for the Port of St. John’s. He wrote a letter of resignation to the shipping company on the spot and came ashore. “That was the end of my seafaring career.” It is interesting to have met someone who came ashore by achieving his own goals, rather than to please someone else. “Well, things just -- things fell into place. And o’ course these opportunities come once. If you don’t grab it then, you’re stuck forevermore.”(HMC 91-6, TTC p. 1)

A British Captain finished with the sea about the end of 1965, when his company “folded” in a general shipping decline and he joined the North Atlantic Conference Organisation, dealing with economic consultancy and pricing structures. Still involved with shipping, although indirectly, he continued to travel a lot in his work, promoting turnaround speed, and the like, and finishing his career as Container Superintendent for Manchester Lines on the Canadian trans-Atlantic trade.(HMC 92-5, TTC pp. 6-7) Another, however, after serving his apprenticeship, remained with Harrison Lines until retirement, coming ashore to work as a Marine Superintendent in the company offices in

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<sup>538</sup>. The American Merchant Marine Academy at King’s Point, New York.

1973 after shipping out for thirty-three years, and retiring in 1986.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 1) Although many ex-mariners stay in maritime-related pursuits, one recently received a card from an ex-shipmate, an ex-Master, originally from British Columbia, who now looks after a golf course in Nova Scotia.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 5)

Of the ratings who made merchant shipping a lifelong career, a few followed patterns similar to the officers' and came ashore to sea-related jobs, usually in shipyards,(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-44, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-49, TTC p. 2 and HMC 92-57, TTC p. 1) on the docks, (HMC 92-44, TTC p. 4<sup>539</sup> and HMC 92-58, TTC p. 1) or in river and coastal shipping,(HMC 92-32, TTC pp. 6 and 1) but one was asked in 1951 to become an official with the National Union of Seamen<sup>540</sup> and remained in that capacity until his retirement, operating either from Liverpool or Birkenhead.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 6)<sup>541</sup> Those who continued to sail as ratings until retirement sometimes characterised the up-to-date vessels "with all mod cons" as being unpleasantly lonely.<sup>542</sup>

The most unusual case was that of a rating who admitted he had left the sea in a "funny way". He saw a lot of action in the war, including bombings and such, and spent six days in a lifeboat in 1942. It was no big deal though. Afterwards it was just "'R and R',<sup>543</sup> go home, look for another ship". In 1945, when the war with Japan ended, he was at sea in a tanker. Lights were allowed on at sea and there was some end-of-war hysteria. Our man

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<sup>539</sup>. Tom Killips "drifted in and out a lot", getting some good shore jobs, but then dumping them and going back to sea. He worked on the docks and at Cammell-Laird's shipyards for a while, but "couldn't stand it. Once you've been at sea, that's it. You wanna get out."

<sup>540</sup>. Well after the war, the NUS merged with railway unions to form the RMT (Rail, Maritime and Transport [Union]).

<sup>541</sup>. For those unfamiliar with British geography, the city of Liverpool and the town of Birkenhead, both major ports, are on opposite sides of the River Mersey which forms the harbour that serves both.

<sup>542</sup>. Jack E. McGinty, HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3. See Chapter Six on conversation as recreation.

<sup>543</sup>. This is a widely used term derived from military slang and standing for "rest and recuperation" from the demands of active duty.

vowed he would jump ship at the next port and did so in Melbourne with several others. That was not the end of it. The ship had a quick turnaround; the captain swore out an affidavit; the deserters were taken to court, given a token sentence of about a fortnight, and invited to settle in Australia. This lad got homesick in a few months, so picked up a ship for Liverpool. On arrival, he put his book into the Pool for rehire, but the records showed a bad discharge with “Decline to Report” stamped under conduct and ability. This was called a “Burndown”, and essentially meant he was blackballed from the Merchant Service for the remainder of his working life. The three grades of stamp are “Very good”, “Good”, and “Decline to report”. He never shipped out again.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1)<sup>544</sup>

One of the men who had shipped first as an orphan and had actually sat and passed the examination for his Second Mate’s licence, said he had come ashore in the 1950s because, after sailing tankers and cargo ships he had realised<sup>545</sup> no matter how many tickets he got, he would still have to go to sea. He had seen the skippers with whom he had sailed constantly drunk, leading empty lives, despite being fine seamen. Others were pathetic, “crawling on board and crawling off the ship”. One skipper, while on the bridge, flung all the charts and navigation equipment overboard and the respondent had to get the Apprentices to see him safely to his room. He did not see that as a viable way of finishing his career.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 7)<sup>546</sup>

Between shipping out for the first time and “swallowing the anchor”, nevertheless, each man interviewed had years of seafaring experience which could be broken down into a multitude of group and individual relationships, which will be examined in the following chapter.

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<sup>544</sup>. See also Chapter Five, Section C, for a further discussion of this system of grading the performance of ratings, both in North America and the United Kingdom.

<sup>545</sup>. As can be seen by the previous testimonies, this opinion is not entirely accurate.

<sup>546</sup>. This theme will be developed further in Chapter Six, Section A.

## Chapter 5

### Shipboard Relationships

Aboard any merchant ship during World War II there were various types of interpersonal associations essential to the life of any working seafarer. Some of these were on a group, and others on an individual level. There were those connections which were extant in peacetime as well, such as the relationship between the three shipboard “Departments”, Deck, Engine-Room, and Catering/Stewards’.<sup>547</sup> In addition to these connections, traditionally unstable since the inception of steam had brought the “black gang”<sup>548</sup> to rival the rigging-climbing, rope-splicing deckhands, there were also associations between the certificated or licensed personnel, universally known as officers, and the general crew or ratings. These interactions between “management” and “labour” had become more strained since the Great Depression of the 1930s and since major trade union movements had begun to organise the seafarer along with his proletarian brothers and sisters ashore. This area had further political overtones in North America pursuant to the widespread fear of socialism/communism in all its aspects of classless broad-mindedness, which were also linked to trade unionism.

Furthermore, there were racial, national, ethnic, and cultural groupings, interactions between which were becoming more and more strained as society’s predilection for racially integrating North American crews became

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<sup>547</sup>. This Department is generally known as the Catering Department in the British Merchant Service and as the Stewards’ Department in the United States Merchant Marine. What it is called by Canadians generally depends whether they have been more closely influenced by their British roots or their American neighbours.

<sup>548</sup>. The term “black gang” has been traditionally used to refer to Engine Department ratings, because of the likelihood on early coal-fired ships, of their being blackened with coal dust. Only recently has it begun to appear “politically incorrect” to the land-based public, and it will be used in its original sense throughout this study. The ratings involved were Firemen, Oilers (known as Greasers in Great Britain), Watertenders and Wipers. Coal-fired vessels divided the Firemen into Stokers and Trimmers.

stronger. British crews were more ethnically varied, though the lines of demarcation drawn by class (officers *vs.* ratings) and between Departments were more fine and distinct than they were on North American vessels.<sup>549</sup> Racial and class tensions were compounded as expatriate Allies of different cultural backgrounds began to lose their own vessels to enemy action and thereafter to ship more frequently than before aboard British-, Canadian-, and United States-flag ships. Lastly, but certainly exerting no less pressure on nervous systems already over-stressed by the wartime environment, there were relationships between naval escort crews, military gunners stationed aboard merchant ships to man their armaments, and civilian crews who were conducting the day-to-day business of the merchant vessel herself, persevering -- albeit in more trying and irregular circumstances -- with the tasks they, or others like them, had done before the conflict started, and would continue to perform after its cessation.

Apart from group relationships, there were those relationships between individuals which exist in every social situation. Some individuals automatically took pleasure in one another's company, and others just as readily felt a mutual antipathy. There were those whose personal feelings as individuals toward groups were mirrored in their actions and in some cases may have affected larger groupings aboard. And throughout the war there were stresses brought on by the conflict in which they took part, which affected the men themselves both as individuals and as members of larger bodies, and influenced their actions and reactions with one another. The enforced intimacy of shipboard living sometimes increased tensions, but it could also cause men to take the situation into account and reflect before acting too precipitately. One of the interviewees said, "Everybody depends upon everybody else at sea." He then explained that "if you do not do your

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<sup>549</sup>. This is expanded in Section D of this chapter.



job, it means someone else has to do it, so people who are idle or seasick do not get much sympathy, but people do ‘knuckle down to it’”(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 5)

5) The man with prewar experience sailing aboard tramp cargo vessels often impugned the “Western Ocean sailor” who only went back and forth across the Atlantic on a liner, considering himself by far the latter’s better in all aspects of seamanship. Liners running between Europe and North America were often pejoratively labelled “ferryboats” or “floating hotels”, and it was clear from the testimonies of those interviewed that the tramp sailor considered himself to have superior knowledge of his craft. Even the fact that mammoth passenger vessels such as the *Queen Mary* and the Canadian Pacific Railway *Empresses* were often called “boats” and cargo tramps more frequently “ships” is an indication of the attitude of the seafarers who manned them. To this day some Liverpudlians speak with contemptuous amusement of the “Cunard Yanks” who, after a single trans-Atlantic circuit, affected American accents and manners.<sup>550</sup>

About “Western Ocean sailors”, Tom Thornton said, “No, they weren’t seamen [on liners]. They were only ferry boats between New York and England. They didn’t have to do -- there was very little splicing, or wire-splicing, or, whereas y’know you had to ‘do, make, mend’ on the tramps and the tankers and all that, where everything’s already sorted out ashore for them and it’s just fitted on ... All they were doin’ on the big ships was just holy-stonin’ the decks y’know and keepin’ watch and that was it, y’know, and lookin’ pretty at times, y’know....”(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 8)

It was generally believed before the war, that a man who sailed too much in passenger ships was not a good sailor. “It was common knowledge [if?] you’re a ‘Western Ocean sailor’, and my own grandfather which’s a very keen seaman, and my father, they had this built into them that ... they really believed to be a proper sailor you had to rough it to do everything and you would see jobs on cargo ships which you wouldn’t be called upon to do in a passenger ship, y’see?” Splicing wire, handling derricks, and so on were not done on passenger ships. “Yet it wasn’t completely true, because the passenger ships did have derricks and that, y’know. It was just a belief. I think it musta come through from the sailin’ ship days, y’see.”(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 8)

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<sup>550</sup>. I was reminded of this term and its meaning by an unknown young man from Liverpool with whom I struck up a conversation on a Sheffield city bus 20 January 1995.

During the war, men who had been to Murmansk considered themselves vastly superior to first-trippers, and deservedly so, but sometimes they were overly inclined to be curt or uncivil with novices. One respondent shipped with a veteran seafarer, who was asked by a first-tripper whether they would use the Panama Canal or the Cape Horn route to reach the Pacific. The irascible old-timer called him an idiot and only apologised for his brusqueness when another shipmate interceded as peacemaker.(HMC 90-26, TTC p. 1)

The stresses of wartime could cause some people to undergo a type of shell-shock or battle fatigue. “Tex” English became friends with one of his shipmates -- “Tex” considered him “old”, so he must have been about thirty at the time -- who “got nutsy” towards the end, taking a metal bar and saying he would hit the relief with it if he (the relief) did not “sing out” loudly when coming on watch. People were nervous then.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 6) The people you remember most are the real characters, not the average ones. How you are treated or, especially, mistreated is what you remember -- degradation, dehumanisation. Capt. E.S. Wagner, a Canadian, remembered “the real bastards” and recalled saying he would never act like that himself under similar circumstances.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 6)

Bill Kirby expressed the feelings of the majority of Second World War seafarers by avowing that, although the war was terrible, there was a lot of companionship and many pleasant things happened as well as the awful ones. He never knew, he said, that people could be as bad, or as good, as they were until that time. His memories were generally pleasant; the bad things were the specifics, the “one-offs”; the people were good.(HMC 90-13, TTC pp. 3-4) The overwhelming bulk of the interview data corroborated this perspective. The most frequent response to questions about specific relationships was “They were fine. We always got along well. There were never any problems on the

ships I sailed in.”<sup>551</sup> The four sections of this chapter will examine representative remarks of this sort as well as the few which contradict them

Seamen’s perceptions of self and shoreside attitudes towards seafarers will be covered in the following chapter, but there is one attitude which does not properly fit within any of the rubrics here, or in Chapter Six, but which cannot be ignored in a study such as this -- the response to homosexual shipmates. Although homosexual tendencies in seamen have been the subject of legend, joke, and song throughout the history of the occupation, there is no indication that they were any more prevalent aboard ship than in the landsman population. It is curious, however, to note that during a period of time when male homosexuality was anathema to society as a whole and when somewhat violent homophobic responses might have been expected from men restricted to living with one another in relatively confined spaces, this does not appear to have been the case. Several informants mentioned “gay” shipmates, but their comments were framed more in humorous tolerance than fear, anger, dislike, or censure. Despite the free and casual air with which they discussed such persons and their behaviour, however, no respondents indicated any such proclivities themselves and it was always made abundantly clear that active or observable homosexual behaviour was displayed by only a very small minority amongst ships’ crews at that time.(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3)<sup>552</sup> The Stewards’/Catering Department bore the brunt of the reputation in both North America and Great Britain, perhaps because the traditional Cabin Boy was found therein. Max O’Starr, in Pacifica, California, said Stewards were apparently all considered “sissies” in the early days,(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2) and

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<sup>551</sup>. Samples of such brief responses can be found in the following data -- HMC 90-27, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-63, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-2, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-22, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-4, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-45, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-44, TTC p. 4; HMC 90-59, TTC p. 2; HMC 91-9, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-31, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-47, TTC p. 2.

<sup>552</sup>. Those gay men I know who are currently sailing make a point of keeping their romantic lives ashore and their working lives aboard in two separate boxes, much like their heterosexual shipmates.

Joe Cunningham, in Skelmersdale, Lancashire, after saying there were no female Stewards except on big ships, said male Stewards were often thought of as “faggots” or “Nancy boys”. Some actually were, he said, but mostly it was only a joke or a “yah-boo”,<sup>553</sup> and they called the other sailors names back, as well.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 4) O’Starr went on to tell about four “limp-wrists” who had signed on one vessel at Los Angeles and obtained preferential positions,<sup>554</sup> but one jumped ship in Auckland where he had “found friends”.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2) Don Gibbs recalled arriving at a port in British Guiana where a man jumped ship for a girl, allowing Gibbs instantly to upgrade. This information was accompanied by the remark that “a young native girl apparently looked better to him than the Cabin Boy”.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1) This was tossed in as a humorous “aside”, and does not necessarily indicate that the man in question was actually involved in intimacies with any other member of the crew, but it does give an inkling of the lack of concern with which such behaviour was viewed. Another informant said there did not seem to be any homophobic response to gays and the crews were more amused than shocked or insulted by ‘campy’ behaviour.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 2)

Hank Adams recalled a homosexual Deck Engineer [Donkeyman] who had a “boyfriend or girlfriend or whatever you call it” aboard. The Deck Engineer was allowed shore leave in Liverpool, while his “partner” had to remain aboard. Adams said the latter “stopped right up there at the top of the gangway and he stomped[sic] his foot and he said, ‘Now I s’pose you’re gonna go ashore and go with some common thing!’” This testimony was given a comic “stage camp” delivery, but without apparent animosity, perhaps even

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<sup>553</sup>. “Yah boo” or “yah boo sucks” is a somewhat outdated but widely recognisable British schoolboy expression of derision. In this case the implication was that the association of homosexuality with the Catering Department was more *blason populaire* than anything else.

<sup>554</sup>. One of them became “Captain’s Boy”, but this merely means he looked after the housekeeping duties in the Captain’s quarters, and does not indicate that he and the Captain were engaged in a more intimate relationship.

with a little sympathy, although Adams did say the Deck Engineer himself “didn’t fit in very good” aboard.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 2)

On my return journey to the U.S., I met a man who had been a seafarer for most of his working life, and he said “all” Stewards were “bent as a budgie’s wing”, although the word “gay” would be neither used by nor acceptable to a seaman, especially at the time of World War II.. He had, however, once sailed with a Steward known as “Spangles”, who had been a war hero, although “as queer as a clockwork orange”. At the evacuation of Crete, this “Spangles” had been a member of the A-turret gun crew on one vessel which continued firing their weapon until retrieved by Mountbatten. This might well be a testimonial to the fact that a person’s sexual proclivities do not necessarily affect her/his performance in the line of duty, even in a tense battle situation.

Contemporary authors of maritime non-fiction have also noted the merchant seaman’s tendency to broad-mindedness toward homosexual behaviour. In *The Atlantic Star*, David Thomas reports:

...some of the P &[sic] O passenger ships were converted to Armed Merchant Cruisers at the beginning of the war. Some of the stewards were gay and had to go in the merchant navy pool for ratings. Two of these were drafted to the [*Empire*]<sup>555</sup> *Opal* as officers’ stewards. During the voyage out they were challenged by the crew to show their ‘party dresses’ but they chose to stage this event one afternoon when an American escort vessel was trying to come alongside to take an oil fuel-line. The US commander was on the loud hailer[sic] when the two stewards appeared on the tanker catwalk in evening gowns, fur coats, full make-up and jewellery. I think all the convoy heard the ‘Jesus Christ! Hard a port’[sic] as the *Spencer* sheared off. What the Americans thought of the British seamen can only be imagined ... but then you have to be a bit queer to serve on petrol tankers in wartime!<sup>556</sup>

Despite the fact that the Merchant Service consisted of “citizens of the world” and was far more advanced in tolerance than the shoreside

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<sup>555</sup>. The brackets here are Thomas’s.

<sup>556</sup>. Thomas, *Atlantic Star*, 146.

community,(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2) there were sometimes, inevitably, situations when animosity arose between individuals for various reasons. When these reasons are germane to the theme of a specific section, the exempla will be placed there, but there is one which cannot be so located:

A Second Cook consistently persecuted a frightened young Scullery Boy, from an inland home, leaving the lad perpetually in tears. One day, when the Cook was leaning into the flour bin, the boy, pushed beyond his limits, hit him over the head with a frying pan. The rest of the crew, especially the Stewards'/Catering Department, upheld the youth's right to so defend himself, the informant describing the inhumanity which precipitated the incident as "hunting elephants with a BB gun," meaning the Second Cook had provoked a prodigious reaction on the younger man's part by his incessant bullying.(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3)

This reciprocal behaviour of the Scullery Boy might well be compared to that of a "battered woman" who unexpectedly revenges herself on her attacker. Almost every other unpleasant shipboard incident, however, is attributable to either individual differences or to the effects of drinking while ashore -- or to a combination of the two.

The single shipboard relationship which was of consequence only during wartime was that between merchant seafarers and the military. It is, therefore, the first to be explored here.

## A. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MERCHANT AND MILITARY PERSONNEL

During his interview, Ed Stanko said “recent reports”<sup>557</sup> indicate friction between merchant seamen and Navy gun crews, but that is a fallacy supported by a few bitter individuals.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 3) Well over half the respondents, including Stanko himself, described the relationship in positive terms.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-64, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-51, TTC p. 6) None of the military respondents indicated they, as individuals, felt any resentment whatsoever toward merchant seafarers, either at the time or in later years.<sup>558</sup> About half the total number of men interviewed suggested possible reasons for less than entirely amicable relations, and examples of problems were submitted by a large enough sample of the merchant seamen to be considered representative.

Military personnel with whom merchant seafarers were in frequent contact fell into several categories. First, and most familiar to civilian seafarers, were the Gunners who served aboard the merchantmen themselves. In the United States these were the United States Navy Armed Guard, usually called simply the Armed Guard.<sup>559</sup> They were all members of the U.S. Navy and either volunteered for or were assigned to duty aboard merchantmen in small groups, usually led by a junior commissioned officer. Many of them came from inland areas and a fairly large proportion appear to have been of minority ethnic origins, such as Native Americans [Indians], Maltese,

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<sup>557</sup>. Most of the bad feeling between the merchant marine crews and the Armed Guard detachments happened early in the war and was concentrated aboard the Liberty ships. (Carse, *The Long Haul*, 88)

<sup>558</sup>. HMC 90-4, TTC pp. 1-2[NAG]; HMC 90-9, TTC pp. 1-2[USN]; HMC 90-20, TTC p. 1[NAG]; HMC 90-23, TTC p. 1[NAG]; HMC 90-70, TTC p. 2[RCN]; HMC 91-2, TTC pp. 2-3[RN]; HMC 92-13, TTC p. 1[TA]; HMC 92-14, TTC p. 1[TA]; HMC 92-18, TTC p. 6[RN]; HMC 92-21, TTC pp. 2-3[RN]; HMC 92-65, TTC p. 4[RN]; HMC 92-71, TTC p. 2[RN]. The letters in square brackets indicate which military group the respondent(s) represented.

<sup>559</sup>. Justin Gleichauf’s *Unsung Sailors* is an excellent work on this group’s contributions to the war effort during World War II.

Mexicans, and such, although there is no reason to believe that their backgrounds had any bearing whatsoever on their placement in the Armed Guard. In Canada, Newfoundland, and the United Kingdom military gunners aboard merchant ships came from a variety of sources, the Royal Marines, the Royal Navy, and the Territorial Army.<sup>560</sup> In fact, one British respondent said they came from “just about every service except the RAF.”(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 2)

2) The term DEMS, standing for “Defensive Equipment Merchant Ships” was often used to refer to gun crews from all these sources, but it was accurate only in regard to those drawn from the Navy. Few, if any, of the British gun crews included commissioned officers, they were usually smaller crews than those aboard American ships, and were more specialised in their training.

One ex-merchant seaman wrote that he believed the U.S. Navy “took advantage of” the Armed Guard, although the latter were “willing and brave kids” who got on well with their civilian shipmates. He felt that the antiquated weaponry they were given was inadequate against submerged submarines and nearly so against enemy aircraft. He also stressed that the gun crews were a placebo to lull the American public into thinking the convoys were protected, but that he had never seen an American naval vessel as a convoy escort but once, homeward bound on a round-the-world, and that convoy was abandoned in mid-Atlantic.<sup>561</sup>

The first gunners aboard British merchantmen were plucked from the ranks of retired Marines and there was usually only one to a ship at the beginning. Later, the Marines were withdrawn for more vital assignments, and replaced by young volunteers from the Territorial Army who had been trained in the maintenance and operation of specific armaments, usually the Bofors guns, and by small groups of Navy gunners, likewise trained in specific

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<sup>560</sup>. The Territorial Army, portrayed in the television series, “Dad’s Army”, was and is the equivalent of the United States National Guard.

<sup>561</sup>. Virgil Sharpe, personal correspondence dated 26/XI-1990.



maritime weaponry. The latter were the true DEMS and usually consisted of up to five ratings with a Leading rate or a Petty Officer in command. It was their job not only actually to fire the largest armaments aboard, three- to six-inch guns and twelve-pounders, but also to train merchant seamen to assist them in this and to handle the lighter weaponry, such as machine guns.

The British system provided merchant seamen with gunnery training courses of varying lengths, all brief, which gave the trainee a rudimentary background in the use of certain weapons, including a “ticket” certifying he had mastered these weapons, and usually a very modest stipend for attending the course -- something like sixpence a day.<sup>562</sup> An occasional American seaman took one of these courses when ashore in Great Britain, for which he usually received not only his “ticket” and the British stipend, but also full pay from his company for the duration of the course, and sometimes a day’s paid holiday in addition.

When he paid off his first wartime voyage, Merseysider Alan Peter went for a gunnery ticket at Salthouse Docks, the naval school in Liverpool. His “Certificate of Proficiency” on four-inch guns, though small, is an impressive document. That was December 1939, and two years later, after upgrading to Bosun, he completed a two-day anti-aircraft gunnery course as well. This certificate is signed from the “DEMS training centre”, and he had a third certificate for an ARPS-staffed<sup>563</sup> anti-gas training under the auspices of the Liverpool City Council, dated 8 July 1944. Gunners were in short supply early in the war, so on midnight, New Year’s Eve, 1939, immediately after completing that first gunnery course, Peter signed on an Anglo-Saxon Petroleum Company oil tanker.(HMC 92-34, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>562</sup>. Rex Rothwell quoted a Gunner of his acquaintance to the effect that the Merchant Navy got ten shillings a day for taking the course, but the DEMS men “only got three bloody cheers.”(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 1)

<sup>563</sup>. This group, the Air Raid Precautions Service, comprised the Wardens who patrolled British cities during the Blitz.

American seaman, Hank Adams, was one who spent some of the time while his ship was in port in the United Kingdom attending a gunnery school for merchant mariners. On successfully completing the course on a mock-up system, he was given ten shillings by the British government and one day's shore leave with pay by the shipping company as well as a certificate.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 2) On American ships, though, most of the actual handling of the guns was the province of the Armed Guard, while merchant seamen merely assisted them by passing ammunition and the like. Some few Cadets, Midshipmen, and Apprentices had more extensive training in the use of the guns and were assigned to fire them, and, as has been said, a few ratings underwent the British gunnery training courses. Occasionally civilians, especially from the Engine crew, were given "hands-on" training in operating the weapons.(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 1)

Bill Kirby was "always one of the first to get to action stations" because the *Marcus Daly*, on which he made his initial voyage, had given him battle experience, winning the first U.S. Gallant Ship award to be granted in the Pacific theatre of operations. "Be where you ought to be!" was his watchword.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 2) Bob Hiller had gun training at Cadet school and operated the 20-mm. machine-gun, with the Engine Cadet acting as his loader. On American ships merchant seamen primarily loaded, but would take over firing if Armed Guard casualties necessitated it.(HMC 89-6, TTC pp. 1-2) Merchant seamen were often involved in gun crews and nearly everyone was trained for a gun position, as Armed Guard crews were relatively small -- only twelve to twenty men -- and it took a lot of people. Pat Brinkley had trained on the 40-mm. at the USMS school on Catalina Island.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 1) Bob DeWees, who served with ATS [Army Transport Service], said the Merchant Marine had "GQ" [general quarters -- emergency] stations as the Armed Guard were "spread thin" and could not keep a twenty-four-hour

watch. The Merchant Marine helped and later more gunners were available.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1) Marty Hrivnak agreed each merchant mariner was assigned a gun position along with the Armed Guard, but in his experience it was all “on-the-job training”. He was “hot-shellman” on the “three-inch fifty”, second loader with silk powder bags on the five-inch, as well as loader and trigger man on both the 20-mm. and .50-calibre machine-guns. He said the Navy got the glory for many deeds done by the Merchant Marine, for which the latter were never credited.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)

The number of military gunners aboard North American or British ships was quite small at the outset of the war, but increased over the duration. Americans said there were only five to eight in the earliest contingents placed aboard, but they later increased to as many as thirty or forty on larger vessels and most ships had at least twelve.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-57, TTC p. 2) A Canadian volunteered that the Second Officer was the Gunnery Officer. His first two ships did not have DEMS gunners, but then they got six of them. On his last ship, in 1945, the number had increased to thirty-two and the vessel was “self-protected”, able to throw more “FLAK” than a corvette or a minesweeper -- almost as much as a destroyer.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 2) Another Canadian acted as “trainer” on the four-inch gun. The “trainer” adjusts the gun horizontally, while the “layer” adjusts it vertically. They also had rapid-fire Oerlikon guns for anti-aircraft, but only carried defensive armaments, “and usually a torpedo got you first”. They seldom got a shot at a submarine, since those were not foolish enough to surface. There were only one or two DEMS, and the rest of the gun crew were civilians. Usually the Navy personnel would “lay” and fire the gun; they had to keep on target and were reasonably accurate. Once when shooting at targets they hit a smoke float on the second shot. “You had to know the range. The first shot was always to get the

range.” The U.S. Navy Armed Guard provided bigger gun crews, seldom fewer than five men.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 2)

A Newfoundlander said there were usually two DEMS and the total gun crew of six to eight was filled out from the merchant crew. The two key men, the layer and trainer, would be Navy and the merchant gunners would load, etc. In December 1939, this informant was sent to a naval gunnery school on the Isle of Dogs, London, to be a sight-setter (set the degree of elevation and correct for wind, etc. -- elevation and deflection). Other crew members -- one worked the breech, one loaded, two rammed the shell home, one put in the bag of cordite, and one put in the cartridge. Then they would report to the gun-layer “Ready to fire” and the order “Shoot” was given -- usually by the Merchant Navy Second Officer. The response was “Fire!” Both mean the same, but that was how it was done.(HMC 91-4, TTC pp. 6-7) Another Newfoundlander took a gunnery course in Portsmouth and said there were two or three courses offered -- six-inch guns, rifles, twelve-pounders.... The military gunners were well-trained and they did the shooting, while the Merchant Navy were mostly “supplies people” who fetched and carried ammunition, loaded, and the like.(HMC 91-8, TTC p. 3) Yet another said he was never on a ship with an actual “Gunnery Officer”. The highest ranking DEMS were Petty Officer Second Class, with maybe a Gunner or something of the sort to lay and train the gun (well, aim it) and merchant seamen loaded, and so on. There were always two DEMS and they would stand watch-and-watch, four hours on-four off in daylight. But there was always a volunteer ship’s gun crew that helped maintain watch and took training from the DEMS people to maintain the six-inch gun (most were six-inch guns). There was always a gunnery crew aboard every ship.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 2) Canadian merchant seamen were mostly involved as ammunition-passers on the big gun and a few were trained on the smaller guns. They had fire training and a day’s anti-gas

training in Halifax, Nova Scotia, all other training was done aboard by the DEMS as well. Occasionally the ship's Carpenter would make a target and, if they were at a distance from other ships, they might drop it over the side and take target practice.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2)

The guns aboard British troopships were mostly in charge of DEMS, but there was also a "real" Royal Navy gunner. Alf Dennis was part of the gun crew, but they never did much but practice a little. On some troopships the troops aboard mounted and manned their own anti-aircraft guns.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 3) Not all DEMS personnel were from the Royal Navy. Some were Royal Marines, some Army.<sup>564</sup> It was important, because they were trained and the Merchant Navy was not. "They had half a chance; we had none at all."(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 2)

Capt. R.A. Simpson told what he labelled "a funny story" about an experience he had undergone in convoy. The four-inch gun was on a platform; the twelve-pounder was lower, but the telephone to the bridge was higher. The Apprentice [in this case Simpson himself] was sight-setter/range-fixer on the four-inch and assistant on the anti-aircraft. His ship was in a two-column coastal convoy leaving the Channel from the East Coast in early 1941; Occupied France was visible, but England was not. Dive-bombers attacked the convoy and, in the midst of the battle, someone told Simpson to lie down or he would get his head blown off by his own gunners. He had not even noticed the hazard. These are the crazy things that happen in wartime.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3)

Another respondent detailed his first experience on an armed merchantman and spoke of some of the additional armaments which were received later in the war. After discharging at Tilbury Docks, they had to

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<sup>564</sup>. This is an example of the inaccurate use of the term DEMS for all military shipboard gunners.

strengthen the poop deck to mount an anti-submarine gun of 1918 vintage, which had probably been languishing in some naval storage depot. They also got a twelve-pound anti-aircraft gun and one Marine Gunner. There were no DEMS as yet, and no other Gunners aboard. The Marine gunner was there to instruct the Merchant Navy in the maintenance and operation of the guns. The merchant seamen had not volunteered, but were chosen for gunnery duties. It was probably about six months before they actually got a chance to fire the gun on their next voyage to the Indian Ocean. They threw an old oil drum in as a target and decided to fire the gun -- probably the first time it had been fired since 1918. To be on the safe side (they did not know if it would explode) they all jumped off the gun platform and fired it with a lanyard. "Missed by a mile. No chance of hitting a thing, y'know." But the steel struts and stiffening that had been installed were not adequate, so the vibration of the first shot cracked the glass in about eight ports,<sup>565</sup> and shattered lightbulbs in the after end where all the crew accommodation was. It was a very amateurish effort. Extra stiffening had to be installed later, but while the informant was on the ship he only saw the gun fired about twice. They "had a couple of goes" at the twelve-pounder as well, but lost that gun on a subsequent voyage when, outward bound to Panama alone, they were sent into Bermuda. The gun was removed to a homeward-bound vessel which was short of armament, and they never saw it again -- only the turret. In its place they were given a "Holman projector", fired by compressed air, rather like a mortar, and intended to fire an explosive device against low-flying aircraft. It was a joke. Sometimes, for fun, they used to fire potatoes out of it, or fifty-cigarette tins. Just a blast of air and that was it. The projectors were always a standing joke amongst ships -- most informants who mentioned them doubted they were ever effective. Another part of the Holman projector fired a little parachute with a wire to

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<sup>565</sup> . Portholes.

entangle low-flying aircraft, but it was never any use, just a joke.<sup>566</sup> The respondent said, “We found it fired potatoes beautifully. Just put a potato down the barrel and away it went. ... It was cheaper to shoot potatoes than anything else!”(HMC 92-69, TTC pp. 6-7) Another British respondent said on his ship they had also fired potatoes to see how it worked, “until the [Chief] Steward got wise to us and he put all the spuds under lock and key.” But he thinks there were more potatoes fired out of it than mortar bombs. “Umpteen gadgets were put aboard ship in the way of armaments at this period.”(HMC 92-50, TTC pp. 6-7) A number of these “gadgets” were described at length by various informants, although it has not been deemed necessary to include descriptions of every device in this study.

Fred Lavis and Frank Brown were Territorial Army volunteers in the Maritime Regiment<sup>567</sup> and sailed as Gunners aboard merchantmen throughout the war. The DEMS were naval Gunners aboard, manning the Oerlikons and the Lewis guns. The “Maritime Regiment” manned the Bofors and were not qualified on the others. The Merchant Navy took care of streaming paravanes and torpedo nets and that sort of thing. All the “Maritime Regiment” did was the guns and barrage balloons. Merchant Navy volunteers worked on the Oerlikons or the Lewis guns with the DEMS, but not on the Bofors. The Army Gunners, however, had to clean and maintain the guns for the Merchant Navy if there were no Royal Navy personnel aboard to do so or to instruct the Merchant Navy in proper maintenance procedures. In the earliest stages of the war, guns were manned by Royal Marine pensioners brought back to active duty, but these personnel were all replaced by Territorial Army volunteers, as the Marines were much in demand elsewhere. Relationships with merchant crews could not have been better and Fred Lavis, especially, fraternised with

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<sup>566</sup>. See elsewhere, where a friendly aircraft became entangled in the wires and barely missed disaster.

<sup>567</sup>. Maritime Royal Artillery.

civilian seamen ashore, going to canteens where his skill as a pianist made him a favourite companion. Never much of a drinker, when he was given free drinks he passed them on to his shipmates, both Gunners and merchant seafarers. The M.R.A.<sup>568</sup> basically operated on the same principle as the Merchant Navy “Pools” -- “when your leave was over, you were fair game”.(HMC 92-13, TTC pp. 1-3; HMC 92-14, TTC p. 1)

Urban Peters was himself a “DEMS” Gunner. They were paid sixpence a day while on the training course. There is now a veterans’ organisation in Liverpool for ex-DEMS and at the time of the interview, Peters was its oldest member.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 6) Barney Lafferty likewise did a fortnight’s gunnery course in Liverpool, where the Albert Dock is,<sup>569</sup> and then did regular refresher courses of two or three days each. He was given a proficiency ticket as a “seaman gunner”, having trained on four-inch (the main artillery of the ship) and on high-angle anti-aircraft guns.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 3)

Troopships often had a had permanent gunnery staff. In the *Andes* these were Americans who “were absolutely first class”! DEMS were generally accepted as members of the crew. They used to go ashore together with their civilian shipmates and got on well.(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 2)

In a merchant ship there was an Officers’ Mess, and a Seamen’s Mess. DEMS were usually placed with the Petty Officers’ Mess (Bosun, Carpenter, Quartermasters). “They didn’t go with the seamen or with the officers; they went somewhere in between.” Often, DEMS were old Marines or Royal Navy sailors called back from retirement, like the convoy Commodores. “Well, we never had any problem like that,<sup>570</sup> because most of our people were old (in their forties and fifties) retired people called back.” Captain Tom Goodyear

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<sup>568</sup> See previous footnote.

<sup>569</sup> Where the Merseyside Maritime Museum is now located.

<sup>570</sup> Silly misconceptions, 90-day wonders, and the like.



told of ex-Royal Marine DEMS, Charlie Andrews, who had been in the first Falklands conflict in 1915-1916, where he was trapped in a gun turret with the doors jammed, and escaped the sinking ship by unlocking the trunnions, firing the gun, and letting its recoil break it out of the after end of the turret. Charlie “was a good man to tell a story”.(HMC 91-4, TTC pp. 6-7)

Beyond their military shipmates, merchant mariners also encountered troopships filled with young soldiers, marines, and airmen who were green both literally and figuratively, and also the men of the military Navy, who manned the escort vessels delegated to conduct them safely in convoy situations. These contacts were rare and brief for men below officer rank, but ample data attest to irascible exchanges between merchant ships’ Masters and military escort commanders.

Most American informants indicated that what few really serious difficulties occurred between merchant seamen and Armed Guard personnel were the result of inappropriate or unfounded attitudes of individuals, especially the junior naval officers assigned to gun crews during the early stages of American involvement in the war. Capt. Emerson Chodzko, for example, stated that all relationships between merchant mariners and the Armed Guard depended on the gunnery officer involved.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3) A typical confrontation between a gunnery officer and a merchant skipper was described thus:

One seaman back from the Red Sea run told of an amusing run-in between his skipper and the ensign who commanded the gun crew aboard her. The Navy man was about 25, a 90-day wonder on his first trip and full of his own importance. “The first day out,” the seaman recounts, “he goes up to the Old Man and gives him a big line of talk, telling him to remember he’s second in command now.”<sup>571</sup> The Old Man looks at him for a spell, saying nothing. Then he calls in the mate and the rest of us.

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<sup>571</sup>. The line about the gunnery officer being “in command” occurs in HMC 89-6, TTC pp. 1-2; HMC 90-59, TTC p. 4; HMC 90-67, TTC pp. 1-2.

“‘This feller tells me he’s second in command now,’ the captain begins, ‘so I thought I’d better get you all up here and tell you.’ He says it perfectly straight-faced, but we know what he’s thinking and let off a big hoot. The poor guy just stands there not knowing what to do. ‘Listen,’ says the Old Man, turning to the ensign after a bit, ‘your job is that gun out yonder,’ and he jerks his thumb aft. ‘You know how to shoot her. We don’t. And we’re not interfering. Now our job’s sailing this ship and we know how to do that without any help from you.’ So it’s all right after that and we hear no more out of *him*.”

Asked how gun crew and seamen get on, however, this man’s answer was, “They’re swell. Mostly young kids, you know, with maybe an old hand along to help out. Sure, we get along fine. When we go to the slop chest we get a carton of cigarettes for them or something else maybe. You see -- we’re a lot better paid. I’ve never met a gun crew yet I didn’t like and I think the rest of the men feel that way.

“They know their guns, too,” he went on admiringly. “I seen them take pot shots at old fuel cans dumped astern for practice. They got four out of five on the first shot. Those guys will keep on firing after the seas come in over the deck. They’ll shoot their damn gun until it’s under water.”<sup>572</sup>

Stories like the primary anecdote above have been told repeatedly throughout the North American fieldwork.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 2, HMC 90-45, TTC p. 3) Even the occasional British respondent who thought the Gunners were “great guys” might have trouble with a “jackass with a couple of stripes”.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 5) It has been noted, however, that the “90-day wonders” who appeared during the early stages of America’s involvement in the war with inflated ideas of their own importance were later supplanted by more mature professional men, such as lawyers, accountants, schoolmasters and professors.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 6) These later gunnery officers were more cognisant of their standing within the vessel’s hierarchy of command and were better able to handle interpersonal relationships than their younger, less experienced predecessors. Many of them have been characterised by their civilian shipmates as “real gentlemen”. Sometimes the same merchant officer came in contact with both types during his war service, and in such cases, there is a palpable contrast between his depictions of the two.

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<sup>572</sup>. Palmer, 261-262.

Capt. Vince Finan was charged by one Gunnery Officer for stopping the ship to adjust the fuel tanks and add water ballast.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 4) Gun crew members were stationed outside Finan's cabin with orders to "shoot to kill" if he turned on his lights without first closing the blackout ports, and another Gunnery Officer was barred from the officers' mess, because he would not wear his jacket to meals in the tropics.<sup>573</sup> Yet Capt. Finan had a third Gunnery Officer, a Certified Public Accountant [Chartered Accountant] in civilian life, who was "the nicest guy in the world" and assisted with the ship's complicated paperwork. The gun crew ratings were "nice kids" as well.(HMC 90-60, TTC pp. 1-2) Capt. Finan's friend and colleague, Capt. Ed March, said one young Ensign, with only a week at sea, told him (he had then been sailing for about five years) that "he wasn't sure if [March's] manner qualified [him] as a lookout". Capt. March in turn "told him to scat". This was his only unpleasant experience with gun crews.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 6) Occasionally the friction was caused not by feather-headed young Gunnery Officers, but by the mulish obstinacy of merchant officers themselves. There was one squabble on the Murmansk Run, when the Captain refused to put out his cigar during a blackout. The Gunnery Officer in this case legitimately relieved him of his command and gave it to the Chief Mate.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)

Many merchant Masters with extensive experience were impatient in convoy situations and disliked being ordered about by young escort officers. Occasionally this resulted in an incident. One such was the case of a merchantman which was capable of a much faster speed than that to which the convoy was limited. Seething with frustration, her skipper suddenly turned her

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<sup>573</sup>. Certain standards were expected of officers, which were not required of ratings. On acquiring a Third Mate's ticket, Jim North discovered most companies had a rule that one did not enter the officers' mess without a "dress shirt" [in American usage, the sort of shirt worn with a business suit, not formal evening wear]. As he had only one white shirt, he thereafter wore it for meals only and never washed it throughout the voyage. One reason Engineers preferred a separate mess, was that they did not need to change for meals, but could manage with simply a uniform blouse and a good hand-washing.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 3) [Cf. also remarks about "patrol suits" in Section B.]

away from the convoy and went off on his own. The Commodore signalled him to get back in line immediately and received an extremely rude reply as he continued on his way. "Part of the reply was 'piss off' and it included a number of four-letter words starting with f-, sh-, -- the lot." This, however, was an isolated incident, as "usually merchant ships were glad of the protection of the guns of the Royal Navy and of the U.S. Navy". No rivalry or animosity existed between regular ratings.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 2)

A slightly less ticklish affair occurred when a merchantman fell behind the rest of the convoy, her Captain having had no sleep for three days and four nights. She was approached by an escort vessel and "a typical Royal Navy voice" asked for the Captain, who happened to be shaving at that particular moment. As he emerged from his cabin, wiping soap from his face, the Navy man said, "I trust you've had a good night's sleep," and proceeded to request, in a rather supercilious fashion, that they rejoin the convoy. The merchantman's skipper was indignant at this, since his ship was "going full out" at the time. Such situations were understandable, however, as many convoys got dispersed and the escorts had to rush about and herd them back together.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 5)

It appears from the fieldwork data as well that Palmer spoke for all related Forces personnel in both North America and the United Kingdom when she wrote:

...the Navy has plenty of respect for the merchant seamen who are taking the ships and their cargoes through as dangerous waters as the Navy itself ever has to travel. They have seen a lot of the courage of these civilians out on the firing line.<sup>574</sup>

since Rutter corroborates her:

...the two services are complementary. They have always been so. Their relations are closer in war than in peace, and have never been so close as they are to-day; but it is well to

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<sup>574</sup>. Palmer, 261-262.

remember that the “merchants’ service” existed for centuries before the Royal Navy, which owed its being to the need of protecting the nation’s sea-borne trade.<sup>575</sup>

One U.S. Navy rating from an escort crew always liked the Merchant Marine. He is almost surprised he did not go into the mercantile marine when he left the Navy, but when he suggested that he sit for a Second Assistant Engineer’s licence and try for a job with American President Lines, his wife’s reply was: “OK, but forget me.” He also said naval and merchant crews regularly fraternised in port.(HMC 90-9, TTC pp. 1-2) A civilian respondent remembered bar fights when merchant seamen and Armed Guard joined forces to fight a common enemy, but he never recalls there being friction between them.(HMC 90-44 TTC p. 3)

A veteran of the Royal Canadian Navy felt merchant seafarers were very underrated and never got the credit they should have had. One of the escorts’ jobs was picking up survivors from torpedoed ships, and they could lose up to half the ships they were escorting. The pick-up was a gruesome task. He had nothing but praise for the merchant marine, which took many casualties and lost the most men.<sup>576</sup> His merchant “opposite” said the “boarding officer”<sup>577</sup> who checked the convoy ships in Halifax, Nova Scotia, usually had no feeling for the merchant mariners’ needs and wants. He had no understanding of the union situation, foreign-manned ships, or any such thing. When they assembled in Bedford Basin, Digby Gut, and similar places, to supply worldwide, the last person whose needs and wants were supplied was the merchant seaman. As the war progressed, RCN officers began to understand the merchant marine much better and to look after them much better as well.<sup>578</sup> The “gut-robbers” were defeated and they finally got a decent

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<sup>575</sup> Rutter, 8.

<sup>576</sup> See Chapter Six, as well as Appendix B.

<sup>577</sup> See Cdr. Frederick B. Watt, *In All Respects Ready* (Don Mills, Ont.: Totem Books, 1986). This is an autobiographical work by one such “boarding officer”.

<sup>578</sup> Watt maintains that he himself gained insight into the problems of the merchant mariners while in this position and was always open and sympathetic to their grievances.

meal at least once a day. The RCN naval escorts did a terrific job. Relations were better than excellent. They had “Brits, some Americans, and lots of good Canadians”. In the United States battle for merchant marine veterans’ status, gunners were the biggest supporters of the merchant mariners.(HMC 90-69, TTC pp. 1 and 3)<sup>579</sup> The Merchant Navy did a marvellous job and suffered the most casualties of the war. Merchant vessels were “walking death-traps”.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 4)

Some British merchant seamen wanted to join the Royal Navy, but were told it was “too late now”. Most admired and respected Royal Navy men and perhaps were even a little in awe of them. There was not much contact, really. Royal Navy personnel consisted mostly of specialists and experts in armaments and gunnery.(HMC 92-1, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2) The Royal Canadian Navy at the time comprised mostly Royal Canadian Navy Volunteer Reserve. There were about four thousand men in the RCN, but that rose to sixty or seventy thousand by the end of the war. Informant Richard Aldhelm-White himself became RCN at the end of 1943. Most of the RCN (and most of the merchant marine) were “inland sailors”.<sup>580</sup> Relations were excellent, although there were shortcomings on both sides. Aldhelm-White never had any problems with merchant seamen, but used to drink with them ashore and was always upset that they were never fully recognised by the Canadian Government.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 2)<sup>581</sup>

U.S. Navy Armed Guard sometimes went ashore with merchant seamen, as well, and one claimed a merchant oiler as one of his best buddies.(HMC 90-23, TTC p. 1) A merchant seafarer echoed this response, saying although the Armed Guard had their own quarters and were not supposed to mix with the merchant crewmen, they did so. They did not “buddy up” too

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<sup>579</sup>. See Chapter Six for more on this struggle, both in the U.S. and Canada.

<sup>580</sup>. Men whose origins were from land-locked areas without coastlines.

<sup>581</sup>. See footnote <sup>27</sup>.

much, but there was no animosity. Sometimes the Armed Guard would do calisthenics or other physical training on the deck, and the merchant crew would join them for the exercise. He again emphasised, however, that most of the “Lieutenants” were “90-day wonders” and some of them were really “whips”,<sup>582</sup> saying sometimes a Gunnery Officer would be especially contemptuous of the merchant crew.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 3)

One ex-Armed Guard had experienced only one problem with the merchant marine -- with a Master who noticed him staring at the casting-off operations and reprimanded him for looking in the wrong direction whilst he was on lookout duty. The Gunnery Officer told the Captain, “Don’t scold my men; tell me and I’ll take care of it.”(HMC 90-23, TTC p. 1)<sup>583</sup> In Puget Sound the merchant marine and Armed Guard together used to “get on” the four-inch gun, which took two people to focus its telescopic sights, and use these sights to watch girls on the beach or observe island scenery while at anchor.(HMC 90-24, TTC p. 1)

Several of the more mature merchant seafarers from the United States were unnerved by the “greenness”, inexperience, and inadequacies of many of the young gun crews, but relationships were generally good.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-58, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-67, TTC pp. 1-2 and 6) One Canadian officer maintained he had often said the DEMS did nothing -- “well, they didn’t, except in action.” There are always a lot of rivalries and animosities on a ship; different types and backgrounds of men are thrown together in a confined space; this is understandable, but camaraderie and professionalism were always foremost on the ships he sailed in.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 2) An English rating said DEMS were “sort of like a foreign body” -- not seen as proper crew

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<sup>582</sup> . Martinets.

<sup>583</sup> . This Armed Guard veteran, Charlie Baca, had overheard Clint Johnson, an ex-Marine Engineer, giving me a tour of the *s/s Lane Victory* and saying the reason the Armed Guard usually had a separate mess was that they did not get along well with the ships’ crews. Baca immediately insisted on scheduling an interview of his own to refute this claim.

by anyone, but there on sufferance only. They were sometimes considered rejects from the Forces and this opinion was perhaps justified. They were also seen as having a free ride, as they had nothing to do but maintain the guns.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 3)

The single area in which the U.S. Navy Armed Guard is consistently notorious is their voracious and seemingly insatiable appetite for food. Most North American seamen remember the Armed Guard as perpetually hungry, or recall that they regularly raided the refrigerator in the messroom and stole the crew's "night lunch".<sup>584</sup>(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1) One man said when they came off watch, the refrigerator would be stripped -- nothing inside but frost.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1) In the hiring hall of San Francisco's SUP [Sailor's Union of the Pacific], a veteran seaman elaborated on what type of young man became an Armed Guard and why they developed their reputation for voracity. They were usually farm boys torn from simple, routine lives and used to hard work and lots of good, plain food. Many of them put on weight aboard, being suddenly deprived of exercise and having little to do but eat when not at action stations.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 2)

In a lighter vein, but on the same theme, it was said that the greatest number of casualties of these "Icebox Commandos" resulted from pneumonia contracted through standing too long in front of open refrigerator doors.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1) One respondent also spoke in jest of the receipt of the Purple Heart<sup>585</sup> by gun crew members who had dropped large tins of marmalade on their feet while raiding the merchant crew's mess.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1) A Canadian statement indicated that Canadian DEMS earned a similar

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<sup>584</sup>. The "night lunch", seldom, if ever, provided on British vessels, consisted of leftovers from the day's meals, a variety of sandwich components, and other snacks. It was left, usually in a refrigerator in the crew's mess, for the late night watchkeepers. [See also Chapter Four under "Favourite Watches" and Chapter Seven for the "black pan" and "hoodle", two systems for providing similar amenities to late-night watchkeepers on British vessels.]

<sup>585</sup>. A medal awarded American Armed Forces personnel wounded in the line of duty.



notoriety for their insatiable appetites.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 2) This does not appear to have been the case with the English DEMS, however; the legendary appetite is attributed there to Apprentices and Cadets, as will be seen shortly.

The humorous poem below was discovered taped to the door of the messroom “reefer” or “fridge” aboard a Liberty ship preserved in the harbour at Baltimore, Maryland.

“GUARDING THE FRIGIDAIRE”<sup>586</sup>

*I'm on a ship that's out at sea --  
Doing my bit for Liberty --  
I haven't a worry, or even a care  
Knowing the Loyal Armed Guard is there,  
Wherever you look, you'll see them on duty  
Faithfully guarding our FRIGIDAIRE.  
Scanning the water -- eyes piercing the sky.  
For they may come by water -- they may come by air,  
But come how they may, he'll still be there,  
Bravely defending -- our FRIGIDAIRE.  
Up in the Turret he bravely stands,  
Thinking of fun he'll have when he lands,  
The coffee bell rings -- he's off with a cheer!  
He'll stand right there, with no thought of fear --  
The Loyal Armed Guard -- by the FRIGIDAIRE.  
The moral of this tale -- Brave Men of the Sea --  
Take a lunch box on watch, or hungry you'll be.  
For if you reach for some food, in the old FRIGIDAIRE,  
You'll find the Armed Guard has beat you there.*

WIPER, SS. ROGER SHERMAN<sup>587</sup>

Despite this apparently prejudicial situation, few merchant mariners felt serious antipathy toward their Armed Guard brethren. More considered the young men in the light of a “pesky kid brother” toward whom they were sympathetic even when exasperated. Men from the Stewards’ Department sometimes struck up friendships with the Armed Guard and became much

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<sup>586</sup>. Frigidaire is the brand name of a North American line of commercial and domestic refrigerators and freezers. As it was one of the first tradenames there, the name is often used to refer to any food refrigeration unit.

<sup>587</sup>. Copied by the researcher on a piece of S/S *John W. Brown* (KHJL) (Project Liberty Ship) message letterhead in the messroom of the above vessel from a notice taped to the refrigerator door, 1990.

sought-after mates because of their ability to oblige their familiars with special treats from the victualling stores.

Most of “Pig-Eye” Watson’s friends were in the Armed Guard. They were young, as he was, but the merchant mariners were older (many were almost thirty!) and “didn’t want to play”. Watson had the keys to the storeroom at night, and would take his special buddies to get tinned fruit cocktail, of which they were fond. It was appropriate for the Armed Guard to be friends with a Messman, as they were always hungry. Once, while bringing up a crate of oranges, Watson dragged it past the Armed Guard’s forecandle, and threw the entire crate inside. He had to get another case for the messroom, but was considered “a hero” by the Armed Guard. Others did not mix much with the Navy men, who usually stayed in their own mess at night to play cards, etc.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 1-2)

Apparently no similar food-related stigma attached to DEMS or other military gunners aboard British vessels. Whether this was because the conditions under which British merchant crews lived were less comfortable and their rations less generous than those aboard North American ships, or simply that the celebrated “shipboard appetite” more strongly affected farm boys from the American/Canadian Midwest, who had never before lacked for as much food as they desired, than it did lads from the Liverpool slums who were used to short commons and rationing, is a matter for conjecture. Both views have been expressed in the field data, although the latter was perhaps given a shade more conviction by its advocates. Amongst British seafarers, it seemed Cadets and Apprentices had the reputation of being perennially hungry, but it was carefully made clear to me during the fieldwork that their diet was adequate, simply not as much as their voracious young appetites would have preferred. In English ships there were no iceboxes or night lunches; no food was provided in the crew’s accommodation; some vessels did not even have a crew’s messroom.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)

Apprentices were most concerned with finding something to eat. They were watch-keeping all night; they were young and working hard in the open air; so they were always “starving”. They got “dry stores” -- a tin of Nestlé’s

milk between the four of them (per week) did not last long, plus coffee and tea, cheese, pickles, and jam, but not much bread, as that was made every day. Two loaves between four lads did not go far. They also got their meals, but any hassles they might get into were associated with “pinching” food from the Engineers’ mess or the Stewards’ pantry. “It was always food.”(HMC 92-26, TTC pp. 3-4)

Dick Playfer believed the Armed Guard and the military Gunners aboard British ships were similar types of young boys, ignorant of nautical conditions. He recalled one who could not be disabused of the idea that it was “downhill” to South Africa and would thus take longer to complete the return voyage “uphill”.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 3)

Most merchant seafarers spoke of a “them” and “us” separation between military Gunners and themselves, a sort of “keeping themselves to themselves” situation, although few felt any animosity toward the Gunners or sensed any severe intolerance toward themselves. One said, “If you met ’em in the pub, you’d have a pint, otherwise you didn’t mix.”(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5) Another felt the relationship was “not a hundred percent”, because if there were problems aboard, the “soldiers would be part of the establishment”.

They had been brainwashed and drilled into discipline and were used to the officer system ashore, so when they came aboard, the Merchant Navy looked like a “crowd of renegades”. Before the war, some Captains and Chief Officers did not like to hire ex-Navy as seamen, because they “couldn’t think for themselves”.

In his own experience, they were the same age, but from other areas of country and did not understand the way of life. All were victualled the same, but generally kept to their own quarters and messed separately. Not every ship carried them. On one ship there was only one Marine, on his own, isolated, so there was no friction. “He got on with us; he was just an ordinary guy.” The “nitty-gritty” was that there was no serious conflict, but there was a little division. “We were seamen; they were soldiers.” In many cases they came from different parts of the country and “didn’t even think like us.” That is where differences arose. “Most seamen, over the years, got to think much along the same lines,” even if they did not agree. When

the informant meets a seaman today, he knows what to talk about generally, even if it is just a chance meeting in a pub. These were foreigners; the sea was foreign to them, too; and if there was a hassle aboard, the soldiers generally allied themselves with the officers, which made a little problem. The soldiers were “sort of a bulwark, like a sort of a watertight door between us and the officers.” It generally started over food, though. Also, convoy conferences made some Captains think they were Navy, because they were involved with “fellas with all kinds of gold braid, used to putting men in chains and everything, and of course some of it was rubbin’ off on these merchant Captains.” Before that they were “quite human bein’s, but they got swell-headed.” They saw themselves running the war after rubbing shoulders with Lieutenant-Commanders and Admirals. Some introduced unnecessary discipline and there was always “the odd friction”. There was never a serious problem with the military, but there was always a “paper barrier” like that between the Deck Department and the Stewards. It was that sort of thing, an imaginary barrier, but nothing serious.(HMC 92-55, TTC pp. 2-3)

A man who served in both the Merchant Service and the Royal Navy said there was always a bit of bantering between the two, especially in the wardroom. “Proper” RN officers said merchant seamen joined the Navy to become gentlemen. “I told them I was a gentleman before they were, and I said it very rudely, too.” There was always bantering between the RNR (which was mostly Merchant Service) and the RN, as well. They always “tried to get a sly dig in” but “the like o’ myself could always counteract ’em.” He was always very quick on the uptake.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 3) A Canadian academic also quoted: “The Merchant Marine is a bunch of sailors trying to be gentlemen; the Navy is a bunch of gentlemen trying to be sailors.”<sup>588</sup> They got along quite well, but the Merchant Navy considered themselves “sailors” while the Royal Navy were “soldiers at sea”. A merchant Master was far more respected than an Admiral, but they still got along quite well. Naval vessels and those aboard went through atrocious weather and suffered more than the larger (by ten times or more) merchant ships.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2)<sup>589</sup>

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<sup>588</sup> . Personal communication, Graham McBride, Librarian at Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1 August 1990.

<sup>589</sup> . See Chapter Four for mention of battering and seasickness about escort vessels.

A major bone of contention on both sides of the Atlantic seems to have been the ostensible discrepancy in wages. At first glance, the merchant seaman appeared to be much better paid than his military counterpart, but even a superficial examination reveals that all was not as it seemed. Merchant seamen, for example, were paid off at the end of a voyage in one large lump sum, which looked huge compared to the military's meagre monthly stipend. One man left the U.S. Navy, where he was making \$78.50 per month, and paid off his first postwar civilian voyage at \$1250.00 -- but no mention is made of the length of the run or whether there were still such hazards as minefields to be encountered. Voyages at that time might last as long as twelve to fourteen months, which would make his civilian wages only about \$100 per month, including danger money. This man admitted the merchant marine got better pay plus bonuses, but said in liberty ports it was "just a bunch of Americans". In some islands merchant mariners got free beer, while the Navy had to pay,<sup>590</sup> which caused a "helluva head-knockin' contest". Otherwise there were not many problems.(HMC 89-3, TTC p. 1) Sometimes the situations were reversed, as on Ulithe, in the Pacific, where military men were allowed ashore, but merchant mariners were not. There was also a small place there, where Navy men could get drink -- at least beer -- but again merchant seamen were not allowed.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 6) But where fraternisation occurred, a merchant seaman might regularly buy drinks ashore for a military buddy who was not as well-paid.(HMC 90-12, TTC p. 1) One interviewee had been told that early in the war, when enemy submarines were thick off the Atlantic coast, merchant crews would hold a "blanket muster"<sup>591</sup> after every trip for the Armed Guard to

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<sup>590</sup> . I believe he meant the reverse, although it may have been a reference to the United Seamen's Service "clubs" which allowed merchant seamen to purchase up to three cans of beer and provided Stateside newspapers to read.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 177)

<sup>591</sup> . A "blanket muster" or "tarpaulin muster" was a nautical way of "passing the hat". A blanket, sheet, or tarpaulin would be spread upon the deck in the forecabin or messroom and each man in turn would toss onto it his contribution, in much the same way that passers-by toss money into a busking musician's instrument case. The resultant yield would then be dispersed to its proper recipient(s), most often a deceased or injured shipmate's family ashore, but in this case the lower-paid military gunners.

equalise their pay, but after things settled down it no longer happened. People did not seem to realise the pay differential was not as large as it seemed, the merchant seamen getting none of the “perks” appertaining to the naval personnel.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 3)

Naval vessels and Forces personnel, especially those from the States, were particularly generous “in kind” to merchant seamen, although merchantmen had smaller crews and did not need extras so badly. In the Pacific they could replenish clothing from Army stores. One Marine Engineer still has one of the good heavy-duty khaki shirts he acquired that way.(HMC 90-25, TTC p. 2) “Distressed British Seamen”<sup>592</sup> were often kitted out by their military rescuers. When one arrived home, still wearing the U.S. Army uniform and khaki forage cap (without pips or insignia) he had been given as a DBS in North Africa, his wife, meeting him at the station in Wales and not knowing the complete situation, burst out laughing, saying the cap looked “like a pimple on a haystack”.(HMC 91-8, TTC p. 3) An English Cadet who had been ill was on watch in cold weather and the Royal Marine DEMS gunner, finding he had no balaclava, gave the youngster his own.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2) The Royal Navy’s gifts of Navy uniforms were “sort of rough-and-ready”, while the U.S. Navy gave the finest -- all brand-new. They were also generous with cold drinks in hotter climes, as they had ice. When at anchor, U.S. Navy vessels also invited merchant seamen aboard to view first-run films. The British Merchant Navy gave them alcoholic beverages in return -- they were generous up to a point.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 6)

One American informant read from a document entitled “Truth and Facts About Merchant Marine Service” and mentioned Bill #2346 which would have granted merchant seamen veterans’ status in 1946. Comparing a

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<sup>592</sup>. The term officially and historically used for British merchant seafarers who had lost their vessels and were stranded ashore in foreign countries, this is often represented simply by its initial letters, DBS.

Navy Seaman Second Class with an Ordinary Seaman (merchant), each with a wife and two children, the naval man would have received \$1886.40 in a year and the merchant seaman \$1897.70, but benefits weighed the balance heavily toward the military man. Insurance for the merchant mariner was only in effect while he was at sea. If he fell down drunk ashore and was killed, his family received nothing. Merchant mariners' dependants received no medical or other benefits. The military man received a uniform allowance and a retirement pension, while the merchant seafarer bought his own clothing and got social security benefits only after reaching the age of sixty-five. The U.S. Navy got special privileges, such as free postage, reduced rates for travel, furloughs, reduced rates for theatre tickets, meals while travelling -- none of which benefits accrued to the merchant seafarer.(HMC 90-39, TTC p. 1) It was repeatedly maintained that the Merchant Marine received their benefits "up front", which made the Navy resentful, but the latter got residual benefits which the former did not. A further reiterated assertion was that it is misinformation that the Merchant Marine made lots of money. Every repetition bore a further elaboration of the genuine facts of the situation, such as no deckwork could be accomplished on watch during wartime, because one of the three watchkeepers would be at the wheel and the other two on lookout duty. In peacetime those not at the wheel would be working at other regular shipboard jobs.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1)

Although most British respondents agreed there was some minor resentment and a slight pay differential between DEMS Gunners and their civilian shipmates, Capt. George Bryson, then an Apprentice, now a retired Master, disagreed to some extent. He first said there was little contact ashore, although they got on well aboard and there was never any problem with the one Royal Marine, about three Navy, and two or three Army gunners. He then replied to the pay scale query with another question -- "What different rate of

pay?" -- citing his indentures, which allowed him only a total of £10 for his first year, £12 for his second, £18 for the third, and £20 for the fourth, plus five pounds for a successful completion of his apprenticeship and twelve shillings yearly "in lieu of washing". "So there you are," he said, with a chuckle, "I didn't go to sea for money!"(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 2) Rex Rothwell added a reminder that British Apprentices only received one-half the "danger money" given other seamen, perhaps, he remarked, sarcastically, under the impression that they were in only half the danger of the others. It was typical of the Treasury, he said, "to try to save a few bob".(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 5)

One fact mentioned frequently was that a merchant seaman's wages stopped the moment he left his ship -- for any reason -- but the Armed Guard's continued. This meant not only that the merchant seaman's pay stopped when he was ashore between voyages, but also that his wages ceased when he abandoned his sinking vessel in a lifeboat or was confined in a prisoner-of-war camp, whereas the military man's continued and his family allotments were maintained as well. The Merchant Navy family's subsistence had ceased with that of its breadwinner.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-44, TTC p. 2) Even during the final fieldwork, in a joint interview with two ex-Royal Navy escort sailors, one said "I didn't know until three years ago that when a merchant ship was sunk the men's wages stopped at the time she was sunk." And the other man present, hearing this for the first time, responded, "Oh, blimey!" in a horrified tone.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 4)

Some Armed Guard veterans were quite outspoken in the belief that there was not much resentment over differences in pay, and felt there was not really that much difference, except for war zone bonuses. After all, the Merchant Marine is made up of civilians and they are in a war zone. They do not have to be there. The U.S. Navy could not do without them; it did not have enough experienced men. Armed Guard Rudy Jasen had no resentment



and thought the Merchant Marine should have been recognised as veterans by the Government long ago.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 1) A merchant seaman who had often fraternised with the Armed Guard echoed him, saying they were buddies, shipmates; there was nothing about the Merchant Marine being “draft-dodging millionaires” and the poor Armed Guard “sleeping on shredded wheat beds”. They played cards, talked together and generally got along well.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 1) Armed Forces also had access to such services as “PXs”,<sup>593</sup> which the Merchant Marine did not.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 1) Resentment could work both ways; two young merchant seamen showed their ship’s discharge papers to a railway conductor in order to ride as “Servicemen”; it annoyed them that “Servicemen” got reduced train fares and preferential treatment, but it was a small annoyance.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3) An American merchant Master noticed resentment between the two services and disliked it. He said Navy personnel thought their own food better, but their stores were often marked “Below US legal standards, but still fit for human consumption.”(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 2)

An Armed Guard veteran designated his service “the orphans of the Navy,” but said they got a better deal than most other naval personnel because of the superior victualling of U.S. merchant ships. They got fresh milk and eggs, fruit, and steaks. Thirty men was the largest complement and they got on well with the Merchant Marine. Armed Guard were not technically allowed to work cargo, but they did help once, loading fish for a dollar or two an hour above their Navy pay.<sup>594</sup>(HMC 90-20, TTC p. 1) In Russian ports, the locals were unable to operate the winches and hoists, so the Armed Guard did the work and were paid overtime.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 1) This happened on British, as well as American vessels. Artie Lee said relations with the DEMS Gunners were

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<sup>593</sup>. The PX or Post Exchange had nothing to do with the mails, but was that site on a military post (station, depot, etc.) where foodstuffs and other necessary items might be purchased, often at reduced prices. The closest British equivalent was the NAAFI, or Navy, Army, Air Force Institute.

<sup>594</sup>. A dollar or two an hour at that time would have been an exorbitant wage.

“fabulous”. “They were smashing fellows and they were only on the military pay, which is far, far below what we were on.” So, on some of the ships -- well, “I can only speak for the ones I was on -- we always found, give them their due, the skipper or whoever it come to used to always give them overtime, y’know when there was nothing doing, paint or chip the rust off the deck plates or paint the bulkheads or whatever. Now that got booked into them as overtime money and they drew that at the end of the trip to make their money up, because they were goin’ over in exactly the same conditions we were.”(HMC 92-48, TTC pp. 6-7) One merchant seaman has a current neighbour who was a DEMS Gunner and earned “a few bob extra” by acting as Trimmer for the Firemen in his spare time.(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 5) Assuming the Merchant Navy was on £20 a month, DEMS would be getting £6-8 a month, only one and a half or two pounds a week. They got the same food and had their own cabins and bunks, but mixed socially with the crew. Half the time there was no work, but if there was, they would do it. They always wanted to work and normally got it, because even the skipper went out of his way for them. A few hours here and a few hours there mounted up by the end of the trip. DEMS Gunners used to be “made up”, volunteered, to get on board a merchant ship, because they knew it would be a soft touch. They still had to do their job, but got more money. They doubled their month’s pay. DEMS were “fat” (figuratively, not literally.)(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 7)

Newfoundlanders and Canadians, like Americans, noted resentment about pay differential, but were quick to justify both sides of the controversy by statements such as: “Merchant seamen got more money, but the hazards were higher. Twenty-five or twenty-six percent of merchantmen never survived.” One said a ship he was on was torpedoed and over ninety percent of those aboard were lost, about ten surviving from a complement of one hundred and ten. The Merchant Navy’s hazards were much higher, and pay

only a minor resentment.<sup>595</sup> The Navy had not admiration, but sympathy for merchant seaman.(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 6)

Neither of the M.R.A.<sup>596</sup> gunners interviewed noticed any real resentment toward merchant seafarers for their higher pay scale. One mentioned the stoppage of merchant seamen's wages on the sinking of a vessel as personal knowledge because his ship, the *Bolton Castle* was sunk in a North Russia convoy. He also noted that while they were in a survivors' camp near Archangel, the ship's Steward came looking for survivors to sign chits for the cigarettes they had got from the slop chest<sup>597</sup> prior to the sinking.(HMC 92-13, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-14, TTC p. 4) A Royal Navy escort sailor concurred, saying the Navy grumbled some, but "grumbling is what the RN do very well."<sup>598</sup>(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 6) Another said they hardly came in contact, even in Russia, and were never discussed aboard, but he felt there was no resentment over pay differential; rather the merchant seamen were viewed as "poor sods" because cargo ships could not move fast enough to escape trouble, and he compared them with huge lorries on the motorways. "Better them than us," he said, adding that if they blew up, the chances of surviving were remote. The principal attitude toward merchant seafarers was: "Thank God we aren't them!" and the Royal Navy felt their ships "were fit and young compared with those middle-aged hulks". They admired the Merchant Navy's courage and bravery, although they themselves did not feel brave. What they felt was less vulnerable, especially considering some of the cargoes. Also, far fewer Royal Navy vessels than merchantmen were sunk in Russian convoys. His dealings with merchant seamen were rare -- perhaps he might meet one on a train

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<sup>595</sup>. Some information about casualty rates and pay differentials will be found in Appendix B.

<sup>596</sup>. The Maritime Royal Artillery, although both men referred to it as the "Maritime Regiment".

<sup>597</sup>. The reader is reminded that this is the shipboard canteen where purchases are "put on a tab" against the buyer's wages, to be settled when the ship "pays off".

<sup>598</sup>. This is a paraphrase of a common saying of Tigger, a character in A.A. Milne's children's books about "Winnie the Pooh".

sometime, but he doubted if he met more than a dozen during the entire war.(HMC 92-21, TTC pp. 2-3) One Royal Navy man went aboard several merchant ships in Russia, but it was only “professionally”. They were not “welcomed” aboard, but the reception was not unsociable. Mostly each group “stuck with their own crowd”, but tried to see the other’s point of view, although those would never coincide. The Royal Navy was in small, relatively “lively” ships trying to protect the Merchant Navy, who were just plodding along. “Without them there wouldn’t have been any need for us. But without us, they’d get sunk, so....” The other informant in this joint interview said, “They had an unthankful job, really, merchant seamen. They’d got to stick rigidly in these convoy lines unless the signal was given. They couldn’ -- Same as us on the destroyer, we’re dashin’ about all over the ocean.... Destroyers bang on twenty-five or thirty knots, they’re [merchantmen] plodding along at six or seven in a straight line followin’ the feller in front of y’ ... But apart from that their wages were quite a lot more than ours and which were only to be expected -- I mean that was a civvy job and it was like they were goin’ to work, wasn’t it?”(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 4)

Pay was not everything. With the granting of veterans’ status to World War II merchant seamen by the U.S. and Canadian Governments, the counting of “sea time” became an important consideration. The U.S. Coast Guard ““screwed around”<sup>599</sup> with the Merchant Marine counting sea time”. If the same had been done to military personnel, some would never have got their discharge.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 4) Time aboard ship in port does not count as sea time for Merchant Marine veterans.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 2) The pay vs. benefits debate was summed up by Cliff Rehkopf, who said that, in the United States, the so-called “benefits” accruing from the 1988 bill conferring veterans’ status on merchant mariners meant only that “if you die your wife gets a flag, you get

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<sup>599</sup>. In this context, “to screw around with” means intentionally foul up, botch, or bungle.

a headstone, and you can be buried in a veterans' cemetery.”(HMC 90-39, TTC p.

1) If veterans' status and benefits had been conferred on merchant seamen immediately at the end of the war, the recipients would have found them of greater value.

One frequent assertion, especially from the North American contingent, was that relationships depended on individual personalities, especially on that of the Gunnery Officer, as mentioned earlier in the “90-day wonder” stories. One man said his personal experience was only of friendly rivalry, although he knew of vessels where there was constant bickering.(HMC 90-2, TTC p. 1) The military for the most part maintained a careful distance, with separate quarters and a separate mess, but fraternisation, especially between younger crewmembers and young gunners, was not infrequent. They “worked, ate, and told lies together”.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 2) The relationship depended on circumstances, however. A merchant seaman who had once worked in a Navy Yard felt he had more sympathy for the Armed Guard and escort sailors than most of his co-workers.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 2)

It was rough on the gun crew the whole time. Most were sloppy, unmilitary outfits; maybe they picked the “screw-ups” for the Armed Guard. One Gunnery Officer assigned Hank Adams to a battle station in the ammunition hold, when, as Bosun, his Merchant Marine emergency station was on the bridge. There was always a conflict of wages. The Merchant Marine were volunteers, but the Armed Guard was at the same risk level. The Merchant Marine had the highest casualty rate during the war; the United States Navy had the lowest; but the Armed Guard was probably equal to the former in its relative casualty figures.<sup>600</sup> They had the same danger, but less pay, and benefits were of no value to them until after they had returned from

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<sup>600</sup>. Compare Chapter Three, footnote <sup>21</sup>., and Chapter Six, Section B, as well as Appendix B.

the war. At the time, as has been said, you only thought about “your skin and a buck to buy a beer”.(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3) Bob DeWees felt they “got along real well”; all were decent people; and there were no “eight-balls”.(HMC 90-57, TTC p. 2)

The point was made that there were three hundred men on a Naval ship, doing the jobs of about fifty on a merchant vessel. One merchant seafarer on each watch would fire six boilers and tend water. The U.S. Navy had six men tending the burners and two Watertenders on each watch on a ship of similar size. Why should three hundred men be put on a single ship -- if the ship goes, they are all lost -- when you could have six ships with fifty men each? It is government idiocy.(HMC 90-44 TTC p. 3)

One thing the British had which North Americans did not was the system called T124 and T124X. Under this system, merchant mariners stayed on their vessel after she had been commandeered by the Admiralty, and continued to work for Merchant Service pay, essentially doing the same job as in peacetime but under naval orders. On about Tom Burton’s second-to-last voyage before the war, the Captain mustered the ship’s company on the promenade deck and said it looked like war. He told the crew they could leave if they wished, and would be given sufficient time to do so, but they were being given the chance to volunteer. Burton did so, as did most of his shipmates. Very few left the ship, but all knew war was imminent. They were in Cherbourg the day before the war; the following day they got down Channel at eleven AM and were just past Land’s End when they got the message that war had been declared.(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 2)

Joe Cunningham also spoke of the Merchant Fleet Support ships which carried Merchant Navy crew, and likened T124/T124X to the press gang system. When one signed on under this system, one could be transferred from

a Merchant Navy to a Royal Navy vessel at any moment. The famed *Jervis Bay*<sup>601</sup> was under T124X articles as an Armed Merchant Cruiser and she only had a four-inch World War I field piece aft.<sup>602</sup> Of the one vessel he lost through enemy action, Cunningham said, “When I got torpedoed, I couldn’t get me arse outta that ship fast enough! There was no heroism.”(HMC 92-7, TTC pp. 2-3)

One of the most notable differences between military and merchant seafarers ashore was that the civilians had no uniform by which they could be easily recognised as playing an active part on the war effort. The British Merchant Navy were issued a small silver badge which they could wear pinned to lapel or cap when ashore, but it was not conspicuous, and was often overlooked the casual observer. The Royal Navy was always in uniform. “They could recognise us, but we couldn’t recognise them.”(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 4)

U.S. Maritime Service training schools issued a sort of uniform resembling both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Coast Guard uniforms, but trimmed in red. Merchant seamen joked that they were “in the Russian Navy”, and were sometimes mistaken for the same when ashore.(HMC 90-24, TTC p. 4; HMC 90-74)

At Officers’ Candidate School, Clint Johnson got a uniform -- “an absolute necessity for a young man in those days to ensure a satisfactory social life” -- which was identical to a U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer’s except for the insignia on the sleeve and on the hat. There was rivalry amongst even the Services for the best-looking uniforms, the “flashiest” being the U.S. Marine Corps’ “dress blues”.(HMC 90-24, TTC pp. 3-4)

Merchant seamen who were not issued uniforms occasionally tried to rig up facsimiles, but sometimes had problems with MPs<sup>603</sup> in port cities as a result.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>601</sup>. The reader is reminded that the *Jervis Bay* was lost in an heroic action defending the convoy she escorted from a German surface raider.

<sup>602</sup>. If you place a gun forward of the bridge, the vessel becomes a man-of-war; abaft the bridge, weaponry is considered defensive.

<sup>603</sup>. Military Police.

The wife of one Royal Navy informant belonged to a social club for the Forces, through which she escorted Allied servicemen (including British) to theatres and such. She said the rivalry was surprising. When the man who is now her husband came to visit her, dissension between Merchant Navy and Royal Navy was patent, the RN being “snobby” and thinking themselves better than the Merchant Navy. Her husband retorted that of course they felt so, as they were better dressed [in uniform] ashore, though not always at sea. Naval ships were always immaculately painted, too, unlike the merchantmen. Commercial owners were not generous with paint. There were more people to do the jobs on HM ships, too, although merchantmen carried much larger crews then than they do today. Merchant seamen who attached themselves to the Royal Navy personnel ashore in Russia were nearly always “DBS”.(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 6)<sup>604</sup> Another Royal Navy rating said the Merchant Service usually had their own places, clubs, in Hull and elsewhere. The Royal Navy were not turned away, but most sailors went into an ordinary pub.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 4)

A few unique circumstances occurred, which bear repetition, but which do not fall into any of the areas already discussed:

Once, near New Guinea, there were two ships supplying ammunition and stores for the United States Navy. When one of the two had to return to Australia for fresh supplies, they would leave their live ammunition with the remaining ship and take the other’s empty shells for return. The transfer was hot, nasty work and when the Armed Guard officer ordered the gun crew to assist, they refused. The next day the gun crew was removed; it was called mutiny and there was a court martial. The ship had no gun crew for about four months thereafter, so they were lucky there was no trouble.(HMC 89-6, TTC pp. 1-2)

The U.S. Navy did not always treat merchant crews kindly. Once, in Trinidad, they were not allowed onto the dock for a ballgame, although they were in port for an extended period. The informant had served in both the U.S. Navy and the Merchant Marine and felt allegiances to and grievances against both.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>604</sup> . The reader is reminded of the term Distressed British Seamen.



While berthed and unloading in Cherbourg, one Engine Room rating relieved an over-exhausted Army truck driver while the latter slept in the seaman's bunk.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 2)

In Gourock, Scotland, before one Russian convoy, the U.S. Navy, doubting the loyalty of the Merchant Marine, posted an armed Armed Guard to watch the steering engine, and he was found shot dead the following morning. The subsequent investigation concluded it had been suicide as a result of depression and the informant never remembers another guard being posted. The gun crew's accommodations on that ship consisted of two converted shops near the steering engine. It was terribly noisy, as the informant knows, because he himself lived back there. He does not know who found the body, but it was not he. That was the only casualty on the entire trip.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1)

A Newfoundlander said they got along "Lovely! Great!" His Irish-American mother had brought him up to hate the snobby English, but he learned to like the English working class(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 4) An Englishman said they were just there, doing their job, and there was no animosity.(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 5) Similar impressions seem to have held with regard to all other shipboard group relationships. Despite nearly a hundred years of traditional animosity, for example, the relationships between Departments seem to have been generally pleasant and, when not really good, merely a friendly rivalry.

## **B. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN SHIPBOARD DEPARTMENTS**

Relationships between members of different shipboard “Departments” were never predictable at the best of times, and were possibly even less so during the war. A great deal depended on the common-sense and likewise the volatility of the individuals involved. Some were steeped in the tradition that “oil and water do not mix”, others considered the Stewards’ Department might better be labelled the “Stupid” Department, but the vast majority could be counted upon to forget such differences in hazardous situations and to pull not only their own weight, but often that of their shipmates from other Departments as well. How did they get along? “Out of necessity, very well.”(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 1)

The origins of the “oil and water” dispute lay primarily between Captains and Chief Engineers, and although, in most cases, the rivalry was superficial and without malice, they were always nominally at loggerheads, as each group considered itself more vital to the operation of the vessel than the other. Deck Officers said they could get on very well without the Engineers -- they could always use the saloon carpets as sails, if necessary. Engineers said they would like to see them try -- they would get nowhere without Engineers.(HMC 91-1, TTC pp. 4-5) A well-known nautical joke, a favourite amongst both Engineers and Deck Officers, and in circulation on both sides of the Atlantic, was cited by at least two informants to illustrate the universality of this situation and its lack of gravity:

The Captain and Chief Engineer trade places for a day at sea, each saying the other’s job requires no skill whatsoever. Once the switch has been made, the Captain, after much ado, calls the bridge to ask the Chief how to start the engines. The Chief replies that the other should not worry about it, as they have been aground for the last fifteen minutes.(HMC 90-50, TTC pp. 2-3; HMC 92-28, TTC p. 3)

One of the oldest informants, himself a Chief Engineer, said, “There is an old saying that ‘oil and water will never mix’, but they will.” In any well-run, efficient ship, the Mates and Engineers are friends. Of course they have arguments, but family members argue amongst themselves and still love each other. He pointed to the lifetime friendship between himself and another informant who was a Deck Officer as representative. Several informants cited as a truism a universally prevalent saying, often drawn as a cartoon: “The Old Man [Captain] points her and the Chief<sup>605</sup> pushes her.”(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-28, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-68, TTC p. 5) This is usually depicted as an oversized figure standing at the wheel of a scaled-down ship while another oversized figure swims behind the vessel, literally propelling it by pushing. The Chief Engineer quoted above said they were all good friends then, but in modern diesel ships it is different. There is no soul.<sup>606</sup> There are also more accidents now, but they were previously rare unless caused by storms, because the men worked so well together.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 3) Position-keeping in a convoy situation required co-operation.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 1) The Departments got along more or less well, although, like any factory or workplace there were certain cliques,(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 4) and one respondent said he particularly liked the term “friendly rivalry”, because the insults were more jokes than anything else. They were natural friendships, never uncivil, but always putting each other down.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 3)

A Newfoundland Deck Officer said there was less rivalry between Engine and Deck Departments than I might have heard. Generally the Chief Engineer and the Captain would have a drink together before meals; they sat next to each other, though at their own tables, “and it was the same all the way

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<sup>605</sup>. Despite the fact that the First Officer is also known as the Chief Mate or Chief Officer and that there were usually at least a Chief Steward and a Chief Cook aboard most vessels which carried passengers, the one-word term “Chief” will always be assumed by mariners to refer to the Chief Engineer unless context is given. See Section C for a relevant anecdote.

<sup>606</sup>. Cf. the quote from Horace Beck in Chapter One.

down the line. ... If you want somethin' 'specially, you'd go and you'd ask for it and somebody got it." If for some reason they could not get it (more steam, more speed, etc.) you would get an explanation why not -- generally good sound reasons. You would get it if they could give it to you. He had heard of interdepartmental friction. It usually happened on long voyages. It could happen to anybody and still does. It is the result of a sort of "cabin fever" and causes one to strike out at those nearby. Recently he visited a local vessel where an entire meal passed without verbal interchange. He thought "Once you lose the ability to pull the other guy's leg, a little chaffing, you're headed for trouble." It was too quiet, but this rarely happens.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 6) A British Deck Officer agreed that rivalry existed, but it was usually good-natured, although there were occasional "awkward cusses" in either Department. This man's father was a Marine Engineer,<sup>607</sup> whom he quoted as having been accustomed to say, "Deck Officers are only Engineers with their brains knocked out."(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2) They got along quite well except for the odd dining setup. The Master, all Mates, the Chief, First, and Second Engineers, ate together in the saloon, and the Apprentices as well. All other Engineers ate separately in their own mess, probably so the Junior Engineers did not have to make such an effort to be clean and tidy. It was a strange custom which faded out during and immediately after the war.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 1) Engineers often had their own mess, separate from the Deck Officers', especially at sea, as it was more convenient in light of their working conditions, dirt, and grime. They often joined when in harbour, though, and the Captain and Chief frequently dined together, especially in harbour.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 1) Capt. Laurie James emphasised that Departmental chauvinism was "not the attitude at all, if you wanted to keep a tight ship. You had to keep

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<sup>607</sup>. I found this an unusual situation, though he said it was not.

good relations with the lower ranks -- work with them and they'll work with you.”(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 5)<sup>608</sup>

Well over half of those interviewed characterised interdepartmental relations as fine, although a few added there was always a friendly rivalry, which the majority of the British sample tended to specify as “the old oil-and-water thing” or “oil and water never mix”.(HMCs 91-1, 92-5, 92-23, 92-28, 92-33, 92-41, 92-42, 92-56, 92-66, 92-68) North Americans tended to refer more generically to joking or teasing one another about imagined distinctions or minor chauvinism.(HMCs 90-11, 90-12, 90-16, 90-24, 90-46, 90-53, 90-67, 90-69) Only one said there was at best an “armed truce” between the Departments, who were always looking for an axe to grind when there was none,(HMC 90-36, TTC p. 1) and the diminutive minority which admitted having seen “really bitter” antagonism on a regular basis was so small as to be insignificant.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 3)

About fifteen of the total interviewees said it all depended on the individuals involved, especially the heads of Departments -- the Captain, Chief Engineer, and Chief Steward, while a similar number said there was so little interaction between Departments even ashore that relationships between them were irrelevant. A spokesman for the former attitude maintained that interdepartmental relationships were generated by Department heads and the happiness of a ship depended on her Master.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3) As regards the latter view, one respondent described ships as rather like boardinghouses with three different groups of lodgers; interdepartmental relationships were civil, but not close. They never worked together, but might occasionally go ashore together.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 2) Another recalled being on a coal-burner with a large crew, where, in hot weather, they sat on the after hatch to socialise. The

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<sup>608</sup>. See also the following section, Section C, for relations between certificated and non-certificated personnel.

Deck crew's accommodation was on the port side and the Engine crew's to starboard. There was no socialisation and very little interaction of any kind between the two groups. They were rather like two large parties at different tables in the same restaurant -- this despite the fact that they were on the same ship for long periods. It was the same when they went ashore. They were not together. Each stayed with his own group.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 3) An almost inconsequential minority of informants held, quite reasonably, that interdepartmental attitudes varied from ship to ship.(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-45, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-55, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-71, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-51, TTC p. 5)

Two Britishers who had spent an extended period as prisoners-of-war recalled that, while Departments were not overly friendly nor inclined to intermingle aboard ship, the situation in prison camps was more egalitarian. Everyone was the same; all were individuals; you could deal with whomever you liked; and everyone pulled together.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-58, TTC p. 4)

Chief Engineer Thomas Brunskill had a bad ship once. The then Chief had been lax in his duties, and was removed on the Old Man's complaint. His replacement was a nice man, but should never have been at sea -- he was too nice. He made a single voyage and would not continue to work with the Old Man, who turned him into a bundle of nerves. As Mr. Brunskill was out of a ship at that time, he was called in. Chiefs and Masters always have to see a Director before leaving and on returning from a voyage. The Director who interviewed Brunskill was "pretty bad" as well. They also have compulsory inspection by a Director before leaving; this did not look good to Mr. Brunskill. Before they had got through the Bay of Biscay, the Old Man sent for Brunskill, who refused to go until he was asked, rather than ordered. He and the Captain then "had a right royal row and were the best of friends ever after". When they arrived home, the Old Man was asked how he had got on

with the Chief [Brunskill]. The Captain said he would not sail without him. They got on fine after that. The skipper was a nice man, but a bully. Mr. Brunskill was not scared, so they got on okay.(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 3)

Another Engineer spoke of interdepartmental relationships in somewhat humorous, but nonetheless illustrative, terms. All ships' Departments, he said, were "united against the Navy Armed Guard, but seriously it all depended on one's social, experiential and educational level. Ordinary Seamen, Wipers, and Messmen were enemies. Able Seamen, Firemen/Oilers [Greasers], and Cooks got along okay, but didn't socialise much within the other Departments, even ashore. Officers were basically friendly with one another. The Chief Engineer and the Captain are best friends, because they are the representatives of management. They have to take care of the 'idiots'. As in modern race relations, the troublemakers are the failures who prefer to blame their own failure on others, or else they are ignorant beginners."(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2)

Speaking of British sea training ships, such as the *Worcester*, *Conway*, and *Indefatigable*, one interviewee said the latter was primarily for deckhands, ratings, and they were usually orphans, but the other training ships provided Deck officers. There was no such "cloak" for Engineers, who might come from anywhere as long as they were experienced with tools. During the war many such "did not have the proper groundwork" and shipping companies "got some real oddballs".(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6)

More than ten percent of those interviewed mentioned the quality and quantity of food as a factor in shipboard relations.<sup>609</sup> Some even claimed certain Captains and Chief Stewards had "fiddled" ships' stores to their own financial advantage and thus short-changed the crews, who were

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<sup>609</sup>. See also Chapter Three, under "Conditions Aboard", where the quality of victualling is also discussed.

understandably irritable as a result. In Chapter Three, the term “bad feeder”<sup>610</sup> was introduced, and the question “how did they feed?” invariably elicited an immediate and vigorous response from any informant, whether this response was positive or negative in character. A happy ship depends on a good Stewards’[Catering] Department; it is not so much the amount of the food as its quality and preparation. Cooks were mainly good, as many came from the U.S. Maritime Service training schools, so there was no problem.(HMC 90-45, TTC p. 1) “A ‘hungry’ ship is an unhappy ship,” said another informant, who recalled a voyage on which the Chief Steward always wore a lifejacket on deck, in case someone tried to throw him overboard because he was receiving a “kickback” from the company for food stores returned at the end of the voyage.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)

A group interview at Sailors’ Snug Harbor, an American home for retired seafarers, produced elaborations on this theme. A retired Master, resident there for twenty-five years, compared the home itself to a shipboard situation.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 1) “The Lord made the food,” said he, “The devil made the cooks.” He then proceeded to tell of a case on the Pacific Coast of the U.S., when a Cook allegedly survived after being thrown overboard twenty miles at sea. He also cited as fact a version of a common contemporary legend<sup>611</sup> in which an Oriental messman who has repeatedly been the victim of practical jokes, such as having his shoes nailed to the deck,<sup>612</sup> informs the

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<sup>610</sup>. The reader is reminded that this term indicates a vessel aboard which the quality and/or quantity of victuals available to the general crew is below a reasonable standard. Likewise a ship with an abundance of high-quality food would be termed a good feeder. Both individual vessels and shipping companies were commonly rated on how well they fed.

<sup>611</sup>. I prefer this term to the more prevalent “Urban Legend” used by Jan Harold Brunvand in his series of published collections or “Urban Myth” as used by two men currently producing similar works for popular consumption in Great Britain. These narratives are legends by the definition of modern academic folklore and they are contemporary because they are presently in circulation, despite some having originated in the distant past. “Urban” is a misnomer, as they are not limited in circulation to urban areas and nor do they fit the definition of “Myth” used by professional folklorists and ethnographers of the Twentieth Century. For further discussion of this theme, see Gillian Bennett, “What’s ‘Modern’ About the Modern Legend?”, *Fabula* 26 (1985), 219-229.

<sup>612</sup>. The informant assured me that there was much jealousy aboard and such tricks were common. He also said shipboard fare is much better since there have been training schools for Marine Cooks.



officers when he pays off at the end of the voyage that he has regularly urinated in their coffee as a form of retaliation.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 3) A second retired Captain stated that he was once aboard a ship with three Native American Cooks from Arizona who regularly got drunk; that a crew ashore in New Orleans once tied a Cook to a telephone pole and sailed without him; and that Cooks in North Carolina<sup>613</sup> are so terrible that a crew discovering the same aboard “would’ve hung ’em to the yardarm.”(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 3) The one ex-Cook in the group told of Cooks being killed for various reasons, and said once, going down the Mexican coast, they had to keep a lookout for the body of a [Chief] Steward from another vessel who had been killed and thrown overboard because of the [assumed poor quality of the] food.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 3) A Californian said the serious problems had all been earlier, when all Stewards were considered “sissies” and the Cook was usually a disabled seaman. He believes he himself must have been a good Cook, as he never had to buy his own drinks in port.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2) A British AB said, “Keep in with the Cook; fall out with anyone but the Cook.” It was he who volunteered that there were no female Stewards except on big ships, and that Stewards were often thought of as having homosexual tendencies.<sup>614</sup>(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 4)

A British Wireless Operator opined the Catering Department was “a mess” because although some Chief Stewards were very good, others were “jumped up people” who were “making money out of your food”. He illustrated this theory with a story about some spoiled cheese which was supposed to be “Danish blue”, but was “Danish grey” because it was so rotten:

The same piece of cheese had been aboard throughout the previous trip and had been sent back to the galley several times, but the Chief Steward kept replacing it on the table. “Nobody could say boo to him.” Chief Stewards were always “fiddling”. They often sold bottles of sauce ashore in India for whatever

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<sup>613</sup>. Sailors’ Snug Harbor is located in the town of Sea Level, North Carolina.

<sup>614</sup>. See Chapter Three, Section C for more about the importance of Cooks and victualling to the merchant marine and see above, in the introductory part of this chapter for more about seamen’s attitudes toward homosexuality.

they could get. The Wireless Operator took a piece of the cheese ashore in London and asked the authorities “Are we supposed to eat that?” The reply was, “I wouldn’t.” The Catering Superintendent said he would come down to the ship and “have a word”, but the Chief Steward had already had the cheese passed as fit to eat by the Port of London Food Inspector. The Superintendent, returning to interview the complaining Wireless Operator and have a second look, agreed the cheese was, indeed, inedible. The Wireless Operator was glad of this decision, as he had intended to suggest the Port Inspector take it for his own personal use. Most people were prepared to keep quiet and put up with that sort of behaviour from Chief Stewards, but the Wireless Operator had always been a bit of a rebel in that respect. If you did not speak up, you could not blame anyone.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 3)

The general approach to the isolation or segregation between Departments which prevailed on many ships was that there might have been a bit of interdepartmental rivalry, or a joking aura of competition, but it was trivial, as each Department tended to stick somewhat clannishly to its own crowd.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-37, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-58, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-44, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-35, TTC p. 5) One Britisher felt there was a lot of interaction and friendly, good-natured rivalry on smaller coastal vessels, but large passenger boats encouraged isolation and segregation to such an extent that the average seafarer would not even notice interactions between Departments.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 4) An American said interdepartmental relations were especially good on tankers, because there was so little difference between the duties of the Deck and Engine crews aboard them. Perhaps the Engine Department was not quite as “visible” as the Deck Department, but most of their time was actually spent on deck.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 1)

Some Deck Department personnel rarely considered the Engine crew, but felt sorry for their more dangerous position below decks, especially when engaged “in action”.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 1) One man worked in the Engine Room only once and hates going into it to this day. He never would do it again, because you are under water, not in your element, closed in, and

confined.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 6) Once, however, as Acting Coal-Passer off Newfoundland, a Deck rating was glad of the warmth of the Engine Room. They were dirty from the coal, had no soap but a semi-liquid stuff, and all had crab lice, but they were not freezing on the exposed deck. He also explained why he did not like to bunk against the bulkhead below the waterline, because the sound of the moving water made him salivate. Crew's quarters on Liberty ships were well above the waterline. This man was interviewed jointly with an Engineer, who responded that he always felt more secure in the Engine Room at night. In the dark the ship seemed "invincible", but he worried during the day.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 3)<sup>615</sup>

There were, however, a number of asides relating to interdepartmental fraternisation. Interdepartmental friendships developed most often between the younger crewmembers who found interaction with men of their own age group easier than with the older prewar seamen, whatever their Department.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 3, HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6)<sup>616</sup> There was always great rivalry between Deck and Engine Departments, but Apprentices usually found Junior Engineers more sympathetic than the Mates. They often felt "hard-done-by" by their own Department, but experienced a fellow feeling with the Engineers.(HMC 92-26, TTC pp. 5-6)

A number of testimonies accented the improvement in interdepartmental relations during and immediately after the war.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6) One retired Master said there was some "oil-and-water" with old Captains and Chief Engineers. "They were going to see that it stayed that way and I didn't like that at all. It was an old-fashioned attitude and it died out very quickly, as far as I was concerned, any rate."(HMC 92-68,

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<sup>615</sup>. See also Chapter Four, Section B, on whether men felt more confident in daylight or darkness aboard ship in wartime.

<sup>616</sup>. One rating sympathised heartily with the difficulties faced by some older officers who had worked for years to achieve their positions before the war started and "a bunch of young clowns" came aboard to run the ship.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 3)

TTC p. 1) It was men like these “old Captains and old Chief Engineers” who castigated young Cadets and Junior Engineers for fraternising. Keith Marshall was a Cadet for two years with a Chief Mate who consistently tried to outdo the Chief Engineer. When Marshall invited a Junior Engineer into his room for a beer one evening, the Mate told him he “would prefer it if [Marshall] did not socialise with the Engineers.” Deck officers thought themselves above the “ginger beers”.<sup>617</sup> It used to be an old saying that if you had a party with drink it was sure to be the Junior Engineer who was sick on the table.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2) When Fred McKamy, a Deck Officer, was studying aboard the *Marcus Daly* for his upgrading though, he did so in the cabin of one of the Engineers when the occupant was on watch.(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 1) And one Third Mate, on a vessel whose Third Engineer had been an Academy classmate of his, was invited to a rum-and-Coke celebration party in the latter’s room at midnight in mid-ocean to celebrate the revolution counter (rather like a maritime odometer) “turning 0000” on their shared watch.(HMC 90-64, TTC pp. 3-4) Another Third Officer became friendly with a young Messman and, after a period of teasing, invited him to the wheelhouse and allowed him to steer briefly, under close supervision. It was the only time the Messman was ever on the bridge. He said the different Departments had a good time together in the messhall, but there was not usually much mixing with the Navy men.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 1)

The phrase “we were all in the same boat -- literally” was employed more than once, and one Department might assist another when the workload was unbalanced.(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 1) A strong trade unionist said some jealousy did exist between crafts. They were distinct resources and were “guarded to the death” -- rather like being supporters of archrival athletic teams.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 3) It was stressed that the wartime situation actually

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<sup>617</sup>. Rhyming slang for Engineers. Mr. Marshall himself is unsure where that bit of rhyming slang originated.

improved interdepartmental relations. One man said there was a good team spirit during the war, but rivalry in peacetime; the war melded them together.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 2) and another asserted that they were “oil and water, but mostly friendly, especially during the war. People were very close then.” He added that he could not recall any specific unpleasant incidents and that no great antagonism existed, even ashore.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3) A British Wireless Officer contended there were no serious differences between Departments, as wartime seafaring was too serious for rivalry.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 1)

One informant stressed the fact that he could get along even with those whose individual reputations were bad.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 1) Others emphasised that the only major discord occurred in port and largely resulted from overindulgence in alcohol.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-11, TTC p. 2) Bill Fortune said everything was okay until the first port, then “When the booze got in, the wit come out.” There might be the odd row aboard, but it was rare.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5) A Canadian said he drank as much as any, but always managed to avoid fisticuffs as he was smart enough to know when to stop drinking. “Next to Americans, Canadians can get the drunkest in the world. The Americans are worst; the Canadians second.”(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 3) Blame for these confrontations was most often laid at the door of the “black gang”,<sup>618</sup> who were reputed to be more quarrelsome than other ratings.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 4) The Captain, as not only the highest rank aboard ship, but also the apex of the Deck Department, often considered his seamen “the bright-eyed ones -- they couldn’t do any wrong” if altercations did arise.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 1)

Each Department had a general reputation within the Merchant Service, despite the fact that each customarily maintained its own boundaries.

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<sup>618</sup>. Engine Room ratings. The reader is reminded that this term was deemed “politically correct” for almost a century.

The Deck Department often thought themselves superior because of their seamanship. No one ever said it, but all knew the Catering Department were at the bottom, then the Engine Room, but all kept to themselves. “Oh, they spoke to one another, but if the whole gang was sitting playing cards, each had their own game and you did not join another Department’s game or go into their cabins unless you were invited.”(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-48, TTC p. 3)

On merchantmen the Deck Department was always cleaner,(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 3) and Stokers on coal-burners were pariahs,(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 1) but these reputations were reversed in the Royal Navy, where the Stokers’ messdecks were always the cleanest in the ship and Wireless Operators were “idle and scruffy”.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 6)<sup>619</sup> The Deck Department looked down on the others, especially the Stewards, and thought themselves superior, although they really were not. The Engine crew had their own quarters and kept to themselves. On coal-burners the Engine crowd was always black and dirty, and the Deck crew naturally tried to avoid them somewhat. There was no real animosity aboard, they only kept to themselves, but ashore the Firemen “went berserk” and always fought a lot, especially in Australia.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 2) On some ships the forecastle deck was split in two down the middle with Engine and Deck crews on opposite sides. The ABs on Deck and the Firemen were hard men. And there were regional rivalries as well -- London against Liverpool, Sunderland or Newcastle against Swansea, and variations of all that, as well as standard types of bigotry.<sup>620</sup> In general terms, though, they got on pretty well, considering the conditions under which they lived.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 3) It was not bad, but there is always an animosity between Deck and Engine Room -- and Catering. “Oh, yes, Firemen and Sailors,<sup>621</sup> there’s always been that and I s’pose there always will be. It’s different now, of course,

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<sup>619</sup> This will be further developed in Chapter Six.

<sup>620</sup> See Section D for further explication of ethnic and regional prejudices.

<sup>621</sup> That is to say Deck crew.

because now they're 'Utility' and they mix." Then it was strong enough to call animosity, rather than friendly rivalry. All were tolerated, but Firemen were "beneath" the Deck Department. Accommodations were segregated of course. The forecastle or common area for accommodation was in the bows where all the noise was. Firemen just went down below and shovelled coal. That was all they had to do, although there is an art in firing.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 7)

Sailors and Firemen were always close -- to a point. The Stewards, there was always a slight feelin' that the Stewards were different. They lived amidships and they were slightly different, although it was only a sort of an imaginary barrier. You might -- as a young boy I would still make friends with the young Steward boys, 'cause they were, the age group would be right. ... But generally the Firemen and Sailors were slightly, always slightly different. They always seemed to be a rougher team than the Stewards. ... If there was animosity, it would be prob'ly over food. ... That sometimes created a little problem, because the Cook and the Stewards were together and obviously the Cook looked after the, er, the Chief Steward and the Cook looked after the food. And a lot of ships weren't very good at feedin' you -- they varied, of course.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 3)

An Engineer said Stewards are called the "stupid department", Deck sailors are called "rope-chokers", and the "black gang" are called "underground savages", but it is not really very serious.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2)

Another said there was some animosity toward the Stewards' Department, but it was mostly racial in origin.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1)<sup>622</sup> One American respondent's brother-in-law had been in the Merchant Service prior to the First World War and considered the Stewards' Department the "low men on the totem pole" and the Deck Department "elite". The respondent himself thought the Engine Department the elite, as they had a larger number of advanced ratings below the licensed personnel than any other Department. Of course many parallel Deck ratings, such as Lamptrimmer and Carpenter, have disappeared over the years. Even Radio Officers are being phased out, although he always envied the Radioman on a merchant ship.(HMC 90-74, TTC

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<sup>622</sup>. See footnote <sup>63</sup>., above.

p. 5) An American who sailed as Electrician said he was always on freighters, never tankers, as freighters need Electricians for the electric winches. The corresponding tanker job rating level would be Pumpman. A “Deck Engineer” is two jumps below Chief Electrician, level with Second Electrician. The only ship he ever sailed on that carried a Deck Engineer was a ship with steam winches.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 6) The British rating corresponding to Deck Engineer is Donkeyman, because he is in charge of the “donkey engine” used for deck equipment. Joe Cunningham found it amusing that I thought the American term “Deck Engineer” had a more elegant ring than the British “Donkeyman”.(HMC 92-7, TTC pp. 3-4)<sup>623</sup>

Englishman Dick Playfer said the Deck Department, both officers and ratings, tended to look down upon the other two Departments, seeing a definite pecking order, with Deck at the top, Catering at the bottom, and Engine in between. Stewards “were considered the lowest form of life” and the Radio Officers “a necessary evil at best”. Before the war, a ship carried only one Radio Operator, but during the war they carried three or even four, as it was necessary to man the radio twenty-four hours a day, and they worked shifts. He thinks they were regarded as a new, slightly upstart breed of officer and some contempt was shown them by both regular officers and sailors. They did not have the “aura” of being seafarers; they were “odd man out”; even Stewards, the lowest, were seafarers, but Radio Officers were not.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 2)

My general feeling toward Radio/Wireless Operators at the beginning of the research was that they must occupy a position aboard a merchant ship rather like the traditional place of the governess in a wealthy household -- wavering between being treated as family and being treated as servant.

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<sup>623</sup>. But then the British term “redundancy” is far more refined than the North American “laid off”, so what would you?



Wireless Operators were neither Deck Department (although they worked above decks) nor Engine (although they worked with machinery); neither officer (as there was no Department beneath them) nor rating (as they were better educated than most and required a licence to do their job). Almost everyone except Radio Operators themselves agreed with this assessment, but at least one was vehement in his claims that Wireless Operators were Deck Officers and entitled to all the privileges associated therewith. Amongst other things, he advanced the information that Radio Officers were not assigned to ships through a Pool, as were DEMS, merchant seamen, and M.R.A., but were hired and given assignments by the wireless company. It was not a good system, but has persisted to the present, and was widespread during the Second World War. Not the only method, it was the simplest at the time, and in the end operated much like the Pools.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 3) Another Radio Officer sometimes acted as “policeman” and went to bail crewmembers out of jail in port. He managed to make himself useful and got on well with most of the officers.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 2)

On larger passenger ships, the Deck Department enjoyed the most privileges of the three. Deck Officers ate with passengers in the saloon, while Engineers had their own messroom. This made sense, because they then did not have to be so clean. Most of the Engineers’ off-duty time was spent in “patrol suits”<sup>624</sup> -- like a uniform, but just buttoned up, without collar or tie. As the war progressed, especially on cargo ships, officers of both Departments ate together and became more integrated.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6) The source of the manpower supply for Deck Officers was training ships and this made for an “old boys’ network”. There was no such “cloak” for Engineers, who could come from anywhere as long as they had adequate experience with tools. When you have served your apprenticeship, you can work with tools. The

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<sup>624</sup>. See previously where junior Engineers came to meals with only a handwash and a “uniform blouse”.

conscientious went to night school and studied for their certificates. During the war, groundwork was lacking and they “got some real oddballs”. Also many came to sea at an earlier age, not having served the five-year apprenticeship previously demanded of a watch-keeping Engineer, but only having done four (aged twenty). Examinations for upgrading were made easier, too. Before the war, if you failed one subject, you had to resit the whole series of exams, but during the war, parts A and B were taken separately and all passing marks were secure; certificated men were needed. After the war there were lads who took training in theory at technical colleges and became Engineering Cadets when they had never been on a ship. Older men were dubious, but the youngsters proved good -- “knew their stuff”.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6)

Relations were generally good. There was lots of kidding and joking, but only occasionally was there real conflict. There was one incident where the Chief Engineer had just finished having the bilges painted and the Chief Mate asked for a manoeuvre where the ship turned “hard over” at full speed, ruining the fresh paint. This strained relations for a while, but the two remained friends. The skipper of the vessel said: “My whole seagoing career as Captain, nine-tenths of my energy has been trying to keep the Mate and the Chief from killing each other. I thought that was the trouble. On this ship they’re best friends; now I’ve really got trouble.” The informant, after getting a command, once complained to a Danish skipper that it was no fun at sea anymore. “Remember the practical jokes we used to pull?” The reply was that the reason it is no longer funny is that all the jokes were played on the Captain or the Chief Engineer. “That’s us now. We’re the victims, not the conspirators.”(HMC 90-53, TTC p. 4)

One American sailed mostly on tankers. His first ship was very nice, but he was the Officers’ Pantryman, basically a Cabin Boy, and did not care

for the job. He would have been better off had he joined the Engine crew. Grumbling about the job, he was told that when they arrived at the next major city he should take his papers ashore and ask the Shipping Commissioner to endorse them for another Department -- the Commissioner would do it if he “talked nice”.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 3) He did this successfully in Houston, but later “got fired for coming home without leave”. He was sailing out of the union hall<sup>625</sup> in Philadelphia in an ancient vessel, “so slow she didn’t even leave a wake”, and while discharging cargo in New Jersey, the informant, who lived in a nearby town, went home overnight and came back the next morning to find he had been fired. It worked out for the best, because that was when he got a Deck job. He was ready to sign on as a Messman, when a pierhead jump<sup>626</sup> became available for an Ordinary Seaman and he took it and eventually shipped [on] all three coasts.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 2)

A number of interdepartmental disputes arose from seamen’s racial, national, or ethnic backgrounds, but this will be covered in Section D. Perhaps a good way to end this Section and lead on to the relationships between officers and ratings [regular crew] would be to wind everything up with a comment on regionalism. James Timothy Murphy first sailed out of Tacoma, Washington, then transferred to the Atlantic Coast. A Norwegian Captain with whom he sailed once said no good Engineers came from the Pacific Coast. Murphy grinned and said that he was one, whereupon the Captain shook his head and replied, “Murph, you’ve been out here [the East] too long. You’re different.”(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>625</sup>. Note that in the previous chapter this unlikely turn of phrase has been defined as being assigned to vessels through a hiring system run by the trade unions in their hiring halls.

<sup>626</sup>. A “pierhead jump” or “pierhead leap” is a nautical phrase meaning the short notice acceptance of employment aboard a ship due for imminent departure, and derives from the occasional necessity in earlier times of actually leaping from the dock to the departing ship to secure a berth aboard.

### C. RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OFFICERS AND RATINGS

Officers and ratings usually maintained a civil, even pleasant, working relationship, despite the fact that their positions were essentially those of management and labour respectively. Some officers, of course, were martinets or ineffectual milquetoasts, while some ratings were “sea lawyers” or “performers” whose main aim in life was to foment trouble. There was one major difference, however, from the hierarchy of the factory floor, when it moved to sea. The officers, or management figures, might be possessed of the only necessary knowledge available to keep themselves and their subordinates alive under certain conditions. No collier, steelworker, or textile mill worker was liable to put at risk the lives of three entire shifts of workers merely by contravening the bosses’ orders, but a seafarer might be. It has well been said that there is no “back door”<sup>627</sup> at sea.

A few years before the war, a maritime author wrote:

The seaman as a deckhand must face wintry seas; as an engine room worker he must labor in the depths of the scorching stokehold when his ship plows through tropical seas; as a steward, in the grey dawn he must scrub decks, and at breakfast, noon and dinner wait on tables. All three sleep in the slum bowels of the ship and eat their food from agate dishes in rivet-studded mess halls.

Gold stripes change each of them to swivel-chaired potentates with emissaries waiting to obey every command.<sup>628</sup>

But the rapid upgrading potential prevalent in the war years, coupled with expanding trade unionism, produced a more proletarian attitude in the younger officers, especially those who had “come up through the hawsepipe”.

About a third of the interviewees said the officer/rating relationship was acceptably congenial. Typical was the response of a Canadian, who said

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<sup>627</sup>. Or ready means of escape. This statement occurs with great frequency, both in printed works with maritime contexts and in the testimonies of men from both sides of the Atlantic.

<sup>628</sup>. Healey, 5.

there was never much of a problem with professional mariners who knew their jobs, only with “captains’ favourites”.<sup>629</sup>(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 5) Approximately one-sixth of the respondents replied that the situation varied from ship to ship and with the individuals involved.<sup>630</sup> Some emphasised the growing isolation of the individual as he neared the zenith of the hierarchy or discussed problems of fraternisation between licensed and unlicensed personnel, while a few spoke of the severe discipline enforced by some officers and the tendency of others to misappropriation and pilferage of goods or funds, as mentioned in the previous Section. One maintained that all Chief Stewards and Deck officers on the Manx ferries had vested interests in hotels on the Isle of Man and appropriated the crew’s meat ration coupons to supply them. Also, when they and the Engineers and Electricians went ashore to their homes on Man, all the lights aboard went out and the crew remaining aboard -- about eight men in a small fore-castle -- had to rely on petrol-burning “Tilley” lamps, which hung in the middle of their quarters, generating fumes and “a terrible stench” in the confined space.(HMC 92-46, TTC p. 3) In some shipping companies which ran passenger liners, a Steward who did not pay a “kickback” to the Cooks got nothing but the passengers’ leftovers to eat for the entire voyage.(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 1)

A British rating cited training schools as “another racket”. “They’d take you to school and you had to buy a uniform, see. Well, as soon as you come aboard, you’d throw it away or start shovelling coal in it. Nobody used to go around in a uniform except the officers, to impress the ladies. All the killer-dillers, the womanisers all dressed up. ... First thing these young Engineers used to do, they were tang[?] lads from Cammell Laird’s, y’know, Apprentice Engineers. They’d get a Junior Engineer’s job aboard the ship, first thing they’d do -- uniform - - gold braid -- and there’s nothing in the world to make a man

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<sup>629</sup>. The seafaring equivalent of “teachers’ pets.”

<sup>630</sup>. “Most skippers were pretty good, but there was one bad one, after the war, who was almost a psycho. Another was very nice, but insisted on eating alone.”(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 7) A Canadian said you might have “the odd individual stinker”, but relations between officers and ratings were mostly good. Most Captains of *Park* boats were English, mostly good with “the odd stinker”. After a while they “changed to our ways”. [MH -- meaning less class consciousness?](HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2)

big-headed than a little bit of gold braid on a uniform. I've seen 'em, me own schoolmates; it does.”(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 6)

Another said these relations were “Not much cop.”<sup>631</sup> Officers thought themselves “God Almighty” in those days. Sometimes ratings could get along with the Fourth Mate which a few ships carried, and occasionally the Third was approachable, but above that forget it. “They didn’t wanna know. ‘Who are you?’ They looked down on you.”(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 4)

One retired Master recalled hearing, in his youth, that a certain Captain chased Mates up the mast and would not let them down. The informant refused to sail with him, even at the cost of his job, but the Captain is the law aboard his ship; it is a matter of discipline. One ship’s Captain shot and killed a handcuffed man, but the charges were dismissed. There is a question in the examination for a lifeboat ticket: “If you are in charge and a person is causing trouble, hit him with the sweep oar and, if necessary, kill him to protect the others.” This, he said, is the exact wording.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 3)

Some Masters were exceptionally good, but on one ship, the Captain was nicknamed “Butcher” with good reason. He abused his Chinese crew physically and mentally, and had acquired his unpleasant nickname before the informant joined his ship, but the other officers were quite good. Many Captains kept to themselves. Some were strict, and a few were “autocratic”, but the majority were “good, decent men”. A Master had to remain aloof, even to his own officers. A “Master under God” was only answerable to God. Now they are answerable to accountants ashore and to other such people as well. This informant declared he would hate to go to sea today, because the accountants run everything from the office. “In those days”, once you cast off, you were “Master under God”; there was only the ship and the elements. The men had to obey the Master. Many deck ratings during the war, including the

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<sup>631</sup>. “Not much cop” is a British slang expression meaning “not very good”.

informant, intended to sit for officers' tickets but never found time to get ashore for the examinations.(HMC 92-35, TTC pp. 2 and 5)

The Merchant Navy and the Royal Navy were very different situations. The Merchant Navy were still civilians, not under military discipline. Officers were respected in the Merchant Navy, but it was a far more friendly liaison. In the Royal Navy during World War II, there was mainly mutual respect between officers and men, but they were totally separated on social occasions, far more so than in the United States Navy, or at least the informant received that impression. On a Royal Navy ship, the Captain's word was absolute law and his power life and death over the crew. "Perhaps not quite as bad as Capt. Bligh, but that idea still remained, anyway, whereas in the Merchant Navy, obviously you had to obey the Captain of the ship, but it was not quite so -- shall we say -- vitally important to be absolutely under his thumb as it would be in the Navy."(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 2) Another respondent noted that on MTBs<sup>632</sup> and other Royal Navy vessels, if an order was given, three men would rush to obey it. In the Merchant Navy, it was always the nearest man who did it, not half a dozen, just one. That was the difference fifty years ago, although it may have changed by now.(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 5)

One interviewee said relationships between officers and crew members were "Not too good, really, I don't think," but a bit "phony" and "awkward". "Well, they're [the officers] the same as us, really, in the Merchant Navy, aren't they?" he said. "They're only ordinary chaps, worked their way up. But in the Navy they're a bit more class, isn't there, the Royal Navy? But with the Merchant Navy I don't think so, no. They made out what they weren't, really y'know."(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 2) A very good example of the awe in which Royal Navy ratings held the officers was a comment by an ex-escort sailor, who,

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<sup>632</sup>. Motor Torpedo Boats, the equivalent to the U.S. Navy "PT" Boat or the German Kriegsmarin's "E-Boat".

speaking of a Court of Inquiry into a shipmate's accidental death, said the officers were very nice. "I wouldn't say they could have been ratings, 'cause I wouldn't try to degrade an officer like that,<sup>633</sup> but it was so human, it wasn't formal at all. ...I s'pose there was a certain amount of sympathy, but at the same time there was still naval discipline there. But it wasn't a frightening experience. I thought it would've been, but it wasn't."(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 2)

The fact that he felt it would have been degrading to the officers to have considered them equal to ratings in sympathy tells the whole story.

An American dodged the job of Officers' Messman, because officers made him uncomfortable. You had to wear a white coat and make the coffee "just so". His favourite job was the hardest in the Stewards' Department, Galley Utility: washing pots and pans, peeling potatoes, cutting up vegetables, bringing stores from below. One did not have to deal with officers -- just Cooks. Once he was Bedroom Utility and hated it, as he had to clean the officers' rooms. It only happened once, though; he dodged the job afterwards. He could not figure out when the officers were and were not in their rooms, which was confusing and embarrassing and "put him in a tight".(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 1) But another Catering rating looked after first the Purser and then the ship's Surgeon, getting on well and enjoying the job, which he felt gave him a lot of leeway and no pressure. On troopers one never saw the officers unless one had something specifically to do with them.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 3) A man who had served in all three Departments regularly did the officers' dhoby<sup>634</sup> and in return they bought items for him when they went ashore.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)

Three Radio/Wireless Officers spoke up for their position and said they had always eaten in the saloon and were considered Deck officers, and one

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<sup>633</sup>. Emphasis mine.

<sup>634</sup>. The reader is reminded that this means the hand-laundering of clothing.



became almost indignant in defence of the right (not privilege) of this group to be so recognised. They had, he said, similar status to Engineers and were entitled all such prerogatives as eating in the saloon or officers' mess and having a Boy to clean their rooms. Another, however, asked whether he felt like an officer or a poor relation, replied that you were entirely on your own and there was some resentment. The only one who could order you was the Master -- not even the Chief Mate or the Chief Engineer. Also, when work and maintenance was done, you were at leisure. Nobody else was allowed this privilege -- they all had to work.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-15, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-22, TTC p. 3)<sup>635</sup>

Several former ratings spoke with warmth and esteem of officers who had given special attention to their tutelage, either helping them learn the ropes when they first shipped out, or giving them special attention during their upgrading efforts, simply from a desire to help them better themselves.(HMC 90-5, TTC pp. 1-2, HMC 90-12, TTC p. 2) It was necessary for a prospective Junior Engineer to get letters of endorsement or recommendation from the Chief Engineers with whom he shipped before he could enter Officer Candidate School.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 4) One man still carries his, fifty years after the fact, although he never ultimately benefited from their use.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1)

One respondent who spent most of the war confined to a POW camp had his Mate's ticket by the time the war ended because the officers helped the men. Two British Captains in the camp approached the German officers to ask if their juniors could do navigation school and obtain their "tickets" in the camp, sending the paperwork out by post. Their captors agreed and examination papers were overseen by the German high command and envigilated by British officers in the camp dining hall. Only certain portions

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<sup>635</sup>. Although British Radio Officers once had a separate union, they are now covered by NUMAST, the British union for all Deck officers.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 3)

of the examinations were allowed in the camps, though, and they had to finish the others on their return home. Some lower ratings, who would never otherwise have had a chance, got tickets that way while in camp, studying with and being tutored by the junior officers, while the senior officers taught them. Once, in a railway station after the war, the informant met a rating he had tutored and thought the man looked smart in his officer's uniform. He did not recognise the man at first but, when he did, thought the two or three years of study in prison camp had really "paid off" for him. It gave both teachers and taught a great sense of accomplishment.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 3) Outside the boredom of prison camp, some already well-educated young men spent much of their time studying and acquired their tickets. Others were too fond of "bending the elbow" to study, so never improved their lot. "Bastards that come up through the hawsepipe are the worst, once they get up", however, as they are harder on their former mates.(HMC 92-32, TTC pp. 7-8)

Prisoner-of-war camps were run on a very egalitarian basis, which could be disconcerting to the officers, but on liberation, it was assumed that they would fall immediately into their old roles, even without the ship, and most did.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 1) As D.B.S.<sup>636</sup> in North Africa, after a sinking, one crew was billeted with U.S. troops "under canvas" in the desert for two weeks. The seamen were well-treated, but no distinction of rank was allowed, even within the ships' crews, which bothered some, primarily the officers. They queued with a plate for meals, but the food was good. While there, survivors were given U.S. Army uniforms. Once the informant and a shipmate failed to salute a ranking military officer, who at first was upset, but relented when they explained they were merchant marine survivors.(HMC 91-8, TTC p. 3)

Most labour and trade union supporters amongst the ratings said it was a "them" and "us" situation in which officers and crew did not mix, but it is

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<sup>636</sup>. Distressed British Seamen.

different now that crews are smaller. Then there were over thirty in a normal deck crew, but now there are seldom that many altogether in the biggest ship.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)

‘They’ [officers] got white sheets; we might dirty ours, so we got blue ones. We got tin plates; they got pottery. All this jazz, y’know, and there no need for it. And when they dished the stores out, they’d have ‘Robinson’s’ jam; we’d have some junk from a factory in St. Helen’s, made out of turnips, in a great big five-pound tin. Load of nonsense. Or they’d have ‘Daddy’ sauce and we’d have a great big bottle like that, y’know. ... I was in one ... boat -- this is no kiddin’. The skipper and the cook and all that, they had four menus in that ship for fifty men. One for the skipper, the Mate, and the Chief Engineer; another for the Second Engineer, the Second Mate, and that; and there was four different grades of food. The poor riffraff, the crew, the decky....(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 5)

They went on strike, demanding “pound-and-pint”<sup>637</sup> whereby a list of stores was doled out by the Chief Steward, prepared by the men themselves, and cooked by the Cook. Food was “a racket” in big passenger boats; cargo boats were different -- there was no “fiddling”.<sup>638</sup> The informant left the vessel mentioned above and came home by train with seven hundredweight of excess baggage leftover from his “pound-and-pint” rations. This was immediately after the war, but still during rationing. He had a huge bag of sugar and a fifty-six-pound box of butter although he had only been on the ship a month. The Cook owned shares in the shipping company and he and the skipper had worked this “fiddle” between them.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 5) Often there was “crew tea” for the ratings and “cabin tea” of a higher quality for the officers. The latter consisted of leaves and the former, nicknamed “timber ponds”, of stalks.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 3) It seemed strange to a troopship’s Baker, that even when at war, ship’s officers were still fed from the passengers’ menu. They had had a “Captain’s Table”, “Chief Officer’s Table”, etc., with the Doctor at the end of the list, each with selected guests. When the war came, they continued the same sort of thing, with the officers eating from the passengers’

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<sup>637</sup>. See Chapter Three under “Conditions Aboard”.

<sup>638</sup>. “Fiddle” is a term common in England, indicating shady dealings.

menu. Similar class distinctions prevailed even amongst the civilians they carried in wartime.(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 5-6)

Other strong trade unionists were in agreement with those who maintained there were both good and bad officers. “Johnny” Johnston said some were wonderful and some were awful, inhuman. Some logged<sup>639</sup> two days’ pay for one and it was always okayed. The one consolation was that most of the money from fines went to the Marine Hospitals.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 6)

It seems to have been an accepted fact that British officers (and ratings) were much more conscious of class distinctions than were North Americans, whether from the U.S., Canada, or Newfoundland. This sometimes caused significant friction, especially when a white British officer had been used to dealing with a crew of non-whites whom he treated in imperious fashion. “We were all one bunch. We were all in the one lifeboat”, said a Newfoundlander, but if they had men from the U.K., it would be “a little different”, as it was harder to get along with British officers.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 3) Another proclaimed that class distinction is terrible. “Don’t clap your hands at a Newfoundlander and expect him to jump!” said he.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 4) And a Canadian launched into a veritable diatribe about relations aboard, beginning with interdepartmental attitudes and expanding to include the officer/rating relationship, the essence of which was: “The age-old conflict between grease and air was propagated by simple old fools who couldn’t live in the modern world. These were generally British, who came to Canada because they were unsuccessful in the United Kingdom, and maintained the class system.”(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 3) An American reported that on his first trip there was trouble

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<sup>639</sup>. To “log” a person aboard a merchant ship is to enter his name in the log book for a breach of discipline or for a shoreside offence. A fine is customarily imposed, to be deducted from the lump sum wages the individual will receive when the ship pays off on completion of the voyage. “The Mate would log men for drinking or shirking. There wasn’t much logging after the war, but before....”(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 1)

with an English First Mate, because the men fraternised with the officers; licensed and unlicensed personnel sat together on the hatch and “shot the bull”. It was a matter of teamwork.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 1) Relations depended on individuals. An informant who was a devotee of football[soccer], played with a mixed group of officers and crew. They got on well, but he was an Engineer and they [Engineers] were working-class, and so got along better than did Deck officers, having more in common with the crew. Of course they were supposed to keep their place, and he was scolded several times for fraternising with the ratings on his watch. Football<sup>640</sup> was the main area of commonality.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6)

The last ship out of Singapore, was saved from destruction during the enemy attack because they were screened by the smoke from a fire on the oil jetty; almost everything else in the harbour was hit. After jury-rigging to repair damage, she waited for the last women and children still coming to be evacuated. The evacuees, dressed in their best, stood waiting in line in the heat. They were parched. Catering staff could not pass them cups, so they emptied a large tin of fruit, filled the empty can with water, and passed it to the women on the dock. The sight of the stylishly-dressed women “like royalty in Ascot hats” drinking from a fruit can was impressive; it was “a great leveller”. All got aboard, and during the voyage the Army wives were segregated by rank -- officers’ wives here, non-commissioned officers’ wives there, privates’ wives in another place. This annoyed the informant, as they all were literally as well as figuratively in the same boat, after all. All got the same food and the many pregnant women were well tended, which was fine, but the informant still could not accept the class-line segregation in other respects.(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 5-6)

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<sup>640</sup>. Soccer.

Fraternisation between licensed and unlicensed personnel was similarly anathema to most British shipping firms, especially the more prestigious. On Blue Funnel vessels, officers and crews were quite separate. James Crewe, a young Radio Officer, was on a ship in the Indian Ocean on a Sunday, during the Captain's inspection, on the forward well-deck, where two ratings were playing darts. Crewe watched their game and was later reprimanded by the Captain for fraternising with the crew -- just for watching. Blue Funnel was exceptional in that way -- they were sticklers for regulations. Nobody liked it, but it was accepted at the time.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 2) Dick Playfer had a more difficult dilemma, as he radically altered his status. As a Cadet, he did not think much about class distinctions. He knew there was a difference and the two groups kept their distance. He conformed without question, until his first trip ashore in Baltimore, when he shared a taxi and the evening that followed with some regular seamen. Observed by the Chief Officer, he was reprimanded for consorting with the men and warned that he must not do so again, as it was bad for discipline. This was a surprise. He had never supposed the distance was deliberately maintained. There was no actual penalty imposed, however, despite the fact that he refused to conform. Later, when he was at the other end of the social scale as a seaman, the distinction between officers and ratings was more obvious and he felt it was wrong. Some of his crewmates were bitter about it and officers were called hard names. There was little discrimination in their minds -- all officers were considered bad. Playfer was no happier with that blanket dismissal by class than he had been with the other. There was lots of class distinction of that sort aboard British ships. In contact with North American sailors he discovered it is not true of North American ships, or at least not to the same extent. With so much discrimination, it was interesting to see both sides of it.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 2) His attitude is the more intriguing when contrasted with the previous remark that the Captain and Chief Engineer, as management, have to take care

of the idiots, while the troublemakers are the failures who prefer to blame their own failure on others.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2)

Some class divisions were between the ranks of the licensed personnel themselves, and made life more difficult for junior officers, Cadets, and especially for Apprentices, who were deemed “lower than the ship’s cat”.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 6) One informant, on the last vessel of his apprenticeship, was either a lone Apprentice or one of two (usually there were four) and had gone to the Engine Room to fetch a bucket of black oil or paint. The ship lurched as he mounted the ladder, causing him to catch the lip of the bucket and spill its contents all over a heat exchanger. The Chief Engineer saw it and “went spare”. The informant spent the entire remainder of the watch below, cleaning off the heat exchangers. It was hot weather and the heat exchangers were boxed in and it was very hot. He feels he “must’ve lost about ten pounds in that four hours!” The stuff was drying on quickly, so he had to work fast. “That was the worst thing that ever happened to me. ... Stuck with me for a long time. ... Talk about a wet rag.”(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 6) Another ex-Apprentice felt there was an interesting note about the war bonus. When it was first instituted, the only ones aboard ship not entitled to claim it were the Captain and the Apprentice, because they were “company personnel”. After about nine months, however, all were receiving it. “It was a princely sum -- five pounds a month -- six months’ wages for an Apprentice!” The informant saved all his war bonuses and had accrued sixty pounds by the end of his apprenticeship. “A fortune!”(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 2) Another said when he was an Apprentice there was “No problem at all, as far as I knew.” In Australia, he had to go to the local pub and bring the sailors back to the ship before sailing. He expected trouble, but there was none; they came with no problem. All were old hands who had been with the ship a long time and were very reliable, very good. He believes he was like a son to them.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 3) But

merely obtaining a licence did not make a man immune to strife with his social superiors:

A Second Mate sailed with a Chief Officer he did not like -- they just did not get along. The ship got into trouble going up the [English] East Coast, through "E-boat Alley", not from hostilities, but by cargo breaking loose, and they all had to get out and help. The informant had a hammer and the Mate was holding a wedge. He hit the other man's thumb entirely by accident, but took it off, so they dropped the casualty at Methil and the informant got an instant promotion. He told the Old Man, "You do appreciate, Sir, that the Third Mate has no ticket, no idea, no hope, no ambition." The skipper replied, "We'll get on all right, won't we?" And they did. For eighteen months, they sailed round like that. Two years later, in a bar, he met the man he had injured, and with whom he had had the personality clash, and was told, "You did me a jolly good turn. ... The next ship I went on they made me Master."(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 7)

Because officer/crew fraternisation was discouraged, some Junior Engineers socialised with the Gunnery Officer,(HMC 90-25, TTC p. 1) but one Engine Room rating saw a distinct difference between licensed/unlicensed personnel's relationships there and in the Deck Department, because Engineers had to work more closely with their men than did Deck Officers. There were close relations because they were so interdependent, but the Mates and the Captain were sort of aloof.(HMC 90-39, TTC p. 2)<sup>641</sup>

A U.S. Navy rating, at one point in our interview, asked "So do I sound like a typical Chief Petty Officer, criticising the officers?" and said, "They called us high school dropouts in the Navy half our life, and we called them idiots ninety days out of a college, but we got along better than what it might sound."(HMC 90-9, TTC p. 1) But an American merchant rating told of a Third Mate who instructed the Armed Guard to open fire on a British destroyer which he could not readily identify and recollected that "it was nice to hear an 'E.M.' [enlisted man] tell off an officer" when the Gunner refused to obey the order.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>641</sup> Cf. also Chapter Seven, Section A and HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6, where the game of soccer football is specified as a proletarian sport played by the Engineering Department, illustrating a lack of class distinction within the Department itself.



The British noted the problems of rapid training as well:

“Towards the end of the war, both the Americans and us were hard-pressed to man the ships. By that time they were building ships so fast they couldn’t train men quick enough to man them. I mean there were American lads coming straight out of college [Academy] virtually getting a Second Mate or a Mate’s job of a Liberty ship, y’know, the first ship they’d ever set foot on.” When told another respondent had said the British concept of American navigation was to take a fortnight’s course at Maritime College, then get behind the wheel and tell the helmsman to follow that British ship,<sup>642</sup> he responded, “Well, it ... wasn’t quite that bad I don’t suppose, but it was getting pretty serious, we were so short of trained men. Churning the ships out, but they can’t train men that quickly.”(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 2)

Some crewmembers found most of the officers to be “real gentlemen” despite the differentiation of rank, and stressed that they were probably lonelier than the crew, as they were fewer in number and could not “buddy up”. Even the Purser did not mingle. On passenger ships, officers were completely isolated from the crew, while on coastal boats they were more friendly and all worked together, although the officers held the authority.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 3)

In many ships with limited space, the upper echelon of unlicensed workers<sup>643</sup> ate and associated with the officers. This made the informant, a Chief Electrician, feel a bit peculiar -- being a union man, attending union meetings, but eating in the officers’ mess -- and he thinks others may have resented it. He was uncomfortable, as he was only nineteen at the time, and the Second Electrician, who ate with the crew, was about fifty-five and resented being bossed about by a kid who got social preferment. Awkwardnesses, however, were individual rather than universal.(HMC 90-72, TTC pp. 5-6)

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<sup>642</sup> Capt. Graeme Cubbin, personal conversation on the day of the interview.

<sup>643</sup> These were basically “Petty Officers” in the hierarchy and often “day men” [see earlier in Chapter Four, Section C, regarding Watches]. This informant was in the Engine Department and no compatible testimony was forthcoming from either Deck or Stewards/Catering Departments, although it is reasonable to assume that the officer-type ranks of the latter, Purser and Chief Steward, might well have done likewise, either on that ship or in a similar situation..

Several interviewees declared the Captain the loneliest man on the ship and noted that loneliness affects people in different ways. A Canadian Master Mariner said relations were excellent as long as neither side overstepped the invisible line of command. His biggest problems were on postwar scientific ships. The scientists, “all Socialists, trained by the CBC [Canadian Broadcasting Corporation],” did not recognise the same limits, but it was they and the seamen who suffered, not the officers. The men would have responded better had the academics behaved like officers, as “they are all aware the barrier is there”. The Captain must remain separate or lose control of the vessel.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 3) He has to be aloof because his responsibility is so great, and he seldom even got to sleep in his own bed in a convoy situation, usually finding it necessary to use a cot on the bridge; nor could he afford to become “chummy” with the crew. In a large convoy with specified “sealed orders” and course changes, the Captain has heavy stress and many responsibilities.(HMC 90-39, TTC p. 2) A Master can be one of three things: 1) He can run the ship by telephone from his room and appear on the bridge only when necessary; 2) He can be a partial participant, appearing on Sundays at inspection; 3) He can be a “real” Master, all-about, all the time, there whenever he is needed. It is an open door policy, how to be a ship’s Master. If there is a problem, ask yourself if you are doing your own job properly. Correct problems. Check the messrooms first. “Money, mail, and meals equal one hundred percent morale.”(HMC 90-69, TTC pp. 3-4)

A retired Chief Engineer agreed that everything depended upon the quality of the officer as an individual, and stressed the fact that close quarters aboard sometimes aggravated existing differences. He was considered a good labour relations man, as he never had problems with his crews. On another vessel, though, they picked the wrong man as Chief Engineer, and when he

was caught using a dime<sup>644</sup> to open a switchbox, the crew turned him in to the union and he was fined five hundred dollars because it was written in the contract that “the Chief Engineer shall not work with tools”. It would not have happened to the informant, because of his good crew relations. The other man did have his good points; he was fair -- but strict.(HMC 90-48, TTC pp. 1 and 4)

Other Chief Engineers were really odd characters. One, a Scot, was in a somewhat “dicey” convoy situation and when he rang his subordinate in the Engine Room, the young Irishman answered, “Okay, Chief!” Turning to the informant, who was standing in his office, he grated, “What does he think I am? A #@\*&%£\$! Red Indian?!”<sup>645</sup>

As in this instance, lack of harmony between officers and crewmembers often hinged on problems in communication. Sometimes it was an amusing incident, but at other times, ship’s discipline might be called into question and the situation would be more complicated. Canadian Elbert Coldwell would give no names when he told following two stories:

Once, when he was Quartermaster at the wheel, the ship was off the coast of Ireland; it was hazy and before merchant ships were equipped with radar, so the other AB on watch was given the lookout’s job up on the monkey island.<sup>646</sup> The lookout used to report anything he saw down through the speaking tube. One of the *Queens* came out of the haze and passed down the ship’s starboard side, so the lookout blew down through the speaking tube just as the Captain and Second Mate walked in from the chartroom, and reported “A ship on the starboard beam, the biggest bastard I’ve ever seen.” This was not considered the proper way to report. The Old Man nearly died laughing and told the Second Mate to call the lookout down and ask if he knew the proper way to report a sighting. The Second Mate had to deliver the reprimand with a straight face, which was difficult.(HMC 91-11, TTC pp. 3-4)

On another ship the only time the crew got ashore in port was evenings or weekends. They came in for a refit and the men naturally wanted more time off. There were twelve ABs

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<sup>644</sup>. A small thin coin worth ten cents, circulated in both Canada and the United States. The approximate British equivalent in both size and value would be the new five-pence piece.

<sup>645</sup>. As has been previously noted, the title of “Chief” is most often attached to the Chief Engineer, so the man’s irascibility on this point was somewhat eccentric.

<sup>646</sup>. See previous Chapters for a definition of “monkey island”.

and each went to the Bosun complaining of toothache and asking for time off to get the tooth pulled. They went once round and were starting a second time when the refit was completed and they sailed. The messroom was right forward and every night after they left Halifax [Nova Scotia] all the way to Italy they had stew for supper[tea]. Finally the twelve seamen took the “dixey”<sup>647</sup> full of stew to the Mate’s room and complained. The Mate replied that he could not help them, because at the rate they had had their teeth out in Halifax he could not see what else they could eat. He had the last laugh.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 4)

However, Geoffrey Arnold, as a British junior officer, had a less diverting discipline problem:

The log<sup>648</sup> was at the stern of ship. The officer on the bridge had to blow a whistle for the standby man to bring the log reading to the bridge. The first and the second time Arnold blew the whistle the man responded immediately. The third time he did not, so Arnold blew again. “A redheaded fellow” then appeared, saying “Why do you keep blowing the whistle?” Arnold responded, “That’s quite enough. When I blow the whistle I want you up here in the required time.” “But they were just trying it on, y’see? To see what they could get away with with the junior fellow. After they had been put in their places, they were all right.”(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 5)

Two strong trade unionists rightly, but a little surprisingly, upheld the class system of discipline aboard. The American said, “You have to have discipline on a ship or somebody will take advantage.” The captain always had to be fair and square.(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 2) This attitude was echoed by the Liverpudlian who said:

“Well, before the war it wasn’t bad.” Before the war men accepted a certain discipline. As an example, after the war the informant still occasionally used the word, “Sir” to the Chief Officer and was told there was no need for it. The officer thought he was being sarcastic, and he had to explain it was automatic. “It wasn’t just common practice; it was the general thing. Now, when you left the wheel, or when you approached any, even the Third Officer, you, when you give’m the course ... you just been steerin’ you repeated after it, ‘Sir.’ Or if you wanted something you’d say ‘Sir’, or you’re reportin’ a light, and you happened to be close and you’d say, ‘Light on the starboard bow, Sir.’ ... It was so common -- young, old, didn’

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<sup>647</sup>. A “dixey” is a nest of big pots that sit one on top of each other like a double-boiler, but nested three or four deep, held together and the lid held on with a bail handle, and used for carrying food from the galley to the messroom.

<sup>648</sup>. The heaving log for ascertaining the vessel’s speed or the depth of draught possible, not the ship’s logbook in which the daily record was kept.

matter. Men used it, tramp steamers, other ships. But that's not so now. ... So discipline was generally quite good. I wouldn't say 'twas perfect, no." Before the war men would know which ships or companies had a bad name. Crew arrests occurred, but were not common; there were more discipline problems during and after the war.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 4) Others also found the relationship deteriorated at the end of the war, as everyone was getting "fed up" and friction naturally arose.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-51, TTC p. 5)

One generally unpopular merchant Master, on a voyage to Okinawa, presented some U.S. Marines with steaks and liquor from the ship's stores, which pleasantly surprised his crew and made them proud.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 3)

Another ship took food to Bari, Italy and then went to Sicily to make up a convoy. The Captain put on dungarees and got the whole crew to unload leftover rice and dried peas into the bumboats. The informant feels it made for harmony when the Captain mingled with the crew like that.<sup>649</sup> This same respondent,, who did not go to sea until after the start of the war, sailed first under a old German skipper who had been a U-boat commander in the First World War. Despite this background, the Captain was generally loved and the informant "would have gone anywhere with him".(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 2)<sup>650</sup>

Another man sailed with a skipper who had "come up through the hawsepipe" and used to stand on the bridge and tell sea tales while the interviewee was "on the wheel".<sup>651</sup> Amongst other things, he revealed how he had originally obtained his Master's ticket during the Depression while sleeping in a boxcar and reading his lessons by the light of a streetlamp.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 6) These disclosures made the Old Man more human and approachable. A lowly Galley Utility Man's friendship with the Third Mate on another vessel was the key to his only visit to the bridge, where he was allowed a brief and closely supervised "trick" at the wheel.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 1) The memory remained with him nearly fifty years later.

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<sup>649</sup>. Cf earlier where the RN rating felt it "degraded" an officer to be considered as sympathetic as a rating.

<sup>650</sup>. See also Section D.

<sup>651</sup>. A Quartermaster's "trick" at the wheel was three and a half hours.

Relationships between ranks, like any other relationships, depended heavily on the individuals and circumstances involved. One rating, for example, had “a barber’s outfit” and regularly cut the crew’s hair. Although he considered the skipper “very nice”, he courteously but firmly refused to give him a haircut in Durban, because the crew had been given extra tasks on New Year’s Day and the “barber” said he had to help his watch finish their work. Basically though, they all used to co-operate. There are not so many people aboard ship anyhow -- even then there were only about forty in a normal cargo vessel’s crew. A normal Deck crew consisted of six ABs, three Ordinary Seamen, a Bosun and a Carpenter.(HMC 90-14, TTC pp. 3-4)

Some unpleasantnesses persisted even ashore. A Chief Cook who believed the Third Mate “had it in for him” refused the latter’s offer of a beer in a shoreside bar. This led to a fracas in which the five-foot-three-inch Cook beat the six-foot Mate and returned to the ship while his opponent was still pursuing him with a police guard. Aboard, he was told that the Baker had had a similar altercation with the Third, who now had a black eye. When they paid off, the Captain “logged” the Mate, who then had to return to Boston from California by train, still sporting his “shiner”.(HMC 90-21, TTC p. 1) Another unlicensed Catering rating, however, went drinking ashore with officers on a regular basis and considered there was no difference between them.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 1) Yet a third respondent said officers and crew got along fairly well, but there were always some problems. Even before the unions, some officers were polite and others were not. Some would go ashore with crewmen to bars and entertainment venues, and others were self-important. An officer in a bar, seeing some of his crew there, might order “Send ’em down a drink”. Each crew member would then send one back, so he always got more than he paid for, in a way.(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 2) A Chief Engineer said there was never any trouble with his crews. They would have a drink ashore, but never missed the

ship, or anything like that. Not that they were angels...no ship is run with angels!(HMC 92-28, TTC pp. 4-5) Officers generally agreed that, if ratings behaved, they got on pretty well, but there were disciplinary problems and insubordination, especially in port, usually with drink at the root. At sea they were quite happy and had few problems.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-41, TTC pp. 5-6)

Even those who had found relationships less than perfect knew the value of applied psychology. During the war, British merchant crewmen were allowed to buy two cans of beer per day aboard at sevenpence per can, much cheaper than ashore. This was unheard of in peacetime, but it was found that, when they reached a port, drink was then “no big thing”. When they went ashore, instead of getting drunk, the crew bought rationed foods and other luxuries for their families instead of drinking, so it worked out well.(HMC 92-41, TTC pp. 5-6) American ships, despite their reputation for being “dry”, were no different. On one, going from Australia to Bahrein, the Captain allowed each crew member to bring aboard a case of beer. These were fifty-four-count cases of Imperial quarts of strong Australian lager, and some problems resulted, so on the next trip, only officers were allowed to have beer. This decision resulted in hard feelings and pilferage. As Americans were unused to warm beer, they refrigerated it, and it would disappear if left unguarded. It was a “Mr. Roberts”<sup>652</sup> situation which brought discord to officer/crew relations. The informant himself experienced little tension from either side of the officer/crew division, but some did. Problems were greater on Deck than in the Engine Room which, as has been mentioned, was more proletarian. The informant would often purchase a case of beer ashore and then divide it with other crew members aboard, including ratings.(HMC 90-25, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>652</sup>. *Mr. Roberts* was a book and later a film starring Henry Fonda and James Cagney, and approaching the life of the American Merchant Marine junior officer in wartime from a humorous angle. Much of the comedy results from subordinates hoodwinking senior officers.

A family friend, Capt. Emerson Chodzko, often talked of one voyage in the tropics, during which he “allowed himself one bottle of beer at the end of each day.” In actuality, he had only one bottle of beer, which he would set on the corner of his desk when he sat down to his evening paperwork, as an incentive. Each day, however, he would decide to save the bottle until the end of the following day’s work, and so put it away. I do not believe he ever told us if or when he finally drank it himself or gave it away.

A Scottish deckhand said relations were generally pretty good, as officers seldom got involved in fights and such.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 2) There was, however, an incident during which some Firemen, who had no money and were already drunk, bartered for rum and got even drunker. The bottles were confiscated and in the morning, as they left port, the Mate called the miscreants up to where he had all the bottles lined up on the wing of the bridge. He then identified which bottle belonged to which man and made each dump his own over the side.(HMC 92-12, TTC p. 2)

At the end of Chapter Four, mention was made of the stamps used in English discharge books, where “Decline to Report” under conduct and ability was called a “Burndown” or bad discharge and essentially meant the man was blackballed from the Merchant Service for the remainder of his working life. The three grades of stamp were “Very Good”, “Good”, and “Decline to Report”.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1) One respondent happily proclaimed that the report in his discharge book was always “Very Good” and that relationships between officers and men were always good on the vessels in which he served, especially his own personal relationships with officers, some of whom called him by his first name.(HMC 92-2, TTC p. 2) Another falsified his papers so he could not be traced, as he had several bad discharges marked “Decline to Report”.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 4) In American discharge books the Deck Department had marks for “seamanship”, while the Stewards’ Department had



marks for “ability”<sup>653</sup> All Departments, however, had marks for “conduct”, and if an officer did not like a man, he would give him a “bad” mark. This is no longer done, but bad discharge records were as much of a problem to the American merchant seafarer as they were to his British counterpart.(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 1) An American ex-Master, interviewed on the same subject, said there were lots of “commies” in the seafaring trade unions just before the war. The Copeland Books<sup>654</sup> which listed a seaman’s work rating as VG, G, F, or P,<sup>655</sup> and which were superseded by discharge papers, were a factor as well.<sup>656</sup> At the beginning of the war seamen’s papers had to be certified by the U.S. Coast Guard, but were also checked out by the FBI(Federal Bureau of Investigation) and other such security groups.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 1)

An Englishman who ended his seafaring career as a Chief Steward and Purser said officers and ratings got along okay; there were no problems. “I ended up an officer,” he chuckled, “My problem was crew changes.” The only time he ever “kicked up a stink” was when his team was split up; he even had a “beef”<sup>657</sup> with the big bosses over it. In a lengthy explanation of the change in company policy which precipitated the change, he spoke with intense pride of his Chinese crew.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 3)<sup>658</sup> Another Englishman said many white British officers were accustomed to Third World crews. In today’s mercantile marine, most crews are Third World; they will work cheaper when a Britisher demands a “living wage”. The Departments were

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<sup>653</sup>. No mention is made of what mark was given those in the Engine crew.

<sup>654</sup>. At this time there were several different documentation systems in use in the United States. Each was official and no choice was given the individual involved, but different Departments or different geographical shipping areas might have different systems.

<sup>655</sup>. Very Good, Good, Fair, or Poor.

<sup>656</sup>. Documents like Copeland books were unpopular with seamen, who preferred not to have notes on their behaviour follow them from one job to another. When such records were abolished in favour of a standardised nationwide system of registration, however, there was a short period of some uncertainty until the U.S. Coast Guard was firmly established as the governing body overseeing all American seafarers’ discharge records. The British simply did away with the revealing stamps, but retained the identical discharge book they had always used.

<sup>657</sup>. The term “beef” is often used by union men to denote a grievance.

<sup>658</sup>. For further examination of ethnic differences, see Section D of this chapter.

“departmentalised” and the sea is “a world of its own”. He also elaborately detailed the “gloryhole crowd” of different Catering ratings.(HMC 92-7, TTC pp. 3-4) John Dalglish said relationships were good in his experience, because of the quality of men employed by Blue Funnel Line. Later in the war, when shipping companies could not be so particular in their hiring choices, there were some problems. They had Chinese crews in the Engine Room, and then started to hire whites, which caused some minor problems, but these were more a matter of class and of “sea-lawyer left-wing types” than of ethnicity. “Seafaring on the whole is conservative, with a small c. When the awkward cuss shows up, it interrupts the flow. The rest of the group is not always ready to deal with it.”(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2) Regional, national, and ethnic relationships are discussed in the next Section. Religious differences are also mentioned briefly in this section, as they pertain more to the sort of cultural intimacy and contrariety considered here than to the relationships discussed in the other three sections.

## D. ETHNIC, RACIAL, NATIONAL AND REGIONAL PERCEPTIONS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Shipboard relationships based on the cultural and ethnic background of the individuals involved were, for the most part, more candid and far less restricted than similar relationships ashore. Both practices and prejudices varied from place to place, however, and this Section devotes itself to describing the former and clarifying the latter.

At the time of the Second World War, a number of British shipping companies regularly employed native seafarers from colonies in China, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent as ratings and sometimes petty officers. “The British Merchant Navy was actually less than 70[sic] per cent British. Thousands of seamen from occupied Europe and from colonies in Africa and Asia manned British ships.”<sup>659</sup> It was almost unheard of, however, for a given Department on a British-flag vessel to comprise more than one ethnic group unless, perhaps, the petty officers were of a different ethnicity from the lower ratings. Officers were almost exclusively of “white” European stock. North America was integrating crews as well during this period, and at first this was accomplished similarly to the British system. A ship might have white officers and Deck Crew whilst shipping black Afro-Americans<sup>660</sup> in the Engine Department and Orientals or Filipinos as Cooks and Stewards. At the outset of the war, it was virtually unheard of to “checkerboard” any Department by hiring more than one ethnic group to fill its uncertificated positions, and blacks were almost never found among the Deck Crew.<sup>661</sup> One of the Liverpool interviewees said this was true of British vessels as well; there were quite a

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<sup>659</sup>. *TimeWatch* script, 6.

<sup>660</sup>. I have chosen not to use an upper-case letter for the word black in reference to race, as I am not capitalising the words white, non-white, or coloured, and also because, due to the necessities of my subject matter, I am capitalising such a large number of other words that I feel this would lead to confusion. It is not done with any intention of deprecating any persons of African or other non-white ancestry. Please bear with me.

<sup>661</sup>. The Deck Department was the last to integrate on North American vessels. See below for the personal testimony of one of the first black men to ship as a Deck rating.

few “coloured” in the Catering Department, but none shipped as “seamen” nor “down below”.<sup>662</sup>(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 4) Almost no non-whites were found amongst the licensed positions, although a small number of Native Americans and Mexicans “slipped through the cracks” in the U.S. and Canada,<sup>663</sup> and a minuscule number of men of Polynesian background achieved similar status.

It is unfortunate that more members of ethnic minorities did not respond to this study’s calls for informants, as only two of the men actively interviewed during the fieldwork were black. Both were originally of African descent and were from the United States sample. One, William Finch, considered race relations aboard the vessels on which he served to be “Okay”.<sup>664</sup> He admitted, however, that he spent more time with the “Seabee”<sup>665</sup> troops carried as passengers than he did with his shipmates. Finch said he did not believe his colour to be a factor in his being assigned to the Stewards’[Catering] Department on his first voyage. Instead he rationalised the situation, saying it was probably because there were no ships in port at the time which required Engine crew (he was trained for Engine Room work). He did mention some racial segregationist policies ashore, mostly in Louisiana, but apparently felt little or no racism had been manifested in his shipboard experiences, although he divulged that two West Indian shipmates aboard a vessel coming into New Orleans had asked if there really was prejudice and he had replied that there definitely was.(HMC 90-26, TTC pp. 1-3)

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<sup>662</sup>. Here “coloured” refers to any non-whites, “seamen” refers exclusively to the Deck crew, and “down below” to the Engine Department.

<sup>663</sup>. Most of these were fairish in complexion and easily able to “pass for white” although their surnames were occasionally indicative of their ethnic background.

<sup>664</sup>. Finch was raised in areas of the United States where the colour bar was not conspicuous for that period.

<sup>665</sup>. The United States Navy’s Construction Battalions; equivalent to the Army’s Corps of Engineers, these men designed and built everything from gun emplacements and airfields to camps and even entire towns. Many of them were black. As noted in Chapter Four, the nickname obviously derives from the initials C.B., but is in universal use and the insignia is a striped honey-bee wearing a naval rating’s white hat.

The other black interviewee, Ed Richards, told an entirely different story.<sup>666</sup> Brought up in the British West Indies, Richards had begun shipping out on small coastal and fishing boats at an early age. His favourite work aboard was that of a deckhand, and he determined to pursue employment in this line when he came to the United States, at the time that country was first entering the war. Sent to the USMS Training Center in Sheepshead Bay, New York, he proved he needed little or no training, and could easily “box” a compass with the best. He received seaman’s papers as an AB, or Able (Bodied) Seaman, unlimited, any waters, as well as a clearance pass from the Coast Guard because he was a foreign national, and his lifeboat “ticket”,<sup>667</sup> registered with the War Shipping Administration, and was sent on to the trade unions. Unable to sign with the Seafarers’ International Union because they did not at the time accept black deckhands, he found the National Maritime Union, with its more proletarian and leftist leanings, presented no difficulty.

At the time he was “green” to conditions in the States, although he had heard about them. On entering the job pool, Richards was assigned to a vessel almost immediately, as there were few men with his superior qualifications. Arriving at the ship, however, he was told they wanted “no niggers on deck” and he returned, disappointed, to the hiring hall. He was rejected in this way by several ships, but accepted such treatment because it was “the norm” at the time. Returning to the British consul for a job, he found they wanted to make him a Fireman again, and he refused. He did not know what it was all about, but he knew he had to eat. After a series of disappointments he was told, “Come back and we’ll send a man with you. They’re anchored off Staten Island, waiting for a convoy. They can’t sail without an AB and you’re it.” He

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<sup>666</sup> Richards had had a laryngectomy some fifteen years before the interview and had to “throat-talk” onto the tape. Nonetheless, he apparently felt his contribution to be valuable, as he persevered for well over an hour, until the physical strain involved was quite evident.

<sup>667</sup> The reader is reminded that this is a certificate of proficiency in small boat handling and basic navigational skills, rather than an entitlement to a seat in a lifeboat in case of emergency.

was then accompanied to the assigned vessel by a union representative (known in the States as a “patrolman”), who told the ship’s officers bluntly that this was the only AB he could offer, that they could not sail without an AB on each watch, and that they would have to take it or leave it, although they need not keep Richards on for more than the one voyage.

On his first trick at the wheel, Richards “could feel people breathing down his neck”, but he knew his job. He was unaware at that time that he was the only “green ticket” (unlimited) AB aboard. The others were all “blue tickets” from the Maritime School and off rivers. Later, during his offwatch hours, he was even set by the Mate to train the new Ordinary Seamen to box the compass, steer, and steady a ship. Over the duration of the initial voyage, Richards proved his capabilities so conclusively that he was encouraged to sign on for further trips aboard that vessel. Among the experiences he detailed from that first voyage was getting to know the young man with whom he shared his forecabin quarters. It is unclear whether the friendly relationship which grew between them was due to the open-mindedness of the white youth, who had previously had no close relationships with blacks, to Richards’s own personable nature, or to a combination of the two, but Richards could talk to “Leo”. As their friendship developed, they went everywhere together, and their shoreside jaunts further exposed segregation and racism. The very last day of the trip, Leo was on No. 4 hatch with his shirt off. “Come on, take your shirt off, let’s get a tan.” “I’m sorry, Leo, I was born with my tan.” The gun crew on duty all started to laugh. “What did I say that was that funny?” You can say anything with friends. Richards stressed the importance of friendship and said in such cases backgrounds mean nothing.

The morning after the first attack off Newfoundland, Richards came on deck and a Fireman, seeing him for the first time, started to laugh, “Hey, we’ve got a nigger on board. We could have some fun.” The word “nigger” never

bothered Richards, as it would have an American-born black person, but he asked Leo why the Fireman would call him names. “Because he’s stupid and afraid. I’ll put a stop to that.” Leo then told the Mate, who held a ship’s muster, telling the crew there was to be no name-calling “or there’ll be Hell to pay.” It still happened, but surreptitiously after that. Leo got classified as a “nigger-lover” because he was the one who told the Mate. What really stopped it was when, two days out from Gibraltar, they were hit by waves of torpedo-planes and strafing. When Richards started passing three-inch shells, nobody noticed his colour. There were no further problems in port or on the way back. He made friends.

Richards stayed with that ship for over a year, then felt he had to quit, despite the Mate’s efforts to keep him aboard. He was offered every incentive to stay, but had made up his mind to go, promising himself never again to spend so much time on a single vessel. By then the whole ship had changed and he was “going nuts”. He was the last to go. The first time a new crew came on, there was always trouble. Once they had faced attacks together it was okay, but until then.... “That was their tradition, so you couldn’t actually be mad at them.” He did find it amusing, however, when the first other “coloured” came aboard. This was the new Chief Cook, who greeted Richards as his “boss”, thinking since he was black he must be the Chief Steward. He was amazed to find a black on Deck.(HMC 90-61, TTC pp. 1-2 and 4)

One respondent said there are now as many black as white seafarers -- maybe more, and then told a story which indicated that attitudes toward racial differences in the wartime Merchant Service, like those toward homosexuality, were treated more with whimsy than with malice by the white majority:<sup>668</sup>

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<sup>668</sup>. This is substantiated by a number of other stories and testimonies below. Unfortunately the sampling of non-white respondents was insufficient to demonstrate how they felt about such treatment.

He asked if I had ever heard of Capt. Hugh Mulzac of the S/S *Booker T. Washington*,<sup>669</sup> and when he found I had, told about another Captain of his acquaintance, who was at the time Second Mate of the Liberty ship, *George Walton*, in convoy behind the *Washington*. Apparently the *Washington* was finding it difficult to keep position, and disregarding messages from the *Walton*, making her job of following even harder than usual, and pushing her into the dangerous position of a straggler. The *Walton*'s Second Mate persuaded the Captain to let him take over and bore down heavily on the *Washington* "nudging" her from only fifty feet astern (the normal distance being 100-500 yards). When asked to ease off, he would not do so. At length, the *Washington* threatened to report the following vessel to the commodore and signalled to ask the identity of her pursuer, who facetiously signalled back "S/S *Simon Legree* of Mobile, Alabama".<sup>670</sup> There was no further difficulty with the *Washington*. This was considered by the informant to be a highly amusing incident. (HMC 90-52, TTC p. 4)<sup>671</sup>

Most interviewees said there were few, if any, problems of ethnicity aboard, primarily because non-whites were so few. A Canadian informant said that one reason British-Canadian relations were so good was that there were so many war casualties and Canadian-flag vessels preferred to replace crew members with British, rather than minorities, especially Asians (Indians). (HMC 92-31, TTC p. 3) Capt. Emerson Chodzko expressed a majority view, saying there were no racial problems on American vessels, but that Pacific ships carried few blacks, American Indians, or Chicanos;<sup>672</sup> most non-white crew were Filipinos and Hawaiians. Blacks were found mostly in Stewards' Departments. The National Maritime Union had lots of blacks, but the Sailors' Union of the Pacific did not. There were no problems; they were all out for the war effort. (HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3; HMC 89-5, TTC p. 2) Artie Grissom

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<sup>669</sup>. Mulzac was a black skipper, the first of his race to have to weather both an Academy cadetship and the pressures of upgrading to Captain, despite the bigotry of many of his classmates and fellow officers. The ship was a Liberty, named for a famous black American; her crew was "checkerboarded" of radical leftists from the NMU and the book about them [John Beecher, *All Brave Sailors*, (New York: L.B. Fischer, 1945)] would be better history if it were not so heavily weighted with political propaganda.

<sup>670</sup>. This is a reference to an episode the famous nineteenth-century novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, in which the vicious white overseer, Simon Legree, mercilessly pursues runaway black slaves.

<sup>671</sup>. The actual man involved was the informant who never returned his release form, so I shall not use his name, but he said the skipper of the *Walton*, Ernest Lewis, was still alive and living on Cape Cod at the time of the interview in May of 1990.

<sup>672</sup>. This is a socially acceptable term in the southwest U.S. for Latin-Americans or "Latinos" of specifically Mexican descent.



agreed, but added that blacks were not assigned combat stations, even in the U.S. Navy, although there were some amongst the crews.(HMC 89-3, TTC p. 2) Two respondents in a joint interview agreed that, by halfway through the war, ethnicity no longer mattered; prejudices were lost because one's life depended on the next man. This was true of the Services, as well; people were accepted at face value.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 6) One of the *TimeWatch* interviewees, however, said, "...I wouldn't say they were equal to the white people. They were treated with a little...bit less respect than the whites," and a non-white veteran seaman said he had been called "nigger" and "sambo" and that officers had been harsher with him and less inclined to explain things like blackout regulations than to simply shout at him for disobeying through ignorance.<sup>673</sup>

Capt. Billy Aguilar, of Mexican descent, said racial relationships were more liberal on the U.S. West Coast than in the South, and the only problems aboard occurred in Southern ports. Some black Stewards were afraid to discharge in New Orleans because of racism ashore.(HMC 90-2, TTC p. 1) Gulf Coast vessels seldom carried racially mixed crews.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 2) Few of those interviewed had noticed any Mexicans amongst the crews, but two informants said they had sailed with "Spanish", which from their age and residential area, I assumed to mean Mexicans.<sup>674</sup>(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3) On the Atlantic Seaboard there was not much of an ethnic mix, so there was little tension, and what there was was usually human -- individual personality conflict -- often aggravated by drink.<sup>675</sup>(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 2) Charlie Baca, a Native American, made no reference whatsoever to racially connected remarks, or incidents, and one could well believe he had never experienced

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<sup>673</sup> *TimeWatch* script, 10.

<sup>674</sup> Both these men were long-time residents of California. I know from personal experience that, until the early 1950s, the "politically correct" usage there for persons of Mexican descent was "Spanish".

<sup>675</sup> The *President Harrison*, however, carried both Chinese and black crewmen in addition to whites. [David H. Grover and Gretchen G. Grover, *Captives of Shanghai: The Story of the President Harrison*, (Napa CA: Western Maritime Press, 1989)].

any sort of prejudice aboard. In fact, at one point he maintained strongly that everybody got along well and there were no problems.(HMC 90-23, TTC p. 1)

Another informant, also of American Indian heritage, maintained that relationships between people of different backgrounds were quite good. They accepted each other as human beings whether “coloured”<sup>676</sup> or white. He illustrated this by a story about being fired because of some sort of shipboard politics<sup>677</sup> and discovering a black Fireman on his watch had quit as a result. He said, “like all Americans”, seamen will fight if they have cause, otherwise they will not do much. If one American sailor is in trouble in a foreign country, however, others will help him.(HMC 90-42, TTC pp. 2-3) Bill Kirby felt ethnicity was unimportant -- people were just people -- in the Merchant Service, most people he met were pleasant. Once, when the ship arrived in Seattle, Kirby had been looking forward to a night ashore, but he drew watch. The Cook, a black man, went ashore, bought good food and whiskey, and returned to fix a superb meal for the watch before taking his shore time -- a very considerate gesture.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 4)

We sailed out the Golden Gate on a beautiful Sunday afternoon. Sunday was steak day. The cook, a big, wall-eyed black, came out to number 3 hold, where everyone off watch was sitting looking at the scenery and wondering, and said he was taking orders for our steaks. That meal was superb. So were the rest of the meals. A week later we left San Pedro on a Sunday afternoon. We were enjoying the sight of Catalina Island when the cook came out. The men began to tell him how they wanted their steaks. He glared at us and said, “Fuck you, you honky sons of bitches.” We never had a decent meal on that ship again.

On my first trip as 3rd mate, the crew was quite mixed. I had a black on my watch as an AB. There seemed to be no friction. On that trip the chief engineer was a Saudi Arabian. He treated the blacks in the engine room so badly that we on deck were

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<sup>676</sup>. The term “coloured” was “politically correct” until the 1960s in North America, where it referred specifically to blacks of African/Caribbean descent. It is also worth noting that this Native American regarded himself as “white” in this context.

<sup>677</sup>. His employment was terminated in Seattle, but he was told to meet the ship in Houston, where he would be rehired.

surprised that some one didn't throw him in the furnace. He earned it.<sup>678</sup>

One respondent admitted being racially prejudiced himself, and said there was "a lot of it" during the Second World War and even the American Armed Services<sup>679</sup> were segregated, but there were "never enough blacks aboard to be a problem". This man moved from the Stewards' Department to the Deck Crew because he did not like working in a subordinate position to black Cooks, but the only blacks he ever saw aboard were in the Stewards'[Catering] Department. One "big black Cook" did not make enough bread, so he was dunked overboard in a storm. "It was not racism; his colour did not matter. He was just too good a baker for his own good." This informant did not believe any crew he ever sailed with had any animosity to anyone except that one Cook and that was not because of his race, but because he did not bake enough bread to be adequate for the nightlunch as well as regular meals.(HMC 90-14, TTC pp. 1 and 3; and HMC 90-15, TTC p. 2) A similar story came from the Engine Department. A black Relief Engineer "got himself fired for bringing a woman aboard", although he was also incompetent in his job. His firing, I was told, was not arbitrary and had nothing to do with his race. It was documented when the union patrolman came aboard. "Nobody lets a good man go."(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 4) This axiom seems to have been substantiated by the testimony of Edward Richards as cited earlier in this Section.

Remarkably enough, the only respondent from Alabama was white, but a member of the National Maritime Union, known for accepting more minorities (specifically blacks) than other unions, and was in the

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<sup>678</sup>. Quoted verbatim from John B. Wilson's letter of 19 March 1990, with only obvious typographical errors corrected.

<sup>679</sup>. Segregation was still in force in the U.S. Army until 1947.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3) My father, a Chief Petty Officer in the U.S. Navy, who trained recruits at the base in San Diego, California, spoke of working with "jig regiments", "jig" being a slang and somewhat pejorative term for blacks, then (unfortunately) in common use.

Stewards'[Catering] Department, where most blacks served. He said most blacks aboard were in the Stewards' Department, but there were only a few. Once they had a black Chief Steward, and the respondent, coming aboard, had to check in and identify himself as a white man from Alabama. He was worried about how this black man might feel about him, but the black was a good Steward. The respondent said "Yessir; nossir" to him and did not mind, considering the man as good as any other Steward. That was the only black Chief Steward he ever saw. There were occasionally black Messmen, but he never saw a black deckhand.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 4)

Many Pacific Ocean sailors cited Polynesians or Hawaiians amongst the crews with whom they shipped. One is immediately reminded of the story in Chapter Two of the "Kanaka troublemaker" whose only real offence was that he was not a Scandinavian-American "squarehead".(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2) Another vessel had a Kanaka as Officers' Mess Boy. This one was a terrible fighter and was sent to the crew's mess, but the demotion was personal, rather than racial.(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 2) There used to be a lot of Kanakas on West Coast (U.S.) ships, and even a few on the East Coast. Some were officers. One man interviewed had sailed on a coastwise ship from the West to the East Coast on which the First Assistant Engineer was a Kanaka, whom he described as a "damn good man".(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 5)

One respondent who had sailed with Polynesians said they were called "pineapples", although this usage, however apt, does not appear to have been very widespread.<sup>680</sup> There were no blacks or Mexicans on the ships in which he served, but immediately after the war he sailed with some "exotics", such as "a fuzzy-wuzzy from the Sudan" with tribal scars.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 2) An Armed Guard informant sailed with blacks, Orientals, and "a lot of

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<sup>680</sup>. See the Section on nicknames in Chapter Eight for further discussion of this term.

Hawaiians”<sup>681</sup> “There was no general trouble at all, but one personal conflict fight. “Nobody slurred anybody, ‘cause we’re all in the damn thing together. ... If you had a personal difference, you just didn’t talk to the guy, that’s all. ... Probably a lot of guys didn’t like me and I didn’t like them, so we just stayed out of each other’s way.”(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 2)

“Politically correct” language usages came under discussion at one point, and Jack McGinty expressed regret that the term “black gang” is no longer a universally acceptable reference to the Engine Department, but shared my amusement that the “niggerhead”<sup>681</sup> is now called the “gypsy head”. There seems to be no alternative to an ethnically deprecatory term for this apparatus. Such terms were “never meant derogatorily, but you have to be careful, as there are all kinds aboard ship now”. In the old New England sailing days, it was a family concern, but those days are past; there is no pride now; it is just a job to make money. Old-timers felt the sea was their life and that they did not fit in ashore. It is all different now. There is a lack of respect.”(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 1) A British informant, at one point, speaking of West Indian Firemen, ostensibly stopped himself in mid-sentence from using the phrase “working like a black”, saying, “I daren’t use the expression these days”, and changing it to “working mighty hard”.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 5)

There was basically a great deal of racial prejudice aboard, said a few interviewees, but it was “divided by unions”. The National Maritime Union was the most democratic. There were no blacks in the Seafarers’ International Union except in the Stewards’[Catering] Department.<sup>682</sup> It was accepted practice at the time to ship no “checkerboard” Departments, so any given Department was either all black or all white.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3) Prior to 1949

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<sup>681</sup>. A sort of drum/winch/capstan used to tighten mooring lines and the like, and so-called for centuries.

<sup>682</sup>. It is to be strongly emphasised that this is no longer the case, and the SIU is now an equal opportunity union in all respects.

only the NMU shipped “checkerboarded” crews. SIU crews were strictly white with the possible exception of an all-black Stewards’/Catering Department.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 2) Doyle Bales’s experience seems to bear this out. He sailed with a “checkerboard” crew, and said there was some primarily racial animosity toward the Stewards’[Catering] Department, also asserting that “they” [blacks] are talkative.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1) This sort of off-hand remark was casually thrown into the testimony by any number of respondents, indicating a sort of unconscious ethnic awareness of “them” and “us” and of some sort of invisible line between the two. For others the ethnic situation posed no problem; they considered racial relations to be very good. There appeared to be a strict and seldom-broken, although unofficial, rule that serious disputes were between black and black or between white and white, never between white and black, not aboard ship.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-75, TTC p. 1)

Coming from the American South, “Tex” English had his eyes opened by a shipboard experience. He did not have a particularly bigoted background, except as was usual for the time; as a child, he was more ignorant than intolerant, and was never involved in fights resulting from racial prejudice. On his first and second ships there were no blacks, but a few Filipinos. On his third ship there was a black Portuguese named Silva -- a nice guy. He was Deck Crew<sup>683</sup> and “Tex”, on his second voyage aboard as “acting AB”,<sup>684</sup> told Silva to take either of the unoccupied bunks in the two-man forecabin they were to share. They talked about their backgrounds and about girls and cars. When Silva left the ship, Tex remembers being surprised that he was “just the same as I am”. It was a revelation. That was the first black man with whom he had ever had a real conversation.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>683</sup>. Interestingly enough, English did not seem to feel a black deckhand was unusual.

<sup>684</sup>. Note earlier remarks concerning the British ratings of “Sailor” and “EDH”, both of which correspond to “acting AB”.

Pat Brinkley sailed primarily with whites from the Pacific Coast of the U.S.A., although there were some Filipinos. Relations were good, and most crewmen were well-educated. One small Filipino Cook, a black belt in karate, said he would give Brinkley fifty dollars for every time he (Brinkley) could touch him (the Filipino) with a table knife. Brinkley was large, weighing about 210 pounds (fifteen stone), and the Cook was only about 110 (less than eight stone), but he threw Brinkley all over the room, while Brinkley never touched him. "It was kind of frustrating, but fun."(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 2) This sort of horseplay clearly indicates a somewhat relaxed social atmosphere aboard, far more than some socio-psychologists would have us believe.<sup>685</sup> Another respondent reinforced this, by saying the crews he sailed with were "just plain old American kids" -- some were "Spanish" and a few were black. They had similar educational backgrounds and did their jobs, so there were no problems.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3)

One Chief Engineer said the best possible crew has no two men of the same racial, national, or regional background in any given department; that way there are not enough to gang up on the others.<sup>686</sup> He did not recall sailing on any ship where racial tension was of any significance, and said race was not a big problem, because "Americans are used to getting along with people who are different ... California is one place where Armenians are fairly safe."(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2) Ethnic enclaves within the crews, generally associating only with those of their own background, developed despite the best-laid plans of Chief Engineers, however, and occasionally deckhands would become friendly with Engine Crew of similar background or ethnicity.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 3)

One British interviewee, who had been in a Merchant Navy prisoner-of-war camp, declared there is a kind of "Freemasonry" among sailors of all

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<sup>685</sup> Sherar, 12, says the monotony of shipboard life leads to a build-up of tension.

<sup>686</sup> The same informant illustrated this opinion with the "Kanaka troublemaker" story reported in Chapter Two.

nations. If one behaves, one can get on with any nationality. That, he said, was the reason there was no brutality in the POW camp.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 2)

Another respondent, who had sailed with many different nationalities, mentioned specifically one Jewish Second Cook who had lost most of his family in the Holocaust, but was a “nice guy” and would lend his shoregoing gear when not using it himself. This interviewee also characterised Dutch seamen as friendly. He had met one or two “cranks”, but that, he said, was no reflection on their national or ethnic background. “You get cranks everywhere. They’re ten a penny.”(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 6)

An American informant said one occasionally got ashore with foreign nationals when a convoy was forming, but the groups did not really mingle. Basically he and his shipmates looked for “other Yanks” at dance halls, bars, and other venues ashore.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 1)

The only foreign crews Americans ever “hobnobbed” with were the English, who had no use for them anyway.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 2)

Another American respondent remembered only problems with the “limeys”, including a fight which was such a big incident that the British involved were loaded into a truck(lorry) and removed. When the informant’s vessel sailed, about ten days later, the British ship was still abandoned except for a sentry.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)

British and American seafarers were not always at odds, however, as Capt. J.K. Gorrie stated:

“I think the American merchant marine did a fine job ... considering where most of ’em came from.... Half of ’em were farmers from the country somewhere or other and they manned these Liberty ships, and, y’know, they weren’t very nice ships, and I think they did a very good job m’self, especially toward the end of the war, when they’d got into it....”(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 6)

One British seafarer, repatriated on a Dutch vessel, said the Dutch did not realise what he and his shipmates had just been through, torpedoed, in a lifeboat, and all the rest of it. They were treated as a different class because



they were English. At first they were treated like swine, and one man accused them of bigotry because he had seen how blacks were treated in South Africa by both the Dutch Boers and the English. The informant had to convince him that seafarers were different, "We're doing a job." The Dutch came round in the end.(HMC 92-46, TTC p. 1) In contrast, another British respondent was on a little Dutch cargo boat during the Sicily landings. She was a very good ship with an all Dutch crew plus a couple of Royal Navy gunners. The respondent joined her with the DEMS gunners and was the only Englishman -- actually the only non-Dutchman -- in the merchant crew, although they had a West African Galley Boy. They all got along marvellously and he considered the Dutch great people.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 5)

The most racially-biased comments of North American interviewees, aside from those of the single respondent cited previously, were mild in the extreme. One American said he had been "shanghaied by scabs" for a tanker with a crew of "Hindus" before joining the union.(HMC 90-41, TTC pp. 1 and 3), and a Newfoundlander said he had been asked to bring a crew to New York to man a ship whose primarily West Indian crew had deserted when they found the cargo was munitions.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 3) A third interviewee acknowledged that rescuers picking up survivors took the most distressed first. On his vessel, the Firemen were Maltese and although they were not considered ethnically inferior in any way, their situation down below had made them more upset, as they could not see what was happening; also many were older men and wet from abandoning ship. They were therefore taken in the first load and more Deck sailors were left behind for the next plane.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 5)

One British M.R.A. gunner observed "a lot of trouble" in Archangel between white American seamen and black American seamen, the latter mostly Stewards; the whites apparently thought themselves better than the

blacks. He disagreed with that attitude, as they were on the same ship doing the same jobs, and he did not consider it a problem of rival trade unions. He himself sailed with Chinese and Lascar crews and there was no trouble with either, except in the boats when they were adrift and the non-whites seemed to feel they deserved food and drink priority when the entire group was trying to conserve and ration the stores. A non-white crewmember supposedly tried to knife someone else to gain advantage in a lifeboat when the *Bolton Castle* was sunk. Another vessel had a Chinese crew and, when they left port, the Quartermaster who should have taken the first trick at the wheel refused to come to the bridge as he had lost all his money at mah jong. The Chief Officer had him handcuffed to the deck machinery during watches and when the ship began taking seas, he decided to return to work. "The officers had to know how to deal with ethnic crews."(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 4) This remark, following, as it does, a denial of interracial tensions and a disclosure of the abuse of authority, is an indication of the difference in attitude between British and North American seafarers toward racist behaviour at that period in history. British Imperial racism appears to have arisen from preservation of the class system, while American racism seems to have resulted more from ignorance and fear on a more even economic level.

Opinions differed according to individual experience as to the ethnic mix aboard ship and the resultant existence or lack of tension. Two interviewees said there was no ethnic mix in the crews with whom they sailed. All were whites of European ancestry. Differences in national and regional backgrounds, however, were noted, and such contrasts appear to have formed the basis for much more friction aboard than did ethnicity or race.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-11, TTC p. 1) Others said there were some blacks, almost always in the Catering[Stewards'] Department, however, relations were good and there were no fights. All looked after one another, considering themselves

brothers aboard ship. They would also help seamen from other ships when ashore, if the latter appeared to be in trouble or too drunk to get back aboard on their own vessels.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3) As far as blacks went, you get away from prejudices -- a man is a man. One naturally preferred certain people to others, but if a man did the job, he was okay.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 4) One respondent found his black shipmates “wonderful members of the crew, always good workers, clean, very polite and good friends to go ashore with”. He said there were no ethnic tension problems whatsoever, and believed ethnic problems were a recent development, as during the war they were “all one big family” and that was how they treated each other aboard.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 3) Another, whose experience of ethnically mixed crews included black Jamaican Firemen, also said, “There was never any trouble. They’d do anything you asked ’em to do.”(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4) A rating aboard a Royal Navy escort vessel remarked that Merchant Navy crews were much mixed nationally and ethnically, but there was never any friction to be seen, though “they were all very pleased to see the Royal Navy”. He saw nothing of racial friction between North American seamen, either, “but that doesn’t mean to say it didn’t happen.”(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 6)

With the exception of individual personality conflicts there was hardly any ethnic friction. The merchant marine was made up of “citizens of the world” and was much more advanced in broad-mindedness than the shorebound community.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2) All nationalities got along aboard ship, since “sailors are sailors and national background makes little or no difference”.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 5, HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2) One man asserted relationships had been good aboard the vessels in which he served due to the quality of men employed by his company; later in the war, when they could not be so choosy, they had some problems. There were Chinese crews in the Engine Room, then they began to hire whites, which caused some problems,

but these were minimal and more a matter of class and sea-lawyer left-wing types than of ethnicity. “Seafaring on the whole is conservative, with a small c. When the awkward cuss shows up, it interrupts the flow. The rest of the group is not always ready to deal with it.”<sup>687</sup> He was never on a ship where there was any trouble except for the occasional fellow back from shore leave -- nothing too important. Except for some of the Chinese, most crews were British subjects. Most of the officers were British. Later on they had some “mongrel” officers from Ceylon, Malaysia, West Africa, etc., but they were probably all British subjects.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2) A Newfoundland informant who sailed under Canadian, British, and Newfoundland flags, said the vessels on which he served carried men from Australia, England, and “all over”, but there were not many true “foreigners”, as most of the crewmen came from Commonwealth countries.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4)

As regards the British system of crew integration, the majority of crews were white Englishmen, and even non-white crew members were nominally English, being British subjects, whether domiciled in the United Kingdom or colonial natives. Certain companies tended to hire white officers and picked non-white crews from the colonies, but the Western Ocean liners did not. Lines on the Indian run often hired Lascar crews and those which ran to Africa hired Africans, some of whom would work for as little as two pounds a month.(HMC 92-1, TTC p. 1-2) Quite a few British Engine Departments were West Indian, especially Jamaican, but again mostly British subjects.<sup>688</sup>(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 6) Many white British officers spent their entire seafaring careers working with African, Lascar, or Oriental crews.

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<sup>687</sup> . This is an iterative entry, but I felt it belonged under both headings.

<sup>688</sup> . Certain ethnic enclaves, such as the now mainly black area of “Tiger Bay” in Cardiff, Wales, arose through colonial black seafarers settling in the home ports of the lines for whom they shipped. Tiger Bay, like Scotland Road in Liverpool, was a known source of manpower for the Engine Room.

Asked if departments were ever “checkerboarded”, Capt. Michael Curtis said they never were. Nearly all his company’s ships had Chinese Engine Room crews and the majority also had Chinese Stewards. Deck crews were generally white Merseysiders. It was quite common to have different ethnicities in different Departments, in fact, but they never mixed.(HMC 92-31, TTC pp. 1-2) Another retired Master told me that, in the company for whom he worked, Indian “Lascar” crews covered all three departments, each with its own “serang” (head man or petty officer), although the certificated officers were white. The war involved India, even without the Empire, as the Japanese attacked Burma, Singapore, and other Asian areas,(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 6) but Deck rating Joe Cunningham said many “ethnic” crews jumped ship because they were not “committed to the same cause”.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1)

One respondent sailed on many ships with Chinese<sup>689</sup> ratings, although the Engine Room would often be crewed by Lascars. Most seamen [Deck crew] on British ships were British, but this respondent also sailed on a Dutch ship which had an entirely Dutch crew. Chinese seamen from Hong Kong crewed many merchant ships. The entire crew of one ship, bar officers, were Chinese, but there was no racial tension, and they got along fine. The Chinese had not bargained on the Russian convoy situation, though, and would not have joined the ship if they had known. One of the Chinese galley staff after a particularly bad air raid asked the respondent if he were afraid. When he said he was, the Chinese nodded, “Me no likee Russia. Too much plenty bomb.” Many would have agreed. Another incident on that convoy was a near miss while the Chinese Cook was working in the galley. The impact blew food all over the place, making a terrible mess. The Chinese Cook stood in the midst of the debris, shaking his fist at the sky and saying, “Bloody blasted German!

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<sup>689</sup>. Several British respondents, although not all, used the term “coolie” in reference to Chinese ratings. One indicated that all “coloureds” were called “coolies” and were given less satisfactory accommodation than white crew or officers on prison ships.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 8)

Bloody blasted German! No can cook! No can cook!” There were never race problems with Chinese crew. Possibly there were with blacks, but the respondent had no experience of these.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 4)<sup>690</sup> Most evidence of racist attitudes arose from stories such as the above, with its use of perceived dialect or from PENs which depended on differing cultural backgrounds to make their point.<sup>691</sup>

Joe Cunningham said African blacks were hired for “bilge-diving” -- all the dirty jobs officers would not ask white crewmen to do. Black crew members were sometimes teased by insensitive young whites, especially about the job of applying graphite, because both it and they were black. Officers who had handled ethnic crews were nervous about handling European crews, especially “Brits” from famous seafaring towns with lots of family sea-going heritage.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 3)

As a Chief Baker and Confectioner, James McCaffrey sailed with mostly British crews, despite the fact that he worked for a Canadian-flag shipping line. There were only a few Canadian officers. Almost all the crews were also white, except on his last ship, which had a Nigerian crew. The question of racial relations he considered “a tough one”. No racial tension originated from the whites aboard, but there was quite a bit of “reverse racism” in that “the Africans could do no wrong”. For example, if there was dessert left over from the passenger menu it was given to the crew. If the blacks requested theirs after the supply was exhausted, they would claim they had been denied their share because of racial prejudice. It was not prejudice; there just was no more to be had.(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 4)

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<sup>690</sup>. I feel that this respondent’s use of pidgin dialect in an essentially humorous anecdotal situation indicates mild though not very significant racial bias.

<sup>691</sup>. One is reminded of the academic dialect joke in which a man of European background, seated next to a Chinese at a banquet, asks throughout the meal, “You likee soup? You likee salad?” and so on. At the meal’s conclusion, the Chinese rises and delivers an address in perfect “Oxbridge” English, after which he resumes his seat, turns to his astounded and embarrassed neighbour, and inquires, “You likee speech?”

Bill Fortune once sailed on a ship that carried white officers, a “coolie” crew, and four white Quartermasters, of whom he was one. The fresh water pump was only open an hour each day, even going through the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf. The Quartermasters each had a two-gallon bucket for their personal use, but each coolie had a ten-gallon drum to himself. Even considering the different type of work they were doing, the ratio was very unfair. It was a “three-island”<sup>692</sup> steamship with steam-driven steering gear, and the Quartermasters lived at the after end of the main deck in a sort of box over the steering engine, where it was unbearably hot. Fortune made himself a hammock and slept in it on deck, but the coolies had their own accommodation “right aft”, where it was cooler.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 6)

Some companies shipped full Chinese crews, and only the Deck Officers, Engineers, and Gunner were white. Alan Peter got on well with these crews and was assigned to help them with writing letters and sending money home. He also had to assist them in going ashore in the U.S., because of the heavy security there during the war. Peter could communicate with them in a sort of pidgin sailor talk and would take six ashore at a time. They had signed on in Singapore, but some were from Hong Kong and Shanghai, and not all were British subjects. He helped them send money back to Hong Kong and there were problems when Hong Kong fell. The Engine Room crowd was mainly from Shanghai, the Catering Department mainly Hong Kong. They were good men, got along well and were great.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 3)

Geoffrey Arnold sailed with Anglo-Indian Lascar ratings. They got on very well, as all were good workers and gave no trouble. Occasionally, however, on going into port, the men had to sign chits or documents and many of the

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<sup>692</sup>. Not to be confused with a “Hog Islander”, a “three-island” ship in profile has raised areas at bow, midships, and stern, separated by well-decks forward and aft.

Lascars were illiterate. Those who could write were very proud of the fact.(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 5)<sup>693</sup>

About 1943, British merchant ships had some trouble with “semi-mutinies” (or “semi-strikes”) by Chinese crews in Australia. One informant’s ship had Chinese Cooks and Stewards, but Malay seamen.<sup>694</sup> The Malays were great; some had been on that ship for years. Then a directive came that all British ships must fire Oriental crew, and they had to lose the nice Malays along with the Chinese, because all were Oriental. They got Indians instead, as Deck crowd, and Goanese as Cooks and Stewards. There were two Indians for every Malay, because there were some jobs Indians would not do because of their caste, and they had to hire someone who would. The Indians also brought live animals aboard for their food.(HMC 92-26, TTC pp. 5-6)

The Deck Apprentices on one vessel stopped work for a “smokko” (tea break). There is a hatch through which a teapot is put to be filled with hot water by the Stewards, and for some reason, on this day, the Steward would not fill it. The informant was the Senior Apprentice at the time and his mate was a Cadet (not an Apprentice)<sup>695</sup> who went to the galley and ended by hitting the Chinese Galley Boy. All the Chinese then stopped work and sent a deputation to tell the Captain they would not work as long as the Cadet remained aboard, so he was told to leave the ship. His mates protested to the Captain, but were told they were in a military zone and came under military law, so he signed off, went back to Suez, and got a job as a Third Mate; it turned out well for him. The Apprentices had to run the galley for about a week while the Chinese refused to work. The Engineers had backed the protest of the Cadet’s sacking while the Deck officers had not, so the

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<sup>693</sup>. See Chapter Six for further reference to illiteracy.

<sup>694</sup>. Seamen in this case refers to Deck crew.

<sup>695</sup>. The reader is reminded that a Cadet signs on Ship’s Articles every trip, like a seaman, but an Apprentice is under indentures to the shipping company for four years.



Apprentices cooked for the Engineers, but not for their own officers. Massaua was a very hot place and all they cooked was chips and tinned corned beef.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 5)

Perhaps, late in the war, when there was a manpower shortage, crews might occasionally have been checkerboarded, but not often. Races were almost never mixed on Deck except for “the occasional Liverpool half-caste”, but there were a fair number of Continental nationals, such as Lithuanians and Estonians. On one vessel there were African and West Indian Firemen, on another, Somalis. The Engineers were English, “of course”, and the rest of the crews were Chinese.

With the exception of one abusive Master, there was no trouble, and it was not Alan Peter’s opinion alone that the man was abusive. He had acquired the nickname of “Butcher” before Peter joined the ship. “A couple” of other Masters Peter sailed under were also “autocratic”. The Master of his last vessel -- a Newcastle tramp -- was selling rice and other staple food from the ship’s stores to the Somali firemen, when they should have been fed in the ship’s mess free of charge. She was a bad feeding ship anyway. A night or two at sea, Peter passed the Donkeyman’s room and smelled lamb curry and rice cooking. Asked where he had got it, the Donkeyman said he had “bought it off the Old Man.”(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 5)

Individual foreign nationals aboard American- or British-flag ships, were widely dispersed. One U.S. Master had once had a Greek Chief Officer, as men with licences were difficult to find, and one black Chief Steward, but he sailed primarily with white Americans.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 2) An ATS Paymaster helped liberate some Free French from one of the Caribbean islands. Some, especially the officers, spoke English, and one knew they would fight for the “right side”, so he “had a great time” with them.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 6) A Cadet sailed under a sixty-five-year-old Norwegian Captain who was licensed in sail as well as in steam and who ate kippered herring and boiled potatoes for breakfast.(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1) One interviewee said he only sailed in American-flag ships, but there were many foreign nationals in the crews. He learned to cook Chinese when in a Houston, Texas, rooming-house with a number of Chinese ABs. His feeling was that most people from overseas are awfully nice -- not the governments! -- the people.(HMC 90-42, TTC

p. 3) In general, relations between foreign nationals or foreign-born crew and North Americans were seen to be good.(HMC 90-31, TTC p. 3) An informant from Georgia stated that although there were a few foreign nationals during the war, before its outbreak Savannah Lines had hired Portuguese Coal-Passers and Firemen. When these men upgraded, they were replaced with blacks, as communications with the “illiterate”<sup>696</sup> Portuguese were difficult. Before the war they had perhaps ten Portuguese in the company’s ships, two to a ship. About seven of these men had no citizenship papers and did not get them until the war. They all got along.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 2) There were lots of foreigners aboard ship before the war and before the union was organised. Some were aliens without visas.<sup>697</sup> Also before the unions took over, some companies “hired” students in the summer for free as sort of “workaways”.<sup>698</sup> They were given better quarters and conditions than the average seaman, and they went ashore as soon as the ship arrived in port. The seamen did not think the practice fair and it was eventually eliminated. “You couldn’t work a seaman on the way back.” A man who had missed his ship could not get a workaway home, as he had already lost his pay when he missed his ship and was no longer “on Articles”, but remained the company’s responsibility until he officially signed off.<sup>699</sup>(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 2) In contrast, when most of the crew of the sunken *Georgic* was brought home from Egypt aboard a Dutch ship, Bob Parr worked his way back, as the Dutch vessel was short-handed, although his crewmates sailed as passengers.<sup>700</sup> This gave him sea time so he could sign on his next voyage as an AB.(HMC 92-2, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>696</sup>. This was the interviewee’s word.

<sup>697</sup>. One respondent mentioned a German Bosun who joined his company after World War I and was deported just before World War II, having sailed from 1928 to 1938 without citizenship papers.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 2)

<sup>698</sup>. A “workaway” is one who is not officially signed on Articles as a paid member of the crew, but whose labour is solely to pay for his passage.

<sup>699</sup>. Or until the Articles were closed when the ship paid off at the end of the voyage.

<sup>700</sup>. Actually they were sailing as DBS, or Distressed British Seamen.

One respondent said there was a great ethnic mix on American-flag ships, including many foreigners, often seafarers who had been at sea when the war broke out and had no home other than the ship in which they served, so the situation was complicated if their vessel was sunk. When the war was over, anyone who had sailed for five years in an American ship was entitled to apply for U.S. citizenship, but many did not want it because, as non-citizens, they did not have to pay American income tax. Finally they were prosecuted for taking jobs from U.S. citizens. Now one cannot ship aboard a U.S.-flag vessel unless s/he is a U.S. citizen.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2) Foreign nationals were permitted aboard up to a certain percentage of the crew, and the respondent who gave this information had never sailed with a crew which exceeded that percentage -- a distinct minority. They got along fine with the rest of the crew.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 3)

One respondent had only sailed with American nationals, but some of his earlier crewmates had acquired American citizenship by jumping Scandinavian ship.<sup>701</sup> There were a lot of “squareheads”<sup>702</sup> -- good sailors but stubborn and hard to get along with, especially the ones from the steam schooners -- they were hard workers, fighters, and drinkers. The respondent always got along with them, as he “knew how to roll with the flow”.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3)

One reason for the decline of the U.S. Merchant Marine is that American ships must meet U.S. Coast Guard standards. Other countries find sailing cheaper because their crew safety standards are lower.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 3) As bad as American ships were, foreign ones were worse. Greek ships

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<sup>701</sup>. To “jump ship” is to leave a ship illegally without signing off Articles. These men would then have signed on U.S. vessels before the laws were tightened up and after a time would have applied for and acquired naturalisation papers, as elaborated below by Capt. Larsen.

<sup>702</sup>. The reader is reminded that this term is a nickname or *blason populaire* for those of Scandinavian or Teutonic origin.

were the filthiest and the hungriest.(HMC 90-31, TTC p. 3) There were some foreign nationals amongst the crews, replacements for those who had got dengue fever and other such diseases. It was not exactly common, but not unusual either and, although the ship was obliged to take whatever men the consul gave them, there were no problems. American ships were good to sail on because they were good feeders and had union hours, overtime, and the like. It was not common to ship foreign nationals, but there were no obstacles.(HMC 90-60, TTC p. 2)

Three men who were interviewed jointly, one Danish by birth, agreed there were many foreign nationals in U.S.-flag ships' crews before and during the war. Before 1920 most crews were fifty-percent foreign; now ten percent is the legal limit, but laws mean nothing; one respondent was signed on three ships at once (by the same commissioner) to make room for foreigners. Danish-born Capt. Evald Larsen explained how a foreigner could join the U.S. Merchant Marine, as he had; a foreigner who sails three years on United States ships can become a citizen. Capt. Larsen came to the United States in 1920, and sailed aboard everything from a canal barge to an ocean liner before acquiring his citizenship.(HMC 90-55, TTC pp. 1-2)

Capt. Ted Hostetter disagreed with the allegations of the above trio, saying there were no foreign nationals aboard; one had to be a United States citizen to sign on Articles, although foreigners "in distress" might be brought back. He then contradicted himself by saying he believed they had hired a couple of foreigners when short of men somewhere in the Pacific and the U.S. consul there had given the new men papers indicating they were suitable for entry into the States. He also recalled a Greek Captain who had to sign on as an Ordinary Seaman and then be promoted; he could not sign on as an officer because he was a foreigner.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 3) Another interviewee added

that there were American undesirables in foreign ports, and an expatriate was never signed on in such a place unless desperately needed.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3)

Yet another North American respondent said there were not many expatriates on United States-flag ships, probably no more than two or three in any given crew.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 1) Latin American, North African and Oriental seamen were as likely to sail on American, Canadian, and British vessels as were Europeans exiled from their Axis-occupied homelands, but in even smaller numbers. Among the nationalities cited as having sailed aboard American and Canadian ships were Peruvians, Panamanians, Puerto Ricans (whom the informants apparently considered foreign, despite the fact that Puerto Rico is a U.S. protectorate), Venezuelans, and Brazilians, Israelis, Arabs, Egyptians, Filipinos, Chinese and Koreans, Italians, Portuguese, Spaniards, Greeks, Russians, Estonians, Latvians, Austrians, Danish, Swedes, Norwegians, Dutch and Belgians, even a few older German nationals,<sup>703</sup> plus Australians, Canadians, Irish, Scots, Welsh and English, and one man from French Martinique.

One interviewee said after the war many of the crew left his ship in Port Said and an international crew was recruited. The Captain left for health reasons and the informant took command, having many problems “back aft”<sup>704</sup> which he could not control due to a lack of discipline attributed by him to the American seamen’s dislike of the foreigners. He hastened to add that, during the war, seafarers of differing backgrounds got along well.(HMC 90-36, TTC p. 1) Another respondent said probably fewer than ten of the crew of his first ship were American-born. Relations between those of different backgrounds were not very good -- nothing serious, but “a lot of hassling”, especially due to the

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<sup>703</sup>. Like the man mentioned just above in footnote <sup>151</sup>.

<sup>704</sup>. “Back aft” is a reference to the crew’s accommodations in many modern vessels. Although the term “fo’c’sle” is still used for crew’s quarters, they are now more often found in the after section of cargo vessels and tankers without passenger accommodation.

language barrier.<sup>705</sup> There were no vicious fights, but “little squabbles and ‘family arguments’”.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3)

A fair number of ratings carried a regular foreign-flag union book as well as an American or British one, and Jim Cunningham shipped out of Scandinavian union halls in New York when he could not find an American ship. He remarked, as an aside, that suicide by jumping overboard was quite common on Swedish ships. There were lots of mixed nationality crews, as American union leaders would sign on foreign nationals “for the duration plus six months”.(HMC 90-10, TTC pp. 3-4) Another respondent said there were always foreign nationals amongst the crews, but not many, and quite a few were Hispanics. Officers, however, had to be U.S. citizens.(HMC 90-58, TTC p. 2)

Among the British sampling, quite naturally, as they were mostly from the Liverpool area, there were a good many interviewees of Irish descent, as well as two men who were born in the Republic of Ireland and three from Northern Ireland. Outside of nicknames like “Mick” and “Paddy” and the occasional reference to the large proportion of seamen out of West Coast English ports who were either Irish or of Irish extraction, little indication was given of a real awareness of that nationality. North Americans, however, have long had a fictive romance with “Irishness” which is displayed vividly on St. Patrick’s Day, when many bars put green colouring in the beer, decorations feature shamrocks and leprechauns, and there is a widespread market for items such as T-shirts and button/badges with slogans like “Kiss me, I’m Irish”. This predilection was evidenced in the testimony of the men, as well, for William Krasnosky asserted that in order to be lucky, one must be Irish and he

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<sup>705</sup>. One respondent had shipped with a Spaniard who spoke no English and a man from French Martinique who could neither speak it nor understand it; somehow, however, they managed to communicate.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 2)

had “changed his name to O’Krasnosky” in order to benefit.<sup>706</sup> Capt. Evald Larsen, Danish by birth, assumed the character of his adopted homeland when, turning to a co-informant of Irish descent, Capt. William Dennis, he said, “Us Irish gotta stick together.” (HMC 90-56, TTC p. 1) Remarks such as these, along with the prevalence of generalised nicknames based on national backgrounds (“bohunk” [Bohemian], “Squarehead” [Scandinavian], ”hunky” [Hungarian] “polack” [Pole]. and so on) give a clear indication that one’s family’s national roots were usually of more consequence to North American seamen and North Americans in general than was one’s local or regional origin.

Despite this fact, New Englanders had a predisposition to ships sailing from Northern ports and Gulf [of Mexico] sailors did not mix well with them. Crews shipping from Boston were basically made up of New Englanders and Gulf ships carried Mobileans. New York crews were more mixed, and often included survivors of torpedoed foreign vessels, who were usually among the more skilled ratings. There were more of these at the start of 1943, even including foreign officers with waivers of their licences.<sup>707</sup> Still there was little actual ethnic tension, although some “boxheaders” (Scandinavians) considered themselves superior in seamanship to those of other backgrounds. Younger men aboard were fascinated by the tales of whaling and such told by the more experienced foreigners.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3) Foreign nationals got along “okay” in the crews. It was a war situation, so you picked up people. There was even a shortage of officers. One respondent sailed as Third Mate on a ship in which the Norwegian Chief Mate, unable to use American navigation tables, could not, therefore, fulfil all the duties expected of his rank. They went from New York to South America and back to Mobile in convoy and were commodore ship twice.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 5) On another ship, the

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<sup>706</sup> This story is fully cited in both Chapter Two and Chapter Seven.

<sup>707</sup> Shipping such men was common during the war. One Chief Mate had to have his Swedish licence verified by a cablegram from the Swedish consul.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 2)

same man sailed with another Norwegian Chief Mate, a naturalised U.S. citizen, who used his own Norwegian navigation tables. The respondent believed he could probably have used the American tables as well.(HMC 90-68, TTC p. 1)

The first Captain one American informant sailed under was German by birth -- an ex-World War I U-boat commander -- and he was quite old, as well, but the informant “loved him and would have gone anywhere with him”. There was also a congenial Russian Chief Mate aboard. At one time the informant and two other Ordinary Seamen developed a convivial relationship with the two officers when the five spent time aboard a ship “laid up” in Bizerte in North Africa. Once a week, two of the five would take a lifeboat to the opposite side of the lake for a five-gallon jug of “vino” -- a week’s supply - - and there was much fraternisation because they were so few. One day the Captain goose-stepped for them, but the informant never learned how it was properly done. The last time the informant heard of him, the Captain was in trouble and sinking in the North Atlantic aboard another vessel.(HMC 90-42, TTC pp. 2-3)<sup>708</sup>

Unlike this congenial German Captain, “Fritz”, a middle-aged Chief Steward of German descent, nearly provoked a mutiny in his own Department through being a “whip” who ruled with a heavy hand. He may or may not have been naturalised, as he was not allowed ashore in Canada, but perhaps had only had trouble with someone ashore there. As to the “mutiny”, about four hours before sailing time, the Catering staff went in a body and asked to leave the ship. The officers sent for the union representative,<sup>709</sup> who

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<sup>708</sup>. Bits of this testimony are cited in a previous Section, but it was felt that it was worthwhile to re-present the background before citing directly from the interview data.

<sup>709</sup>. This was when “Tex” English first joined the NMU, as the contract required all seamen to have a union book if they wanted to stay aboard. “You had to pay seventeen dollars to join, plus three dollars for the first month’s dues. It was a ridiculous sum for the time. It now costs three hundred dollars or so to start and fifty dollars a month, but the wages now are fantastic.” “Tex” had no problem joining, as he had belonged to a shoreside union previously.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 4)



reprimanded them, saying they could not hold up the ship. He also said Fritz “needed a rest” and should take some time off, but he asked the others to stay on at least as far as the next port, as the union had agreed they would never delay a sailing during wartime. Fritz simmered down and at the next port he took a vacation. In retrospect, now that he is older, Tex can be generous to Fritz and perhaps see his point of view: he had been aboard for a long time; his nerves were shot; perhaps he had family trouble; he was trying to “run a tight ship”, and his ethnic background was that of the enemy. Tex also remembered “Robert”, the crotchety old Radio Operator, who wanted to make his own bunk the way he liked it and disliked the Stewards’ intrusion. “Damned housework!”(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 4)

A Canadian respondent had himself skippered an 18,000-ton ship with a crew of forty-three, of whom eleven were Canadians and the rest mostly Latin American and West Indian. “When you look at those foreign nationals,” he said, “one good professional Canadian seaman is equal to about three of those in performance and work output. It’s hard to believe, but true -- they are very slow workers.” The language problem was not bad, however. Most of the foreign crew spoke Spanish, but many could cope with English. This was beneficial, as Anglophones are lazy about learning other languages.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 5) “Tex” English served in one vessel with seamen of at least three other nationalities,(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 2) and one Newfoundlander said he had served aboard one vessel with twenty-eight of his fellow islanders, but all his other ships had mixed crews, especially British-flag vessels, which were crewed primarily by Scots and Englishmen.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 3) On the *Panchito*, another Newfoundlander was one of three “whites” aboard. There was every nationality, mostly Greeks, although most spoke English, if only in a strange pidgin form. They got along fine; in fact, with so many nationalities, they got along better than most. When crewmen were all from one ethnic

group and the officers from another, there tended to be problems. On one such, they had a full-scale mutiny. There was some hostility between Newfoundlanders and British. “We had the worst kind of Limeys, b’y, I don’t care who hears it,” he said. The problems were class distinctions in food and conditions. The Newfoundland crew had replaced 144 Indian Lascars and the Officers were accustomed to being racist and “superior”.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 3)

There were many mixed nationality crews. Most British interviewees had found it no problem to get on with them, although when asked if they were actually international and not just British subjects of different backgrounds, the most common admission was, “Well, even the Chinese were British, from Hong Kong.”(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 3) Another typical statement was, “No, not really -- there were Maltese and there were Somalis. They were British subjects.”(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 8) There was, however, one Liverpool respondent who said he had never sailed with foreign nationals. In his words, “No, a British merchant ship is a British merchant ship -- all the ones I’ve been on anyway.”(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 4)

I was interested that Glaswegian Herbert Taylor had been in the Deck crew, as Scots are traditionally Engine Department aboard deep-sea vessels.<sup>710</sup> He said perhaps the reason behind this tradition was that it was “a well-known fact” that in the past the best ships were built on the Clyde and it has been known that an Engineer from Glasgow might sail in a ship for which he himself had built the engine. Good Firemen, he opined, come from Liverpool, however. He maintained that “they say” the best ships have Scots on Deck and Liverpudlians below, especially on liners. “You could check that out with CPR.”<sup>711</sup> That “suited the officers and was the best set-up”. I asked if all the

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<sup>710</sup>. Guy Gilpatric’s “Mr. Glencannon” stories (see the bibliography or Section A of Chapter 2) are typical in this portrayal, with which I am familiar from my lifetime contact with seafarers.

<sup>711</sup>. Canadian Pacific Railroad, a shipping line, owning seagoing passenger liners as well as railway stock.

officers on the Norwegian ship in which he served had been Norwegians, as I had heard it said that<sup>712</sup> Scots and Norwegians did not mix in the Engine Room. Taylor did not agree with this opinion.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 6)

Prejudices were demonstrated primarily in covert or unconscious ways, such as PENs involving dialect or pidgin quotes. It became evident in the course of the fieldwork that most men who told such narratives were unaware of the bias thus demonstrated. One respondent from the Catering Department enjoyed working with the Chinese crew, who usually did their own catering in a divided kitchen. He said the Chinese “were crazy for pork and chicken, but they’ll eat anything”, and substantiated this by telling a PEN about an albatross which fell exhausted on the deck of a vessel he was in and which he took into his cabin to recuperate. It had a head the size of a cat’s and could be stroked like a kitten. The Chinese Bosun wanted to cook it. Reminded of the Ancient Mariner’s penalty for killing an albatross, he declared the Chinese did not believe that. They would eat anything: dogs, cats. “If you stand still, they’ll paint you; if you didn’t, they’d eat you.” The ship’s Captain had “adopted” a British school for the ship, taken up a collection to buy souvenirs abroad, and apportioned the students’ letters to the crew to answer. The respondent’s student wrote, “I am 16. What do Chinese eat?” He answered: “If we don’t move quick enough they’ll eat us.” They ate anything, but mostly rice, and spent all their leisure time in port fishing, as it was a long turnaround then. What they could not fit into the freezers, they would dry. At one time the ship took cars one way and grain the other and had thousands of pigeons flocking around. The Chinese would trap twenty-five at a time for food. They loved pigeons. “...that meant they could keep that money.” They were given fourteen dollars [yes, dollars] a day to buy food -- that way they could suit themselves with food they liked -- and had their own cook. The company was

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<sup>712</sup>. This was from a Great Lakes Engineer of Norwegian birth, whose name I remember only as Egil. I met him in the early 1980s in the State of Maine.

wise; the more food the crewmen caught, the more money they had for luxuries like Chinese New Year, for which they really saved up and had lots of firecrackers and hundred-year-old eggs. The informant loved hundred-year-old eggs! He liked anything. He was fortunate, in that he liked unusual foods, as not everyone does. His wife does not. He calls her “the good shepherd” because all she ever cooks is lamb.(HMC 92-4, TTC pp. 2-3)

Generally one never saw any trouble, although in the *Bosworth* the situation was unusual. The Firemen were British Chinese; the Painter (an unusual rank in a cargo boat) was Chinese; the Cooks were Chinese, and also the Carpenter. The Deck crew and officers were all white. The Chinese Firemen had a separate part of galley where they fixed Chinese food. They also caught fish when they could, soaked them in brine, and hung them to dry. The interviewee remembers many whole round fish hanging up, and their fins and tails being painted buff by boisterous Deck crew, as the camouflage paint scheme had by then changed from grey to buff and black. The Chinese complained to the Captain, but none of the crew would admit to the act. It was “artistic”, but they said it had been caused by the weather.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 7)

One Radio Officer often sailed with Asian Deck crews from India or Pakistan. Some people, he said, might call them “Lascars”, but he would call them “Abduls”. He found Asians “apathetic people” from a “terribly dismal background”. The first time he went to India, he wept at the living conditions. “No wonder they came to countries such as ours, thinking that there was a, y’know, the streets were paved with gold. But, uh, tragic.”(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 3) It was clear, however, that this man did not consider his views evidence of ethnic or racial prejudice.

Another respondent said he had sailed mostly with fellow countrymen, but some shipmates were coloured, Arabs, and there were a couple of Belgian

nationals from Antwerp, and a Greek. A scar on his hand was the result of trying to stop the Greek from fighting with a knife, and his Arab shipmates had been violent as well. One split another's face with a "round nose" (type of shovel), so the respondent had to "trim" <sup>713</sup> two Stokers for the rest of the voyage. He was standing a 6-10 watch at that time, since only two Trimmers were carried.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3) Another Wireless Operator was on only one vessel carrying a mixed national crew. This was in 1942 -- a British China Coaster which had escaped from Shanghai to Calcutta after the Japanese invasion. It was common practice to have mixed crews aboard such vessels even before the war. There were always one or two White Russians aboard Shanghai ships, as well as the odd Norwegian, Dane, Chinese, and/or Indian. All got along very well, and what national rivalry existed was minimal.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 1)

British seafarers, far more than North Americans, tended to have regional rivalries and stereotypes. Dick Playfer sailed mainly with Liverpool crowds, <sup>714</sup> in which there were many of Irish background. He noted that "people from the North End of Liverpool never got on with those from the South End of town, and crowds from the Birkenhead side of the Mersey thought themselves superior to both. There was a lot of that kind of distinction. Crowds from different ports did not mix well; for example, Liverpool crowds thought themselves better than Cardiff." It was okay if it was just one person on his own in the middle of a different crowd, but if two crowds were aboard -- watch out! Fights would break out ashore when they were "boozing".(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 4) Tom Thornton agreed there were always local divisions -- London against Liverpool, Sunderland or Newcastle against

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<sup>713</sup>. "Trimming" is using a metal "slice bar" to break "clinkers" and spread an efficacious bed of coals in the firebox of a coal-fired ship.

<sup>714</sup>. It was during the fieldwork interviews with Mr. Playfer that I first became consciously aware that the words "crowd" and "crew" were interchangeable in British nautical parlance, and regularly so used by my Merseyside respondents.

Swansea, and variations of the same. There was racism and bigotry as well, but in general terms they got on pretty well, considering the conditions under which they lived.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 3) Playfer did not know if shipping companies deliberately hired area-specific crews, but it tended to happen, perhaps mainly because they were recruited from the Pools. If it was a London Pool, it would be a London crew, and so on -- it was generally circumstantial. He does not think crowds from one end or the other of Liverpool were deliberately chosen, but friends went looking for work together, so people from a single area tended to sign on at the same time.(HMC 92-24, TTC pp. 4-5)

Before the war, most of the men Alan Peter sailed with were either from the Northwest or the Midlands of England. There was the occasional Londoner, but they were mainly Welsh, Irish, and Liverpudlians. Firemen were mainly from Liverpool; Liverpool Firemen are the best in the world. There were many foreign nationals; some ships, like the "colony boats" from the Australia and New Zealand runs had Estonians, and Furness Withy's Black Sea run signed on in Antwerp and carried Danish, Dutch, Lithuanians, all types of Europeans. They all got along well -- no problems. There was the occasional racial slur, but it was never serious.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 3)

There were quite a few foreign nationals aboard the vessels in which Capt. Laurie James sailed -- mostly people who were "stateless" in a sense. Two Spaniards came aboard in the islands, fell asleep, and the ship sailed. When the vessel returned north, these men were refused re-entry, so stayed with the ship for some time, lived aboard in Liverpool, and worked from the ship. "They were very, very good, those two boys. They were older, not really young chaps at all." It was a long time before the Spanish Government could be persuaded to accept them again, though Capt. James was unsure why. Foreign nationals posed neither language problems nor ethnic problems to any

degree. No doubt problems occurred in some ships, but Capt. James experienced none.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 2)

Only two data were given which directly concerned religious backgrounds and both were from British wireless operators and about Jews:

One interviewee sailed with a young German Jew, who had escaped from Germany as a Deck Boy in a Dutch ship just after Hitler came to power in 1934. By 1937 he had got to Palestine, then a British mandate, and been given a British passport as a German refugee. Some begrudged it him, but not the respondent. The Jewish lad continued at sea in Palestinian ships until 1942, then went South, hoping to reach South Africa or India to sit for a British officer's ticket. He joined the respondent's ship in Suez and signed off in Durban to sit his exams. The respondent saw him several months later, after he had become a Second Mate. "There was a man you respected, 'cause he'd made the effort and would do well, as he deserved it." The respondent had helped him with his English.(HMC 92-16, TTC p. 3)

The other informant said, in reference to a problem of inaccuracy in receiving orders by wireless, that in one ship, the Chief Radio Officer had not liked the Third RO, who was Jewish, but "couldn't say a word wrong about me".(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 1) He did not give any indication, however, that he himself had felt any prejudice toward this shipmate or that the Chief's dislike had been based on the man's religious or ethnic background. Several of the North American sample were themselves Jewish and close to a third of the total sample mentioned having had Roman Catholic upbringing. Two respondents had been raised in devout Salvation Army backgrounds and another proudly declared himself a born-again Christian. Other than this information and the few casual asides about such things as caste consciousness amongst Indian shipmates or Catholics crossing themselves before battle, religion appeared to be of no consequence at all as a factor of social bias among these men.

As regards foreign-flag vessels, Capt. George Jahn, official Master of the restored Liberty ship, *Jeremiah O'Brien*, which took part in the D-Day

landing fifty-year commemorative events, said most ships in convoy were either American or British, and all were bound for different destinations, so there was not much interaction. It was mostly United States-flag cargo vessels on the run to the Soviet Union, but the Royal Navy was in charge. Escort vessels were both British and American across the Atlantic, mostly British to Murmansk, but there was once an American cruiser to be turned over to the Soviets.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 2) Two men interviewed jointly on the same day, however, recalled no convoy that comprised only U.S. vessels, and said all flags were represented.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 6) The next interviewee added that not all ships in Pacific convoys were American either, as there were some British ones as well.(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1)

Most North American informants who had shipped before the war, recalled having sailed in at least one foreign-flag vessel. In the case of American respondents, these ships were usually of Panamanian, Honduran, or Scandinavian registry and often had international crews as well. Canadians often shipped aboard American- and British-flag vessels, and Newfoundlanders (technically considered British at the time) tended to favour Canadian and American registries, but such tendencies were not unalterable. One Newfoundland informant sailed on a few Panamanian vessels, since he had been deported from Canada and was afraid if he went through the regular channels he would be caught, jailed, and re-deported.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 4) A Canadian interviewee had sailed under Canadian, British, Norwegian, and Panamanian flags with mixed crews and said all relations were good and there was never trouble amongst the crew on any ship on which he served, but possibly the best of the lot had a supposedly “all-Canadian” crew.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 1) British respondents had sailed on Scandinavian, Dutch, and Greek vessels, as well as the occasional Canadian or American ship.



An English interviewee said the closest he came to sailing on a foreign-flag ship was one registered in Belfast. When asked about shipping with foreign nationals, he referred to those from the Republic of Ireland, saying, “I found them very good. They believed in fairies at the bottom of the garden, y’know, but they’re damn good sailors.” Other foreign nationals he recalled were Indians and Pakistanis. These Lascars were very good as crews, but very much exploited by the English in those days, despite the fact that they were hard-working, good seamen.(HMC 92-51, TTC pp. 4 and 6) Other informants had never sailed on foreign-flag ships. One American said this was because it was strictly against union rules.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 6) Several, however, on both sides of the Atlantic, actually carried discharge books from Scandinavian unions.<sup>715</sup> Herbert Taylor, a Glaswegian now resident in London, carried a Norwegian as well as a British paybook throughout his seafaring career, and believed it was easy to sail on foreign-flag ships during the war, if they were short-handed, as “time is money and they needed a quick turnaround”.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 3)

One Britisher who never sailed foreign-flag had nonetheless shipped with foreign nationals. These were mostly Scandinavians who spoke English, had been around, and fit into crew pretty well. “Oh, hell, aye, yes!” There was no nationalist bigotry in that sense.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 3) Another who sailed only on British vessels said all his wartime shipmates were British subjects, but they came from all over the Commonwealth -- Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, as well as Great Britain. After the war there was “the odd Pole” and such like. His company had some vessels in which all the ratings were Indian, and one vessel had a few from Aden, but there was not a large ratio of foreigners amongst the crews, although racial diversity was common. They carried blacks, Arabs, Chinese, but all were born in Liverpool,

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<sup>715</sup>. Jim Cunningham, HMC 90-10; Hank Adams, HMC 90-14/90-15; Herbert Taylor, HMC 92-11/92-12.

Cardiff, or elsewhere in the United Kingdom. Asked about “checkerboarding”, he surprisingly said they had some whites and some blacks in each Department,<sup>716</sup> but there was no more racial tension aboard than one would find elsewhere. Problems were due to individual personality conflicts, as the occasional “awkward one” was likely to appear in any given crew.(HMC 92-67, TTC p. 2)

Both of the M.R.A. Gunners interviewed during the fieldwork were familiar with foreign-flag ships. Fred Lavis sailed with many North American ships and seamen, especially on the Malta run and Russian convoys.(HMC 92-13, TTC p. 2) Frank Brown spent most of his sea time on British-flag ships, but made one trip to New York aboard a Norwegian vessel. This *Kong Haakon II*<sup>717</sup> was a brand-new ship, built on the Clyde, the first Norwegian ship built during the war, and this was her maiden voyage. Brown was told that when she was launched she had collided with another vessel and had to be repaired, but he did not know if the story is factual or accurate, and he attached no luck beliefs to it in any case. The Crown Prince of Norway and the government in exile were in New York at the time and were entertained aboard when the convoy arrived. Brown’s first voyage as a Gunner was aboard a Polish ship.(HMC 92-14, TTC pp. 1 and 5) On the Norwegian ship there were two sixteen-year-old Scottish Cabin Boys and two English Gunners, but the rest of the crew was Norwegian. Things started off well, but the Chief Officer beat one of the Cabin Boys and Brown reported it to the Captain. The Boy was sixteen and Brown about nineteen at the time. Later, in New York, a man entered a bar where Brown was, and collapsed. The barman asked if Brown knew him and Brown at first said no, but then realised it was this same Chief Officer. After Brown had carried him back to the ship, his behaviour became

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<sup>716</sup> I have stressed this, as it was the only British testimony to this effect.

<sup>717</sup> My Norwegian colleague, Espen Ore, suggests this would probably have been King Haakon VII (the reigning king during World War II) rather than Haakon II.

“more civilised”. It was not made clear if this Mate’s reprehensible behaviour toward the Scottish Boy was ethnically directed or simply a display of personal indiscipline. There were Nazis amongst the Engineers on that ship, and Jews among the crew, as well. In addition to the two English M.R.A. men there were Norwegian gunners aboard who were very pleasant. One invited Brown to come and visit his farm in Norway someday and spoke of his beautiful white fowls. This was all done without a common language. By the end of the trip, Brown could converse basically with him. Whenever Brown went on watch with him, this man would say “Mørk natt”, meaning “dark night”.<sup>718</sup>(HMC 92-14, TTC pp. 1 and 5)

Several interviewees said they had sailed on at least one ship where “practically everybody was from a different country”. “Anybody who could walk and was warm to the touch could ship out.” One Norwegian Captain “couldn’t see this far”<sup>719</sup> and was in his seventies. Some others aboard were “old”, but probably not as old as they seemed to the youthful informants, then in their teens. They have sailed with shipmates as young as fifteen, as well as a lot of ex-convicts and parolees. The U.S. War Shipping Administration was desperately short-handed, particularly in 1944.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 2)

In such a social environment, varied in many ways, but restricted in others, how did the seafarer perceive himself, and how did members of the shoreside community view him? These questions will be addressed in the following chapter.

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<sup>718</sup>. Ore also tells me that the man may alternatively have said, “Mørkt i natt” or “(It is) dark tonight,” which would sound much the same in the Eastern Norwegian pronunciation.

<sup>719</sup>. He indicated a very short distance, intending to signify that the man was severely visually impaired.

## CHAPTER 6

### PERCEPTIONS AND ATTITUDES OF AND ABOUT SEAFARERS

In addition to interpersonal relationships, individual attitudes and perceptions of the seafarer must also be considered, both how he perceived himself and his shipmates, and how they in turn, as a group, were perceived and treated (or thought they were perceived and treated) by those ashore, either at home or in foreign ports. Such perceptions and treatment have been seriously considered, for the purposes of this study, only in North America (the United States, Canada, and Newfoundland) and in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, as a more extensive investigation would have been impossible given temporal, geographical, and financial limitations. A few passing comments regarding Africa, Australasia, and Continental Europe have been noted, as well as a few remarks about Allied seafarers' perception of their nautical enemy.

In this chapter, some note will be taken of the sociological concept of the seafarer as part of a "deviant" culture, an "outsider", "odd man out" or member of a "marginal"<sup>720</sup> occupation. Howard Becker, in *Outsiders*, quotes Everett Hughes: "Wherever some group of people have a bit of common life with a modicum of isolation from other people, a common corner in society, common problems and perhaps a couple of common enemies, there culture grows."<sup>721</sup> The applicability of this concept to the seafarer can scarcely be

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<sup>720</sup>. "A seaman's life is a lonely one. In a world where alienation and anomie are becoming commonplace words, the seaman's life has always been one of loneliness and alienation." (Sherar, xi).

<sup>721</sup>. Howard S. Becker, *Outsiders: Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, (New York: The Free Press/London: Collier-Macmillan Ltd., 1963), 80 [ft. p. 81 -- Everett Cherrington Hughes, *Students' Culture and Perspectives: Lectures on Medical and General Education* (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas Law School, 1961), pp. 28-29.]

disputed. Becker further interprets “deviance” in this context as a term applicable to types of behaviour rather than to types of people and most simply characterises it as failure to conform to the rules of the dominant society.<sup>722</sup> For my purposes I shall adopt this definition, and nothing beyond it should be implied by my use of the term. The implied “dominant society” in this case is, of course, the shoreside community.

Seafarers, like anyone else, have perceptions of themselves, both as individuals and as part of a group. Non-seafarers, particularly those with no maritime connections, have their own perceptions and stereotypes of mariners. With respect to such attitudes, William Hugh Jansen has described what he calls the Esoteric-Exoteric factor as follows:<sup>723</sup>

The esoteric applies to what one group thinks of itself and what it supposes others think of it. The exoteric is what one group thinks of another and what it thinks of that other group.<sup>724</sup>

The two sections of this chapter reflect upon these concerns. In the first, the focus will be upon the esoteric view, or how the seafarer viewed (and often still views) himself and his shipmates, while the second section will concentrate upon landmen’s attitudes and behaviour toward mariners and how they differ and have differed from one place to another, especially during the Second World War. The infrequent narratives from the fieldwork which dealt with stowaways (HMC 92-37, TTC pp. 1-2) have been omitted as irrelevant to this study, except for a few scattered references. People did stow away, but such incidents occurred too sporadically to merit pointed attention in a work such as this.<sup>725</sup>

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<sup>722</sup>. Becker (1963), 20, 1 and 7-8.

<sup>723</sup>. Although Jansen’s article deals with this factor only as it relates to the study of folklore proper, his concept is set forth in such a way that it is clearly applicable to other related areas of study, especially to one as closely linked with folklore as is ethnography.

<sup>724</sup>. Jansen, “The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor,” 46.

<sup>725</sup>. Tom Killips, however, wrote me late in 1992, after the fieldwork was long over, to tell of a young stowaway who, when discovered freezing cold and hungry in a lifeboat just before the convoy left from Milford Haven, after loading in Swansea, was not frightened of being discovered, but of what his mother would do to him when he was returned to Liverpool.

One sensitive and perceptive lifetime seafarer remarked that long voyages made men more and more easily irritable, until their tempers could be triggered by “any little thing”. The closeness of the quarters and the limited number of people aboard with whom interaction was permissible created an almost prison-like atmosphere<sup>726</sup> in which personal habits could sometimes become intolerable annoyances, and he listed methods for making associations easier, such as granting a five-minute leeway on the relief of watches, one area which proved a major bone of contention. It was his allegation that there are good crews and bad crews and, if one is lucky, one will get the good ones.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3) Another interviewee noted that disagreements aboard the vessels in which he served were often decided by “hands on a stick”<sup>727</sup> in the manner in which baseball teams were chosen during his school days.(HMC 90-13, TTC pp. 3) All three respondents in one group interview declared that all group relationships aboard, those between military and merchant seafarers, between licensed and unlicensed personnel, and between Departments, were close-knit. They had to work well together. There were about thirty in an average merchant crew and usually twelve to fifteen Armed Guard personnel on U.S. vessels. If fifty people spend that much time together, they have to get along. No one was ever seen to act “superior”.(HMC 90-39, TTC pp. 1-2)

“Tex” English characterised shipboard life as “rather like a monastery”. There may have been cursing and talk about women on the fantail<sup>728</sup> after supper, but there was really very little discussion of sexual exploits, probably not as much as might be found ashore. Not much thought was given to sex at sea, where it was unavailable, but when nearing shore, one’s “genes start

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<sup>726</sup> “The ship is like ... a prison without bars.” (Sherar, 9).

<sup>727</sup> Using a baseball bat or other stick, one person would close his hand around the base of it, the next would grasp it just above, and so on to the top. The person who could not find enough remaining space to actually grip was either “in” or “out” depending on the group’s consensus. Similarly haphazard methods of decision would be flipping a coin or spinning a cricket bat.

<sup>728</sup> An area at the stern of the ship.

perking up”. Really, especially amongst the old-timers, they tended to be very quiet, perhaps like long-term convicts. This of course provides an analogue to the comment above about the “prison-like” atmosphere.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5)

Yet another interviewee maintained that he had “always been treated real good on board ship, I thought.”(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3) After losing his first ship, however, this same respondent discovered he could only “get close to” one of his shipmates, a Danish expatriate, but they became virtually inseparable, and much of his interview time was given to stories of their joint escapades ashore. Many others, he said, could not take the emotional stress at all; some jumped overboard and committed suicide, others “went nuts” and had to be put in chains or otherwise restrained. He did drink a lot, though, and the “me and Jensen” tales usually involved “boozing”.(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 2)

Such time-honoured stereotypes of “sailormen” were recognised by seafarers as part of their perception of self and also as a factor influencing landsmen’s attitudes toward them. It is in this chapter that sociological studies of “outsiders” and “deviance”<sup>729</sup> are most apposite.

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<sup>729</sup>. Lane, *Grey Dawn Breaking* and *Merchant Seamen’s War*, as well as Becker and Sherar.

## **A. ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS, AND BIASES OF SEAMEN ASEA AND ASHORE**

Seafarers have long been perceived as eccentric and recognisably unique within society. “The ... seaman ... is the supreme, and possibly the last of the individualists.”<sup>730</sup> “In the street and in the pub the seaman’s friends greet him with that strange mixture of interest and envy that so often marks the landsman’s approach to anyone connected with the sea and ships.”<sup>731</sup>

Because of the enforced isolation of this “marginal” occupation,<sup>732</sup> many sociologists allege that the individual seafarer must suffer, becoming more and more of an “oddball”, “outsider” or “deviant”.<sup>733</sup> One informant, during the fieldwork for this study, agreed seafarers are “a race apart, really. ... And every one is an individual....”(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 5) The term “deviant” as used here, reflects only the marginality of the occupation and some eccentricity on the part of the individual, rather than the strongly negative connotations often attributed to the word.<sup>734</sup> An essay by a seaman credits his fellows with: “a breadth of mind that comes only with meeting and mingling with people of many races, understanding to the best of your ability their ways of life and viewpoints; and, above all, learning to tolerate that which you cannot agree with nor understand.”<sup>735</sup>

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<sup>730</sup> Healey, 4.

<sup>731</sup> Hope, *The Seaman’s World*, 88.

<sup>732</sup> Enforced long term isolation from ordinary shoreside society defines the occupation as “marginal”.

<sup>733</sup> Sherar, 15 ff. characterises the seaman as “marginal”. Becker (1963), pp. 1-8 offers a sociological interpretation of the words “outsiders” and “deviance”, and, in a footnote on p. 20, says the words refer to not to types of people (personalities), but to types of behaviour (acts). “The same person’s behavior[sic] can ... be conforming in some activities, deviant in others.”

<sup>734</sup> “Deviance”, as used here, infers only nonconformity with conventional standards of the dominant society, not moral turpitude. In a racially biased community, for example, friendship with a person of different ethnicity might be considered “deviant” behaviour.

<sup>735</sup> Hope, *The Seaman’s World*, 92. This attitude also explains, to some degree, the lack of stigma attached to homosexual behaviour.



Despite the “downside” to the universal perception of seafarers, the vast majority do not appear in any way unusual. Of the large sampling interviewed during the fieldwork, only about ten percent could be described as eccentrics and more than half that group were apparently “performers”,<sup>736</sup> consciously attempting to impress any audience. The others, both in North America and Britain, fell into two fundamental groups based on socio-economic class: the working-class man and the middle-class man. Both basic groups were well-dressed, well-spoken, and respectable in every way; the majority were married or widowed, and their homes were a pleasure to visit. The only noticeable difference was that one group was a bit more financially “comfortable” than the other. No respondents or their families could have been described as in any way ungracious; each offered hospitality of some sort, from coffee or tea to shared meals and more, in addition to the recorded data, and none appeared in any way exceptional.

Modern merchant seafarers are seldom recognisable to a casual observer on the streets of even the most active seaport town.<sup>737</sup> During the Second World War their visibility consisted solely of being apparently healthy, capable men who were not in the uniform of one of the Armed Services. Mary Babcock Palmer wrote descriptively of those she had met at the time:

“Seamen are unique,” said one ... man in an impeccable gray gabardine suit. To the reader of pulp stories about rowdy sailors on the waterfront, he ... would seem unique. They would never spot this groomed, handsome fellow as a sailor. They would be more likely to take him for a lawyer. The reason for the popular conception of a sailor, the seamen say, is that the public recognizes the one or two men in every crew who race off the ship in their dungarees and head for the nearest waterfront bar. But the majority who clean up, change into regular business suits and go uptown for the evening, simply aren’t recognized.

[Another] ...got into the Merchant Marine almost by mistake. He had been a runner in a bank, a sales statistician

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<sup>736</sup> See below or the glossary in Chapter Eight for a definition of this term.

<sup>737</sup> “Ashore ... a member of the mercantile marine in most respects is not very different from the ordinary run of men.” (Healey, 3).

and a broker's clerk on the floor of the San Francisco Exchange when the depression hit ... and he couldn't find work ashore; so he went across the Bay to talk it over with some shipping men he knew, and signed on as an ordinary seaman. After that he sailed from the East Coast where trade was better than on the Pacific. At first completely enthralled by his adventures, he tired of the sea after about five years, went ashore to marry and take another clerk's job. But when the war came and the union sent out calls for old hands to return he reported back immediately to help out.

Another in the group ... who looked rather like a farmer in his Sunday clothes, said he'd gone to sea because his father and his grandfather had gone before him. Another ... had lost a factory job and joined up in the depression. Others trying to explain why the lonely seaman's life appealed to them could only say, "You've got a lot of freedom that you don't get in other jobs. On the boat you work -- but never too hard. When you are rushed there's always a mate to give you a hand in a pinch. You work eight hours nowadays for pretty good pay, then in your free time there's always the gang on board, the radio, poker and the marine libraries. It may get pretty boring on a long trip, but in peacetime they generally break the voyage so that you're not at sea much more than eight days. Then you're on your own on shore leave."<sup>738</sup>

Such evidences of respectability notwithstanding, American informants for this study said there was "a lot of truth in the awful stories". "Seamen were a rough lot to begin with; now they are more sophisticated." In the early days they were rougher, few married men went to sea, and all lived from day to day, playing pranks, working like dogs, and getting little out of it.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 6) The USMS<sup>739</sup> training establishments, especially in the case of Messmen, only served to sort out the misfits. "You learned the sharp end from the blunt end and that was it." Anything worthwhile actually learned was learned aboard ship.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 7)

A Newfoundlander said "bandits" would be the most complimentary term for one crew with whom he sailed. They were collected from jails; some had been "flung out" of the Services; he himself had been deported from Canada for sailing under an assumed name. They were the dregs: jailbirds,

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<sup>738</sup>. Palmer, 131-133. [cf. also in Sections 5-A and 6-B the fact that merchant seamen are not easily recognisable because they have no uniforms.]

<sup>739</sup>. United States Maritime Service.

murderers, maniacs, and “violent no-goodniks”. Everyone was “wanted” by at least one or two countries, “but they were a pretty nice crowd for all that”. He said he had to fight a lot; people hated him; he was “saucy” [pugnacious] and “fought like a dog”; he had to be able to fight. He also “drank a lot of rum and gained a lot of guts”, but he got along pretty well with people anyway, as he “was not a man it was easy to dislike”.(HMC 91-10, TTC pp. 3-4)

A man from Northern Ireland said some men joined the Merchant Navy to dodge prison sentences, and there were “hoboes from Liverpool. ... You never knew who you were shipping with.” There were some “hooks and crooks”. “Liverpool, especially was ‘drastic’.” There was never any major contention, but a few “scraps” -- he also used the word “fisticuffs” -- now and then.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 1)

One of Capt. H.G. Skelly’s ships took men out of jail to make up a crew, as they could not get enough from the Pool. Six Firemen from this group were later arrested by the Military Police, who proved they were not such “hard cases” after all. One said, “Hey, I’m not in the Army!” “No, but you’ll be in worse than that, Mate.” And the policeman clouted him, knocked him onto the deck and commanded the six of them to “Fall in!” “Can we get our clothes?” “Get your clothes, get your clothes!” And they were marched off and replaced with six Australians who had been in a Vichy French prison. These latter did not sign on, just came aboard and acted as Firemen, and the ship “[gave] them a hand to get home”. There were often crew problems, as there were quite often “bad eggs” who made trouble in foreign ports and tried to get themselves locked up in order to get off the ship. “A lot of bad eggs got into the Merchant Service in the latter part of the war -- Army dodgers and cunning heads and crooks.”(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 2)

Another British Deck officer interviewed said his ships' crews had included "scallywags" from places like Liverpool and Glasgow. "And I think during the war a lot of people came to sea who thought they'd get out of something worse. ... And towards the end of the war we seemed to get more trouble with crews. I think both sides were probably getting a bit fed up with life by that time. Bits of friction used to arise."(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 5) Tom Thornton agreed "The seaman was the lowest of the low." This may have been because during the Depression they were not treated like human beings at all, even by the shipping companies -- "especially by the shipping companies".(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 3)

Even during and after the war, those in authority tended to overlook the Merchant Service in favour of the Armed Forces and often failed to recognise the former's justifiable desires and to give credit where it was due.<sup>740</sup> One example of this oversight occurred as a result of the loss of the tug, *Poolgarth*, just off Canada Dock in Liverpool Harbour. "Shack" Shackleton's brother was lost on the *Poolgarth*, and on one occasion when Shackleton's own vessel was mined, the rescue vessel brought the survivors in past the wreck of his brother's tug. They were taken to the Sailors' Home, where there was a roll call and the local men were then sent home. As Shackleton's mother was expecting his arrival from Glasgow, she was not bothered when he arrived home, until he told her "We've been mined!" The only body recovered from the wreck of the *Poolgarth*, was "Shack"'s brother's, so his name does not appear on the memorial monument at Tower Bridge in London, although the vessel and the rest of the crew are listed. Since the body was recovered, he was not considered "lost at sea". This disturbs Shackleton, who feels the authorities were too inflexible in adhering to the wording, rather than the intent, and he feels this would never have happened to a Royal Navy sailor.

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<sup>740</sup>. For a more detailed exegesis of this situation, see Section B. of this Chapter.

His own name and that of his uncle appear on other rolls and memorials. (HMC 92-43, TTC p. 3)

Despite the seaman's status and repute as "odd man out", however, many of the interviewees declared their enjoyment of life at sea was the direct result of the fellowship and camaraderie engendered by living in fairly close quarters with a limited number of people and, as has been illustrated in the previous chapter, the seafarer tended to be more broad-minded and tolerant than his landsman counterpart.

"They're unique ... because they've been around so much and through so much that they've built up a great feeling of camaraderie. ... You don't forget a guy you've bunked with."<sup>741</sup>

A sizeable segment of those interviewed during the fieldwork specified "chewing the fat" or "chewing the rag" as their favourite shipboard pastime,<sup>742</sup> re-emphasising the importance of talk as a bonding mechanism to make life more bearable in a situation necessarily fraught with anxiety at the best of times and even moreso during wartime.<sup>743</sup> The only real expression of the enforced detachment of the individual was a frequently-uttered complaint that it was difficult for merchant seafarers of this period to locate old shipmates once they had become separated:

"But like everything else, seamen you see, the war years afterwards as well, were like ships passing in the night. It's a million to one chance of meeting, y'know, the same people again. Different ships, different places and all that, when they dock and that." This is the saddest aspect of the Merchant Service -- unless you stay in the same ship, with a company like Cunard,<sup>744</sup> for example. Ratings who sailed in cargo boats, tramps, and tankers were reassigned after each voyage and did not stay with the company.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 8)

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<sup>741</sup>. Palmer, 132.

<sup>742</sup>. See Chapter Seven under "Recreational Pursuits", where conversation is given as one of the most popular pastimes.

<sup>743</sup>. Green, 74.

<sup>744</sup>. Liner galley staff were often encouraged to stay with a ship.

If the seafarer's role in a marginal occupation includes no terminal ceremony to mark his movement back into ordinary society then, superficially at least, his "deviance" is irreversible:

"And as a result, the deviant often returns home with no proper license[sic] to resume a normal life in the community. ... It should not be surprising, then, that the members of the community seem reluctant to accept the returning deviant on an entirely equal footing. In a very real sense, they do not know who he is."<sup>745</sup>

And nor, often, does he himself. Invisible in "civilian" clothes, in most cases never having owned or worn a uniform, and with few, if any, agencies, such as veterans' associations, to succour and support him in his quest for former shipmates, the merchant marine rating who has left the sea might well be termed the forgotten man. Even military sailors note that it is more difficult for them to locate old friends than for land-based Armed Forces personnel, so how much more difficult it must be for the merchant seaman. Joseph Bennett, a Royal Navy Stoker, said in the Army one stayed with the unit one joined "practically forever", and it was the same in the RAF, but in the Navy one changed ships as an individual, not as a group member. Giving details from his own personal experience, he concluded, "You were always on your own in the Navy." (HMC 92-65, TTC p. 7) It was even more troublesome for a merchant seafarer trying locate former shipmates. Merchant crews were relatively small and more transient as well, ratings changing ships as the Pool or the union hall assigned them, rather than staying with the same vessel for long periods. (HMC 90-67, TTC p. 6)

We have already noted that the "deviant"'s return to ordinary community life is often difficult, with nothing to cancel out stigmas imagined by the general community, including himself, to have arisen from his links with a marginal occupation. One interviewee, who joined the Merseyside

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<sup>745</sup>. Becker (1964), 16-17.

police force on leaving the sea, found police work in the dock areas somewhat eased his transition back into the shoreside community, although the stress was not entirely alleviated:

“It’s funny how they all come back but, as I say, I still dream sometimes about bein’ back at sea. I think I’m back at sea and it doesn’t seem forty years ago at all and it’s more than forty years. And what’s helped a bit, I think, is ... I’ve spent a total of ten years in the Force, because obviously I was down the docks every day and prior to that I would have periods of six months or something. It’s kept in t[ouch?] and if I ... dealt with a fatal accident or drowning or something like, a shipboard accident, I knew exactly all about it. I knew exactly the terms and then I could speak, I could talk to the crowd<sup>746</sup> and the Old Man and the Mate on their terms. And, y’know, I understood what was goin’ on. ... It helped me enormously....”(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 3)

Well over a third of the total fieldwork sample appeared conscious of the occupation’s reputation for marginality, but only a minimal number would have been described as “outsiders” by any but the most narrow-minded of observers. It was common for all, however, to rationalise behaviour such as alcohol abuse, and while some discussed drunkenness, fighting, smuggling or black-marketeering with a sort of roguish pride, others maintained they were not among the followers of such pursuits: “a lot of them did, but I did not”. In addition, during the course of the fieldwork, I was made aware of the term “performer”. A “performer” is one who, intentionally or otherwise, upholds the mariner’s notoriety for womanising, “boozing”, and generally treading a thin line just outside the limits of social and legal acceptability. Often “performing” manifests itself in the practice, for which seafarers are traditionally notorious, of embroidering accounts of their experiences, telling “sea stories”,<sup>747</sup> or “yarning”. A few informants themselves fit the paradigm of the “performer” and I have reason to suspect that a fair share of the testimony of this small minority consisted more of accounts created or at least

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<sup>746</sup>. British interviewees often used the term “crowd” as a synonym for “crew”.

<sup>747</sup>. According to the tradition which was verbalised by any number of my informants(i.e., HMC 90-49, TTC p. 3), a “fairy tale” begins: “Once upon a time....” and a “sea story” begins: “Now this ain’t no bullshit....”

embroidered for my benefit than of authentic <sup>PENs</sup> as genuine as fifty years' memory could make them. One respondent, however, told a Russian convoy tale laced with transparent inconsistencies which appeared to be totally unintentional and simply a matter of being a good story-teller with an inaccurate memory,(HMC 91-3, TTC p. 3) while another, co-interviewed with him, wove into his narrative such pithy statements as "I did it the hard way -- I joined the Navy as an Admiral and worked my way down to AB," but was more accurate in his factual data.(HMC 91-3, TTC p. 1)

It is notable that, despite the reputation for yarning and a certain amount of pride shown in an ability to dupe landsmen, most of those I interviewed expressed nothing but contempt when others' reports of their own sea service showed inconsistencies.<sup>748</sup> "Fish" Ramsey heard men in New York bars lying about the number of North Russian convoys in which they had sailed, but he can show documentation for his own trips,(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 1) while R.J. Warren was accused of stretching the truth because his audience thought him too young to have been at sea during the war and got "...the shock of their life when I [told] 'em that you could be at sea when you were ten, fifteen, durin' the war."(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 10 ) Artie Lee, after explaining that all British seafarers involved in D-Day had identity cards marked "V" for "Volunteer", scornfully said many claim to have gone to sea during the war, when they could not have done, as they did not even know what the "V" represented. A lot of men talk big in pubs, and say they have done things they did not do. It can be verified. ... Not a British merchant seaman was made to go to D-Day, and that's what the 'V' stands for."(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 2)<sup>749</sup> "Fish" Ramsey's complaint was that between 1936 and 1974 he "must have met

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<sup>748</sup>. Those who had specific points to make about wartime conditions at sea usually showed, or even gave me documentation. At the least they gave me references to printed sources.

<sup>749</sup>. An AB was paid £20 a month, about £5 a week, although he was not given the money until he signed off. Ten pounds of the monthly stipend was danger money, and there was an extra thirty bob for the [D-Day] invasion, so many "said 'Let's go!' not knowing what would happen. It was just another trip. So what?"(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 2)



2,000 people who said they sailed with Joe Curran”.<sup>750</sup> He said this was exaggeration and required documentation, as some were too young to have even been born at the time Curran was sailing. “That’s sea stories!”(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 3)

Unlike these men, Frank Power boldly, almost proudly, told me he had actually attempted to mislead people, not only ashore, but aboard ship. These efforts were often unsuccessful, however, as his inadequacies were made manifest by the forged documents he carried, which indicated proficiency in areas where he was, in fact, incompetent. Whenever he was assigned to a ship bound for the British Isles, it was diverted before reaching its destination, but in the past he had refused to admit this, and made up yarns of the places he had visited in London to disguise the fact that he had never been there.(HMC 91-10, TTC pp. 2 and 5) Unlike him, “Tex” English never told tall stories even to those ashore, although he did exaggerate a little about times when “the subs were so thick you could walk across ’em from one ship to another”. Nonetheless there were “a couple of real smoothies” aboard, who had “classy” shoregoing suits and tried to “snow” the girls. Returning aboard they bragged of the “stories they had put over”, but “Tex” never had time for that -- he would just go ashore and have some drinks.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 8)<sup>751</sup> No British respondents told of having done any boasting at all. Perhaps it was less easily accomplished in long-established seaports which had dealt with the “rambling sailormen” for countless generations.

Some shoreside bragging by seamen was intended to impress women. This included trying to convince potential dates that USMS stood for Under Sea Maintenance Service,(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 7) or that the seaman’s

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<sup>750</sup>. Curran was the founder and wartime leader of the National Maritime Union. in the United States, but he was no longer regularly shipping out at the time of the war.

<sup>751</sup>. With respect to “snowing” people, some typical stories will be found in Chapter Seven under the rubric of “Fools’ Errands”.

identification card headed “Captain of the Port of (Baltimore, New York, etc.)” proved the bearer whose photograph was on the card to be the Port Captain.<sup>752</sup> When loading ballast in Barry, Wales, Dick Connelly and a shipmate went ashore for a beer in a dockside pub. The barmaid asked which ship they were on and they pointed out the window, indicating their vessel. “Oh,” says she, “What do you do aboard her?” “We’re ABs.” “I’m glad to hear that, because I thought there were only Third Mates aboard.” “For heaven’s sake, why?” “See that table over there? (indicating a table surrounded by the boys’ shipmates) All five of those fellows told me they were the Third Mate.” (HMC 90-29. TTC p. 3)

Not all such misleading pretension was aimed to impress the girls, however. An Engine Cadet and a Deck Cadet went ashore together in their Midshipmen’s uniforms, and were accosted in a bar by a man, obviously “scuppered”<sup>753</sup> who slurred, “Shay, I can shee you’re in uniform, but I don’t reckonize what branch of the Shervish y’re with.” The informant, with a wink to his mate, said, “Well this is all very hush-hush and you must keep it under your hat. We are Americans, but we’re attached to the Norwegian Undersea Air Force.” After a moment’s puzzled thought, the inebriate brightened, saying, “I’ve heard of them guys -- they’re doin’ a great job! Lemme buy you two a drink!”<sup>754</sup> This sort of relatively innocent and playful braggadocio<sup>755</sup> was apparently common to young American seafarers, especially abroad, but no more weighty deceptions were mentioned by any interviewees.

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<sup>752</sup>. One respondent’s U.S. Coast Guard pass identifying seafarers for boarding vessels said: “Captain of the Port of New York, James B. North III, seaman, NMU.” His friend, Mason, had a similar pass from Baltimore. They used these to impress girls in foreign ports. They were seldom believed, but it was fun. (HMC 90-16, TTC p. 1)

<sup>753</sup>. Scuppered is a nauticalism for drunk. See the Glossary.

<sup>754</sup>. Robert Hiller, communicated in private conversation, outside the formal interview situation, December 1989.

<sup>755</sup>. Perhaps this may be a reaction of neophyte seamen to rituals of induction such as fools’ errands and Line-Crossing ceremonies in which they themselves are the victims. See Chapter Seven.

Seafarers also have a long-standing reputation for profanity, but neither my personal nor my professional experience would substantiate this, despite such similes as “swearing like a Portuguese sailor”.<sup>756</sup> Capt. Derek Belk’s wife quite agreed with me, saying “bad language” would never be used in front of a woman by a seaman.(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 2) Mr. and Mrs. Harry Kilmon, however, disagreed. Mrs. Kilmon noted her husband’s grammatical lapses after his round-the-world voyages and, although she admitted it was a very narrow viewpoint, said, “The typical merchant seaman wasn’t an educated man.” She regarded other merchant seamen’s wives as “vulgar and foul-mouthed” and felt there was “a general lack of respect for women” in the merchant marine. In this, she never considered her husband a typical merchant seaman. “The woman up the street” sailed as a ship’s Cook and the only female aboard; she could match any man and is a fascinating person; Mrs. Kilmon enjoys her company, except for her language. Harry himself said in the middle of the ocean on a ship, all men, especially during wartime, curse a lot, but it still shocks both Kilmons when women talk like that.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 3) Appointment to a command was usually permanent, and Masters were individuals. The Master of the *King Lud* was known on the coast of Australia as one of the foulest-mouthed ever to exist, but to his crew he was “Number One and a thorough gentleman”.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 3)

One of the most memorable quotes regarding seafaring during the wartime period came from an entirely respectable married man, who said, “One of the things that struck me ... when I look back now, and I didn’t think nothing of it then, is how cheerful people were, considering the circumstances that you were living under, not knowing whether you were gonna be dead in

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<sup>756</sup>. This phrase was used amongst my family and friends as I was growing up and is now part of my vocabulary. I have no idea why Portuguese sailors should curse more than others, but the phrase may have originated in New England where there were large colonies of Portuguese fishermen from an early time and they may have been considered excessively profane because of the rapidity and emotion of their speech and their tendency to invoke saints and other religious concepts when upset.

the next five minutes. The people ... just used to carry on, as we said ... it's a job and you did it. There are always characters, y'know, I mean your habitual drunks and one thing and another that y' used to make allowances for." He could not pin-point anything specific except that one knew and liked one's shipmates. "An odd one wouldn't stay there too long, y'know." Ships were reasonably happy in the wartime years in particular. "You used to look forward to coming home, but you just did not know."(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 3)

Like commercial fishermen,<sup>757</sup> most seafarers are regarded by landmen either as hardy individualists fighting the immense power of the romantic oceans, or as poor, drunken waterfront scum, who have no recourse but to work the sea.<sup>758</sup> Seamen themselves, however, seem most frequently to conceptualise themselves simply as workers, continuing with their normal jobs whether at peace or, with somewhat more effort, during a wartime situation. The interviewees, as noted in Chapter Four, considered themselves to be simply continuing in a peacetime occupation under wartime conditions. Some enjoyed the opportunities they would not otherwise have had;(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 7) others reiterated time and again that they were "just doing their jobs" and "keeping on"(HMC 90-10, TTC pp. 1, 2, and 3). Fred McKamy said the merchant marine had a more responsible attitude than the military -- it was a necessary job to do, and then they could go home. The Navy "was just out for a good time".(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 2) A maritime author with foresight wrote, in 1936:

The merchant seaman's occupation is the same in peace and in war. His task is to serve on commercial vessels ... no matter what may be the condition of international amity or enmity.<sup>759</sup>

Nonetheless, despite their no-nonsense attitude, the fieldwork also revealed that a fair number of respondents were affected -- either in a positive

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<sup>757</sup>. Timothy C. Lloyd and Patrick B. Mullen, *Lake Erie Fishermen: Work, Tradition and Identity*, (Urbana/Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 4-5, and see also 11.

<sup>758</sup>. This will be investigated more fully in the following section.

<sup>759</sup>. Healey, 7.

or negative way -- by the widely known and circulated stereotypes of the seaman as a drunken, womanising, profiteering lout. On the positive side emerged testimonies such as the following:

Most seamen were good, honest, hard-working chaps. Card cheats and the like “got the silent treatment”.<sup>760</sup> If a shipmate or his family were ill or in need, the crew would take up a “tarpaulin muster” collection.<sup>761</sup> They also looked after each other when drinking ashore.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3) “They were ... tough and rough, fight at the drop of a hat, but if you were on their side, b’y, they’d stick with you -- great, great sailors.”(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 3) “Most seamen have a good sense of humour”,(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 1) and “once you lose the ability to pull the other guy’s leg ... you’re headed for trouble,” but this rarely happens.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 6)

The 1936 *LIVERPOOL ECHO* carried a column called “Today’s Quotation”, which once published the quote: “The wonder is always new whether any sane man could be a sailor.” This troubled Alf Dennis, as there was then a widespread tacit feeling in Britain, never openly expressed, that only “no-goods” went to sea. I disagreed with the view that seafarers are escapists, saying I felt that, in a sense, seafaring is “realer” than any shore job except possibly farming. Mr. Dennis strongly agreed on this point, saying there were bad boys at sea, but it was the same anywhere. He felt the bad reputation of seafarers must have come from the days of sail, with their “press gangs” and such, and characterised seafarers as hardworking people, saying he himself had worked an eighteen-hour day throughout a seven-day week, and farmers or miners were the only shore careers that could possibly compare to this sort of hard work. He believed farmers, seamen, and miners to be the mainstays of the British economy and the worst-treated by “the powers that be”.(HMC 92-10, TTC pp. 4 and 5)

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<sup>760</sup> i.e., were ostracised.

<sup>761</sup>. Also called a “blanket muster”. See Chapter Five, Section A, Chapter Seven, or the Glossary in Chapter Eight for a more extensive description of this tradition.

An eighty-nine-year-old retired Chief Engineer never forgot the Bible verse<sup>762</sup> inscribed over the main entrance of the Dock Board Building in Liverpool. He thought it wonderful, and it has affected his entire life.(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 3) He declared he thought seafaring “the most wonderful life on God’s earth” and “the only life” for him, saying if the opportunity arose, he would return to sea, but for the fact that he was now too old. “Seafarers are a race apart. They think differently, and are brighter and better than landmen.” “Not that they were angels.... No ship is run with angels.”(HMC 92-28, TTC pp. 3 and 5)

Unlike the sociological analysts of the mercantile marine,<sup>763</sup> he also maintained “it has been statistically proved”<sup>764</sup> that there are fewer divorces amongst seafarers than in any land occupation. In my family it was always maintained that seafarers and their wives do not have to put up with one another as much as shoresiders, so every time the ship comes home it is like another honeymoon. A modern mariner, writing in a collection of seafarer’s essays, listed parallel reasons given by other seamen’s wives why their marriages were strong and successful:

One said that every time her husband came home it was like a second honeymoon. Another maintained that in nautical marriages there was never time for the couple to get tired of each other: they always tried to look their best and be on their best behaviour to each other during the husband’s leaves, all of which it would be well-nigh impossible to keep up indefinitely. All things considered, I believe a seaman can have a happy married life provided that he confines himself to comparatively short trips.<sup>765</sup>

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<sup>762</sup>. Psalms 107:23 and 24, which he quoted almost verbatim in the King James Authorised translation: “They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters; these see the works of the Lord and his wonders in the deep.”

<sup>763</sup>. Sherar’s Chapter V, pp. 24-29, on p. 29 her “prognosis for successful marriages is poor”. Tony Lane concurs at several points in *Grey Dawn Breaking*.

<sup>764</sup>. The nature of the “statistics” or their whereabouts was never mentioned.

<sup>765</sup>. Hope, *The Seaman’s World*, 90.

Mrs. Ed Richards entirely concurred,<sup>766</sup> and the sister-in-law of the informant cited immediately above once confessed to a gathering of the distaff side of the family<sup>767</sup> that she believed he was the youngest-looking husband because he was so often at sea and away from nagging women.<sup>768</sup>(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 3)

If there is one thing the average seafarer is not, however, it is “henpecked”, for:

...[s]ince time immemorial the sea has been regarded as a moulder of character. Family black sheep, erring sons, and just plain ruffians, were pushed off to sea as a last resort, the theory apparently being that the sea was an almighty leveller of men, and that they would return home chastened, wiser and better beings. Nowadays the practice is not as popular as it was, but the fact remains that a few years at sea can do wonders for a lad if he has half a mind to avail himself of the unique advantages it offers in the way of self-education.<sup>769</sup>

Thus the orphanages geared to sending their charges to sea, and thus, also, the shoreside attitude discussed in the second section of this chapter, that the seafarer is an incorrigible reprobate -- the “before-and-after” illustration skewed to fit the biases of a few.

Some of these negative perceptions of seafarers as reflected in their own self-images, have already been discussed, but many saw seafaring as a highly desirable lifestyle which they advocated to others. Alan Peter said he had enjoyed his time at sea and would encourage anyone to go -- for adventure and “The University of Life”,(HMC 92-34, TTC p. 7) while Capt. H.G. Skelly launched into a veritable soliloquy on the subject:

He never regretted going to sea. Professional sailors are the nicest people in the world, not just the British ones, but all “are a breed apart”, probably because they live so closely for so long and are hard-working and terribly loyal, never chivvying for favours behind one’s back. Shore people seem different. Capt.

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<sup>766</sup>. “He was doing what he liked to do and I was always on a honeymoon. ... It was when he retired that the honeymoon ended.”(HMC 90-62, TTC p. 1)

<sup>767</sup>. He was told this after the fact by his wife.

<sup>768</sup>. Her assessment of his looks was accurate, as at the time of the interview he appeared a good ten years younger than his actual age.

<sup>769</sup>. Hope, *The Seaman’s World*, 91-92.

Skelly's father, grandfather, and four brothers were sailors, and he never thought of doing anything else, but he did realise when he first went aboard that he had just given up everything in life that had given him pleasure. He was strange, only a boy amongst a crowd of men; he had just begun to notice girls, go on innocent dates to movies with girls from the rounders<sup>770</sup> team, go bicycle riding, and to church dances, etc.; he was on the football team. This was his life and he had to give it up. It had been a jolly, happy life, but he had gone into a strange environment with no back door, no enjoyment, and none of the pleasures he had had for a couple of years before. It was not a job, it was a new way of life and it was not all pleasure, because things you were just learning to love, (football/cricket matches, dances, church, movies, bicycle rides, watching girls play rounders) that were enjoyable to any young lad, must be given up to go to sea. Still he has never regretted going to sea. He would have been a failure ashore, as he is not parsimonious, does not love money, and will not backbite others to improve himself. On shore he could have gone farther in the firm than he did, but when criticised for what he considered proper behaviour, he said he would "go back to sea tomorrow" rather than conform. And there was happiness at sea, because you liked the fellows you sailed with and the people you worked for. Most were very fair and very nice. Capt. Skelly was never unhappy with his employers, but could always talk to them, although he occasionally "got a raw deal". Still, it was mostly good. "If you stayed at sea until you were Chief Officer, you were too far gone for anything else." To go ashore then, even to a seafaring-connected job like stevedore foreman would give irregular hard hours, so you would rather go to sea. (HMC 92-39, TTC pp. 4-5)

As Capt. Skelly stressed the professionalism of the British merchant seafarer as opposed to the offhandedness of his North American brother in the period just prior to the war, so, too, did a maritime author of the period:

The seagoing population of Great Britain is a professional group. This is not so true of the American merchant marine. In the United States, to a greater degree than in other countries, there is a seasonal, fluctuating employment. The seamen affected often engage in temporary occupations ashore.<sup>771</sup>

Men who went to sea often had opportunities to learn things they would never have been exposed to ashore. Dick Chilton was lucky to have sailed with two experienced old Bosuns, each of whom took him in tow for a time, teaching him ropework and wire-splicing techniques that were even then on the decline. (HMC 92-57, TTC pp. 4-5)

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<sup>770</sup>. A game rather like a cross between softball and cricket.

<sup>771</sup>. Healey, 8.



On Derek Belk's second voyage there was a doctor aboard -- the head surgeon from a Glasgow hospital. The company had given him a free voyage for all his war work, and he treated the four Midshipmen as if they were medical students. One day he made them chloroform him, and afterward excoriated them for not doing it properly according to his instructions. There were two appendectomies on that voyage outward bound and the Midshipmen learned a lot more about medicine than most of their contemporaries. It served Capt. Belk in good stead later, when he got his own command, and may well have saved the life of at least one of his crew.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 4)

Bearers of a single deviant trait, such as alcohol abuse, are often assumed to possess other undesirable traits allegedly associated with it,<sup>772</sup> and treating someone as a general deviant can produce "a self-fulfilling prophecy".<sup>773</sup> This syndrome frequently appears in children falsely accused of misbehaviour, but is no less likely amongst adults in similar circumstances, and, as has been seen, many seafarers retain a youthful outlook in many ways,<sup>774</sup> which may well extend to these areas as well, while the observer must remember that, although "deviant" behaviour is unconventional, sometimes even bizarre, it need be neither immoral nor illicit.<sup>775</sup>

Combat fatigue and general exhaustion were occupational hazards during wartime, and some seamen could tolerate more pressure than others. Jim North met only one person in three and a half years at sea who "went completely nuts", and never saw anyone in the merchant marine who quit through cowardice. Although many had the opportunity to sign off ships in Iceland, and avoid the Russian convoys, few did so.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 1) Nor could Fred Williams recall anyone ever saying he had had enough and was going to quit. Opportunities opened up for shore jobs, even in North America, (he was British) but few, if any, took them. "You always had the feeling that you were gonna get there, just the same. It was accepted. No one

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<sup>772</sup>. Becker (1963), p. 33.

<sup>773</sup>. Becker (1963), p. 34.

<sup>774</sup>. "...as a general rule, seamen retain their youth, both physically and mentally, far longer than their shorebound contemporaries." Hope, *The Seaman's World*, 87. See also testimony of Thomas Brunskill(HMC 92-28 and 92-29) quoted elsewhere in this chapter.

<sup>775</sup>. Becker (1963), p. 79.

deserted.”(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 2) On the other hand, several of Max O’Starr’s shipmates had to go to the United Seaman’s Service rest camp to recover from combat fatigue after returning from the North Atlantic run,(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 1) and there were those “limp-wristed” Stewards mentioned earlier who jumped ship from one of his vessels.

Those like British Apprentices and Cadets, who were on double watches, suffered most severely. One, often so tired he went without meals,<sup>776</sup> was reprimanded by the Captain when he was supposed to turn in his bookwork one Sunday, as he had been too tired to complete it,(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2) while another was sometimes forced to add fourteen hours of in-port cargo duty to a normal ten-hour day. The result was that “many times” he fell asleep when he was supposed to be overseeing cargo.(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 3)<sup>777</sup> Junior Radio Officer, Roy Caine, could not “just sleep” even when off duty, as he was not only standing a “six-on-six-off” watch, but relieving his superior for meals as well. When someone came to wake him, he would often sit up in bed and carry on a conversation, but “didn’t know a blind thing about it”. Sometimes the Chief [R.O.] would come down, very, very “hot under the collar”, to find out why he had not come on watch, but Caine honestly did not know he had been called.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 2)

In some cases, consequences were more extreme. A man could become a kleptomaniac,(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 7) or even be driven to suicide:

At the end of a twelve- to thirteen-month voyage, the Chief Steward waited until they got to the Mersey Bar, just before they picked up the tugs and the pilot, then dressed in his shoregoing rig and went overboard, committing suicide. The crew later heard rumours that he had got himself into financial

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<sup>776</sup>. The reader is reminded that British Cadets and Apprentices had a reputation for voracious, almost insatiable appetites, so only overwhelming fatigue could have provoked this desperate situation.

<sup>777</sup>. Although he could have been severely penalised, the authorities were lenient, as much was too heavy to steal and liquor shipments and valuables from the specie locker had more than one person minding them, so would still have been safe.

trouble. He had kept himself locked in his cabin during the latter part of the voyage.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 6)

It is curious that despite the widespread portrayal of the mariner as a person who spends most of his earnings on drink, gambling, prostitutes and related activities of low moral reputé ashore, a significant portion of my sampling stated that they did not gamble, because it led to ill feeling,<sup>778</sup> and that they drank (and often smoked) only in moderation, if at all.

On one interviewee's first voyage, they loaded beer for PXs[NAAFI]s overseas, and everyone aboard took a case for himself. The officers did not mind as long as nobody got drunk; one or two beers a night was okay. If anybody caused any trouble there would have been a search and all the beer would have been confiscated.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 7)

Three respondents said they did not drink at the time they were shipping out actively, one saying he did not drink or smoke until 1956. Another was unfavourably impressed by seeing how others conducted themselves under the influence and therefore did not drink. He said that many of the seafarers of the wartime period were not heavy drinkers.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 7; HMC 91-3, TTC p. 4; HMC 90-58, TTC p. 3) This was not a momentous disclosure, as my stepfather himself neither smokes nor drinks and most of his friends who do so exercise moderation.

Other informants admitted to having had drink problems but had later given up drinking altogether. One has been "dry" for twenty-two years. Another said there were many alcoholics in the merchant marine, but since the problem only manifested itself when they were ashore, it posed no obstacle to their on-the-job performance. A third had been a heavy drinker throughout his sea service and after, only having given it up recently.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-75, TTC p. 7; HMC 91-10, TTC p. 3)

Nonetheless, despite these apparent tendencies to a virtuous nature, only a small minority mentioned having habitually frequented religious institutions -- even seamen's missions -- in search of shoreside recreation or temporary accommodation. Those who did mention such affiliations did so more often with gratitude and praise for the missions' good works, however, than with the off-handed amoral attitude one might suspect of the stereotypical seaman. While few seafarers are pious, many have strong personal faith.

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<sup>778</sup>. See Chapter Seven, Section A for more on this subject.

Asked by a minister after the war how he had prayed in the war zone, one respondent said at times he would have paid God to take his life, but there is a lack of inner strength from being brought up by a non-disciplinarian family. Since he was raised strictly, he did what he was told and did not ask questions because it was right, thus he did not find the wartime Merchant Marine difficult.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3) Another said that since the war he has changed and become “spiritual”. Although he despises organised religion, he often thinks about his shipmates and hopes one day to meet those who were lost.(HMC 91-10, TTC 4) One interviewee belonged to the Merchant Navy Christian Fellowship -- “when you reached port, you just picked up a telephone and some Christian in the port would come and meet you.” In Tampa, Florida, for instance, a man came from the Lighthouse Mission, and in Corner Brook, Newfoundland, a family entertained him in their home several times.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 5) Two other respondents were from strict Salvation Army backgrounds(HMC 92-21, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-43, TTC p. 1), and another, blown literally head-over-heels the length of the ship during an attack, was reminded of his infant school days when a nun teaching religion had described “the bumpy road into eternity”. He thought he had died and experienced it for a moment or two until he came to his senses and realised he was all right.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 1)<sup>779</sup>

A dichotomy appeared with regard to mariners’ clubs and hostels. Two British seafarers interviewed during the fieldwork spoke of having stayed in them regularly, another only as a shipwreck victim, while a fourth paeaned the social amenities provided by such institutions, but one of the U.S. sampling decried them as “doghouses” run by and for anti-union “scab” labour. Tom Thornton said, “And you never docked in your own home port.

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<sup>779</sup> See also the Section on “Luck” in Chapter Seven, where a number of respondents said that either they or their shipmates carried religious articles as talismans or relied on faith rather than luck.

You had to accept wherever it docked, y'know. 'Specially tramping or tankers and anything like that. So often after you paid off and went for a drink, you stayed in the Sailors' Homes or wherever it might be." One shipped out again when one ran out of money.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 4) And R.J. Warren, an orphan, listed Plimsoll House, Atlantic House, the Gordon Smith Institute, and the British Sailors' Society as among his shoreside "homes" prior to his marriage, saying there were "quite a number of clubs which were run by the Merchant Navy Welfare Board that [also] supplied accommodation for merchant seamen and carried on after the war". "The fact is," he said, "that I was much of a lone wanderer. I was happy with the seafarin' life. I just more or less decided to carry on."(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 7) Missions to Seamen organised weekly dances after which the parson saw the girls home so there was no "monkey business" and they were "a nice class of girls" as well. Three of Capt. William Ashton's associates married them.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 6) It was Missions to Seamen as well which picked H.G. Skelly and his shipmates up at the railway station when they arrived in Dublin after a shipwreck and took them for a meal.(HMC 92-38, TTC p. 8)<sup>780</sup>

"Tex" English, on the other hand, always "sailed out of the union hall"<sup>781</sup> after he had joined the union and said "scab outfits" had their own "doghouses" -- places for the crews to wait when they were between ships. The Seamen's Church Institutes were also denounced as "doghouses" because many non-union seamen stayed there. "Tex" was sure they were good places, although he never was in one. He often passed the one in New York.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 5)

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<sup>780</sup>. Note also, in Section B of this chapter, seafarers' attitudes toward the Red Cross and the Salvation Army.

<sup>781</sup>. The reader is reminded that this terminology is nautical standard for getting assigned to vessels through the union hiring hall.

The British fieldwork disclosed that men there almost invariably shipped from their homeport, paying off there at the end of the voyage as well. If the vessel paid off in a different port, these men would return to their homeport Pool before shipping out again. The situation in North America is quite different, perhaps because of the disparity in the geographical size of Great Britain compared with that of Canada or even the U.S. Dick Playfer asked me where men would stay between ships in strange ports, and was told it was generally in a seamen's boarding house, in a seamen's mission, or with friends and friends' families. Everyone Playfer sailed with went home when paid off; after the allotted leave (they sometimes sneaked an extra day or two) they went back to the Pool.(HMC 92-24, TTC pp. 4-5)

During the early stages of the war, tankers from Texas oil ports were being sunk at a great rate off the Atlantic seaboard of North America. After a while, the U.S. Government began offering a five-thousand-dollar life insurance policy to merchant seamen, in case they were lost on this deadly run, sometimes called the "Atlantic Turkey Shoot" because of the ease with which victims were picked off by marauding U-boats. A rumour began to spread that the seafarers were making the prostitutes of Texas towns like Beaumont, Orange, and Galveston their beneficiaries -- and that these "ladies of the evening" were collecting. Women from local churches, scandalised by such intelligence, went to the ships and complained about this state of affairs. They were basically told: "In peacetime you didn't have time for us. These gals have been our friends, as well as doing business with us. They've given us affection, if not love, certainly more than just sex. What have you ever given us besides a cold shoulder?" Needless to say, the warm-hearted ladies of the

brothels continued to benefit from the financial assistance of seamen both living and deceased.<sup>782</sup>

Despite the womanising reputation of the sailor, nevertheless, said James McCaffrey, “A wife in every port” is a fantasy. Before the war, seamen did not make enough money to have a girl in every port. Most fellows only went as far as the Missions -- great places, which had picture shows, concerts, and bus outings, and were patronised by nice girls (and fellows). They still do it. But there was never enough money for a wife in every port. Even today’s salaries would be spent up in no time. The rumour was started by a few single fellows who managed it.(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 5-6) A Chinese Assistant Cook was the only sailor Rex Rothwell ever knew who literally had a wife in every port. The allegation is usually untrue, but this man actually married someone in every port; in Liverpool, the bride was a bus conductress. One day Rothwell asked the Cook about all his wives; there were at least twelve. He said it did not matter; the only serious one was the one in Hong Kong. If he returned to any of the other ports in future, he said, he would stay on board.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 1)

One of Frank Power’s shipmates, nicknamed “Shorty”, looked “like one of the seven dwarfs”, but “was a real killer with the women”. He always managed to get girls, in every port, “one on each arm”, although “he was real grumpy, like ‘Grumpy’ in the Seven Dwarfs, always grumpy about everything”.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 4) A Royal Navy escort sailor was “footloose and fancy-free up to a point, but that would have been misleading”. There were problems about spending most of one’s time aboard ship between Scapa Flow and North Russia -- there was nobody waiting at either end. Even when one came down for a “summer holiday” (he did so once to do a Malta convoy,

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<sup>782</sup> On 14 July 1995, the *SAN LUIS OBISPO COUNTY TELEGRAM-TRIBUNE* ran a feature article on me and my work. Capt. John Cusick rang me in response to the article, and this story emerged during our telephone conversation.

once for the North Africa landings in 1943, and finally for the invasion of France) one was confined to the ship for most of the time. If one got a leave, it was a “quick prowl” round either Plymouth or Portsmouth, both of which were inundated with sailors and also full of American troops who had social priority because of nail varnish and nylons.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 4) The North African coast was a resort area populated by German girls who had been in France when the war broke out and had removed there and become prostitutes. “They had no other way to make a living; but if all the guys were like me, they made a damned good living!” said one American. He also met a Chinese madam in British Guiana, who wanted to “keep” him, and, thinking this a capital idea, he attempted to jump ship, but failed, and the MPs<sup>783</sup> brought him back.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 3)

James McCaffrey told a sad little story about how womanising could backfire on seafarers during the war:

The CPR<sup>784</sup> *Duchess* boats were continuously on the move in peacetime. One would be in Liverpool, one in Montreal, one outward bound, and one homeward bound: there was a continuous stream of them. Every so many trips, each man got five or six days’ leave. Occasionally the crews met, but very seldom, because of this pattern. All ran smoothly until the war. When they began bringing evacuees to Canada from England, the ships “laid up for a bit” in Montreal, as there was no convoy system established yet, and sometimes two were in Montreal simultaneously. The *Duchess of Richmond* was in and the *Duchess of Atholl* arrived a few days later. The lads from the *Duchess of Richmond* were out with their girls. When the *Duchess of Atholl* came in, the crew went to see their girlfriends and found out they were the same girls! There were four *Duchess* boats and many of these girls had a “bloke” on each. It was funny, but pathetic as well. Those of the crew who were not philanderers “had a field day ragging the others”.(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 5-6)

But one Liverpool sailor said he was usually relieved to get a night aboard in foreign ports as a change from “gallivanting”,(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 7) and there are numerous seafarers, both past and present, who took and still

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<sup>783</sup> . Military Police.

<sup>784</sup> . Canadian Pacific Railroad.



take their interest not in the stereotypical shoreside pursuits of the sailor, but in any number of other activities. “There were things to do ashore besides booze and brothels. There were opportunities.” In Bombay, one of Fred Williams’s shipmates went to the Parsee “Towers of Silence” and met the outcast who had the job of taking the bodies up. It was miles away from the docks, but the opportunities were there. There was such a lot to see.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 6)

Another Merseysider also became quite voluble about the educational aspects of going to sea. If he had stayed ashore, he said, he would not have had the education he did. He went ashore in India, into the worst parts of Bombay. “If you mean well, you can go anywhere. Animals and people know if you are friend or foe.” He liked these experiences and they broadened his outlook. He made many friends this way -- not only in India, but in Singapore, as well.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 5)

My stepfather, an avid amateur photographer, long after the war, fell into conversation with a docker in Thailand and eventually found himself helping the docker’s brother to bathe the Royal Siamese White Elephants. And in Rio de Janeiro, Doyle Bales was initiated by a shipmate into the practice of hiring a “bar girl” as a “factotum” and tourist guide, rather than as a prostitute. The idea was to give the woman a set sum of money for the day, allowing her to make all the arrangements and keep whatever was left over. It was cheaper than hiring a guide, the girls were familiar with the local practices of cheating tourists and kept their patrons from being so rooked, and one had a pleasant companion for the day. The girls were out to make money any way at all, but they were honest, and they got a holiday with pay and meals as well, “and the company is fine as long as you stay outside the bedroom”.(HMC 90-34, TTC p. 3 and HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1)

Drugs were mentioned by only two interviewees. Both were from the British sample, and one said he could have been a drug baron if the time had been right, having first learned of marijuana from a man who joined the ship

from the Middle East Pool.(HMC 92-12, TTC p. 1) The other declared that nothing was taken to extremes during the war and that no one used drugs, even in foreign ports. He then dolefully remarked, “It’s an age that’s gone by.”(HMC 92-7, TTC pp. 2-3)

About a fifth of those interviewed during the fieldwork made specific references to alcohol abuse, either with regard to themselves or to seafarers in general, but nearly all limited their remarks to shoregoing behaviour, indicating that only infrequently was drink available aboard ship and that, even when it was, drunkenness at sea was an exceptional occurrence. “Robbie” Owen said merchant mariners do most of their “performing”<sup>785</sup> in port. “Everybody gets drunk at the foot of the gangway.” The cocoon aboard ship is safe and protected. Folks are the same all over, but the merchant marine is very tolerant. Ashore the seafarer may appear to be the dregs of the earth, but at sea he is different -- warm and good. Trouble occurs in port, not at sea.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 3) Another respondent said that men “got so drunk ashore that they wanted to get back to the ship and behave, because they were so sick and miserable”.(HMC 90-17, TTC p. 1) Capt. E.S. Wagner said, “There were no holds barred. Women and drink are an occupational hazard -- a way of life. You have to put yourself in our situations. We spent weeks and months at sea. Once, in 1942, I spent two and a half months at sea without getting ashore at all. People in that sort of situation relax and get plastered. It happens.” That is why mariners were pictured that way -- because of how they behaved in foreign ports, particularly in South America.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 3) In “the Brazils”, when the crew went ashore with a little pay and he had to bail them out the next morning, one Radio Officer always had to bring them boots or shoes, because in Brazil, when a drunken sailor was thrown out of a bar, he

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<sup>785</sup> Like the Irish term “to create”, “to perform” means to behave in an undisciplined manner. There are many degrees of such behaviour, ranging from the innocuously amusing to the criminal.

was always “rolled” and his footwear, as well as his wallet taken. This was a regular occurrence.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 3)

Several informants told anecdotes about specific incidents involving drink.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-12, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-44, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-46, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-52, TTC p. 5) One of these episodes was so grave that it precipitated a bona fide mutiny. There were English officers and Newfoundland ratings, one of whom got drunk and went berserk with a fire axe, attacking several others. He was returned to St. John’s and discharged, but none of the others were allowed ashore. Some, who lived near The Battery, jumped overboard in The Narrows<sup>786</sup> and swam ashore. They were then ordered to sail to Ireland, but the crew refused to go, instead taking over the ship and making once more for St. John’s, after considerable damage to the vessel. They eventually received naval escort back to St. John’s, where they were tried for mutiny and malicious damage.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 3)

Another man, emphasising that American merchantmen were dry ships, but that most British vessels made beer, at least, available to the crewmen, said he had once received only two pounds when he paid off at the end of a voyage, due to the extent of his “slop bill”<sup>787</sup> for beer and tobacco.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 6) Most crews, as has been said, were fine until they got ashore and got drunk, but one man’s ship found a solution. They allowed each crew member two cans of beer per day at sevenpence a can, much cheaper than the price ashore. This caused disinterest amongst that crew in getting drunk when ashore and fostered a tendency instead to purchase gifts for their families and friends of items which were in short supply or difficult to obtain at home.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 6) Interestingly enough, a captured seaman

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<sup>786</sup> The Battery and The Narrows are areas of St. John’s Harbour.

<sup>787</sup> The “slop chest” is the shipboard canteen where such necessities as soap, razor blades, and underwear may be purchased as well as such luxuries as sweets and tobacco. Payment in coin is not usually made, but a bill or slate of each man’s purchases is kept to be settled when the ship pays off at the end of the voyage.

told how he "...used to get seven pfennigs a day prisoner-of-war allowance. You never got the money, but for seven pfennigs you could buy a bottle of beer, so we used to save up all week and get seven bottles of beer and get drunk on a Saturday night. Now that might sound surprising on a German raider on the high seas. And if we got too noisy, they shut the fans off. Quieten us down a bit."(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 7) I found it curious that the prices were so similar -- sevenpence in the one case and seven pfennigs in the other.

Bill Fortune admitted that, like many others, he was too fond of "bending the elbow" to study for a higher ticket, so never rose above the rating of Bosun,(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 7) and Tom Thornton also rose to that rating, but never sat for an officer's ticket. Saying he was often asked why, especially since he was on ships which carried Cadets, he maintained that basically it was because he looked older than his age and enjoyed good times ashore mixing with the rough-and-ready sailormen and going drinking with them.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 1) He later told the story of a trip to Dakar on a tanker which discharged at a dock about six miles from town where there was a "snack bar" type of establishment which sold onion beer, which the seamen drank and liked. "It sent us off our trolleys." Once they were there about four days, unlike the modern twelve-hour turnaround. They ran out of money and sold their clothes to buy more beer. Twice one of Thornton's shipmates returned to the ship in nothing but his underwear. It was almost the same in Falmouth -- he was a smartly-dressed man when he went ashore, but as soon as his money ran out, he would sell his watch and clothes. There was not a thing he did not know about seamanship, however. If it had not been for drink, he might have been a skipper, as his ability was second to none. It was sad. He was in his late twenties, when Thornton was about eighteen.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 7)

And the seaman's legendary individualism and tendency to drink could lead to amusing incidents like the one from just after the war's end, recalled by

Radio Officer Alan Kingdom. One morning they were coming back into the Thames, with the skipper “on the bottle”, and there were no pilots at the pilot station. The man on the pilot boat called out, “There are no pilots. Follow the ship ahead!” The Old Man got on the loud-hailer and replied, “Follow him? I wouldn’t follow Jesus Christ up that channel; not even if he was walking!” He had to go up channel in the end, though. His Deck Officers often “carried” him, but he eventually received the Order of the British Empire, which was well-deserved after five years on that coast, despite the booze, and no one begrudged him the medal.(HMC 92-16, TTC p. 2) Yet another interviewee mentioned a Master who had turned to drink as a result of the heavy strain under which he was put by his job in wartime.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 10) The evident sympathy in such cases always lay with the alcoholic Captain, whose failings were excused and justified eloquently, but not everyone would have wished to emulate him. Ernest Tunnicliffe, as has been said in Chapter Six, Section C, did not see as a viable option ending his career like some fine skippers he had known, who led empty lives and turned to drink as a refuge.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 7)

When drink was combined with some happenings aboard, friction could result. In places like Liverpool, where there were bigger-class ships with lots of Firemen, shore problems and family feuds sometimes came to sea, as well.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 5) In his entire career, J.H. Shackleton saw only one “dust-up”, where British merchant seamen fought another group. This occurred in South Africa, and it was more the fault of drink than anything else.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 8) Sometimes, however, men “went missing at sea”. Everyone knew what had happened; there was a “squabble” and two were just “lost at sea”; they were dead.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4) Several men told of serious confrontations, resulting in severe injury(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-49, TTC p.

3) or even death.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 3) In the latter instance, however, it was patently a case of self-defence, and the killer was exonerated.

All the men aboard one vessel had unsavoury reputations. One of them had killed five people. The informant, however, was a good friend, “once the others got over the initial resentment that ‘a little fucker like me’ with only six months’ sea time had papers” declaring him a Quartermaster or an AB. He used to get into a lot of fights, though. He would go ashore and get drunk and resentful. Everybody drank too much; they were madmen. He knew no one who did not. You experience a lot in emotion. He has always been afraid of everything, but was ashamed of the fears and could not handle them. “It wasn’t the fear that killed me, but the shame of admitting it. So I took to the exact opposite.” He was afraid, so acted fearless -- with loads of booze -- he could not do it without. He was drunk all the time; he drank a lot.(HMC 91-10, TTC pp. 3-5)

Conversely, as a Junior Officer on the “Manzland Run”,<sup>788</sup> Keith Marshall was asleep one night in port, when, in the early hours, the Quartermaster summoned six sailors and entered his room.<sup>789</sup> Marshall “woke to see a half a dozen leering drunken faces, saying ‘We think you’re the best man on the ship, Third Mate.’” It was “something to remember”, although he ruefully admitted thinking he had “gone downhill since”. Neither of us was sure whether or not such behaviour should be taken as a compliment, but the point was that when men became homesick or drunkenly maudlin, such reactions were exaggerated by the length of the voyage.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 6)

“Draft-dodging” or evading conscription will be covered in more depth in the following Section, but it is worth noting that half a dozen of the fieldwork interviews brought forth strong personal opinions on this controversial topic. One respondent considered the United States Maritime Service, at least the Sheepshead Bay establishment, to be a “draft-dodger outfit”(HMC 90-19, TTC p. 1), but Capt. Frank Waters spoke for the majority

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<sup>788</sup>. This route ran between Montreal, Australia, and New Zealand and was semi-acronymically nicknamed “MANZland”.

<sup>789</sup>. It should be noted that, while the term “cabin” is used for passengers’ accommodations, officers’ are usually called “rooms” and crew’s quarters are most often termed “fo’c’sles”, even when the latter sleep only one or two people.

when he said it was true there were some draft-dodgers aboard ship, but generally the men were good and loyal people.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 3)

One informant's wife, hearing us discussing the prevalent North American view of merchant mariners as draft-dodgers, profiteers, and "4-Fs",<sup>790</sup> joined vigorously in the interview. She said she was young and impressionable at the time and thought the merchant marine was "bad". "You either joined the Services or you were a draft-dodger." She was never proud that her husband had been a merchant seaman, because "the typical merchant seaman is not a gentleman".(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 3) In the subsequent interview I was reminded additionally that although there were many "4-Fs" in the Merchant Service, not all were so rated because of physical or mental deficiencies. The rating applied to moral turpitude as well, and a number of ex-convicts joined the merchant marine because they were rejected by the other Services.(HMC 90-74, TTC pp. 4-5) The wife of the following interviewee however, energetically refuted this viewpoint, telling in detail how she had "tongue-lashed" a real estate agent immediately after the war, when he suggested that her husband, ineligible for the "G.I. Bill", "was not a vet" and so did not deserve a veteran's discount on the mortgage of a home.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 7)

An English interviewee maintained that within six months after the start of the war there were neither sufficient ships nor seamen to man them, so the Merchant Navy increased by about a hundred percent, both ships and seamen, the latter from diverse backgrounds. People volunteered to go to sea as a choice between that and the Army. Many "local lads" in sea towns opted for the sea, because they knew more about it; nearly every family had someone

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<sup>790</sup>. A designation instituted by United States Draft Boards (conscription authorities) indicating that, in opposition to 1-A, or "ideal for conscription", these people were inadequate to serve in the Armed Forces by virtue of weakness, ill health, physical or mental disability, moral turpitude, being a convicted felon, etc., and therefore generally undesirable.

at sea; but they were not necessarily suited to the life.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 4)

And an American who had served in both the merchant marine and the U.S. Navy said of those who joined the Merchant Service at the beginning of the war, some were “4-F”, some just wanted to join something, some were draft-dodgers, but they had as much or more combat in the North Atlantic than the United States Navy did in the South Pacific, so many of those “sorry merchant seamen” paid with their lives because they were unarmed.<sup>791</sup> Over eight hundred vessels with crews and cargoes were lost on the Murmansk Run alone, “so the draft bit is pro and con”.(HMC 89-3, TTC p. 1)

“We were the Cinderellas, of course. And yet, pro rata we lost more men than all the other services, didn’t we?” After this remark, I said I was afraid the golden coach had turned back into a pumpkin and the rats had run away.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 2)

British merchantmen have never lacked crews in either peace or war, despite frequent harsh conditions and ill-treatment. Though their service was recognised in wartime, they were often overlooked in peaceful periods and had to struggle to improve their own conditions.<sup>792</sup>

Nevertheless, little inducement though they have had, some insistent urge has driven them to seek their living upon the sea. They have always been a race apart from their fellows ashore, with an attitude to life which landmen have found difficult to understand. They have been tough-livers, used to giving hard knocks and to taking them, improvident and thriftless by standards ashore; yet they have shown themselves brave, resourceful and pertinacious, and through the centuries they have created a tradition of their own which is as strong as it ever was and is altogether different from that of the Royal Navy.

In the essentials of character they seem to have changed little through the centuries. They have always been, and still are, impatient of discipline, fiercely tenacious of their rights, and ready to combat any infringement of their independence. They are the Freemen of the Seas, taking service when they

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<sup>791</sup>. This latter remark is almost a word for word quote of War Shipping Administration spokesman, Capt. Edward MacCaulay’s rebuttal of media insults to merchant seamen. See Donald Edward Willett, “Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union, 1936-1945,” Graduate College of Texas A. and M. University, (American History), December 1985, 159-160, citing “Slackers and Suckers,” *Time*, January 11, 1942, 4. See also the following section for a more in-depth examination.

<sup>792</sup>. Rutter, 195.



will, leaving it when they feel inclined, preserving their liberty to choose their ships and to sail to whatever part of the world happens to call them. They may be led, but they cannot be dragooned. Among the industrial workers of Great Britain they are the supreme individualists, and whereas their brothers in the naval service are content to live in settled communities at sea and to accept the conditions of a life which is ordered at every turn, the merchant seamen are nomadic in habit and temper, brooking no restraint, desiring only to follow the call of the sea when and as they hear it.

This sturdy insistence on their independence has, throughout their history, put them at a disadvantage in dealing with their employers, particularly when the supply of men has exceeded the demand, as it usually has. By their own wish they have been treated as casual labour, with no assurance of a permanent wage, liable to be thrown out of employment in times of trade depression, because freedom of choice and action has meant more to them than security. The British mercantile marine has never lacked seamen to sail its ships, either in peace or war. Those men have rarely been well-treated; usually their ships have been ill-found, their pay inadequate, their food badly cooked and badly served and only too often insufficient, their quarters such as decent men would not tolerate ashore. While the nation has appreciated their services in time of war, in peace-time they have always been forgotten; such improvements in their condition as they have obtained have come through their own efforts, in the face of stern opposition.<sup>793</sup>

But much of this eloquent and descriptive passage applies to all seafarers generally, not just to those from Great Britain or even the Allied nations. Men who were torpedoed or taken prisoner often pointedly declared that they had not been ill-treated at the hands of enemy mariners; all were seamen and so had something in common; but it was different when the German Army or the Gestapo were in charge, as in many prison camps ashore.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 2) “Merchant seamen -- seamen generally -- were more broad-minded than were Army personnel.” Luckily, one prison camp, even had a German Naval administration.<sup>794</sup> This was fortunate, as they were kind and considerate to the captives in their charge.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>793</sup> Rutter 195-196.

<sup>794</sup> This informant did not clarify which camp he was in, but it is to be assumed it was the one designated “Marlag”, as that was a camp set up specifically for captive mariners, primarily merchant seamen.

Certain U-boat commanders are also commended for making every effort to assist those who had abandoned stricken vessels, and at least one is quoted as apologising for having sunk the informant's ship, but "war is war". This same enemy kept the lifeboats together, although he "had orders ... to shoot everyone".<sup>795</sup>(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 5) A former prisoner-of-war said after his ship had been sunk: "They couldn't give us enough. They were very, very kind -- sort of -- to us at the time." When a prison ship landed her human cargo at Bordeaux, her Captain, "a Merchant Navy man, after all", gave each POW "a tot" of cherry brandy, and since some was left after the first round, he served a second, because they had given no trouble on the inward journey.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 7) Another respondent, who lost two ships to enemy action, said the Captain of one attacking vessel was "the old type who went by the rules of the sea", while the other was "a real Nazi, who let his crew have target practice, raking different levels of the ship with fire" resulting in a number of deaths among the crew.(HMC 92-43, TTC p. 2)

While in the Combat Zone, Vincent Finan's American merchant ship rescued the crew of a stricken British freighter. At the time of this rescue, said Capt. Finan, "it was still a gentlemen's war". The German U-boat commander had sent the distress signal received and followed by the American vessel, and none of the British crew were lost.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 1)<sup>796</sup> This testimony demonstrates that not all the enemy were perceived as barbaric by mariners, and it gives more insight into the amicable postwar contacts known to have been made by some of these veterans with surviving veterans of the Axis maritime forces.

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<sup>795</sup>. The informant said the German submariner was exonerated at the Nuremberg trials because he had refused to obey that order.(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 5)

<sup>796</sup>. A romanticised painting of this rescue operation hangs in the American Merchant Marine Museum at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, King's Point, New York. Capt. Finan, then a junior officer, was ordered to write a complete, but brief, radio message describing the operation, to be sent home under his Captain's signature, and this message is inscribed on a brass plaque beneath the painting.

Merchant seamen, far more frequently than their uniformed military brethren, came into contact with enemies and enemy sympathisers in foreign ports. At the Portland [Oregon] Maritime Museum, I encountered a “watchkeeper”<sup>797</sup> who, although not formally interviewed on tape, told of going into a port in South America where he and a shipmate went into town for a drink. When asked, they admitted to being Americans, and the landlord quietly told them his was a “German house” and they should finish their beer and leave, which they then did, without further incident.<sup>798</sup> An Englishman’s story was more elaborate:

Lourenço Marques in Portuguese East Africa, like Portugal itself, was neutral during the war, and there were lots of Germans in the town. Before British seamen were allowed ashore, the British Consul came aboard to warn them of places to avoid, and “naturally” many headed immediately for the banned areas. (“It’s psychology -- a ban makes it desirable. Forbid would be too strong a word,” but they had been given quite an adamant warning.) The informant and a friend went into a crowded café to get something to eat, and only a shared table was available. The man seated there told them, in good English, that he was German and perhaps they would not want to sit with him. They did not know how to react, but he seemed a decent sort, so they went ahead and sat. The interviewee has felt vaguely unpatriotic ever since, for having “consorted with the enemy”. “It seemed odd -- a situation that could only occur with seafarers.”(HMC 92-25, TTC p. 1)

The American seafarer’s comprehensive view of himself during the Second World War is expressed in articulate if somewhat sentimental fashion by Palmer:

The typical seaman [in 1936, the Maritime Commission] found, was born in a seaboard state, unmarried, underpaid, a transient from ship to ship. He considered himself to be working at a job inferior to his capacities, and he didn’t take enough interest in his country to cast a ballot. From seamen themselves one gets the impression that most of them look on their work prosaically enough -- as a means of earning a living and nothing more. Some got in during the depression when shore jobs folded. On the whole they soft-pedal any notion that they lead a romantic life, but a lot of them have salt in their blood whether they will

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<sup>797</sup>. Guides or interpreters, especially volunteers, who serve the public at maritime museums are often nautically designated “watchkeepers” or “watchstanders”.

<sup>798</sup>. Paul Buhman, personal conversation, January 1990. Mr. Buhman later sent me a typescript of his wartime seafaring memoirs, which he was preparing for his grandchildren.

admit it or not, and get restless when they are on dry land too long. By travelling around the world they claim they have a better grasp of international affairs than the ordinary citizen.

“Seamen are pretty cosmopolitan.... They’ve been around and seen things. We were ready to refuse to load old scrap for Japan six years ago. We knew what was coming all right.” ...they had had a good first-hand squint at fascism in German and Italian ports. Many ... felt an admiration for Soviet Russia after stopovers in the Black Sea and the Baltic. They say they are fighting now because, unlike a lot of people, they know what war is all about.

According to the seamen themselves, they come from every part of the country and nearly every trade -- not only from farm and factory but from the professions. Some are lawyers and quite a surprising proportion are ex-reporters. ... Many went to sea during the depression when jobs were hard to get. Some are pure adventurers.<sup>799</sup>

What did the seafarer think of when he considered “The War at Sea”?

It appears that circumstances presented the British and the North American seaman with viewpoints as widely divergent as their geographical points of origin. The war was not actually being fought on the shores of North America, and the teenager who signed up for one of the Maritime Service training schools was often the same who had been rejected by military recruiting officers as too young. Capt. George Jahn remarked that he been approached for berths by fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds who could not get into the United States Navy. There was no reason for them to be draft-dodgers; they just wanted to be in on the action. He told them if they would send their mothers to him, their requests could be expedited. This was neither a sarcastic comment about their ages nor a lascivious remark, but a suggestion that if the mothers agreed to present their sons’ cases to the Captain, he could be assured that the youngsters actually had parental permission to go to sea.(HMC 89-5A, TTC p. 2)

One fifteen-year-old seaman was the son of a secretary of the railroad engineers’[engine drivers’] union. “Tex” English visited his home and found

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<sup>799</sup>. Palmer, 130-131.

it was luxurious and the family “dressed for dinner”. The son, however, only wanted to work on cars and sail ships. A sixteen-year-old with whom he also sailed only “weighed 100-110 pounds wet” and was too small to handle the steam hose, so it was left to “Tex” to “blow” the boilers himself.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1)

One of the oldest respondents said there were a lot of age extremes, both very old and very young. He felt the young ones often “froze” under stress and that very old men would usually make only one trip, “because they could not stand the young ones”.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 3) Another interviewee said the ages of the men aboard ship probably ranged from about seventeen to sixty-six. Some were very old; these were usually in the Engine Department. Most Deck people were a little younger than the Engine crew. There were no academy graduates; all were old “up from the hawsepipe” types. Academy graduates were rare and he never sailed with any until after the war.

Age-related deficiencies became apparent at boat drills, when the older ones had to be “carried”. Almost all the thirteen deaths amongst the *President Harrison*’s crew in a prisoner-of-war camp were due to age and related infirmity, but in doing the normal jobs they had been hired for, they were quite adequate.<sup>800</sup> The informant postulated as to what jobs one might manage to do, if one were not in good shape physically. Cook, yes; Messman, no; Engineer, yes; Mates did not do as much physical work then as they do now, and he cannot recollect anyone who was really too old to be effective. It may have happened, but they either learned to compensate for their deficiencies or others “covered” for them. Being people who were there because of the war effort, they were usually people who had few other skills.(HMC 90-3, TTC pp. 3-4)

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<sup>800</sup> The informant and his daughter jointly researched and wrote a book on the *Harrison*’s loss: David H. Grover and Gretchen G. Grover, *Captives of Shanghai: The Story of the President Harrison* (Napa CA: Western Maritime Press, 1989).

There were some characters aboard. One man, old enough to be the informant's grandfather at the time, was an alcoholic and a problem. "You have to learn to handle people like this. You learn on the job. Experience is the best teacher. You had to grow up quick to survive."(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 3) Bill Krasnosky first sailed in 1928 and was in his thirties during the war. Although actually older than many of his shipmates, he was involved with a lot of kiddish pranks that he "wouldn't dare attempt now."(HMC 90-7, TTC p. 1)

During the war many were not "able-bodied" but just taken aboard as "bodies". A one-armed Second Mate was unable to use the sextant, so the Captain or Chief Mate (or the "green" Third) had to take his sights for him and turn the information over so he could plot his courses. Another ship had a Chief Pumpman with a wooden leg. "It didn't stop him; he got the job done; there were all kinds of people like that."(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 3) Anybody who could walk and was warm to the touch could ship out. Some aboard were "old", but probably not as old as they seemed when one was eighteen. The respondent sailed with lads as young as fifteen, as well as a lot of ex-convicts and parolees. They were desperately short-handed, particularly in 1944.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 2) Nor were such physical infirmities the only inadequacies in the wartime Merchant Service; there were cases of illiteracy as well. One respondent said there was a "professional" Ordinary Seaman<sup>801</sup> whom he tried to teach to read without success,(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3) while another sailed with a Second Cook who had to open tins to ascertain their contents if the labels did not include pictures.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 3)

The young North American greenhorn often had no background in seafaring; neither family nor friends had been career seafarers to influence his

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<sup>801</sup>. By this term he intended to indicate the man was consigned permanently to the lowest rating by his inability to read.

decision for or against the sea as a career. He went to do his part in the war effort, to seek adventure and fortune in foreign parts, and often to at least a small extent because of the danger involved. In many cases, like that of Bill Kirby, a cattle rancher's son from the San Joaquin Valley of California, he had no intention of remaining at sea once the war was over, but planned to return to his shoreside work, friends, family, and lifestyle on the cessation of hostilities.(HMC 90-13, entire)

The British seafarer did not have to run away to seek adventure, action, and danger; they were right in his own back garden. Many who sailed out of Liverpool carry discharge books stating that a previous book was "lost through enemy action." At first one would assume the book went down with a torpedoed, bombed, or mined ship, but he might be wrong; many such books were lost because they had been left ashore for safety and were destroyed when the Liverpool customhouse was bombed.(HMC 92-2, TTC p. 1)<sup>802</sup>

One military informant told of a fashion-conscious young matelot who returned to his vessel after leave in a "natty double-breasted civvy suit". While he was out socialising on shore leave, his home had been bombed and his entire Royal Navy kit destroyed. Not so much as a collar was left, and he had to be entirely re-kitted in Greenock.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 3) A merchant seafarer, having lost all his gear when a vessel was bombed, bought a suit and overcoat from a Liverpool tailor, but left them at the tailor's shop in Lord Street "for safekeeping" when he went back to sea. On his return, he found the shop had been levelled in an air raid and his shoregoing clothes were gone, as well. He never discovered whether the tailor himself had survived the bombing.(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 8 and HMC 91-8, TTC p. 1) Many casual mentions were made during the course of the interviews of family photographs, pre-war

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<sup>802</sup>. This is verified by other interviews and printed sources as well.

seafaring mementoes, etc. lost when the family home was damaged or destroyed by enemy action during the Blitz.(i.e., HMC 92-61, TTC p. 1)

Men spoke of being unable to persuade their wives or other family members to evacuate to more rural areas,(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 2, HMC 92-61, TTC p. 1) of having Anderson shelters in the garden,(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 2) of being locked into railway stations during air raids or dodging from shelter to shelter between bombing raids in an effort to get back to the ship before leave expired.(HMC 92-62, TTC pp. 2-3)

To a man living in such circumstances ashore, his shipboard career truly was “just doing the job” and being immolated in the blazing wreckage of a torpedoed tanker was no more objectionable a fate than being burnt to a crisp in one’s home or workplace by an incendiary bomb. Artie Lee said, “You never considered the war. You could have been killed by a bomb on your house or by crossing the road. Everyone at home was going through the same thing; it became part of life; you were not particularly afraid of where you went. You could be killed; many were, but you just got on with your life. It didn’t seem any more dangerous to be at sea than to be at home.”(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 4)

A far smaller segment of the British than of the North American interviewees had shipped originally because they were too young to join the armed forces, but one said that when he first sailed he was so small that he had a special orange box to stand on so he could see the compass in the binnacle.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 5) A significant number, however, joined the Merchant Service because poor eyesight or other physical shortcomings made them ineligible for their preferred military service. Nevertheless it seems the percentage of those who continued their seafaring careers into the war years



despite advancing age was not significantly larger on either side of the Atlantic.

W.L. Hoyer, a British Catering rating recalled an incident after a collision, when a man in his Department, about seventy years old, (“they didn’t worry about your age then”) appeared at his boat station fully dressed, with his bowler hat and overcoat, scarf, umbrella, and lifejacket. He had a big white moustache and looked like he was out for a stroll -- at three in the morning, with the alarms all going, and a lifejacket on over the lot. “If that isn’t an Englishman, I’d like to know what is!” The funniest part was when they left their fire stations and went to boat stations, all the boats were crushed, but some were only half destroyed. The old chap got into a half-lifeboat. “What are you doing, Walter?” “I’m going to row.” “You’ll have a hard time doing that, Walter, it’s only half there.”(HMC 92-45, TTC pp. 2-3)

One seafarer’s wife, asked what it was like for her, waiting at home, said simply, “Worryin’, really.” The mail was not reliable; even aerograms were often held back, heavily monitored and censored. Her husband had once brought her a handbag from Casablanca, so he wrote in one letter, “I may be able to get you another handbag,” to give her some idea of where they were. When he was on the troopship *Andes*, “half the population of Liverpool” knew they were going to New York and when they were going and when they were due back. It was not too bad when you were on a regular run, but long tramp voyages were the worst. The worst thing for those at home was the lack of communications.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 5)

Reassignment through the Pools or the labour unions was complicated by the conflict in which the world was involved. Leave between assignments was a desirable thing and a statutory right, but the way in which the hiring offices administered the letter of the law could vary as much as the actual

statutes did between North America and the United Kingdom. All the time one Newfoundland interviewee worked at sea, especially during the war, he “never had a holiday, never had a leave. There was no such thing as leave; if you signed off, you were out of a job.”(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 5) An American disagreed slightly, saying that in his experience there was a liberal leave set-up, with two days off for every week aboard up to a thirty day total, but “if you took more than thirty days’ leave, the draft board was after you”,(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 4) while another said wires were sent to men ashore on leave, warning them not to overstay their time or they would be drafted.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3) Another Newfoundlander, sailing out of England, whose previous ship had been bombed, was told he had one week leave, which was not much after a shipwreck. At the end of the week he went to the Pool office. “And you know what he said the first thing? Not how do you feel or whatever. He said, ‘I got a ship for you.’ Well the way he said it, it made me mad a little bit. I said, ‘I’m not taking it,’ I said, right straight out. ... I said, ‘I’ve been on a big shipwreck,’ I said, ‘And I don’t think, I think people should have more’n a week to get over this thing.’ ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘You can refuse two ships.’”(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 7) During the time ashore without a ship, while waiting “on the Pools” for another vessel British seamen during the war received a temporary subsistence allotment known as “Pool Money”.(HMC 92-46, TTC p. 2) Seamen on both sides of the Atlantic were generally allowed to refuse two assignments before acceptance became mandatory, but this rule did not always hold.

Smuggling and black market trading were rife amongst seafarers, especially in Germany immediately after the war,(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 2) but it took place in plenty of other places as well. Bedsheets were at a premium in North Africa. Twenty-five to fifty dollars per sheet in U.S. cash currency was not an unusual price.<sup>803</sup> The Armed Guard watched the proceedings as my

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<sup>803</sup>. Fantastic deals were arranged for stolen ships’ sheets and pillowcases, butter, sugar, cigarettes and candy.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, p. 152)

informant sold sheets to men in a “bumboat” and even shot into the water to frighten the boatmen into offering “the right price”. The informant made five hundred dollars, which he sent home to his mother who worried that her son was doing “something wrong” to send so much money. On another occasion, the informant and several of his shipmates wrapped sheets around their bodies under their clothing when going ashore, but were caught by the Military Police. The informant does not believe he was doing wrong, as “we were only trying to raise money to buy war bonds”.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 3) A woman who lived near my Sheffield accommodation told me how, when she had been on guard duty at the London Docks during the war, men used to pass rationed items to her and her fellow guards to carry out of the security area. She said they often looked “like pregnant elephants” and would then go to the nearest public toilet, where they would remove all the items and return them to the men to take home to their families and girlfriends.<sup>804</sup>

In Singapore, waiting for the last load of evacuees, some Catering staff were asked by a sailor from the Deck crew to help unload medical gear and the like so they would be prepared to load passengers in the morning. They agreed as some of them knew how to operate the winches and other loading machinery. They worked until about 2100 hours and then one of the gang came back drunk. My informant “checked out” the warehouse and found a shed with whiskey and other spirits, as well as foodstuffs which were scarce in the United Kingdom, such as tinned bacon, butter, Ovaltine, and other such items. There was looting, but although he let them help themselves to the general stores, my informant allowed his crew to take only one case of spirits (12 bottles) to be divided between them. They headed back to the ship, but saw the captain on the dock, so they put their spoils down and assumed a nonchalant air. The ship’s doctor, actually a male nurse, found them out and told them, “Get it aboard the bloody ship!” It was a “real haul” due to the rationing at home and they also got a bottle of whiskey each.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 5)

Another respondent recalled a time when three cakes were delivered aboard and he and his mates stole one. The cakes were for the Captain, who demanded to know where his third cake had gone, but they never admitted the

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<sup>804</sup>. She appeared at a local bus stop on V-E Day Commemoration Sunday, wearing medals on her jacket, and we fell into conversation.

theft. Also, in an English port, the crew broke into a jewellers' and stole a large chiming clock, which woke the respondent as it was brought aboard. The next morning, when the C.I.D.<sup>805</sup> came to investigate, there were gin bottles floating all round the ship.(HMC 92-12, TTC p. 1-2)

One ship we had a small deck load of medicinal alcohol aft of #5 hatch, and covered with a tarp. It was in gallon cans. Every day the ensign would uncover the load and count the cans. Every day the load would be another can short. The last night he stood guard himself. In the morning another can was gone. There was a shaft coming up from the shaft alley that ended under the tarp. Every night someone from the engine gang would climb up, reach out and swipe another can. He never figured it out.<sup>806</sup>

"Perhaps things were a bit more rambunctious" in 1945, at the end of the Japanese war, when yet another British interviewee went to Baltimore in "the craziest ship" he was ever in. "It was a right headcase crew. There was fellas from the mines of Wales, Spaniards, 'throwbacks' and fellas on the beach in America, they joined us, 'cause the other blokes got out, jumped ship -- oh, terrible ship. Got a Legionnaire on, fella out the Legion, North Africa, yeah -- he joined at Port Said. We got two Spaniards on in Port Tewfik, the other end of the Canal, gets to India they jump ship in India -- oh, it was a terrible thing." They went from Calcutta to Lourenço Marques -- "it's Zaire now or something", Mozambique. When they went back to Port Said, three were jailed. "Crazy they were." They went to Naples at the latter end of war and these "performers" sold cigarettes on the black market. They used "service lira" then -- army money. "What a time!" The informant got in no trouble. "I don't suppose I was that way inclined." Others fought, were insubordinate, and "gave cheek" to the skipper, who could not hold the crew at all.(HMC 92-57, TTC pp. 6-7)

Going through Customs homeward bound was a major problem for the United States Merchant Marine as well, since they were "taken advantage of and treated like dirt." There were heavy "shakedowns" and confiscations, as Customs men were profiteers. Seamen would break cigarettes in half before turning them over to Customs, to avoid confiscations. The Customs officers never bothered the U.S. Navy.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 4) A British rating similarly felt that British Customs Officers were uncivil and unfair to the Merchant

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<sup>805</sup> Criminal Investigation Department, these are English plain-clothes detectives.

<sup>806</sup> John B. Wilson, from a letter dated 19 March 1990. This is given verbatim, with only his own corrections and one typographical error emended.

Navy during the war. They were terrible, “like the Gestapo”,(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3) and another described an incident when a shipmate tried to get out of Hull docks with some smuggled tobacco. The docks in Hull were terrible, like London, with lots of turnstiles and the like.(HMC 92-12, TTC p. 3) American troops were placed aboard vessels passing through the Panama Canal. They were very officious and watched the crews’ every movement. It felt insulting, as they were supposed to be allies, and the soldiers were aggressive. The troops were actually guarding the Canal to assure that no one rammed the gates, and it was probably sensible, but was very off-putting at the time.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 7)

Several British informants noticed the extreme security measures undertaken during wartime in North American, particularly U.S., ports. North Americans themselves, however, were less impressed and more likely to react with pranks than to take the situation seriously. Hank Adams recalled encountering armed and officious female shore guards in one port. He and his mates, while ashore, purchased a number of white mice from a pet shop and, returning to the ship, loosed them on the women, inducing quite a panic, to hear him tell of it.(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 2)

Sam Hakam, a young Radio Officer was impressed by his visit to North Africa. Casablanca, exactly as it was on the cinema screen, was full of refugees desperately trying to leave. Although he did not meet Humphrey Bogart, he did see a black American piano player called “Sam”. He also became involved with a British agent named Maurice and a beautiful fifth-columnist called “Jeannine”. The planned assignation worked beautifully, and the female spy got the “doctored” information, but Hakam felt he had been desperately miscast for the part.(HMC 90-33, TTC p. 2)

But if, indeed, as seems to have been evidenced by much of the above testimony, the general perception of the seafarer has traditionally been that of a drunken rake and a “loser”, we must ask ourselves the question recently posed by Archie Green: “How do losers function in a society caught up by worship of

competitive sports and entrepreneurial spirit?<sup>807</sup> And what of comparative casualty figures and pay differential in wartime? How did the ‘loser’ theory apply to these?

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<sup>807</sup>. Green, 72.

## **B. SHORESIDE ATTITUDES, PERCEPTIONS AND PREJUDICES TOWARD SEAFARERS**

This section deals with the exoteric part of Jansen's "Es-Ex Factor"<sup>808</sup> Seafarers are often perceived by the general public, as well as by themselves, as a singular breed, standing apart from society in general by virtue of a number of determinants, and this perception, especially as it was coloured by the considerations of wartime, established attitudes through and by which landsmen viewed and treated their seagoing brethren during those years of conflict. Here we see the seafarer from the viewpoint of the landsman's community, and it has been interesting to attempt a comparison between the attitudes of the British and the North American general public to the merchant mariner during the course of the Second World War.

With the able assistance of heavily biased data disseminated by American newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, and radio commentator, Walter Winchell, the reason for whose aversion to the Mercantile Marine can only be hypothesised today, the American public generally came to consider the merchant seafarer a profiteering, draft-dodging, drunken, "4-F"<sup>809</sup> lowlife. During the fieldwork, I attempted without success to discover similar prejudices in the British Isles. The strongest remarks elicited, even with mild coercion, were that some military personnel "looked down on" merchant seamen when they met in public places, as the latter's lack of uniforms implied they were not "fighting for King and Country". There were, indeed, times when the British merchant mariner was treated as shabbily as his North American brother, but the full picture did not emerge until, on

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<sup>808</sup>. This is an abbreviation used by Jansen himself in his essay, as cited in the introductory segment of this chapter.

<sup>809</sup>. The reader is reminded that this is a designation instituted by United States Draft Boards (conscription authorities) indicating that, in opposition to 1-A, or "ideal for conscription", these people were inadequate to serve in the Armed Forces by virtue of weakness, ill health, physical or mental disability, moral turpitude, felony conviction, etc., and therefore generally undesirable.

Wednesday, 12 January 1994, I viewed a *TimeWatch* programme on BBC2. In this documentary segment, entitled “Forgotten Heroes”, a number of merchant marine veterans of the Second World War told of their experiences and several stated plainly that they had been insulted, treated with general discourtesy, and even spat at in the United Kingdom by civilian landmen as well as military personnel who did not realise that they were indeed playing their part in the war effort.<sup>810</sup> It is, however, curious that a major portion of the historical mistreatment of the British seafarer has been at the hands of the shipping companies, rather than those of the general public.<sup>811</sup>

The image of the sailor as an undesirable extended even to the uniformed services, as Joe Bennett, a Stoker, and Charles Fowler, a Leading Telegraphist, both ex-Royal Navy, could attest:

Bennett -- “Aye, the uniform, you were some sort of an outcast because you were wearing that uniform.” Fowler -- “It’s quite true, Joe, that you ... could fight for your country, but you couldn’t ... reap some of the benefits of it.” Bennett always remembered the story told him by an old prewar sailor from Lancashire -- he thought it was a joke, but it was perfectly true - - the old-timer had been in China between the wars and a notice outside the Raffles Hotel in Singapore read: “Sailors and dogs not allowed in here.” Fowler had also heard this and both men agreed it was gospel truth. Bennett -- “But nowadays, of course it’s all very democratic and so it should be! If you want in a place and you’re respectable....”(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 8)

Although they were immaculately turned out, many local hotels near their home bases would not allow ratings to enter in uniform. Three weeks before, they had been civilians and could have patronised any of them, but with the Navy suit on, they “probably could die for their country, but were suddenly not allowed to drink with these people. And it’s all wrong! Mind you, it’s altered now, I know, but that’s what it was then!”(HMC 92-65, TTC pp. 7-8)

Charles Fowler knew a Leading Coder who “had made a name for himself in the entertainment world” and was “a bit of a snob”. He wanted to go to a hotel in Edinburgh for an evening meal, but the commissionaire refused to let him in, as he was in naval rating uniform. He went round the corner to a phonebox, rang up, gave his name, and said he would like a table for the

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<sup>810</sup> “Forgotten Heroes”, *TimeWatch*, BBC2, 12 January 1994.

<sup>811</sup>. This will be borne out by both my own interview data and the *TimeWatch* material. See also Chapter Three, Section C. -- “Conditions Aboard”.



evening meal -- "Yes of course". He said he would be there in half an hour. When he arrived, the commissionaire started to chuck him out again. He said he had just booked a meal, and thus was admitted.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 8)

On V-E Day, one respondent's ship was in Edinburgh (or Rosyth, actually). There were so many ships there that the Lord Provost demanded some put to sea in the teeth of a howling gale to avoid having too many sailors in town for the celebrations. Even now this seaman feels aggrieved when he sees pictures of people rejoicing in the streets on V-E Day.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)

The most telling fieldwork datum on British behaviour came from an interviewee who said, "The Merchant Navy were[sic] regarded as they always had been -- staffed by a lot of scruffs and people of dubious character."(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 3) Another did not recognise prejudice against his occupation in his home country, but acknowledged it in the U.S.:

One thing that did strike me when I was at various times in the States was that the merchant seaman in the States is considered a second-class citizen -- not in Europe. But why? I can't understand why the difference, because ... after all -- they've got the same cultural background.(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 2)

The American merchant mariner had a somewhat unsavoury reputation even before the Second World War. Just before the American Civil War, there was a "lack of public support for seamen, since they were either foreigners or **the dregs of U.S. society**. ...class conflict was mediated through the application of harsh labor laws to control **this dangerous class of men**."<sup>812</sup> Even after the Civil War, merchant seamen were perceived by the vast majority of the populace not to be fully integrated into society.<sup>813</sup> This marginality, inherent in an occupation such as seafaring, carries with it the stigma of "deviance" in its most telling sociological sense -- nonconformity to the rules which would fully integrate them into mainstream society.

Howard Becker, in his sociological works, notes that "the visible deviant", by trespassing against group norms, may act on society in the same

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<sup>812</sup>. Forsyth, 7. Emphases mine.

<sup>813</sup>. Forsyth, 31.

way that traditional folklore characters such as evil spirits and demons have done in the past, giving form to the unseen dangers which threaten community stability, and marking the difference between inside and outside, representing the contrasts through which society distinguishes identity and cohesion.<sup>814</sup> In studying such marginality or deviance, it is necessary to take the viewpoint either of those who are labelled “deviant” or of those who have so labelled them and, although a single researcher may investigate both viewpoints, it is impossible to do so simultaneously. It is also inevitable that the researcher will be accused of bias no matter which viewpoint is taken.

It is not a matter people take lightly. They feel either that deviance is quite wrong and must be done away with or ... that it is a thing to be encouraged -- an important corrective to the conformity produced by modern society. The characters in the sociological drama of deviance ... seem to be either heroes or villains. We expose the depravity of deviants or we expose the depravity of those who enforce rules on them. ... Both these positions must be guarded against.<sup>815</sup>

Donald Willett, in a doctoral dissertation on the history of the National Maritime Union, entitled his chapter on public relations, “Slackers and Suckers”,<sup>816</sup> and with good reason. According to Willett, this title was “liberated” from a smear article in *Time* magazine for 21 December 1942, the aim of which was apparently to malign the United States Merchant Marine and to show it in the worst possible light. Seamen were generally viewed by the American public as “outcasts and rootless drifters”,<sup>817</sup> and the *Chicago Tribune* blasted them as “draft dodgers, misfits, yellow, insubordinate and scum” and said they were “no credit to the nation”, but the unions received sympathetic mail in response to this attack not only from Admiral Land of the War Shipping Administration, who called it “scurrilous and untrue ... a libel upon seamen of our Merchant Marine”, but from a number of further dignitaries,

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<sup>814</sup> . Becker (1964), 15.

<sup>815</sup> . Becker (1963), 172-3 and 175.

<sup>816</sup> . Willett, 157-173.

<sup>817</sup> . Willett, 157.

including Eleanor Roosevelt,<sup>818</sup> and *Time* was censured for its uncharitable article by a representative of the War Shipping Administration, who:

...wired a strong rebuke to the magazine for this “intolerable insult to brave men volunteering for dangerous duty.” He reminded *Time* that merchant seamen joined “a service which had suffered a higher percentage of casualties to date than have any of the armed services”... [and] ...further noted that “these ‘draft dodgers’ are volunteering for as tedious, as hazardous and as essential a duty as there is in the whole war program.” He finally reminded the magazine’s publisher that “these ‘profiteers’ would make more money ... from the background of their own homes with the comfort and pleasures of private life than they will make on the long cold voyages to the Arctic or running the gauntlet of ‘Bomb Alley.’”<sup>819</sup>

Despite such support, Westbrook Pegler, a widely-read tabloid journalist of the period, produced articles singling out the National Maritime Union’s President, Joe Curran, as a “draft dodger”, vilifying the “fabulous earnings of the merchant sailor”, and stating flatly that too many seafarers “are drunks and habitual trouble-makers who get away with it because they have unions to protect them.”<sup>820</sup> Perhaps it was the vision, admittedly myopic, yet common in North America, of trade unions in general as hotbeds of communism and fountainheads of “creeping socialism”<sup>821</sup> that engendered this attitude, as the seafaring unions, along with miners, longshoremen, and teamsters, were often characterised as the most radically leftist and menacing to democracy of the lot. Even some authors with a sympathy for the left admitted that seafarers who demonstrated openly against fascism in the early

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<sup>818</sup>. Willett, 160-161, citing *The Chicago Tribune*, December 25, 1942 and the *Pilot* January 1 and 15, 1943.

<sup>819</sup>. Willett, 159-160, citing “Slackers and Suckers,” *Time*, January 11, 1942, 4. Artie Grissom, one of the earlier informants in the present study (HMC 89-3, TTC p. 1) quoted MacCaulay’s rebuttal of the insults to merchant seamen virtually word for word during the interview and is cited in the previous section for so doing. See below in this section for further casualty figures.

<sup>820</sup>. Willett, 163, citing Westbrook Pegler in the *New York World Telegraph* for May and June of 1943.

<sup>821</sup>. A popular phrase among United States conservatives in the 1940s and 1950s, similar to the “scare” term “yellow peril” a decade later.

years of the conflict were often “regarded by their shipmates as “screwballs” or part of the “Commie fringe”.<sup>822</sup>

Early in the war, Curran had asked the Navy to scale down its Armed Guard crews and allow more trained merchant seamen to man the weapons, as the British were doing. This suggestion caused the journalist Pegler to impugn the loyalty of the merchant mariners.<sup>823</sup> One wonders how the British public would have reacted to a similarly scathing attack on the patriotism of their own Merchant Navy, even in the light of the *TimeWatch* information.

Willett cites no fewer than six major confrontations between national media and the NMU, a lone example of the several American trade unions which represented seafarers. Multiply this by the number of representative bodies and add to it the lesser local newspapers; take into account the extensive, vitriolic and carefully directed attacks of the larger media moguls; and you begin to realise that the American seaman had more than the firepower of the Axis and Japan to fear. He had a fearsome enemy undermining his reputation on the home front as well.

The British public, in contrast, often imagined the merchant seafarer a selfless hero, who would sail bravely, unarmed, through enemy-infested seas, risking injury and death, to deliver the necessities (and sometimes the little luxuries) of life to his countrymen, unmindful of his own well-being.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-57, TTC p. 1)<sup>824</sup> The slogan “Britain delivers the Goods” was as idealistic under the circumstances as it was laconic. Any discourtesy suffered by the British merchant seaman at the hands of his shoreside

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<sup>822</sup>. Carse, *The Long Haul*, 15. It is notable that one local representative of a merchant marine veterans’ organisation, pressed me to investigate the presence and activities of “commies” aboard in the wartime convoys.

<sup>823</sup>. Willett, 164.

<sup>824</sup>. Cf. also Lane, *Merchant Seamen’s War*, 2-9.

countrymen was due almost entirely to the fact that, without a uniform, he was not easily recognisable as a hero.

“Well as far as I know everybody looked up to them, especially during the war, because they were our lifeline. And they did a wonderful job... We depended on them for ... an awful lot of food and all our arms and ammunition, things like that.” “...[T]his country has always been very proud of its Royal Navy and its Merchant Navy” which were necessary, because the British were an island people with a far-flung empire and had to keep their lines open, “so thank heavens they had a wonderful Navy to do it”(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 4)

If the public were not sufficiently impressed during the war by their own knowledge or the image portrayed by the news media, H.M. Stationery Office, toward the end of the war, printed *Merchantmen at War* and *British Coasters*,<sup>825</sup> each a beautifully printed and illustrated booklet priced at a little over a shilling. Each maintained it was “The Official Story” of the vessels and men it chronicled, and there can have been no more effective propaganda on behalf of the Merchant Service. America’s parallel efforts were limited to such fictive media as comic books and Hollywood films.<sup>826</sup> The difference between a comic book and a government publication in terms of credibility must be apparent to even the most naive observer.

The Canadian public, more pragmatic than either the Americans or the British, apparently saw aspects of both extremes, or at least so the research would lead one to believe. Fieldwork data from Nova Scotia and Newfoundland generally indicate the attitude toward the merchant seaman depended on whether one was influenced more by British roots or American proximity. Nevertheless, it is an incontrovertible fact that the American, British, and Canadian Legions all expended great effort to keep the merchant seaman out of their ranks on the grounds that he was not a “serviceman.”(HMC

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<sup>825</sup>. Both cited previously.

<sup>826</sup>. “Heroes in Dungarees”, the *Comic Cavalcade* publication of the NMU and the Humphrey Bogart/William Bendix film, *Action in the North Atlantic* have both been cited previously

90-38 ff.; HMC 90-69; HMC 90-71; HMC 92-48, TTC p. 8)<sup>827</sup> The degree of this restrictive attitude varied between individual Legion posts. A garrulous British respondent was rejected by one post and accepted by another, although he said: "You have to watch out for the Legion fellows, especially the RN and Army blokes." (HMC 92-48, TTC p. 8) This prejudice was likewise endorsed by Willett:

American merchant seamen came home to no hero's welcome, no victory parade and no honourable discharge button. **The American Legion denied them membership** and the government refused to bury them at sea in an American flag. Many cities even passed ordinances barring the inclusion of slain merchant seamen on local war memorials. And their government refused to include them in the G.I. Bill of Rights and the unemployment compensation sections of the Social Security Act.<sup>828</sup>

Regarding monuments, a Merseyside respondent complained:

And y'know there was 65,000 people that you lost, y'know, seamen. And, ... it upsets me like there's no, ... monument. Like this is a great port of Liverpool -- there's not a monument here for it at all. There is for the Royal Navy and a few seamen who ... served in with the Royal Naval ships.... (HMC 92-56, TTC p. 1)<sup>829</sup>

Because merchant seafarers had no uniform and were civilians, they were unwelcome at USO or Red Cross Centre. (HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1)<sup>830</sup> But the lack of uniform could be a protective device as well. If people had anything against merchant mariners they would not recognise them, as they wore civilian clothes and went to their own clubs, but also often utilised Royal

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<sup>827</sup>. This particular subject was not specifically searched at the time I was doing the Tape Tables of Contents for the 1989-1990 fieldwork, so the specific sources cannot be cited at present. Nonetheless it was discussed, and the Willett citation, below, should verify that the situation did, in fact, exist..

<sup>828</sup>. Willett, 172, citing Dean Jennings, "Heroes Without Privileges," *Coronet* (September, 1945), 16-21; interview, Capt. Donald F. Willett by Donald Willett, Texas A. and M. University Oral History Collection. [Emphasis mine.] Rhode Island was the only state that gave returning merchant seamen a bonus.

<sup>829</sup>. Presumably by the latter, he meant T124 and T124X sailors. A Liverpool monument for merchant seafarers now exists. I visited it in 1993, near the Liver Building and the Liverpool landing stage for the "ferry 'cross the Mersey".

<sup>830</sup>. See below for a quote from Willett on this subject.

Canadian Navy facilities.. Dick Aldhelm-White never heard that they got into much trouble.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 3)

Merchant marine officers had an optional uniform, but usually only wore the hat for identification aboard.<sup>831</sup> Most Cadets had uniforms, but the only uniform for any ratings, eventually issued by the U.S.M.S. training facilities, was only worn under protest. It was similar to both U.S. Navy and Coast Guard uniforms, but was trimmed in red, and “looked like a Russian sailor”. Some were actually mistaken for Russians by people they met. Some men also contrived “high-pressure dress uniforms” to wear in an effort to impress people. One man wore his to visit his wife at her workplace and she did not recognise him. You were allowed to wear anything, as there was no official uniform once you were out of the school.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 7)

The British merchant seaman would not tolerate a uniform, so he was given a small silver “buttonhole” badge<sup>832</sup> to be worn on his lapel or on his knitted watch cap to signify that he was a merchant mariner:

Americans put their Merchant Navy onto a sort of Coast Guard thing during the war. They tried it here, but it wouldn’t work. Merchant seamen wouldn’t have it, wouldn’t wear uniforms. All they’d wear was the badge.”(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 2)

Many British seafarers remember the badges being issued so they might avoid civilian abuse, and wore (sometimes still wear it) with as much pride as if it had been a medal.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 3)

“‘Cause in the United Kingdom, somebody walkin’ around in civilian clothes, especially when the war had been on for a few years, they’d look on you and more or less presume that you should be in the [Forces], because it was only apparent if you wore that kind of uniform. Now the only identification that

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<sup>831</sup>. A Chief Engineer was once mistaken for an usher at Radio City Music Hall while wearing his Merchant Service uniform.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3)

<sup>832</sup>. Tony Lane describes the badge in endnote 22 of Chapter 2 in *Merchant Seamen’s War*, p. 35. “The badge was in the form of a length of rope tied in a sailor’s knot encircling the letters MN and surmounted by a crown.” The Canadian badge is similar, but bears the word CANADA along the arc of the rope oval below the crown.

merchant seamen had, in civilian clothes...” was the little silver badge.<sup>833</sup> “Now that was the only identification that a rating in the Merchant Navy had. And you could always prove that it was yours, because in your discharge book....” The badge could only be issued once and if lost was never re-issued. This stopped people from claiming to be merchant seamen when they were not. “Because ... there were many copies ... various colours and metals and enamelled over, but that is the official issue badge, the little silver one.”(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 7)

Shoreside attitudes were like everything else. Maybe a bit cynical now, but.... “As you know, ... we were the poor relations ... the seamen were, ... and ... when this war broke out ... they gave you a little tab, a Merchant Navy badge, y’know, and ‘our heroes’ and all this lot ... but as soon as the war was over it all went by the board again y’know and now we’ve practically got no merchant fleet at all.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 1)

It is somewhat ironic that the British Merchant seaman after the close of the First World War was considered part of the “Services”; that the U.S. Merchant Marine veteran has recently been accorded “Veteran’s” status (after a long and arduous struggle against almost overwhelming governmental opposition),<sup>834</sup> but that the Canadian Merchant Mariner was still at the time of the fieldwork on which this study is based, denied the benefits so long overdue and so richly deserved by those who expended their efforts, their energies, their healths, and even their lives to “deliver the goods.”<sup>835</sup>

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<sup>833</sup>. He showed me his own, which he has had since the day it was issued. It was still on the lapel of his best suit. [At the Merseyside Maritime Museum, I purchased two replica badges, one of which I gave my stepfather as a gift, and the other of which I wear proudly on a knitted watch cap in winter.] He also displayed the pages in his discharge book where it showed the badge was issued and where he was issued with his first ribbon of the war, the “1939-43 Star” known as “The Atlantic Star” and also where he had become eligible for his AB’s papers under the Merchant Shipping Act.

<sup>834</sup>. One man felt he had been cheated of compensation for both retirement and hearing loss, as with merchant marine, Army, and Army Reserve time, he should be entitled to something.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 4) Another felt the educational opportunities presented by the “G.I. Bill of Rights” would have eclipsed any pay differential.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 1) And yet a third, with severe health problems, was told on achieving veterans’ status that he had no hospitalisation benefits and all he could get was a loan to buy a house. He already had a house.(HMC 90-62, TTC p. 2)

<sup>835</sup>. “Even to this day the Canadian government hasn’t recognised the Merchant Service as full-fledged veterans.”(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2) The Bill to give Canadian merchant seamen veterans’ benefits was scheduled to be introduced in the House the day before the above interview [22/X-1991]. Ironically, the first place I saw the merchant seafarer included on a war memorial monument was in St. John’s, Newfoundland. At the time the monument was erected, the Republic of Newfoundland was a crown colony of Great Britain. Now a province of Canada, Newfoundland was thereby rendered unable to officially honour her merchant seamen as veterans until July, 1992. Some Canadian statistics will be found in Appendix B.



British seafarers did not receive their medals until recently, but were always recognised as veterans. With the United States and Canada it was the other way round -- they received medals but no recognition of their veterans' status. Only in the last month before the interview did the respondent discover he was entitled to war pensions and disability pensions.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 8)

It took two years to get their medals. Merchant seamen had never bothered with medals, but then, about 1989, someone enquired. Then everyone applied and all have the medals now, "before it all goes into really into history. ... For the likes of us, the end of the war was only five minutes ago."(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 8)

P'r'aps another fact that I might bring to your attention ... was that very few merchant seamen of the rating grades wore medals in them days. We never even applied for them. The ... medals were only issued after the war. And the great majority of merchant seamen that I know of, apart from the officers themselves, who obviously, if they're entitled to war medals, would've applied for them and wore them on their uniforms, but most merchant seamen in my day never applied for them. ... Little did I -- I never thought I was entitled to any of those, and they just turned up out of the blue and I thought, well, at least there's some recognition[sic] of the fact that you were at sea during the war....(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 10 )

Capt. Frank Conley, the first man I ever interviewed for a sealore project in 1965, had a Torpedoed Seaman's Pin from the NMU, and described his experiences in a lifeboat for fourteen days,(HMC 191[65]-1, TR p. 5) but when David Leary arrived home, after the sinking of his first ship, he wrote asking for a similar pin and giving details of the vessel's loss. They replied, "You don't deserve it." He has never accepted a decoration since that time.(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 1) And Newfoundlander, Stan Hoskins, on requesting the British "defence medal", received a negative reply from the Canadian Government, with the words "you are fully operational" underlined.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 6)

At the end of the war, one American seafarer could hitchhike home from his upgrading school in three hours or less, saving a six-hour train journey. There was never any trouble if one was in uniform, but after V-J Day, one could hardly get a ride -- it took hours and hours. He had suddenly become "just a burden on the taxpayer". Nevertheless, away from the waterfront he was always treated well.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 1) The school gave students liberty from noon Saturday to ten p.m. Sunday, and the local station gave them Armed Forces rates, although railroad was not supposed to do so. They sometimes went to New York for the weekend, but one conductor was "out to get them",

threatening them and trying to throw them off. Once the boys threw him off while the train was moving. There was no liberty the following weekend.(HMC 90-68, TTC p. 2)

The most frequently used propaganda weapon with which the merchant mariner was belaboured was the “vast” difference between the size of his paycheque and that of his opposite in the Armed Forces. Willett states:

Unfortunately for seamen this comparison was quite unjust. Pegler claimed that privates in the service risked their lives for \$50 per month, while messmen on merchant ships “grabbed” \$100 per week from the government. Actually messmen earned \$87 per month, plus the one hundred per cent bonus, only while in a designated combat zone. They averaged ten months employment per year and did not receive unemployment compensation. They did not receive extra compensation for a spouse and dependants, for hazardous duty, nor for medical expenses. Admiral Land of the War Shipping Administration calculated that all merchant seamen, including licensed officers and crew, averaged \$57 per week. And yet the myth of overpaid merchant seamen remained intact well after the war.<sup>836</sup>

An Able Bodied seaman averaged \$100 per month base salary. He worked fifty-six hours a week for an hourly rate of \$0.45. On the other,[sic] hand steelworkers’ hourly rate averaged \$0.80,<sup>837</sup> while the Department of Labor reported that workers in the shipbuilding industry averaged \$60.62 for a 47.7-hour week (\$1.27/hr.).<sup>838</sup> Merchant seamen were by no means the best-paid laborers in the United States. The merchant marine was the only American industry that did not receive a salary increase and actually took a wage cut after the war.<sup>839</sup>

Capt. Richard Connelly, who sailed in an unlicensed capacity for most of the war, having achieved his current status “through the hawsepipe”,<sup>840</sup> contends that statistics dealing with pay differential could always be slanted by comparing the wage of a Merchant Marine officer to that of a military rating. He noted that an accurate study was later made and printed in the *Congressional Record*, showing that the actual difference in wage scale was insignificant. Capt. Connelly was also the first man interviewed during the

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<sup>836</sup> Willett, 165, citing the *Pilot*, June 4, 1943, 7.

<sup>837</sup> Willett, 165, citing multiple sources.

<sup>838</sup> Willett, 165, citing the *Pilot*, January 21, 1944, 12.

<sup>839</sup> Willett, 165-166, citing two sources. See also Chapter Five, Section A, where Capt. George Bryson said “What different rate of pay?” and compared Apprentices’ wages (unfavourably) with those of the military.

<sup>840</sup> The reader is reminded that this term refers to rising to officer status through the ranks, on merit and study alone, rather than attending a nautical college or maritime academy.

North American fieldwork to advance the evidence provided by the case of the *Roger B. Taney*. None of her crew was lost when she was sunk, but they spent forty-two days in lifeboats before they were picked up by rescuers. During this time the wages of all the merchant seamen were stopped, but those of the Navy Armed Guard continued to accrue. The shipping companies interpreted the Ships' Articles which provided for stoppage of wages "when the seaman left the vessel" as equally applicable to the abandonment of a sinking ship and to walking down a gangway onto a wharf in port.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3) This claim was later substantiated by others from both the United States and Canada.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 4; HMC 91-12, TTC p. 5)<sup>841</sup>

A British merchant seaman's war bonus (paid by the government) was stopped in similar circumstances, although his wages (paid by the shipping company) were maintained until he found another ship. A prisoner-of-war's "danger money" ceased, as it was considered that he was no longer in danger. His regular pay was also transferred from the shipping company to the government's pensions department, which gave him the accrued lump sum on his release. There was also a system of allotments to assist those at home, which continued even if a seaman was killed.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 3) American seafarers' allotments ceased with their wages when they "left the vessel", resulting in hardships for families ashore as well as seamen themselves.

Never told whilst aboard ship that he was eligible for a war bonus, a Newfoundlander was later told he should apply, but on doing so, was informed that the deadline had passed. "As far as the Canadians were concerned, the war was over in 1944 ... and the last day of the war they were sinkin' ships around Newfoundland."(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 7)<sup>842</sup>

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<sup>841</sup>. Some pay differential statistics will be found in Appendix B.

<sup>842</sup>. Cf. quotes from HMC 92-48, earlier in this Section.

It seemed at the beginning of this project that I would find the landsman's wartime attitude to the seafarer positive in the United Kingdom, where his labour was essential to the nation's well-being, and poor in North America, where the populace had been duped by the media into regarding him as a member of the "criminal classes." This was borne out by the vast majority of the North American research, but inroads into fieldwork in the United Kingdom disclosed that most of the British seamen interviewed felt they had gone virtually unnoticed at "home",<sup>843</sup> while in Canada, or more especially the United States,<sup>844</sup> they were wined, dined, and generally fêted. Stories abound of young seafarers being taken to the hearts of local people or British expatriates,(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-66, TTC p. 5)<sup>845</sup> of their being received into families' homes, invited to cinema studio parties in Hollywood,(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 5) or opening nights on Broadway.(HMC 92-34, TTC p. 3)

Dick Playfer spent over a year as a Cadet running<sup>846</sup> molasses from Cuba to Port Everglades, Florida, and got to know nearby Fort Lauderdale so well it was "like coming home" -- they knew everybody.<sup>847</sup> Younger seamen found many people their own age and were invited into the community for meals, "wienie roasts", etc. "It was like being on a ferry run." They saw both sides -- the welcoming small-town feeling that they were part of something, as well as the exotic atmosphere of Cuba.(HMC 92-25, TTC p. 1) George Bryson had no problem with shoreside attitudes either, and was always treated well in the U.S. They were "regulars" in San Pedro, California, while on the Pacific

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<sup>843</sup> . See also the closing paragraphs of this chapter.

<sup>844</sup> . Seafarers' testimonies indicate that the "red carpet" treatment prevailed as well in other places less relevant to the focus of this study. New Zealand and South Africa are cited with fair frequency by the British interviewees.

<sup>845</sup> . The first of these informants said the United States was sympathetic to England, as the May Blitz was in progress and HMS *Hood* had just been sunk -- they saw the news in Times Square. They kept getting bad news and felt guilty about being safe in New York with hospitable people, many of whom were of British extraction.

<sup>846</sup> . "Running" in this case means "sailing with a cargo of".

<sup>847</sup> . Capt. Dick Connelly, an American who was then a young rating, said that he had been to many ports in the UK, where the social climate was receptive to The U.S. merchant mariner and that the crew "all had girls there".(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3)

run. Capt. Bryson was then Apprentice -- “a dogsbody that did everything and had no authority”.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 5)

During and shortly after the war there was a “Union Jack Club” of Anglophiles in New Orleans, which treated British merchant seamen very well. If one goes into the same places time after time, one gets to meet people and finds them very friendly. The country does not matter, people will take you home, and there is nothing nicer than to get off the ship and go to an ordinary house, and talk to a lady. You get fed up talking only to thirty-five men for two months.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 6)

One night “Shack” Shackleton and the Electrician (a nice Scots lad with well-off parents, who always had money when the others had very little) went to the Berkeley Club, a night club near New York. It was early evening, and there was not much happening, but a singing waiter there found dates for the two youths from among the girls in the chorus line and told the girls not to eat much as the seamen did not have much money. It was easy to make friends. Some of these girls eventually visited aboard the ship. Some people would think “Oh, boy, chorus girls!”, but they were really most respectable. The Electrician got engaged to one.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 7)

The “Yanks” treated the British well and would not let a Britisher buy a drink. The respondent “got blotto”, but they always saw him back to his ship.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 3) Dick Playfer, like several others, found the attitude question difficult to answer. In the States, when it was discovered that he was from the British Merchant Navy, they could not do enough for him. He was invited into homes, bought drinks in bars, taken out for meals.... The attitude was extremely welcoming and there was a recognition that the Merchant Navy was doing something worthwhile. In the United Kingdom the Merchant Navy never got the esteem the Forces did, nor were they welcomed as if they were contributing to the war effort.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 3) The only people Tony Wrench met in North America besides dockers were those who “put themselves out” to be welcoming. They were particularly kind, nice people.(HMC 92-27, TTC p. 1)

Tales of the British Apprentices’ Club in New York City ranged from skating parties, dances, and a free ticket or two to Radio City Music Hall or a cinema,(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-33, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-51, TTC p. 5) to being individually invited to spend holidays ashore in the mansions of affluent benefactors.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 5) The club was not for Apprentices only, but welcomed all officer ranks, especially the “juniors”, and was characterised by more than one respondent as “a great place”.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-51,

TTC p. 5) Tony Wrench recalled it as a suite of rooms with fridges full of sandwiches and drinks, as well as theatre and cinema tickets, bundles of magazines, etc. And records -- gramophone records you could take. He loved going to New York because of the Club.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7)

Other organisations were noted by R.J. Warren, who said:

Americans welcomed us with open arms, and through the various merchant seamen's organisations in America. They used to supply us with tickets for ... shows in New York, ... supply us with books and clothing, and ... entertain us in ... various seamen's clubs, especially the South Street Mission in New York. And I found them more, shall we say, friendly towards us as civilians than what they were in the United Kingdom.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 7)

Rationing cast its ugly shadow on everyday life in Great Britain. American seamen remembered leaving excess stores of food with British people. Food was fresher and more plentiful aboard ship than ashore in the United Kingdom during the war, and there were things like butter and eggs, especially in the passengers' menu.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 3)<sup>848</sup> American seamen became popular for bringing chewing gum, candy, fruit and nuts to children ashore, some of whom had never before seen such luxuries.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-68, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-65, TTC p. 2) A non interviewee wrote:

I was ship's carpenter on the Paul Luckenbach and we had a Scotchman[sic] come out and put blackout screens up on doors that opened out onto the deck ... to keep some dumb so and so from giving our position to an enemy submarine. [He] worked ... for about five days and did a beautiful job.... I went to the skipper and asked him if we couldn't reward that Scotsman. The captain asked me what I had in mind.

I told [him] we might give the Scotsman a few of the things that had been rationed in the U.K. for over two years. Like fresh fruit, cigarettes, etc. He told me to go to the steward and tell him that it was his order to fill an orange carton with such things and that he'd put in a few cartons of cigarettes himself.

Just as the Scotsman was about to go ashore I told him to wait a moment. We handed him that box of bananas, oranges,

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<sup>848</sup> A non-interviewee, Henry Piaskowski, wrote in July of 1995 that: "While in Falmouth, Milford Haven, and Oban [Scotland] -- on the "hook", I always took eggs, oranges, lemons to pregnant mothers -- silk stockings for "scotch".

cigarettes, etc. The Scotsman broke down and cried, saying, D'ya ken, I have a little girl at home who has never seen a real banana or orange in her life, only pictures of them. She's seven.[sic]<sup>849</sup>

One man was invited for a meal by a family in Scotland, where he was fed the same lamb he had given them.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 1 and 3) It is traditional to have hard candy (boiled sweets) on merchant ships at Christmas, so in Liverpool, in 1944, Clint Johnson and his shipmates took theirs ashore to a pub, where it was distributed for local children and five or six American seamen were invited to family celebrations. The Steward contributed a ham, and they also provided oranges, which were very scarce in England at the time; the English had no chocolate at all. It was a memorable Christmas.(HMC 90-24, TTC p. 1) Some Americans brought cigarettes, bought at the negligible price of sixty cents for a carton of two hundred -- even in the States one had to queue for that many. After smuggling them ashore in Britain, one non-smoker never had to pay for a drink for himself, especially when his "limit" was two or three beers. "I wasn't doing anything nice for 'em -- except giving 'em something they wanted -- cigarettes.(HMC 90-73, TTC p. 1)

Even in the South Pacific, after the Battle of the Philippine Sea, there was a standard of reciprocity. U.S. Navy ships invited merchant crews aboard for movies or meals and were repaid in liquor from the British vessels. All one British merchant rating's clothes were U.S. Navy issue; he stocked up with uniforms which came in handy, as it was hot and one needed to change often. Clothing also had value when they returned to England, as rationing continued in effect for quite a long period after the war's end.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 2)

Sometimes the roles were reversed, however, as when American survivors of one Murmansk sinking were given ration books and a "draw"

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<sup>849</sup>. Virgil Sharpe, personal correspondence, 30 May 1991.

with which to purchase clothing in the United Kingdom. Not caring for British clothing, the respondent and his mates “tipped” the hotel maid with shoe ration points to be used for her children.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 2) Another was provided with gifts of warm clothing by the British public.(HMC 90-39 TTC p. 1; HMC 90-39, TTC p. 1) In Hull, on the East Coast of England, Bill Finch, an American ship’s Electrician, was sent to the officers’ mess to eat. A representative of the British Government distributed ration books for food and clothing, a pass to a special restaurant for meals, and the thanks of the British people to the merchant seamen. It was very different from the States.(HMC 90-27, TTC p. 1) And at one London feeding station a courteous British officer ushered two young ratings ahead of him in the queue to get the last fresh egg of the day when he discovered they were American merchant seamen. At the time they did not even appreciate how much that egg meant to the Englishman. Much of the difference in attitude was the result of misunderstanding.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1)

After hearing that story, it was hard to believe the food Americans had in their barracks and commissaries -- eggs, bacon, fruit, rolls, white bread ... (HMC 92-3, TTC p. 3) and Frank Brown felt that American ships had better food and accommodation and the American seamen had more money to spend, but there really was not all that much difference.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 6) At sea they were all fed “pretty well” throughout the war. The Merchant Navy did far better than the Army, though, “no doubt about it” -- and they had a bunk to sleep in most nights as well. “It had its compensations.”(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 5)

Some saw no appreciable difference between the merchant seamen’s situation in the United States and Great Britain.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-45, TTC p. 3) “Pig-Eye” Watson never went ashore much in foreign ports, but always had a good time when he did, as he enjoyed seeing other places and people. He was treated fine and never noticed much difference between the way he was treated at home and abroad.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 3) They were slightly more graciously accepted in the United Kingdom, because of the special wartime situation there, but it was not deliberate, and they were not shunned in North



America.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 2) James McCaffrey noted, “People are the same all over”. Moreover, interaction with shoresiders was limited, as merchant seamen seldom ventured outside certain dockside areas.(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 1)

British seamen in North America “went mad over” goods which were rationed or unavailable in their homeports, although they did sometimes reciprocate, as when one interviewee, a Chief Baker and Confectioner, made cakes for the elderly aunt of a shipmate’s friend whom he visited in Montreal, and who frequently purchased rationed items for the British seamen to take home with them.(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 1) Another informant was unable to visit his uncle in Montreal, but shopped in Canada, buying his girlfriend (now his wife) items unavailable in the United Kingdom, and finding shop assistants very kind.(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 3) The handy practice was to go to a shop, find a female clerk the same size as one’s girlfriend or wife, and buy clothes, which were heavily rationed at home.(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 5) Dungarees and other such items were readily available in North America during the war,(HMC 92-27, TTC p. 1) and one could “load up” on things that were scarce or unavailable at home, like nylons. One informant specifically used to purchase coffee, but not much tea. He did not care for American tea, but found tins of butter, KLIM (a powdered milk product) and sides of ham were popular. The Merchant Navy were not rationed aboard ship, so shoreside purchases were for families at home. You could not come home with less than six pairs of nylons for your girlfriend, female relatives and friends.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 6) North America generously gave the British Merchant Navy reciprocal “chits and dockets” for clothing in the winter during the war. Some British seamen simply took the clothing and “flogged”<sup>850</sup> it for drink money, as they were “terrible people for drinking”.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 7)

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<sup>850</sup>. “Flog” is British slang for sell or hawk on the street. The closest American equivalent would probably be “peddle”.

Americans, even those from Southern states, appeared to take no umbrage at being termed “Yanks” when abroad.(HMC 90-73, TTC p. 1) British were not always so tolerant. In Baltimore, “taking over” a newly-built ship, most of the crew stayed in hotels ashore, but a “Duty Officer” and “Duty Engineer” were stationed aboard. The shipyard posted one watchman, a “dear old chap” who chatted with the duty men. The Third Engineer was a “rabid Scottish Nationalist”. Asked if he had a family, the watchman said yes, “he had two boys, both in the U.S. Navy. One was stationed in Boston, Massachusetts, and the other in ‘Scotland, England.’ The Third nearly burst!”(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 4) Similarly, before the U.S. had entered the war, the States gave the British seamen “a royal time”, but on one occasion “the band slipped up”, playing “There’ll Always Be an England” as the British seamen entered a dance hall. Unfortunately a good half the crew at that time were Scots. “They must’ve wondered what they’d done wrong there. It ended up in a fight, of course.”(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 5) And a T124X sailor said seamen always got into trouble with the locals shoreside.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 4)

Shoreside attitudes are difficult to assess, and some respondents were never aware of any “attitude”, either pro or con. Harold Squires was always treated with courtesy -- but the Merchant Navy always got the bad name if anything bad happened ashore, although they were usually innocent. “But the poor old Merchant Navy, they seemed to get the bad name for doing the things that might’ve happened at one of the hostels, or something like that.” Otherwise, everything went well.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 4)

It has already been noted that security measures were stringent, especially in the U.S., and that customs personnel were particularly hard on merchant seafarers. With regard to the security personnel, though, the degree of severity or leniency depended on the individual. The usual port sabotage watch in New York always included a Pinkerton detective. Once, in pouring

rain, Frank Brown [an RMA Gunner] and the Pinkerton man sat in the cab of a truck in the deck cargo and talked.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 2) Dick Chilton, was not to be allowed ashore for his birthday in July of 1942, as his youth and small stature might put him at risk. The FBI man, aboard to watch the guns in case of saboteurs, took young Chilton to his home in the Bronx, where he had a fine time with the man's family and was very well-treated. He had a marvellous birthday and did not want to go back to the ship, much less home. He had a Navy uniform from his training school days, and the FBI man made him put it on, so he would "look more colourful to the people, being so little and so young". He was very well treated and repeated "marvellous" several times.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 4) On the other hand, some saw the security forces as more of a threat.

There were more security forces in North America. In Britain they were "a bit airy fairy" about security, but you could scarcely walk down a gangway in the States without a U.S. Navy Shore Patrol guard pointing a gun at you and demanding a pass. They also "cruised around in Jeeps" and were very security conscious. Some of the firemen became abusive, called the Shore Patrol rude names, and were "hailed into the hokey", so the Captain had to go down, bail them out, and apologise.(HMC 92-33, TTC pp. 5-6)

The German-American community could pose a problem as well for the unsuspecting British. Before the United States entered the war, Joe Cunningham dated a girl in New York. They got into an argument in a bar in the German community because Hitler was praised and the British were called "Dunkirk harriers". There was a big fight, and the barman held off the crowd with a baseball bat while Cunningham and the girl escaped.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 4) There was always somebody who wanted to buy the drinks for the foreign merchant mariners ashore. In one bar, the manager bought the first round and someone warned the seamen that he was a "Dutchie". The British crew did not realise that meant "Pennsylvania Dutch" (i.e., German). The people who

warned the seamen were unsure of his motives and the crewmen were told to be wary of him.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 7)<sup>851</sup>

One British informant went to a cinema in Times Square and when he emerged an anti-Europe demonstration was taking place, with mounted police charging the crowd. It was an isolationist demonstration, chanting “No, Sir, the Yanks ain’t comin’!” It was the first opposition to the U.S. joining the war, but normally there was little unpleasantness. The feeling was generally anti-Europe, though, rather than anti-merchant seamen.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 2)

Another respondent also noticed a difference in shoreside attitudes, especially before the United States became involved in the war. The attitude of the media was unfavourable to their soon-to-be Allies. This anti-European attitude made the situation uncomfortable. Most people were very helpful, however. British merchant seamen were allowed in some social venues where the U.S. merchant marine was not. British in the United States were never treated like scum,(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 6) although the British at home often believed the “Yanks” were after their whiskey and their women.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 2)

David Grover tried to absorb culture wherever he went. In the autumn of 1943, going from Liverpool to London with shipmates, he was impressed by wartime England and the blackouts, etc.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 1) Some saw a great difference in treatment of the merchant mariner, saying: “They (the British) were so damned glad to see us they were on their knees.” In the States, on the waterfront, you were just another sailor, but at home they treated one well, like any serviceman home on leave.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-48, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-52, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-27, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-65, TTC p. 3) The social climate in Great Britain was receptive to the U.S. merchant marine. They were well

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<sup>851</sup>. Compare these two data with the items in Chapter Five about meeting Germans ashore.

received. All had girls there.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3) The British public viewed them with mixed attitudes, but more good than bad, as they needed the goods. British politicians hated the American “commoners” but the common folk loved them.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 2) One young Engine Room rating, who found it necessary to go ashore in Scotland to be treated for blood poisoning, was given three lipsticks and three bottles of nail varnish by an Engineer to present to his nurses. There were six of them, so he had just enough, although they wondered if it were “proper” for them to accept such gifts. They also asked him about nursing and nurses’ wages in the United States.(HMC 90-34, TTC p. 1)

Although no stories of serious shoreside unpleasantness in the United Kingdom emerged from the British fieldwork, the *TimeWatch* episode already mentioned illustrated dramatically that such incidents did, in fact occur. It might well be supposed that these would be all the more traumatic to men who had been survivors of vessels sunk in convoy and occurring, as they did, in a country which paid lip service to their tenacity and courage under appalling circumstances.

According to the data used by the BBC’s *TimeWatch*:

“One in every four merchant seamen died, a higher percentage of losses than the Royal Navy, the Royal Air Force or the British army. ... In 1941 the Americans entered the war. Despite sailing newer and better equipped vessels, they too suffered a greater percentage of merchant navy casualties than any of the American military forces.”<sup>852</sup>

Casualty percentages for World War II were quoted by one respondent as being 2.9% for the U.S. Marine Corps and 2.8% for the Merchant Marine. This has since been corrected to 3.3%.<sup>853</sup> The percentages for the Merchant Service were even higher if only Engine Crews’ casualty lists were examined.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 4)<sup>854</sup> At one time the casualty rate for ships on the East Coast of the United States was

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<sup>852</sup> TimeWatch script, pp. 5 and 7.

<sup>853</sup> Cf. document in Halley Maritime Collection donated by Capt. Ed March (HMC 90-67/68), reproduced in Appendix B.

<sup>854</sup> This interviewee also mentioned that one reason the pay differential between merchant and military personnel appeared so substantial at the time is that merchant seafarers receive their full trip’s pay in one lump sum, whereas the military pays in small increments at regular intervals.

astronomical. The interviewee cited loss ratios for both merchant and military vessels, saying that it was not until the facts became known that landsmen's sentiments changed slightly for the better.(HMC 90-45, TTC p. 3)

During the Second World War the United States Merchant Marine lost more men proportionately than any other service except perhaps the United States Marine Corps. There were over three thousand Allied merchant shipping losses in the North Atlantic alone.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) It must also be remembered that merchant seamen fought a defensive, not an aggressive war, and tried always to steer clear of trouble, although they did not always succeed. If they could avoid trouble by any means, they would do it, even if it meant breaking convoy.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 3)

With the end of the war, America's love affair with its merchant seamen heroes died. By war's end, at least 5,662 seamen had died for their country. This 2.8 percent death rate in the merchant service was second only to the U.S. Marine Corps' which had a slightly higher death rate of 2.9 percent.<sup>855</sup> Yet the plaudits given seamen after the war were at best miniscule[sic].<sup>856</sup>

The National Maritime Union failed to change America's image of its merchant seamen. Death rates, casualty rates and ship sinkings soon faded from memory. Americans, after the war, retained a dual-edged image of an average seaman -- neither one complimentary. First, he was a draft dodger looking for an easy way out of combat. Second, he was a mercenary who received exorbitant wages at little or no risk.<sup>857</sup> Like so many other aspects of American culture and society, seamen fell by the wayside. They became disposable heroes -- there when America needed them and discarded when they served no more useful purpose.<sup>858</sup>

Sometimes, however, they received official recognition and plaudits. The National Maritime Union mounted a campaign to improve the American seaman's public image and combat hostile press reports. This campaign was

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<sup>855</sup>. Willett, 172, citing U.S., Treasury Department, United States Coast Guard, "Summary of Merchant Marine Personnel Casualties World War II" (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1950), 34. Other sources estimate over three percent losses.

<sup>856</sup>. Willett, 172.

<sup>857</sup>. Willett, 172, citing dual references.

<sup>858</sup>. Willett, 172-173.

advanced when President Roosevelt requested five torpedoed seamen visit him in the White House.

On June 30, 1943, ... the five seamen, all veterans of the deadly Murmansk run, exchanged pleasantries with their Commander-in-Chief. ... Roosevelt was extremely friendly with one of the younger members of the group who had suffered from frostbite. FDR remarked "You and I have great handicaps, but as you see a handicapped man like me became President of the United States. That ought to be of some comfort to you. At least you can still move around on your feet."

This meeting meant even more to America's merchant mariners. It was the first time [merchant] seamen ... received presidential recognition. This encouragement undoubtedly boosted morale within the merchant service.<sup>859</sup>

Although the main focus of this chapter is the treatment of the merchant seafarer ashore in North America and Great Britain, other places were mentioned in the course of the fieldwork interviews. Iceland was unpleasant, as many of her people were pro-German, but Jack Sharrock, torpedoed on the *Andania*, later met the skipper of the Icelandic fishing trawler which had rescued him, and thought the entire story might make a readable book.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 3) Several British respondents lauded the treatment they had received in South Africa and New Zealand.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 3) Once at a football match in New Zealand, the crew was introduced by the mayor over the tannoy as "heroes from the Merchant Navy" and the band played "Sons of the Brave". It was very embarrassing.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 5) South Africans were "tops when it came to supply", especially the women's bowling clubs which provided "comforts" like knitted jerseys, waterproofs, etc. and gave the mariners "bales of stuff" to take home to Missions to Seamen for distribution as well. "On one occasion, when I was torpedoed, I was kitted out in Freetown -- re-kitted in Freetown. All my stuff came from the Argentine. ... Fitted me to a T."(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 2) Corner Brook, Newfoundland,(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 5) and Bermuda(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 2) were remembered less

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<sup>859</sup>. Willett, 168, citing multiple sources, including Joe Curran, *Oral Memoirs*, 210-211.

pleasantly, while the then Soviet Union aroused mixed memories, from getting a \$250 bonus from “Uncle Joe” Stalin because the Russians “fully appreciated” their efforts(HMC 90-45, TTC p. 1) to having the KGB prevent an American crew from sharing food with Russian dockers.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 1)

Some North American merchant mariners had no experience of shoreside prejudice either at home or abroad and saw no difference in the attitude of landmen.(HMC 90-30, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-2, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-11, TTC pp. 3 and 5) John Lappin, a Californian from the San Francisco Bay Area, said he never heard the Merchant Marine described as 4-Fs and draft-dodgers. His father, a machinist for Matson Lines,<sup>860</sup> had previously worked for the Joshua Handy Ironworks in Sunnyvale, California,<sup>861</sup> and for the Milwaukee Railroad<sup>862</sup> in Montana. The family knew a lot of people with merchant shipping connections. Some of the girls Mr. Lappin dated had older brothers who had attended the maritime academies. He felt no stigma at all; the people understood and all “pulled together”.(HMC 89-5B, TTC p. 4) In those days “the general attitude was all for one, one for all, and none for them.” Some men thought there was a warm spot in the heart of most of the population for merchant mariners.(HMC 89-3, TTC p. 1; HMC 89-5, TTC p. 4) Others returned from Murmansk thinking they had “bucked the odds a bit”, only to find the odds worse when they were labelled “draft-dodgers”.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 2) Some felt the difference in attitude between the United States and Great Britain was dramatic. “In the United Kingdom merchant seamen were appreciated. In the United States we were ‘draft-dodgers getting rich’. Nobody gave us anything in the States”.(HMC 90-68, TTC p. 2) But Capt. Mike Curtis, then an Apprentice, noticed no difference in treatment and though perhaps it was because he and other Apprentices, Cadets, and junior officers

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<sup>860</sup> A United States shipping company.

<sup>861</sup> Which produced a large number of Liberty ships’ engines.

<sup>862</sup> Which had connections with Great Lakes shipping.



were somewhat “cocooned” by having their own club in New York. He found Americans very hospitable.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 5)

Many merchant mariners had difficulties with the draft board. They were conscripting men off ships into the Army at the same time they were releasing men from the Army to go back to sea. Merchant seamen had been deferred during World War II, but were still liable for the draft at the war’s end. Some were discharged from the merchant marine after meritorious service, only to be drafted because they had not “served their time”. Some of these men deserted under pressure, adding to the bad reputation of the merchant mariner. Animosity was only evident from “small-minded” people, however.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-38, TTC p. 4; HMC 90-75, TTC p. 6)

Harry Kilmon was in England so often he “thought [he] was on the England shuttle run!”(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 7) He noticed a distinct difference between the way merchant seafarers were treated in North America and in the United Kingdom. In the United Kingdom, people were appreciative; they understood the situation. Merchant seamen were not considered draft-dodgers, but were as welcome as the military. England is a seafaring nation, so seafaring is considered a respectable occupation. The red carpet was rolled out for the merchant marine, and they were accepted as one of the “Services”, definitely. Of course they were called “Yank”.(HMC 90-73, TTC p. 1) A Canadian who also went to Britain many, many times, definitely saw a difference in the way merchant seamen were treated there. “Existence in the U.K. depended on the Merchant Navy, and they didn’t have much to offer, but they certainly offered it. In Canada you were just another face.”(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2)

Stan Hoskins, a Newfoundlander, likewise saw a difference. The Merchant Service got more respect in the United Kingdom and Europe. “Over there it’s looked upon as a profession.”

North Americans do not look at it as a profession. Hoskins is a Chartered Engineer, a fellow of the Institute of Marine Engineers in England, yet he cannot join the professional engineers' associations in Canada, because he did not go to university, even though university graduates can join the Marine Engineers' Society if they are working in the maritime field. Some Marine Surveyors and Engineers have now been accepted by professional societies in Ontario, but in earlier years it was impossible, and still is for those in Newfoundland. "No way." He also felt insulted that he had been deported from Canada as a "foreigner" after almost two years of wartime shipping in the Canadian Merchant Service because of his Newfoundland citizenship.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 6)

It is certain that there were heroic men among merchant seafarers. It is just as certain that there were cowards, profiteers, madmen and criminal types. Heroes are no more drawn to the Merchant Service than they are to driving a milk float and nor are villains, despite the various publicities that have been put about regarding the general character of the merchant seafarer.<sup>863</sup> All in all, during the Second World War, whatever his geographical origin, the merchant seaman was simply a worker doing his job. This is one of the most noticeable attributes of the merchant mariner as reported by members of the military gun crews -- that he went about his work with such calmness and deliberation, as though no crisis and no war existed. From personal experience with tension-riddled situations, I would submit that during times of stress the most mitigating activities are often those of routine and repetition. Perhaps it was this very potential for quiet adherence to routine that aided the seafarer in staying calm and composed in the most violent of action.

Shortly after the United States entered the war the merchant seamen in convoy duty showed the first signs of traumatic war neurosis -- convoy fatigue. Since the U. S. O. excluded seamen from its membership, merchant mariners back from a war zone had no organization designed to meet their shoreside care and welfare. The government ... broached this obstacle in August 1942, when they sponsored the United Seaman's Service (USS).<sup>864</sup>

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<sup>863</sup>. "You find decent people at sea and you find the rotten sods like there are everywhere else. They're only human beings; they're just like anybody else."(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 6)

<sup>864</sup>. Willett, 171.

During the war torpedoed seamen made good news stories. But government care for these men after their ordeal excited little journalistic curiosity. The harsh treatment accorded torpedoed American seamen by U.S. consular Officers and U.S. Naval personnel was one of the biggest covered-up scandals of the entire war. Seamen returned to the union halls with stories of inadequate medical treatment, incarcerations in internment camps and repatriation to the States under the worst possible conditions.<sup>865</sup>

Merchant seamen's lives were as rigorous as any during the years of conflict, and in the light of the casualty figures quoted here, perhaps moreso, consequently it is disagreeable to recall such injustices, which were repeatedly suffered ashore, especially at the hands of the very organisations established by mainstream society to assist those in need of relief. One of the most frequent targets was the Red Cross.

When the survivors of the *Francis Asbury* arrived in London, they were tired and hungry, having travelled all day. The Red Cross refused to feed them, even after an hour-long "pep talk" by the captain, until they were promised payment.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 2)

About three months before the Japanese surrender, Stanley Willner was released from prison camp and taken to an Army Camp outside Calcutta to be dewormed and medically evaluated. The merchant marine got nothing after their imprisonment, although servicemen got new uniforms, money - - everything they needed. The flight home stopped in Gander, Newfoundland, where a Red Cross worker offered Mr. Willner some milk. He took it, having not tasted milk in four years. When it was discovered that he was a civilian, a charge of fifty cents was requested for the milk. He told the woman she would have to "put it on his tab", as he had no money at all. Even the few trinkets he had picked up in Singapore were stolen by airplane cleaners in Italy. They were landed in Washington, DC, given a night in a hotel, then left "on their own hook", even the sick ones.(HMC 90-58, TTC p. 1)

After one attack:

An old four [stack] destroyer came along and did pick us up. They put us on the dock and ... we had a number of men lost, either nine or 11[sic] men lost of the ship's crew. There was a nine man [N]avy [A]rmed [G]uard crew -- none of whom were injured. We had a ... number of injured ... among the ship's crew, mostly minor injuries. But one man was really severely injured. He had a rivet in his right eye. ... And we were sure he was going to die.... It wasn't very long ... until a

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<sup>865</sup>. Willett, 168-169.

Red Cross vehicle came, a couple of them, and they took care of the ... unharmed [N]avy [A]rmed [G]uard, but they weren't doing anything for us. We were civilians. The devil with us. And here we are, with somebody we think is dying and the rest of us are not in very good shape, and most of us have practically no clothes, and we have nothing.<sup>866</sup>

Such unpleasant data were frequently amongst the informants' most vivid reminiscences, and Cliff Rehkopf summed up a general conviction of the interviewees from both sides of the Atlantic when he said that during the war the best dockside "help" came from the Salvation Army, who provided coffee, doughnuts, and similar amenities. Only once, in Cardiff, did he see the American Red Cross do anything worthwhile and "that was for a big show and was being filmed". Since that time he has never given anything to the Red Cross, and seldom donated to other "worthy causes", but always found something for the Salvation Army.(HMC 90-39, TTC p. 1)

One respondent perceptively suggested acceptance in foreign ports while being snubbed at home might well be a result of the "foreign-ness" of the respective mariner, and felt Americans were more hospitable than British.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 3) I quite agreed with the first notion, but differed with the second, as my research had led me to view them as equally hospitable. Perhaps this might have been due in part to my own "foreign-ness", but I attribute it to the general outlook of seamen and their families.

Poppy Williams, the wife of one informant, calculated that North Americans may have felt they were better treated in the United Kingdom, because the British did not make the colour bar,(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 7) and Tom Brunskill said merchant mariners were always welcomed, wherever they went. In the U.S. there were clubs for them, and in England they were just at home and wanted to be at peace and left alone with their wives and families. There is no way of comparing these two situations.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 5)

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<sup>866</sup>. *TimeWatch* script, 36-37. [With minor corrections.]

The two sides of the Atlantic produced altogether different types of treatment, according to Tom Killips. There were 10,000 seamen on Merseyside during the war and one was “just part of the mob”, but in New York they were treated like lords. Merely showing an identity card would get a seaman into the pictures or onto a bus, and they were given such items as free cigarettes. I asked if he thought one reason he was well-treated in North America was that the British call their service the Merchant Navy, but he did not think it made any difference.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 6)

Ernest Tunnicliffe tied this chapter neatly to that which follows, by saying shoreside attitudes differed between Britain and North America. Especially on the Pacific Coast, Americans were very kind, giving seamen magazines and other reading material, which would not have been the case in the United Kingdom. In a British port, “you’d just have gone home and that’s it.” American people were very good to British merchant ships that way. This probably applied to all merchant ships. Americans could always be relied upon to provide reading material such as magazines. The informant’s ship later exchanged these same reading materials with the tug and the other tows in the convoy.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 6)

## CHAPTER 7

### RECREATIONAL PASTIMES AND FOLKLORE ABOARD SHIP

The routine workaday cycle aboard the modern merchant vessel offers little of folkloric or ethnographic interest with the exception of such verbal data as nicknames, slang, and jargon. Non-essential activities such as recreational pursuits, on the other hand, generate a considerable amount of such material, and provide the substance for this chapter. Among the more readily distinguishable specimens of occupationally-linked folkloric genres still found at sea are customs such as the “black pan” and the “blanket or tarpaulin muster”, initiatory rituals, including fools’ errands on which neophytes are dispatched, and “line-crossing” ceremonies -- and the occasional folk belief.

These latter, usually considered “superstitious” even when rationalised by the holder, have been sparse and sporadic amongst the collectanea, which came as rather a surprise, since so many have been recorded in relatively recent studies of fishermen, small boatmen, and yachtsmen.<sup>867</sup> Even a social psychologist studying modern mariners noted: “The seamen’s[sic] experiences aboard ship, his constant contact with a potentially dangerous existence, are certainly reasons enough for him to be superstitious. ... It is no wonder that seamen are superstitious.”<sup>868</sup> A few such beliefs were current amongst my family and friends, but even those familiar items were anything but conspicuous in the fieldwork data.

Seafaring, like mining or commercial fishing, is an occupation reputed to be a repository of traditional lore, but this study deals with a modern

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<sup>867</sup>. Beck, Mullen, *et al.*

<sup>868</sup>. Sherar, 40.

technological service in a time fraught with danger. Survival was the first priority, and the job second; there was little time remaining for superstition. The attitude of the vast majority of informants, though usually expressed a bit less succinctly, was “superstition be damned -- we had to stay alive!”

This chapter is divided into four sections, the first of which deals with the off-watch recreational pursuits of seafarers, the second with what I term “generic folklore” -- belief, superstition, charms, amulets, and the like (that which was most difficult to obtain during the fieldwork). The third segment considers custom and ritual, from ceremonies attendant on crossing the Equator, International Date Line, or Arctic Circle, to burials at sea and “tarpaulin musters”.<sup>869</sup> The final subdivision concerns itself with “fools’ errands” on which “greenhorns” are sent -- those initiatory practices which occur in many occupations and circumstances and are not limited to seafaring, but which may have entirely maritime manifestations which can be examined here. These latter were allotted a section of their own because they could not be considered ritual as such, and because of the substantial number of examples which came to light during the fieldwork.

Since each of these sections is distinct from the others, it has been concluded that no need exists to attempt to link them textually within the chapter; each therefore stands alone as a separate entity. First, as has been noted, is recreation, since it is generally understood that everyone needs a moment or two of relaxation, especially in a stressful situation such as a wartime convoy, and choices of recreational activities may hold some interest for the investigator into ethnography and occupational folklore.

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<sup>869</sup>. Proper definitions of these terms appear in Chapter Eight, and the practices themselves are described in Section C of this chapter, so there is no need to further examine them at this point.

## A. RECREATIONAL PASTIMES OF SEAMEN AFLOAT

Pastimes and recreational pursuits aboard ship seem to have varied with the type of vessel, the rank of the seafarer involved, the shipboard Department in which he served, and his geographic origin. A simple list of such diversions mentioned during the fieldwork includes: reading,<sup>870</sup> studying or teaching, learning by observation, writing letters and occasionally writing for publication, publishing a ship's newsletter, drawing cartoons,<sup>871</sup> talking, taking the air, sleeping, eating, drinking coffee or cocoa,<sup>872</sup> socialising, gambling or simply playing such games as cards, checkers/draughts, chess or other board games, mah jong, dice, or dominoes, doing extra work or personal chores, indulging in arts and crafts, listening to or playing music, singing or reciting verse, swimming, playing deck games, "PT",<sup>873</sup> and the occasional shoreside game of soccer football for the British or baseball for North Americans.

A slight trend towards the U.S. Navy Armed Guard saying there was nothing to do but eat, British military gun crews "never having a free moment" for recreation, Stewards'/Catering Department personnel indulging in talk sessions, and Deck and Engine crews tending to read more was apparent, but there seems to be no method of establishing the accuracy of this impression. It is merely an overall impression realised through listening to the tape-recorded data and reading the Tape Tables of Contents over an extended period of time.

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<sup>870</sup>. "...[S]eamen are avid readers and all ships carry a library whose books are rotated every so often." (Sherar, 10).

<sup>871</sup>. A sample of such cartoons is to be found in Appendix B. Interestingly enough these two were drawn by Capt. Jack Broome, who was Senior Escort Officer on PQ17 and were photocopied from his book, *Convoy Is to Scatter* (London: William Kimber, 1972).

<sup>872</sup>. Tea was never specified under this heading, even when we were drinking tea during an interview session in Canada or England, whose predominant hot drink of choice is usually tea.

<sup>873</sup>. "Physical Training" including calisthenics, using a punching bag, actual boxing/wrestling matches, or simply walking or jogging round and round the deck.



Primary among all recreational pursuits was reading. Most of those interviewed asserted they would read anything legible that came aboard. John Pottinger flippantly alleged that he was “sometimes reduced to reading instructions”,(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1) while another informant told of the disappointment he and his shipmates felt upon opening a large bundle of magazines provided by the young nephew of a junior Engineer, only to discover they were juvenile comic books rather than fare for the more mature reader.(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1) Others described how they and their mates organised the purchase of books and magazines ashore in order not to duplicate acquisitions, but to have the option of trading for something “new”.<sup>874</sup> Many praised shoreside organisations, such as seamen’s missions,<sup>875</sup> women’s charitable societies, or even individual benefactors for having sent regular supplies of books and magazines.<sup>876</sup> One informant specifically recalled with obvious pleasure the large number of mysteries by Agatha Christie and Raymond Chandler in the bundles received by the vessels in which he served.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 2) And the loquacious Barney Lafferty said: “prob’ly that’s why we all become ‘sea lawyers’ I suppose. We’d read anything.” He said they would read a paper two months old or things nobody else would bother reading.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 7) Comparing this passion for the printed word with that which has similarly impelled many academics, one can only regret that there were no readily available items such as telephone directories and cornflake packets convenient for their perusal.

R.J. Warren said:

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<sup>874</sup>. They read whatever they could get their hands on and then swapped it. After everything aboard had been read twice by everyone, they swapped the lot with another ship.(HMC 90-12, TTC p. 1)

<sup>875</sup>. Frank Brown never played cards, but read “a terrible lot”. Wherever he went he would go to the Seamen’s Mission (and once, in Cuba, to the British Ambassador) and try to get as much information, magazines, and books as possible.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 2)

<sup>876</sup>. An American woman called “Auntie May” used to send “comforts” such as woolly hats, fur-lined mittens, cigarettes, and second-hand books. The informant credited his education in classical literature to this generous lady.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 4)

I don't believe in those days we had a library. ... There was an organisation -- The Merchant Navy Welfare and Comforts Fund -- which used to bring out to the ship various "comforts" of socks and jerseys and gloves and protective clothing, which was, I believe was organised by shore establishments. I believe the Women's Voluntary Services had a lot to do with it, and they used to get a lot of apparel sent over from the U.S. and Canada to the U.K. specifically for merchant seamen."(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 2)

Ed Richards, the man from the British West Indies, whose story is told in Chapter Five, read books for recreation. He loved to read and, even on lookout watch, carried a book in his pocket. His attitude was, "If a man got a book there is no loneliness."(HMC 90-61, TTC p. 4) Perhaps this is the most perceptive comment made during the fieldwork, for surely any voracious reader is aware that acquaintances on the printed page never grow old, abandon their friends, or change their attitudes. They are a sure and certain immutability in an ever-changing world and their constancy would be the more cherished amid the uncertainties of war.<sup>877</sup>

Both the United States and Great Britain organised societies which supplied merchant seamen with reading materials as a circulating library and encouraged them to broaden their educational outlook. The Marine Society, founded in 1756 and based in London, includes Seafarers Libraries, the Seafarers Education Service, London School of Nautical Cookery, and College of the Sea among its branches. It provides libraries and educational facilities for seafarers, puts schools in touch with them, and provides scholarships for ratings.<sup>878</sup> The American Merchant Marine Library Association, founded in 1921 and based in New York City, provides similar amenities for those sailing under the United States flag. One of its divisions, the William P. Bollman Nautical Library, is the only public library in the United States chartered to provide service on ships.<sup>879</sup> Despite the existence of library societies and

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<sup>877</sup> I make this contention from personal experience, having been a solitary child, all of whose friends were characters in books until she reached age twelve or thereabouts.

<sup>878</sup> Ronald Hope, *The Merchant Navy*, (London: Stanford Maritime, 1980), 108.

<sup>879</sup> Capt. Ed March expressed his gratitude for the work of the American Merchant Marine Library Association.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 7)

charitable organisations<sup>880</sup> however, some wartime vessels still suffered a dearth of reading matter<sup>881</sup> and had to resort to elaborate schemes of buying and trading books and magazines in order to assuage the crews' appetite for the printed page. One crew of about forty men donated to a common fund and sent one person ashore to buy as many books and magazines as possible, so they could trade without duplication.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 3) Others simply took their own reading material whenever they shipped out, and swapped it on board.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2)

Those who read for entertainment were usually quite erudite, though more were self-educated than scholarly. One of them wrote: "I have sailed in the fo'c'sles of ships with learned men who never saw the inside of more than a primary school, but they could leave the majority of university graduates standing in their gasp of life and its implications."<sup>882</sup> A few, however, were less inclined to indulge in broadening literary interests. One, who said he had occasionally read "little love books", proclaimed during his interview that he had not read a book since he left the sea, thirty-nine years before. He was more inclined even then, he said, to stand on the bow, watching the porpoises and "dive-bombing" them with potatoes from the galley, although he never hit one.(HMC 92-58, TTC p. 3) Others used the term "book" quite readily to include lighter reading material such as magazines, as well.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3) One American, whose own recreational preference was reading, spent some of his offwatch time teaching a Danish shipmate to read English, through the use of comic books.(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 2) Another, however, said he had been much

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Capt. Dick Britton agreed. He did not have much time for reading, though, as there was always something going on. When he had time off, he slept.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1)

Eddie Mathiasin noted there was a library on each ship with "a lot of" books.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 1)

<sup>880</sup>. Books and other gifts of the Canadian people through the Navy League of Canada, were what made life bearable for Capt. Paul Brick, then a Cadet.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 2)

<sup>881</sup>. Libraries were almost non-existent on merchant ships, although the Navy Armed Guard sometimes got books through the Red Cross, and after they had read them, they would swap books with the merchant seamen.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 2)

<sup>882</sup>. Hope, *The Seaman's World*, 92.

brighter and better educated than other merchant mariners, who were “the scum of the earth” and opined that his British counterparts had dialectal “speech impediments”.(HMC 90-16, TTC p. 3)

Not all reading was “recreational”, either, as many interviewees upgraded their seafaring positions significantly before concluding their shipboard careers and such men naturally included their studies in “offwatch pursuits”. From Apprentices and Cadets on British vessels who spent the last hours before actual sleep lying in their hammocks or bunks in the ’tween-decks quizzing each other on points of navigation,(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7) to junior Mates and Assistant Engineers from North America who spent off-watch time in their rooms “cracking the books” in preparation for examinations to be taken when next ashore, there were many, many serious students of seamanship and marine engineering. While others read or played cards, Joe Milcic studied for his officer’s examinations. One had to occupy oneself or one would “flip out” from boredom, he said, adding that many men actually did have mental breakdowns under the pressure.(HMC 90-5, TTC pp. 1-2) In addition to those who studied to upgrade their official credentials, there were a small minority who enrolled in correspondence courses on a variety of subjects and these, too, swelled the ranks of the shipboard scholars.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 1) One of this group said he had read more at sea than at college.

<sup>883</sup>(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3) In at least one European prisoner-of-war camp, British Merchant Navy officers organised a school of navigation for promising ratings and tutored them throughout, even sending to England for some of the requisite examinations which were sat and invigilated in the camps themselves, leaving the successful examinees with fewer tests to concern them on repatriation.

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<sup>883</sup>. By the word “college” an American implies an institution of higher learning equivalent to a university or polytechnic. The educational institution called a “college” in Great Britain and some parts of Canada would usually be described as a “junior college”, “community college”, or “trade school” depending on its curriculum.

Graeme Cubbin was very keen on studying in those days, and had a correspondence course from college on which he spent a few hours every day. The college was very strict about returning work on time. If he were late in sending it, despite the war he got a nasty letter from the chief tutor.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 1)

Capt. J.K. Gorrie recalls an Apprentice's life on a Clan Lines ship was excellent training, but rough and hard. Clan Lines steamers were rough ships. They did not feed so well, but you worked hard. There were no facilities for study aboard, as there were with some companies which had special ships for Cadet training. It was purely up to the kindness of the other officers on the ship to help or not, as they chose. You were very much on your own.(HMC 92-51, TTC pp. 1-2)

Amongst the ratings, there were other sorts of study. These were less an academic book-learning and more a case of hands-on training in the crafts of seamanship itself:

Beyond singing or playing cards, some seafarers were good with their hands, and made models, especially sailing ships (some in bottles), or did ropework.... A mark of the difference between passenger and cargo boats was that on the latter youngsters sat with the old hands and were shown how to do traditional seafarers' tasks. Some excelled at one or another of these crafts and they would compete to see who was better -- a friendly competition, with no friction involved. As a youngster one would be interested and pick up ropework and sewing quite rapidly from these tutors.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 1)

At sea, as a boy,<sup>884</sup> Ernest Tunncliffe learned from older men and was fortunate to meet a large number of Irish seafarers, marvellous seamen, who taught him knots and splices. At the time, he thought this knowledge not much use, but was required to do it and found later, safety-wise, he could secure things as landmen could not. There was always a hobby or something to do at sea.(HMC 92-41, TTC p. 6)

The wartime passion for reading as a recreational pastime may seem strange to today's technologically sapient, but at that period in history it fulfilled a vast need for entertainment in the life of the average person on either side of the Atlantic. There was a huge trade in fiction magazines and papers ashore, public libraries were a source of great pleasure and social activity for the majority of the populace, and reading aloud to one another still formed a central part of many families' lives. Radio technology was not

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<sup>884</sup> I believe in this instance he meant his age, and not his shipboard capacity.

sufficiently advanced for very reliable long-range broadcasting, and public access television was still inconceivable. There were a few widely scattered newsreel theatres and regular newsreels were shown between feature films at local cinemas, but the newspaper was still the basic source for information on current events. The written and printed word was a vital link with the home front for those serving at sea. Reading might be engaged in in a “public” area such as the mess or sitting on a hatch cover in good weather, but it could also be pursued in the privacy of one’s own bunk.

It is only reasonable to assume that the term “reading” as used in the interviews would also cover general correspondence with the home front, writing, reading, and re-reading letters to and from family, sweethearts and friends. A number of men mentioned this in passing, although few specified it as a major recreational pursuit.<sup>885</sup> Especially within a group like the Merseyside seafarers, during a time when telephone communication was infrequent, a single letter from home might carry news of interest to an entire watch aboard, informing the recipient that the writer had been in contact with his shipmates’ families and friends as well as his own.<sup>886</sup> Moreover, if correspondence did not loom large amongst the seamens’ pastimes, what accounts for the popularity of the “mail buoy” in the catalogue of fools’ errands examined later in this chapter?

Men from the Catering Department, whose work was scheduled to regular hours, rather than on a “watch” system,<sup>887</sup> frequently mention sitting and talking, over coffee or beer, as a standard pastime, and “chewing the fat”

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<sup>885</sup>. Carse, *The Long Haul*, 176, however, avers: “The homesickness was worst of all. Long hours were spent in writing letters which men tore up and then re-wrote. Mail call was nerve-wracking, often tragic. Men who had failed to receive letters broke down and wept, and sometimes attempted suicide.” So correspondence obviously was meaningful.

<sup>886</sup>. Receiving and replying to mail usually took up all the seamen’s time in port. Many got a letter every day or were sent serial letters, telling of bombings of their family and friends ashore; the sailors felt safe aboard. There was not much censorship of letters from home, but the letters to home were heavily censored. (HMC 92-18, TTC p. 7)

<sup>887</sup>. These men were called “day workers” even if their working hours fell mostly during the hours of darkness.

is cited by a significant number of interviewees as well. Fred Williams, for example, said his time was taken up with “reading, mostly, and, as most seafarers do, talk.”(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 2) It would be reasonable to assume from the data that talking, although designated by fewer respondents than reading and studying, might be rated the second most popular recreational pursuit of World War II seafarers aboard ship.<sup>888</sup> Perhaps the preponderance of reading is due to the fact that it is basically a solitary pursuit, even when the participant is surrounded by a crowd, and many seafarers are solitary in character. The “sea wolf” tends often to be a “lone wolf”. But even the wolf travels in packs by nature, which fact connotes the proclivity for conversation. On the other hand, the tendency to group conversation may have been so universal and commonplace that many of those interviewed felt no compulsion to mention it at all. One avid reader also averred that playing cards was good recreation, but uncomfortable in the tropics because of the blackout, which meant no air, and reading was difficult for the same reason. He said at night there was not much to do, so one might deduce that nighttime in the tropics was perhaps a time for indulging in conversation as a pastime.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1) This assumption may be erroneous, however, as another informant said the combination of double watches and blackouts during the war, along with the seriousness of the situation, left little chance for social life aboard. When he got off watch, he immediately prepared for bed.(HMC 92-16, TTC p. 1)

The Deck crew had a happy relationship with the other Departments and they often sat out on the hatches, “nattering”, especially while in convoy. Older seamen would tell the younger men about other ships they recognised, which they might previously have sailed on, while convoy escorts were “whizzin’ around here, there and everywhere”.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 2) This competition to identify other vessels was a common pursuit, and, of course, was linked to talk, as correspondence was to reading and studying. If you saw a ship on the horizon, you could always tell which company it was by the funnel and the architecture, but every sailor saw it differently and they had arguments about whose ship they were seeing.(HMC 92-35, TTC

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<sup>888</sup>. It is actually the third most frequently listed, with card-playing ranking higher, but see further.

p. 7) It used to be a game aboard for some to pick out the identity of ships and shipping companies by looking at funnel markings.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 2)<sup>889</sup>

“If possession of a language is the most essentially human of all attributes, then the use of language in its appropriate social context must be the most essentially human of all activities,”<sup>890</sup> and conversation itself is “without doubt the foundation stone of the social world.”<sup>891</sup> The author of these statements studied the activity of talk in many forms and, in at least one of his books, intimated that those who lack conversational skills may be so lacking in other social adjustment skills that they may be clinically diagnosed as suffering from actual psychological disorders.<sup>892</sup> It may then be inferred that sociologists’ hints at the inadequate social adjustment of the “marginal” and “deviant” seafarer, to which we alluded earlier,<sup>893</sup> are to some extent overridden by his enthusiastic involvement in conversation with his peers. Jack E. McGinty, who sailed periodically as a deckhand until his retirement, hated his last vessel, an up-to-date ship “with all mod cons”, as he felt private rooms for all crew members isolated them, precluded the interaction of earlier days and made one “too lonely”.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3)

Nor can there be any tangible dividing line between readers and talkers aboard ship. Not all readers read, or attempted to do so, in privacy, eschewing conversation. Many talkers also read, though seldom simultaneously. To advance the unqualified statement that merchant seamen of World War II

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<sup>889</sup>. The markings on funnels (smokestacks) were unique to each shipping line, hence “Blue Funnel” or “Blue Flue” was a nickname for the Holt Line of Liverpool and a tugboat firm in San Francisco was called the “Red Stackers”. During the war, of course, when ships were camouflaged, the pastime of identifying ships by funnel-markings was in abeyance. Nonetheless the game continued, as they could still be recognised by their outline and architecture. An entire volume on merchant ships, using their outlines as identification, is Commodore David W. Bone’s *The Lookoutman* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923). Charmingly well-written, this book is as readable as any fiction. Unfortunately, the vessels he describes are no longer afloat.

<sup>890</sup>. Geoffrey Beattie, *Talk: An Analysis of Speech and Non-Verbal Behaviour in Conversation*, (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>891</sup>. Beattie, *Talk*, 2.

<sup>892</sup>. Beattie, *Talk*, 85.

<sup>893</sup>. Sherar and Tony Lane, see previous.



displayed a flagrant lack of social or verbal skills would be as erroneous as to make the same claim regarding 1990s teenagers wearing personal stereos in public, perhaps moreso, as reading does not shut out the surrounding world of people and conversation to the extent that earphones do.

Archie Green has noted that:

“Workers build traditionalizing arenas of speech and memory in every corner of our land, at every busy airport and shopping mall, in high-rise towers and entertainment domes. Such talking circles carry their own markers: ‘shooting the breeze,’ ‘clowning,’ ‘taking five,’ ‘coffee break,’ ‘goofing-off time.’”<sup>894</sup>

Because the interviews on which this research is based were not carried out under wartime circumstances at sea, there was no opportunity to study the processes of the seamen’s talk sessions in the context of performance, or as tale-telling displays. The closest we can approach this sort of investigation is examination of multiple-party interviews, and most analytical methods used in performance study cannot be successfully applied under such conditions. Therefore the works of Beattie, Linda Dégh, Howard Becker, and others whose exegeses of speech, performance, sociology, psychology, deviance<sup>895</sup> and the like have been fundamental tools to other observers of the verbal activities of occupational groups have been found largely, though not entirely, inapplicable to the data in the present study.

There was lots of gambling, crapshooting, and sea stories (not bullshitting).(HMC 90-9, TTC p. 1)<sup>896</sup> The biggest form of recreation aboard ship was telling lies -- or trying to invent ways of washing clothes without a washing machine.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>894</sup>. Green, 74.

<sup>895</sup>. The reader is reminded that the word “deviance” in this context means merely unconventional and not really bizarre behaviour.

<sup>896</sup>. See Chapter 6, ft. 18 -- According to the tradition with which I am familiar and which was verbalised by any number of my informants, a ‘fairy tale’ begins: ‘Once upon a time....’ and a ‘sea story’ begins: ‘Now this ain’t no bullshit....’

One thing Capt. Tom Goodyear especially enjoyed as an Apprentice was discussions of all things. Always aboard any ship there would be a few intellectuals. Always. They might be different ratings or ranks. One was a Butcher. There were usually two to five people in discussion and Goodyear found himself “gravitating to them” where he sat on the fringes. “You’d be amazed how knowledgeable they were, although not educated in the formal sense.” Opinions varied and arguments ranged back and forth, for and against. There was always something new to Goodyear and it was a great place to learn.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 4)<sup>897</sup>

Even a Royal Navy escort sailor said:

In any 24-hour day, if you were on watch for eight hours, you were probably sleeping or dozing the rest of the time. Companions were mostly on one’s own watch. There were few others around, as you shared a mess deck. The first priority was to get into fresh air. Much time was spent “On Funnel Party”, which meant sitting with one’s back against the funnel (smoke-stack) on the upper deck, getting the fresh air with two or three regular companions with whom one used to talk about all sorts of things. One of his familiars was a sort of father figure -- an insurance agent from Huddersfield (Yorkshire)-- well-read, and a popular philosopher. It was an interesting relationship. He spent most of his off-time chatting. It was foul in the mess decks. You only went there to sleep and that meant dead to the world on top of your lockers and covered with a tarpaulin. There was not much daily playing of games, social intercourse, etc. That was confined to these spells on the upper deck.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 2)

Some people are great story-tellers. The story often gets better with every telling. Much fiction is often added to fact. There was a lot of story-telling aboard ship in the off hours, especially about the opposite sex. It was no holds barred.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 6)

Taking into consideration formal tale-telling as studied in most folkloric contexts, there was none aboard ship during World War II. Captain/Doctor David Grover, until recently the administrative head of the California Maritime Academy, who himself sailed as a Cadet during the war, stated that crews then were “too young” for story-telling and “there was not a

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<sup>897</sup> “I have sailed in the fo’c’sles of ships with learned men who never saw the inside of more than a primary school, but they could leave the majority of university graduates standing in their grasp of life and its implications.” (Hope, *The Seaman’s World*, 92.)

good attitude for it".(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 3)<sup>898</sup> According to him, they did not even get together and sing popular songs. There was no attempt to "stay mellow" aboard ship, he said, although ashore it was different.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 3)<sup>899</sup> A British informant, asked about recreation, said there was plenty to do on watch and "there was no dancing the sailors' hornpipe, tying knots, and whatnot. That's for kids' books."(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 2) According to the other fieldwork data, nevertheless, although few North American seamen engaged in handicrafts as recreation, many of the British appear to have done so. Knotwork, macramé, and the making of rope mats and sandals were popular seamen's hobbies, as the tools and materials necessary were readily available on most cargo vessels.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2)<sup>900</sup> Carving or building of miniature furniture for dollhouses,(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 5) painting (especially in watercolours, which dry rapidly),(HMC 90-53, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-36, TTC p. 4) building ships in bottles or other models either from scratch or from kits,(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 1) rug-making,(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 1) knitting and other fibrework, even a variety of delicate needlework, were also named as favoured means of relaxation. Many proudly displayed examples of their handiwork to me, often with little or no persuasion. In some homes the husband's embroidered pictures were framed and hung on the walls above his wife's appliquéd cushions.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 2)<sup>901</sup>

Mr. Tom Brunskill remembered a naval officer passenger -- a "hard nut" -- who did fancywork on a cushion (petit point). Mr. Brunskill himself made models. He had served five years'

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<sup>898</sup>. By this, I believe he meant that there were few "old sea dogs" who would be likely to sit around telling tales of their early experiences, and these would not have had much of an audience. The old man telling sea stories to an enthralled group of young listeners belongs more to the Seaman's Home or the dockside pub than to the twentieth-century merchant vessel's fo'c'sle or mess.

<sup>899</sup>. Note that these opinions are not universally echoed by other informants. See below.

<sup>900</sup>. Before the three-watch system was instituted, they stood a four-on-four-off, two-watch system with a dog watch 4-6 and 6-8. Hobbies were pursued during dog watches; the rest of the time one was either working or too tired. Those without hobbies "chin-wagged", did washing("dhobying"), or read. When the three-watch system was established, it provided more leisure and the choice of how to divide the free time was left more to the discretion of the individual.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2)

<sup>901</sup>. James Crewe also read and made models, not necessarily of ships.

apprenticeship, much of it on a lathe, and “was a fair turner”. At sea, he got timber and made standard lamps.<sup>902</sup> He made a teak one for his wife, which she used for years; it is now owned by her sister. A young boy made a lovely model of *Glenorchy*, but it went down with her.

Once the Chief asked Mr. Brunskill to make a miniature cannon for his nephew. Despite the fact that Mr. Brunskill did not particularly want to do this, the Chief insisted -- MAKE IT! About six to eight inches long, it was made in two halves. When it was finished, Mr. Brunskill delivered it to the Chief and showed him how it shot. The Chief ended up shooting the Old Man in the backside. It was an accident. They were very good friends.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4)

One of the most prevalent types of handicraft was that involving rope or fibrework of various sorts. This ranged from knitting and embroidery, through variations on the sailor’s traditional knotwork (macramé) and sailmaking skills (the sewing of canvas) to tailoring, mending, and the construction of rope mats and sandals.

Tom Thornton, when he was not reading, had learned from “an old-timer” how to make “what are called ‘tidies’”. And you make your own ‘tidies’ ... to hang up and put all your gear in it.” He showed me one he uses now, which was like a little canvas ditty-bag sort of thing with compartments, or a more elaborate version of a hanging shoe-holder for a wardrobe or closet door, and decorated with “fancywork”, rather as one would embroider a sampler, with examples of different sorts of knots, splices, and plaiting done for practice. “But mostly I done a lot of reading, y’know, I like reading.”(HMC 92-56. TTC p. 4)

As soon as I started shavin’, y’always done your shavin’ brush with half-hitches, ... d’y’know I still got one up there [indicates upstairs] and ’t’s all half-hitched, y’know the handle of the shavin’ brush. And Turks’-heads on rope and ... sewin’ canvas ... y’often made little things if you could get hold o’ canvas, and some ships weren’t too keen on it and ... mebbe you could steal a bit of canvas or get hold of a bit off the lamptrimmer or somethin’. ... You made all your seabags. I never had a case,<sup>903</sup> I always had a seabag up till the recent years, so you made your own seabags and that all helped.” Men bartered work. Someone good at cutting hair would do so and someone else cobbled the Firemen’s boots, with a last and singing all the while.<sup>904</sup> These were not “hobbies”. The work was absolutely necessary, but there was always one man good at it; some liked the work and were proud of their work. “On

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<sup>902</sup>. The North American term would be “floor lamps”.

<sup>903</sup>. Suitcase.

<sup>904</sup>. See below in this Section, where Lafferty discusses the Liverpoolian Irish singing tradition in more detail.

every ship you'd get someone very good at something. An' o' course, he'd be better than the next fella and...." Lafferty scorned any sexual prejudice attributable to doing "women's work", as these tasks have been traditional seafarers' jobs for generations. His wife will verify that he often sews, and used to make clothing for their children. When he was young, his mother gave all the mending to his grandfather, who was the best at it in the entire family. Young Barney asked once why his grandfather was so good with the "steel bar",<sup>905</sup> and was told when he first went to sea, the old man had been in the United States Navy and when one joined as a boy "at the bottom of the ladder" one was given a roll of cloth and had to make one's own uniform.<sup>906</sup> "And his exact words were 'If you didn't learn to make it, you went bare-assed.'<sup>907</sup> You either learnt, very rapidly, to make a pair of pants, or you went around in your bare ass, if you don't mind me sayin' that, but after all I'm quotin' what he said." Lafferty's grandfather said that in large cities, if you had money, you could take the cloth to a tailor and have it made up, otherwise you had to do it yourself, especially if you were a boy. Some older man would show you how, and that was how he had learnt. Not every seaman got his knowledge that way. ... When you went to sea, you had few clothes, were very poor, had one pair of dungarees, or, if lucky, two. You had to mend them, if they were torn or damaged. You could not give them to your mother or your wife, so you yourself had to learn. "I suppose any fella livin' up in the hills would have to do the same thing." Lafferty sometimes mends his own shoes even now, and discussed today's lack of such knowledge as darning socks, mending shoes, and so on. Some work even then, of course, was sloppy. "I wouldn't say everything we did you'd put in a museum, now. We had to make things do for a long time. ... The Navy recognised it officially. They used to have a special time in the actual Navy, the Royal Navy, they used to have, I think it was Sunday, it was 'do and mend'." (HMC 92-55, TTC pp. 1-2)

This rather "nineteenth-century" style of plain and fancy sewing followed by a substantial number of the older seamen, was often described by the British informants by the Royal Navy usage "make and mend". No stigma was attached to such pursuits and J.H. Shackleton, after describing how he had learned, at an early age, from his seafaring grandfather, to make and repair his own clothing, boasted that he was still in demand by his daughters, who

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<sup>905</sup> Needle.

<sup>906</sup> J.H. Shackleton [HMC 92-42 and 92-43] also had a grandfather, born a Manxman, who had served in the United States Navy during the American Civil War. Like Lafferty's grandfather, he had learned to sew there, and did the family mending, but he was so proficient at sewing canvas that he became a sailmaker and in his later years constructed and erected tents and marquees for outdoor social events.

<sup>907</sup> His pronunciation was somewhere between "ass" and "arse".

brought him their own children's garments to mend, because of his superior skill with a needle.(HMC 92-42 and 92-43)

Beck's *Folklore and the Sea* devotes several pages in its chapter on art to 'marlinspike[sic] seamanship and the arts of splicing, knotting, and serving lines as well as sewing sails and canvas.'<sup>908</sup> He discusses both the functional and the aesthetic aspects of these skills in some detail. He does not, however, comment on the seafarer's ability to sew clothing or on his propensity for a variety of fibre-related handiwork not directly connected with seafaring.

A perpetual interest in music among the human family manifested itself no less amongst the seafaring community of this period, despite the assertions of Capt. Grover as quoted above. A goodly number of respondents spoke of singing sessions and mentioned the occasional shipmate who played a mouth organ, guitar, or other easily portable instrument.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2)

The music in question appears to have consisted mainly of contemporary popular songs and tunes, however, rather than sea chanties, forecastle ballads, or other pieces drawn from what is generally considered "traditional" or "folk" repertoire. One U.S. Navy Armed Guard told of his gun crew singing songs recorded by Bing Crosby and the Andrews Sisters to each other through their headsets while actually on watch.(HMC 90-20, TTC p. 1)

Fred Lewis described how on-deck music sessions had begun on his ship in the South Pacific. Some of the crew had built a lean-to on deck to sleep -- it would be cooler but still keep the rain off. One night there was a general alarm. After that the Merchant Marine and the Armed Guard "jelled" and began to gather regularly for "bull-and-music" sessions. One AB had a good voice, and there was a guitar player aboard, who accompanied the singing. This took place in the Coral Sea during July and August of 1944 and almost exclusively after midnight.(HMC 90-12, TTC p. 1)

Several British informants agreed that there were often Welsh shipmates who sang and the possibility of a "sing-song" on No. 5 hatch in the evenings, which everyone enjoyed.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 8) If there were more than two or three Welshmen in the

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<sup>908</sup>. Beck 192-196.

crew, you almost had a choir.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2) Once people carried wirelasses to sea, getting together seemed to die out. It affected shipboard society, destroying self-made music. Before that, at the least thing Welshmen would start a choir, and there were lots of sing-alongs.(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 6)

Barney Lafferty very clearly linked singing aboard with his family and neighbourhood traditions, and gave his testimony in animated detail, volunteering the information that:

Often people played instruments, singin', or men'd just sit, you, like, could you imagine about three or four men sittin' together just singing ... but that was common at sea, and when you talk about these little pranks, they were part of the thing that made the life, y'know, they filled in an hour of fun and prob'ly everyone on the ship got a ... good laugh out of it, y'see.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 1) Shipboard recreation was generally singing and they always had one or two musicians aboard. Guitars were not common in those days, but banjos and "piano-boxes" were. Even now he recalls men who were very talented, having great voices or instrumental virtuosity. "If they were around today, they would make some o' these clowns look silly".(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 7)

Singing was always popular aboard ship, having originated with chanteymen on the old sailing ships, and Lafferty's earliest days at sea were not too far removed from that era; many older sailors were moving from sail to steam, bringing their traditions with them, and conditions were similar. Ships were slow and there was no other entertainment, but it [singing] also mattered ashore. No one thought it strange if grown men sat for two hours singing aboard ship, because it was done ashore as well. On the streets where Lafferty and his wife grew up, people doing their morning chores would be singing in their homes. As a pedestrian passed from one house to another, he heard different songs, wonderful songs. There were no radios or other entertainments in the homes and it was not a great change to the environment at sea. Even "going out" ashore there was only the cinema and the music hall. People sang a lot. Lafferty thinks in another twenty years few people will be able to sing, if things go on as they are, with television, tapes, and so on. You used to hear music from every home and no one felt embarrassed about it. "A woman'd sing at top of her voice or the man, if he didn't get work, my father, for example'd -- like all the other men in the street... -- 'cause they were all casual workers, y'see, on the docks -- and they would come home from the docks say at nine o'clock, and it was common practice then for the man of the house to help to do the 'peggyin' as we used to call it.<sup>909</sup> ... I'd often as a kid hear him, me father'd be polishin' away and he'd be renderin' English ballads, Irish ballads. That was 'bein' posh' we'd say, renderin' an English

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<sup>909</sup>. "Peggying" was the heavier house chores, such as cleaning fire irons, emptying ashes, and the like.

ballad all night. ... because we, I come from an Irish area.”(HMC 92-55, TTC pp. 1-2)

There was often instrumental music aboard, as well as singing. Some men had a mouth organ and played a lot, and some played banjo/uke, George Formby style. There were a few guitarists and even one Australian who played the mandolin. They occasionally made up “skiffle”<sup>910</sup> groups, often around a guitar player. (HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-10, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-14, TTC p. 4) There was always some kind of entertainment, especially in the old tramps, even if it was only playing spoons.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 7)<sup>911</sup> The ukulele was popular, as well, being small and portable. Alan Peter once tried to take it up, but was never very good at it, although Urban Peters (no relation) played fairly well and still had his after sixty-odd years. There was usually someone, though, with a banjo, uke, guitar, or melodeon. Some ships would form a little band to entertain themselves and any passengers with “ship’s concerts.”(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-47, TTC p. 2) Capt. William Ashton only remembered one lad with a tin whistle, but in the early 1930s many Firemen had melodeons and three or four of the crew would have banjos. He remembered this, because several big passenger boats that went into Veracruz had a full German band playing, as he put it, ‘*Deutschland Über Alles*’ and his crew would stop work, go into the galley and get the big bread tin to use for a drum; others would get mouth organs, “squeezeboxes”, etc. and the result would be a “battle of the bands”. It really upset the German bands, the Liverpool skiffle. They had a good time doing that, though.(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 6)

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<sup>910</sup>. The classic Liverpool “skiffle” band is similar if not identical to the North American “jug band” in which a few genuine musical instruments were augmented by makeshift contraptions such as bass fiddles made from washtubs, percussion sections comprising spoons and pot lids, and comb-and-tissue-paper wind instruments.

<sup>911</sup>. It is interesting to note this reference as the percussion musical instrument known as “bones” (even when constructed of other materials) was a traditional one aboard in the days of sail and apparently its successor, the spoons, maintained popularity amongst seafarers for quite some time.



During the war a number of British seafarers, usually Firemen, still carried “either a mouth organ or a squeezebox”. There was no other entertainment. There would often be a sing-along on the hatches in the evening. There was always someone with a mouth organ, Jew’s-harp, or other small instrument. There were, however, no guitars, “rec. rooms”, or electric pick-ups. When Bill Fortune returned to sea after his marriage, the first thing youngsters asked on joining the *Reina del Pacifico* was where was the “rec. room” and the sockets to plug in their guitars. Fortune, the Bosun, told them it would bother the men who were off watch. They were upset and he was unpopular, but “you can’t teach an old dog...”(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 7)

A number of seafarers, especially junior officers, were accomplished pianists, but their shipmates often remained unaware of the fact, as so few vessels boasted an instrument.<sup>912</sup> There was a Second Officer who practised with a fake keyboard, while humming to himself, and was thought a bit mad on this account.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 1) One old established ship’s Carpenter had a concertina and even a little harmonium. He was noted for coming back drunk in port and playing hymns at all hours.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3) The reason that self-made music seems to have been less popular amongst North American than amongst British seamen is probably that the former lacked the tradition of the music hall, and the continent of North America, being so large, with so many people living isolated from one another, had taken early to the more technological media of phonograph (gramophone) and radio, which did not encourage audience participation to the extent that the live theatre did.

Poetry- and song-writing were popular pastimes on both sides of the Atlantic, however, and Maven Young, a shipmate of my stepfather’s as well as

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<sup>912</sup>. Some, like Gunner Fred Lavis, mentioned in Chapter Five, Section A, became popular shoregoing companions because of their virtuosity.

of interviewees Bill Kirby, Fred Lewis, and Fred McKamy, wrote a parody<sup>913</sup> lyric to the then-popular tune of “Chattanooga Choo Choo”, entitled “Filipino Convoy”:(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 1)

#### FILIPINO CONVOY

*Pardon me boys, is this the Filipino Convoy  
From dock 29  
Oh, brother you can spare me a line  
You leave that Hollandia Harbor, about a quarter to Four  
Sink a submarine &[sic] go looking for more  
Dinner on the diner, nothing could be finer then[sic] to have your bread  
&[sic] beans, aboard the Merchant liner  
When you hear the bombs a bursting head for your gun for you know the Japs  
are here &[sic] not here for fun.  
Keep the guns a shelling, gives the Japs a helling  
Woo, woo convoy here we come.  
I'm gonna cry until I tell her that I'll never more roam  
Filipino Convoy won't you carry me home.*<sup>914</sup>

The fact that Kirby, and perhaps others who sailed aboard the S/S *Marcus Daly* during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, had retained a copy of this parody for nearly fifty years, shows that such verse was of consequence to these seafarers and not lightly cast aside. It is to be presumed, given the predilection for popular music among the younger seamen and a modicum of cleverness, that many such parodies were created at the time and circulated within a certain limited range of shared experience. In *Grey Funnel Lines: Traditional Song & Verse of the Royal Navy 1900-1970*, Cyril Tawney offers a multitude of similar parodies from a broad chronological spectrum, indicating that such activity was, indeed, common aboard military vessels,<sup>915</sup> so its

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<sup>913</sup>. The word “parody” in this context signifies only a paraphrase of the original words, and not of necessity a humorous or satirical product.

<sup>914</sup>. This is taken verbatim from a photocopy of a hand-written original on narrow-lined, triple-punched 8.5-by-11-inch notebook paper. The photocopy was obtained from Bill Kirby(HMC 90-13) at the time of his interview, but it is not known whether the handwriting is his or Young's.

<sup>915</sup>. Cyril Tawney, *Grey Funnel Lines: Traditional Song & Verse of the Royal Navy 1900-1970*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987). See especially the chapter on War, pp. 16-97, songs numbered 64 to 73, including #65, about the *Jervis Bay* incident [Another verse about this incident was quoted by Joseph Cunningham(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 2)] and #69, “The Twenty-Third Flotilla Song” to the tune of ‘Lili Marlene’, a tape-recorded copy of which was presented to me by professional singer and ex-submariner, Tom Lewis, and is archived with the Halley Maritime Collection.

prevalence on merchant ships may be assumed as well.<sup>916</sup> Verse of all sorts, from doggerel to art, has been written and passed around from hand to hand aboard ship. Several letters from respondents whom I never met in person contained verse written by them, and a rather nice piece of apparently anonymous light verse entitled “Mr. Fall Guy”, about the troubles of the Chief Mate, has cropped up in several places during the research, both from individuals, and in a photocopy from *The Tempest*, the newsletter of the Sons and Daughters of United States Merchant Mariners of World War II, edited by Ian A. Millar, of Kernersville, North Carolina. In this case it was noted as “Observed on an American Vessel” and had been submitted by Capt. Edward C. March, one of the U.S. interviewees recommended to me by Capt. Frank Ford. Capt. March was not among those who gave a copy of this verse to me, but my stepfather was.

**MR. FALL GUY**

*(ALIAS THE CHIEF MATE)*

*If the ship begins to roll, call the Mate  
If the cook runs out of coal, call the Mate.  
If the old man goes to bed, if you see a squall ahead  
If you need the sounding lead, call the Mate.*

*If the running lights are out, call the Mate.  
If your latitude's in doubt, call the Mate.  
If the wind begins to howl, if the sailors start to growl  
If the whistle cord gets foul, call the Mate.*

*If you're coming into port, call the Mate.  
If the night lunch runs too short, call the Mate.  
If the cargo starts to shift, if the skiff is going adrift  
If the fog begins to lift, call the Mate.*

*If you want to drop the hook, call the Mate.  
If you're looking for the cook, call the Mate.  
If you run a light abeam, if the chief won't give you steam  
If the steward has no cream, call the Mate.*

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<sup>916</sup> . Ronald Hope of The Marine Society has collected and published several anthologies of seafarers' writings, at least one of which is entirely given to verse. Several correspondents who were not interviewed also sent me poems they had written. Song/poetry and seafarers seem to go together.

*If you need a hand on deck, call the Mate.  
If the gangplank is a wreck, call the Mate.  
If the capstan's on the blink, if a drunk falls in the drink  
If you don't have time to think, call the Mate.*

*If the boxes won't defrost, call the Mate.  
If the chartroom key is lost, call the Mate.  
If the windlass won't work, if the reefers gone berserk [sic]  
If the night mate is a jerk, call the Mate.*

*Yes, that's who the fall guy is:  
All the petty griefs are his --  
That poor old bird never gets a pleasant word.  
Thank the Lord I'm only the "Third" not the Mate.*

Even familiar prayers were parodied, but these may have achieved a wider circulation. Fred Lewis(HMC 90-12) took a seafaring parody of the Twenty-Third Psalm, typed it onto a photocopy of a photograph taken by him of a merchantman's bow cleaving the water as seen from her bridge, and reduplicated it for distribution to friends and old shipmates. The prayer is as follows:

#### SEAMAN'S PRAYER

*The LORD is my pilot; I shall not drift.  
He lighteth me across the dark waters;  
He steereth me in the deep channels;  
He keepeth my log.*

*He guideth me by the star of holyness[sic]  
For His name's sake.  
Yea, though I sail 'mid the thunders  
And tempests of life,*

*I shall dread no dangers;  
For THOU art near me.  
They love and Thy care,  
They shelter me.*

*Thou preparest a harbor before me  
In the homeland of eternity.  
Thou anointest the waves with oil;  
My ship rideth calmly.*

*Surely sunlight and starlight shall  
Favor me on the voyage I take,  
And I will rest in the port of  
My GOD forever.*<sup>917</sup>

I have seen another prayer parody taped up in the Engine Room of a ferryboat which was a floating exhibit at the San Diego Maritime Museum, but I was unable to acquire a copy of it. Although I do not recall whether it was based on The Lord's Prayer or, like this one, on the Twenty-Third Psalm, I do remember it was in a humorous and satirical vein, implying that the Chief Engineer wielded divine powers -- although I am certain that some among the black gang almost believed this to be the case.

Songs and poetry were made up aboard one tanker, perhaps written by the Radioman. These verses were posted with the notices on the bulletin board, and there were cartoons, about four by five inches, about characters aboard that ship.<sup>918</sup> The informant never found out who did them. He always intended to save one, but never did and still wishes he had.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 7)

The question of whether recitations formed a regular part of shipboard recreation was only asked sporadically. I could not seem to bring it to mind at every interview. Those who were asked if verse was recited were almost equally divided into "never" and "always/constantly". Capt. Mike Curtis never knew anyone who memorised and recited verse,(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 5) but Frank Brown, a Gunner, although not overly fond of verse himself, opined that: "Merchant seamen could always quote poetry."(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 4) And Joe Cunningham broke into recitation midway through the interview:

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<sup>917</sup>. Several copies of this document described were given me by Fred Lewis(HMC 90-12) at the time of his interview.

<sup>918</sup>. See previous remarks regarding cartoons. Cartoons are also mentioned in HMC 90-60, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2 ("Klassy Keith"); and HMC 92-68, TTC p. 5.

Twenty-eight ships with food for you;  
 Twenty-eight ships that must get through.  
 The Atlantic calm at dusk of day,  
 A shell screamed over the *Jervis Bay*.  
 Twenty-eight ships, full speed ahead,  
 Off with their needed cargo sped,  
 But over to where the warship lay,  
 Guns blazing, went the *Jervis Bay*. [...] <sup>919</sup>  
 She sank with the sun at the death of day,  
 And the guns still spoke from the *Jervis Bay*. (HMC 92-7, TTC p. 2)

In *The Merchant Seamen's War*, Tony Lane noted an instance when a lifeboat-ful of twenty-three survivors of a vessel sunk in the equatorial region of the North Atlantic were mentally and emotionally sustained by the Mate reading aloud to them from a book of English verse which included such un-nautical items as "Ode on a Grecian Urn". All survived the ordeal at sea, perhaps to some extent because they drew solace from the poetry.<sup>920</sup> Dick Playfer, however, remembered only that some shipmates composed or recited "rude verse"<sup>921</sup>, but had little or no memory of other recitations, except for one Welsh Chief Officer who recited Masfield. The most frequent recreation was talking, then cards. Those who did sewing or ropework were in the minority, and there was not much reading or music. A few men sang well, and there was the odd guitar or sing-song, but not often. (HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5)

Several times, when my stepfather and his cronies have had a get-together, someone, usually Capt. Carter Houston, has begun (and often finished) a song or recitation. Some of his repertoire is humorous, even risqué; some is not. Some is the work of established authors; some is traditional; some falls into neither category. Sometimes, if one of this group of ex-mariners begins to recite a well-known verse by an established author and stumbles in the middle of it, one of the others will take it up and fill in the

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<sup>919</sup>. Several songs and poems were written about this incident. Another appears numbered 65 in Cyril Tawney, *Grey Funnel Lines: Traditional Song and Verse of the Royal Navy 1990-1970*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 86).

<sup>920</sup>. Lane, *The Merchant Seamen's War*, 254.

<sup>921</sup>. For the North American reader, the word "rude" in this context indicates risqué or even thoroughly obscene matter, rather than the simply coarse or vulgar.

gaps, and the entire recitation will become a joint effort, each man reciting alternate verses with the other there to back him up when he falters.<sup>922</sup> Carter Houston also allowed my family to photocopy a book of “official”<sup>923</sup> U.S.M.S. sea chanteys, one copy of which is in the Halley Maritime Collection, and is well-known amongst his acquaintances for telling “naughty” jokes and stories, including one recitation which I never heard, but which was recommended to me by my late mother under the dubious title of “The Man With No Balls At All”.<sup>924</sup>

As has been shown, there appears to have been more self-made music among British and Newfoundland mariners than among those from the United States or mainland Canada, but some respondents, especially American junior Engineers, said they had brought phonographs aboard.<sup>925</sup> They bought records ashore, and those who frequented the Apprentices’ Club in New York discovered a further repository of records free for the taking.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7) Privately owned radios were not permitted in the crew’s quarters,(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) as the early sets had a tendency to “rebroadcasting” which could be picked up by enemy aircraft or submarines. One respondent said:

“... you couldn’t use radio receivers, because they caused too much oscillation, which submarines could pick up, so in that respect there was no outside entertainment as regards to radio -- television wasn’t even heard of in those days.”(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 2) And a second concurred: “As I said before, you’ve got to realise there were no radios on, outside the official ship’s radio. You got no news -- well I’m talkin’ now mainly of cargo

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<sup>922</sup>. This happened on one occasion in late November or early December 1989, when Capt. Houston and Capt. Charles Sauerbier were visiting my parents at their home in Arroyo Grande CA. One began to recite “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, whilst standing in the living room. The other took him up as they moved through the dining room, and they finished their verse-on-verse recitation in the kitchen, reciting in unison.

<sup>923</sup>. Unfortunately these were intended for public performance by male voice choir or soloists and are heavily bowdlerised as are most printed versions of these songs.

<sup>924</sup>. Although I have seen several archived data under this or similar titles, I have no way of knowing, unheard, which variant our friend’s most resembles.

<sup>925</sup>. Clinton Johnson(HMC 90-25, TTC p. 1) found when he got off watch he could get in and out of the shower and dry enough to change the record in the space of a single song. The phonograph was very important to Johnson, especially as cameras were not allowed. Recreation otherwise was reading magazines, writing letters, and working. He “did not mind having no booze, but would have minded having no music”.

ships, tramp steamers and that and they, you could be at sea quite a number of weeks and just nothing done or the same routine, outside changin' weather -- you may get bad weather, they may get good weather, you might be in an area where you're continually runnin' in with good weather." (HMC 92-54, TTC pp. 1-2)

When "Scott" receivers were developed, many ships acquired them and used the tannoy or Public Address system of the vessel to broadcast popular programmes of the day, including both news and music. (HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1) It was through this medium that a number of seafarers listening to "Lord Haw-Haw", "Tokyo Rose", or "Axis Sally" heard reports of the sinking of their own vessel "with all hands" while in fact she was steaming merrily along on her assigned course with a cargo of war materiel or troops. (HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)<sup>926</sup> In addition, the men used often to dance with one another aboard -- and ashore, when female partners were in short supply -- and considered there was nothing wrong, or even mildly suspect, in so doing. (HMC 90-4, TTC p. 1)<sup>927</sup>

One of the British respondents covered nearly everything involved in this area of the research by saying:

They had dominoes, draughts [checkers], and cards, but even in the early days ... there was a great number of people aboard the ship over and above the normal ship's complement and one could say there was never really a dull moment, because we'd mix together quite a lot and we must remember in them days that there was no access to radio, because it was complete radio silence. ... But I think all the normal -- there was games like deck quoits, that you used to play on the hatch and there was always somebody skylarkin' around in those early days anyway, but there was never any really organised entertainment. (HMC 92-50, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>926</sup>. A letter from John B. Wilson, dated 9 February 1990, says: "I was on the Liberty ship *Clarence King* off the north coast of New Guinea in 1943. It was a small convoy of six ships and a small escort. The island of New Britain was visible all day. It was still Jap held.[sic] All the trip Jap planes circled us out of gun range. That night at Lae we turned on Tokyo Rose. She reported that our convoy, and correctly named all the ships, had been attacked and sunk. Not only sunk, but there were no survivors. We had 800 troops on us so that convoy loss was a major defeat of the United States. Being dead is no big deal. No one knows of my demise but me and Tokyo Rose." A later letter reports: "I was twenty-one when I died." This correspondent had a sense of humour!

<sup>927</sup>. For shipboard attitudes toward homosexual behaviour, see Chapter Five.



Card playing, especially two-man games such as cribbage, (usually referred to simply as “crib” in the interviews)<sup>928</sup> were suggested as typical recreational pursuits by quite a large number of interviewees on both sides of the Atlantic, but dominoes, chess, draughts/checkers or other board games were cited less frequently, and more by British than by North American respondents. A borderline majority of informants indicated that gambling as such was generally less frowned upon by the authorities than by the men themselves, which was surprising.<sup>929</sup> However not all seafarers adopted this morally superior stance, as the practice of gambling is mentioned far too often in the fieldwork data for that to be the case. One Apprentice said he and his mates used to “win hundreds of pounds from each other -- on paper -- at poker.” Rather than play with matchsticks or other such markers, however, they used all the small change they had accumulated in foreign ports, in all its varied coinages.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7) And Capt. William Dennis said, “We had to play cards, because we weren’t allowed to steal money.”(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 1) Nor was card-playing the only type of gambling. Dice games (especially craps) were always popular, or there might be a ship’s pool as described by one informant:

In the coal trade from the U.S. to Europe, the ship would leave the States for Port au Prince and then be sent a message telling them their ultimate destination. There was a pool, gambling on which port would be the eventual destination. A player would buy a ticket for a dollar, and write on it the name of a port. If he were correct, he would “take the pot”.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 3)

Gambling with cards and crap-shooting were especially popular on troopships,(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 1) and the stakes at sea were not always money.

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<sup>928</sup>. Cribbage was one of the most popular card games aboard. One interviewee facetiously suggested that the reason cribbage was so popular with the “Black Gang” was “the intelligence factor -- the Deck Department could not count that far”.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3) They played crib or other card games, if someone had a deck -- cards were not supplied [by the shipping companies] as they would be today.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 7)

<sup>929</sup>. Capt. Michael Curtis did not think “cards” aboard was a good thing, as it caused discontentment.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 1) Capt. Harold Skelly never played cards. He had hated cards ever since, on his first voyage, he had seen two officers fight over a card game.(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 6)

Cigarettes or other tobacco products were commonly wagered, but the most unusual bets were made in sugar. Ships in Arctic convoys were often stranded for long periods of time without the opportunity to restock food supplies, and were running low when they arrived in Russia. On one they could not even bake bread, because the sugar supply was so low, so they took some sugar from the cargo and rationed it at five pounds per man per month. Gambling stakes were set at a shot-glass of sugar instead of money. The informant won twenty pounds of sugar shooting dice and donated it to the galley for pies and other sweets. The Navy Armed Guard aboard were more distressed by the shortage of sugar than were the rest of the crew.<sup>930</sup>(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)

Bridge and solo whist, as well as “crib”, had some popularity with British deck officers. Poker was played more by American ratings, especially on troopships, where a seafaring cardsharp might victimise the “passengers”, but discharge them from the vessel before he was detected. Craps and other such non-card gambling games are seldom mentioned except by the occasional “riverboat gambler” type boasting of having bilked military passengers of their earnings just before arrival at some exotic port.<sup>931</sup>

It may perhaps be logically assumed that card-playing was more generally popular than board games because a deck or two of cards (and a cribbage board) were less expensive to purchase as well as easier to keep and carry than a set of chessmen or draughts. Moreover, if pegs from a cribbage board were lost, they could be replaced with matchsticks or even rolled-up cardboard, while a deck which was missing cards might be filled out with another deck which was lacking others, or the jokers might be used or replacements made by hand.. It would have been far more difficult to replace

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<sup>930</sup>. For further comment on the U.S. Navy Armed Guard and their position on food supplies, see Chapter Five, the section on relations between merchant and military personnel.

<sup>931</sup>. Although the most outspoken of the lot was a poker player who won 186 cartons [200 each] of cigarettes which he sold in Cherbourg for \$20 [U.S.] apiece and had champagne for breakfast.(HMC 90-38, TTC p. 2)

game pieces for more intricate sets, but one interviewee was virtually addicted to mah jong and said every player aboard carried his own set.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 2) An American Engine Room rating learned chess from a Fireman with whom he served, eventually becoming so “hooked” that he had to limit himself to three games a night or found he could not sleep for “playing chess in his head”.(HMC 90-35, TTC p. 1)

Despite the assertions of two ladies I met in a railway coach en route to the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, the expression “Housey-Housey” appears to have been an invention of the British Army, not the sea-going services, who seem to have called the same game “Tombola” (not in its present fun-fair incarnation). It was seldom played aboard except in the ship’s home port and almost never on merchant vessels. This particular “Tombola”, I was told, was nothing more nor less than a form of what is now commonly known as “Bingo”, in which unique and somewhat esoteric names were given to the numbers involved.<sup>932</sup> Informants<sup>933</sup> have attested that this was the only gambling game legally permitted the men of the Royal Navy,<sup>934</sup> although they sometimes indulged in an illicit game of “Crown and Anchor”, a game which was mentioned in passing, but never actually described to me.

On those passenger vessels used for civilian evacuation and on some of the more luxurious ones taken over as troopships, such deck sports as shuffleboard, deck quoits, and deck tennis were still played, occasionally in a team fashion with the ship’s junior officers opposing the passengers (civilian evacuees or other junior officers from the troops aboard). Passenger liners used as troopships usually boasted genuine swimming pools, but these were

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<sup>932</sup> The two I recall, which were given me by several of the British Royal Navy respondents, would likely be familiar to a British bingo-player today, but would not be so to a North American: “Doctor’s orders” for nine and “full English breakfast” for ten. British doctors tell their patients to said ninety-nine, rather than simply “Aaaah”, and the numerals 10 resemble a strip of bacon and an egg.

<sup>933</sup> Joseph Bennett and Charles Fowler, HMC 92-64 and 92-65.

<sup>934</sup> By this term I mean not only the regular RN, but also the RNR and RNVR on active duty.

often unavailable for their intended purpose, having been filled with extraneous bits of cargo as additional hold space or arranged to billet further troops. Nonetheless, seafarers aboard cargo vessels in tropical waters often used their ingenuity to build swimming pools on deck between the hatch and the gunwale on one side, using hatch boards or dunnage lined with a tarpaulin, and filling the resultant pool by means of the fire hose.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 3) Less luxurious passenger vessels might have carried collapsible pools which could be assembled on deck.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 1)<sup>935</sup> Immediately post-war, when armaments were removed from merchantmen, a number of crews transformed the after gun tub [gun pit] into a makeshift pool, which was then used by everyone “from the ship’s dog to the Captain.”(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 3)

It is apparent from the descriptions that a sizeable number of the jury-rigged variety might better have been described as “sitting-in-the-water-and-cooling-off” pools rather than as “swimming” pools per se, but this was not an inevitable circumstance and certainly made them no less popular if they served the latter purpose successfully. Swimming “over the side” in the sea itself was also indulged in when at anchor in safe tropical waters. It was not always safe: in Bahrein, one could swim whilst in port, but with the water temperature around 96° F., one could get heat prostration whilst swimming,(HMC 90-25, TTC p. 1) and it was impossible to swim in the waters off New Guinea because of poisonous sea snakes.(HMC 90-19, TTC p. 3)

An occasional mention is made of boxing matches,<sup>936</sup> usually held in a makeshift ring on one of the hatches, but this pastime became less and less frequently cited later in the war, as the incidence and volume of deck cargoes

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<sup>935</sup>. On one cargo ship which carried eight passengers and had a swimming pool, the crew could use the pool, but only at specifically allotted times, to avoid contact with the passengers.(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 1)

<sup>936</sup>. Albert Precious said once, in the Mediterranean, the troops aboard set up boxing matches on No. 3 hatch. Nearby ships crowded in to watch and had to be reminded to keep their stations.(HMC 90-36, TTC p. 1)

increased. Only a few alluded to calisthenics or physical training exercises. In Capt. David Grover's experience, no recreational equipment at all was provided aboard cargo ships and nobody brought anything with them in the way of equipment, either. He himself used to jog on deck, but no one else did. One ship on which he sailed could easily have had a boxing ring atop the deckload but did not, as there were neither gloves nor interest.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 3)

Occasionally English interviewees have mentioned ships' football teams,(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-60, TTC p. 3) whether regular sides with matching jerseys in the vessel's or company's colours or slapdash affairs thrown together for one game only, during which the participants wore seaboots, dungarees, and heavy jumpers/sweaters. It is to be assumed that the "football" to which they allude is soccer, as it is a more proletarian and universal game than is rugby. One respondent noted some pilots aboard a Canadian escort aircraft carrier had been seen playing "football" on deck in shorts while their ship was "rolling like a Bowery whore" in a North Atlantic gale, and soccer was specified. This informant considered the situation "funny", though whether in the sense of humour, oddness, or both, was not immediately apparent.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 1)

It is highly unlikely that "American football" would have been played to any degree, as it would have required much more elaborate and protective gear,<sup>937</sup> although North Americans do mention occasional shoreside "ball games" which would almost as certainly have been baseball.<sup>938</sup> Other physical training is most often mentioned on an individual basis, although military personnel, both ship's Gunners and "passenger" troops are occasionally cited as having practised a regular routine of calisthenics in which some

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<sup>937</sup>. The occasional "touch" or "tag" American football game might have occurred.

<sup>938</sup>. See comment from Jim Moore, below.

crewmembers found pleasure in joining. Ships which had been passenger liners often had the facilities for deck games, and some ship's personnel, especially junior officers, indulged in these.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3)

Although several interviewees acknowledged that there were no "movies" aboard merchant ships,<sup>939</sup> troopships and North American escort vessels usually had a cinema projector and some films aboard. These were not only training films, but also first-run theatre-cinema productions as well. A U.S. Navy rating who had served in destroyers, said that in port, in a secure harbour, they had movies, although he did not believe that this was true of the Merchant Marine.<sup>940</sup> The Navy's recreation, he averred, was better organised than that of the Merchant Marine. The former usually had an "athletic officer" who set up ballgames in port, which were good for morale, exercise, everything.(HMC 90-9, TTC p. 1)

Recreations, as is evident, were many and varied. One of my early correspondents wrote in a letter dated 19 March 1990:

Recreation off watch. On my first trip on the Francis Preston Blair[sic] (a mystery ship) some guys built a swimming pool. Most of the time was spent just talking. As one man said "We chase the women all over the ocean and sail the ships all over the bar." On the Clarence King we built a small sail boat, which had proudly emblazoned on her sail "shit King, Jr." We also in Port Moresby painted a penis and testicles in red lead about 400 feet long. The local admiral got quite upset over our art work and ordered it painted over. So much for art appreciation. I think it was also on the King that two or three men would sing any song that anyone could think of. They even knew the words to "Who Threw the Overalls in Mrs. Murphy's Chowder." On the King when the first mate would give us orders for the day (in port) I would say, "Yes sir, very good, sir, fuck you, sir." [this sentence is scored through in pen] He always stared at me but never said anything. I was looking at the keyboard. The correct quote would be "Yes sir, very

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<sup>939</sup>. Merchant ships in this case refers only to cargo vessels and tankers, as troopships would be considered to be operating in a military capacity.

<sup>940</sup>. There were no movies on merchant ships.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 3)

good sir, right away sir, fuck you sir.”<sup>941</sup> Discipline was not naval.

Another crew stole a little wooden boat in Panama and kept it aboard, occasionally rowing about. The Bosun set them to repainting the draught numbers on the hull, and they also painted “Is this trip necessary?” The latter provoked great mirth, as it was the slogan used on the home front to make people think twice about using rationed fuel for trivial reasons.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 6)

Many interviewees made the point that there was almost no time that could accurately be described as “leisure” during convoys and spoke of extra work duties assigned them to keep them busy.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 6) Almost all military informants emphasised the time spent in maintenance of armaments and in practice drills. One, on first being asked about his recreational pursuits, laughingly remarked “What recreation?” and maintained that most “free time” was spent in “busy work”, cleaning guns and equipment, policing quarters, firing practice. However, he then added that he had read a lot and that musical radio programmes had been “piped” through the messes.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 1)

An American Army Transport Service paymaster, who worked with the Chief Surgeon on hospital ships during part of his time at sea, stated that there was never a dull moment.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 6) British informants described “field days” -- a sort of extra work detail outside of normal watchkeeping hours<sup>942</sup> -- and also informed me that the military gunners aboard, whether DEMS, Royal Marines, or Territorial Army<sup>943</sup> volunteers, were occasionally given extra duties by the Merchant Navy officers, whereby they might augment their scanty military pay.(HMC 90-20, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-49, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-48, TTC pp. 6-7; HMC 92-61, TTC p. 5)

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<sup>941</sup>. Cf. the same remark from “Tex” English, as documented in Chapter Eight.

<sup>942</sup>. See also the section on Favourite Watches in Chapter Four and the Glossary for further discussion of this term.

<sup>943</sup>. The Territorial Army, or TA, was the British equivalent of the U.S. National Guard and when aboard ship were known as the Maritime Royal Artillery.

Despite the fact that any number of respondents said there was no alcohol aboard -- at least for the ratings -- five spoke of having made huge quantities of “bootleg hooch”, giving elaborate details as to the manufacturing processes and ingredients, the majority of which were dependent on tinned fruits and raisins for the sugar necessary for fermentation.(HMC 90-21, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-72, TTC p. 7; HMC 90-74, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-11, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-44, TTC p. 6)

6) Harry Kilmon said the only reason they did so was as an antidote to the excruciating boredom of repeated voyages on a run that lasted over two months round trip.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 6)

As for going ashore, they were sometimes in a “human port” with wine, women and song. The entire crew would be buddies after such an experience.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 1) When ashore in port there was a lot of drinking. Wine, women and song was the sailor’s life.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2) There were a lot of card games, but that was never one of “Tex” English’s vices. He laughingly said “Women and booze were all I could handle.”(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 6)



## B. "GENERIC FOLKLORE"

### 1. superstition, beliefs, and luck

The most venerable in age of my bibliographical reference sources was Bassett, who stated: "The belief of the seaman in ... deities ... did not ... prevent him from having a firm belief in the operation of good or bad luck, and of omens warning him of danger or of success, while he also did not hesitate to use charms and amulets to bring about that desirable end."<sup>944</sup> Most authors whose subject matter derived from seafaring, including such recent writers as Sherar and Lane, have stressed the superstitious nature of the mariner. I entered upon the fieldwork for this study similarly predisposed, but was disabused of this impression before the research was long underway.<sup>945</sup>

One of the questions regularly asked during the interviews was, "Can you think of any beliefs or practices that might be considered to make a vessel or a person lucky or unlucky?" The response was usually something like "Oh, you mean superstitions. That went out with the old sailing ships," followed by an attempt to dredge from memory some item of data, whether read, believed at some earlier time, or remembered from the conversation of shipmates. There were a few -- though very few -- exceptions to this position. About forty respondents said no such beliefs existed, half a dozen said there were many but they were never seriously believed and the respondents could not recall them, three or four said they personally held no such beliefs. Only one or two professed any such personal convictions. One American informant jokingly asserted that: "It wasn't permitted. ... We never had superstitions on our ships because Americans don't believe in anything." (HMC 89-5, TTC pp. 4-5) Capt. David Grover maintained that the Liberty ships themselves were too new

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<sup>944</sup>. Bassett, 426.

<sup>945</sup>. Bone, 145 states that large grey seagulls "(as everyone knows) harbour the souls of honest sailormen when they die and go aloft." The following three pages contain a fictive conversation between two such gulls while watching the shipping traffic.

for superstitions. There may be omens attached to launchings, but the production and launching of Liberties was too rapid for launching traditions; there was no “accumulated lore”. The only thing he recalled was that once, leaving Houston on a shakedown cruise, they had picked up another (lost) anchor along with their own during an emergency at Galveston. An older man aboard said it was a “sign” of some kind, but Capt. Grover no longer remembers what sort of omen it was supposed to be. Although he had heard about good and bad days for sailing, he never heard any jinx tales.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 1)

Much of what was once thought of by landsmen as “sailors’ superstition” and *fata morgana* has been proven scientific fact. Ball lightning and St. Elmo’s fire are no less impressive for being explained by electricity. The “green flash” seen under certain conditions at the setting of the sun,<sup>946</sup> or phosphorescence in the water at night are now recognised as natural phenomena, but never cease to amaze and delight both novices and well-seasoned salts (no pun intended). Certainly these were among the experiences mentioned by my family and friends, as well as by those whom I interviewed.

It was impossible in an interview-based collection such as this to discriminate scrupulously between superstition and belief as is done in *Folklore and the Sea*. “Superstition”, as Beck sees it, is open-ended (gives the adherent a choice of what will happen if he does or does not do something), requires some action on the part of the believer, and is generally expressed in some sort of mnemonic device, often rhymed; “belief” is rarely open-ended, does not necessarily require action, concerning itself more with tangibles, and does not necessarily have attached mnemonic devices. Reversal of an act

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<sup>946</sup> . “On a calm, cloudless evening, when the sun sets clear of the land, just seconds after its upper limb dips beneath the horizon, a tiny brilliant blue-green flare, in shape like a candle flame, flickers for an instant on the horizon.” Beck, 237, which associates this with the kelpie or water-horse, and, on 84, notes its employment as a weather predictor.

associated with ill luck through a belief in his terms does not necessarily bring good luck, and vice versa.<sup>947</sup> Almost none of what Beck terms “superstitions” were found in my database. What little I did find was of the type classified as “belief” by him, but the tradition-bearers who offered it to me termed it “superstition”. Under these circumstances it would be utterly impracticable to follow Beck’s lead in making such a distinction.

John B. Wilson wrote to me, in a letter dated 19 March 1990:

I never heard of a lucky or unlucky ship. I read a lot of sea stories growing up and never met any superstition fearing seaman. There were probably about as many as in the general population ashore.

Commodore David Bone, however, in his “boy’s book of ships” called *The Lookoutman*, states succinctly:

There are “lucky” men in every ship’s company. I do not mean that the gods shower gifts upon them or that wealth and honours are theirs by hazard, but rather that these favoured individuals of the crew ... bring a measure of good fortune to the ship or are themselves happily placed when some rare event occurs.

He cites “coloured” men, Westcountrymen, and South of Ireland men (those without black hair) as lucky, Liverpudlians as having indifferent luck, and Russian Finns as being “Jonahs”.<sup>948</sup>

Another collector of maritime folklore was of the opinion that superstitious beliefs were a natural response to danger, declining only when rendered redundant by the advance of steamships and radio.<sup>949</sup> Although disinclined to accept her view at the outset, I have since been compelled reluctantly to acknowledge that merchant seafarers’ beliefs of this sort have in fact diminished greatly in recent times for no readily apparent reason. My

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<sup>947</sup> . Beck, 279-280.

<sup>948</sup> . David W. Bone, *The Lookoutman*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1923), 39-40. See below in this chapter for more on luck, Jonahs, and Russian Finns.

<sup>949</sup> . Baker, 10.

reluctance to accept this decline was based on the fact that I had often been told by my stepfather, Capt. Fred A. Steele, that it was “bad luck” to turn a hatch cover upside down<sup>950</sup> (or to whistle aboard ship, or to spit either on the deck or to windward).<sup>951</sup> He had rationalised the first by saying it was dangerous, as anyone might trip over such an obstacle.<sup>952</sup> I never once encountered this belief/superstition during the fieldwork for this study,<sup>953</sup> but it is mentioned briefly in Baker’s *Folklore of the Sea*,<sup>954</sup> as well as Bassett,<sup>955</sup> and Jo Anderson, in a book based on oral histories of Thames River fishermen, directly quoted one of her informants: “Never leave anything on a vessel upside down. You wouldn’t half get a belt from the Old Man<sup>956</sup> if he saw yer fo’c’sle hatch upside down. ... ’Cause it was common sense...but it went deeper than that -- it wasn’t just practical -- it was bad luck, and you didn’t tempt providence.”<sup>957</sup> At least one other of Anderson’s subjects made similar assertions and it seems to have been a relatively common belief amongst fishermen, although, as has been said, its absence was conspicuous amongst the fieldwork data in the Halley Maritime Collection.

Spit was not the only substance prohibited -- with every justification -- from disposal to windward. *Red Ensign* mentions a ban on emptying ashes in that direction,<sup>958</sup> and both vomiting and urinating to windward have been mentioned so many times by both oral and printed sources of nautical tradition that it would be impossible to list them all. It is only common sense to realise that anything flung into the wind will almost instantaneously be hurled back

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<sup>950</sup>. Beck, 280. Bassett mentions a number of inversions as boding ill, 433-438.

<sup>951</sup>. Bassett, 434.

<sup>952</sup>. The whistling taboo is rationalised in any number of ways, spitting on the deck is simply dirty, and spitting to windward will be covered below.

<sup>953</sup>. One respondent, however, said turning a mattress over would put a vessel in danger of capsizing.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2)

<sup>954</sup>. Baker, 90, which also cites the inversion of a variety of other objects (shoes, washbowls, etc.) as retaining a similar onus of misfortune.

<sup>955</sup>. Bassett, 433.

<sup>956</sup>. As has been mentioned, the Captain of a vessel is frequently so designated.

<sup>957</sup>. Jo Anderson, *Anchor and Hope*, (London *et al*: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), 92.

<sup>958</sup>. Rutter, 186. Cf. also Bassett, 434, re: spitting.

upon the initiator of the action and that the more disagreeable the substance involved, the less desirable such an outcome will be. With regard to (as in common seafaring usage) “pissing to windward”, there is even a short article by Graham Nixon<sup>959</sup> to the effect that the commonly used slang word “loo” for a toilet may have been derived from seafarers’ use of the leeward (pronounced “looward”) side of the vessel for latrine purposes.

With regard to the interdict on whistling, one U.S. Navy Armed Guard said he was told upon joining up: “Only two people whistle aboard ship -- a bosun’s mate and a damn fool. And you’re not a bosun’s mate.”(HMC 90-23, TTC p. 1)<sup>960</sup> One British Gunner said although it was supposed to be bad luck to whistle, he always whistled, because he could not sing.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 2) while one of his colleagues, although a talented musician, declared in his own interview that he had never heard of this belief.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 3) It is of interest that the taboo appears of recent years to have been laid far more stringently on military than on mercantile mariners and that, among the latter, the Engine Room crew seem to have borne the major brunt of this restriction, being told that whistling might be mistaken for the sound of malfunctioning machinery. About a dozen respondents said whistling aboard was bad luck,<sup>961</sup> and about half this number said whistling would bring high winds.<sup>962</sup> One of the group specified only whistling at nighttime as liable to raise a wind.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>959</sup>. Graham Nixon, “Loo”, *Lore and Language* 2:8 (January 1978), 27-28.

<sup>960</sup>. I have also heard this dichotomy described as “A Bosun’s Mate and a queer”. In this instance, the seafarers’ broadmindedness regarding homosexuality does not appear to hold, but the informant in both instances was a U.S. Naval rating rather than a merchant seaman.(HMC 191[65]-2, TR p. 1 and HMC 191[65]-3, TR p. 3)

<sup>961</sup>. e.g. HMC 90-46, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-57, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-60, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-60, TTC p.6

<sup>962</sup>. “If you were whistlin’, you were whistlin’ for the wind and a lot of silly superstitions.”(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2); “They used to talk about whistling at sea and that, y’know.” In sailing ship days you were not supposed to whistle or “you’d get a gale o’ wind” and would probably be lost.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4); “Don’t whistle or you will bring a storm. Only whistle if you want a wind.”(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 4); “Don’t whistle. If you whistled, it would bring the wind and they would call you a Jonah -- unlucky. No, really, no.”(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 7)

Asked about luck, Roy Caine replied:

“Not that I know of. If y’mean superstition, no, generally speaking, no. ‘If you whistle you’ll bring the wind.’ This was said but not believed. All that went out with the old fishermen. By and large seamen these days are pretty level-headed sorta characters, not ‘carried away’ with these sort of things, y’know.”(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 5)

Very few beliefs of the sort commonly labelled “superstitious” were acknowledged by the informants. One said he was not superstitious, but religious and declared “You get awfully close to God at sea.”(HMC 90-64, TTC p. 3) Almost nothing was specified by respondents as “lucky” or “unlucky” behaviour, although several stated that personal talismans or charms were not at all uncommon among their shipmates, and one flatly stated that his luck derived from trying to live a good life and carrying a rosary,(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 3) while another attributed his to praying every night and morning and, “You always had some little mascot.”<sup>963</sup>(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 2)

When the subject of luck arose, however, the most frequent comments were that seamen during the war were “too busy” for that sort of thing or that such beliefs belonged to the days of sail or to the seafarers who had been old men when those being interviewed (approximately from ages sixty-two to eighty-nine at the time of the fieldwork) were youngsters. When asked about the luck, good or evil of a vessel or person, many ironically said, “Well, if you came through all right, that was good luck, but if you got hit, that was bad luck.”(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3) Others passed over the subject into something else entirely. One respondent, asked if he knew any beliefs or sayings about luck, said:

No, not particularly. The only thing that seemed to be consistent -- when you were on a ship, the Master in the eyes of the crew, was always a bastard. The Old Man was always a bastard. Now, once you signed off, God, he wasn’t so bad. But when you joined another ship, always, you talked about how

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<sup>963</sup>. He said he would show me his “mascot” before I left his home, but forgot to do so.

good the skipper was ... on the previous ship. It was a pattern that ran through, right throughout my experience.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 6)

Capt. Emerson Chodzko said he knew of no superstitions; he sailed whenever and wherever he was told to sail. He thought perhaps foreign seamen might be more superstitious, and felt it was hard to remember what actions were deemed lucky or unlucky during the war since so much time has passed.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3) In this regard, a fair complement<sup>964</sup> of those interviewed mentioned the sentiment that a Friday sailing was bad luck, especially if that Friday happened to be the thirteenth of the month, although they usually qualified this by saying “it used to be believed” that this was the case.(HMC 90-2, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-27, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-24, TTC p. 4)<sup>965</sup> A Newfoundland respondent said on one tanker, “The crew were all pretty ruffled up because the Old Man was gonna sail on a Friday.” He had never worried about Friday sailings after that; they sailed on a Friday with 10,000 tons of oil and had no problems. Many people believe in that sort of thing, but he never put any faith in it.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4) A British respondent, however, rather startled me by the datum that CPR’s *S/S Montrose*, doing regular fortnightly cruises into the Caribbean, had a standing Friday departure.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 2) Though most seafarers no longer give the belief credence, I would still have expected that an established passenger liner cruise schedule would avoid Friday sailings, but another British informant said most such traditions “had died with the sailing ship”. If a ship sailed on Friday, someone might say he wished she would not, but that was about all. No one was really frightened.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 2)

One American informant said the British Admiralty (in perhaps the seventeenth century) had attempted to suppress the superstition that it was bad

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<sup>964</sup>. About ten percent.

<sup>965</sup>. Baker, 88-90 gives a fairly detailed account of such beliefs under the heading “Friday sail, Friday fail.” Cf. also Bassett, 439-446. The section dealing specifically with Friday begins on p. 443.

luck to sail on Friday. They laid a keel on a Friday, launched the vessel on a Friday, named her the HMS *Friday*, provided her with a Master surnamed Friday, and sailed her on her maiden voyage on Friday the thirteenth. She was never heard from again. This story, he avers, is periodically reprinted in *Readers' Digest*.<sup>966</sup>

Ships' names were seldom mentioned in connection with luck,<sup>967</sup> but one interviewee stated that it was bad luck to change a vessel's name.(HMC 90-53, TTC p. 3)<sup>968</sup> At least one other mentioned that a vessel at whose launching a person had been killed would forever after be a "jinxed"<sup>969</sup> ship and referred to such a vessel as having been "bathed in blood".(HMC 191[65]-2, TTC pp. 1-2)<sup>970</sup> The idea that such a vessel would be unlucky is of interest, since it is widely assumed by maritime folklorists that the original liquid with which a ship was "christened" in some cultures was, in fact, not wine but sacrificial blood,<sup>971</sup> and a death at launching should thus imbue the vessel with good luck rather than bad. This was borne out by one testimony, the respondent alleging that a mishap at launching makes a ship lucky.(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 3) A few traditions of ill fortune attending ships which had undergone aberrant launchings were mentioned to me outside the fieldwork data, but by persons who were not themselves seafarers.

Several interviewees, who denied being at all superstitious, allowed that there were occasionally ships or men (usually Masters) dogged by

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<sup>966</sup>. William Krasnosky, HMC 90-7, TTC p. 1-2, also Jack E. McGinty, HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3, who said he believed it implicitly. It was not deemed necessary to further attempt to verify this story. Two versions of this story appear in Bassett, 446.

<sup>967</sup>. Except in the case of the *Friday the Thirteenth* story immediately above. Also one respondent said he had heard it was bad luck to name a ship for a woman or for a "Jesus-screamer" (member of the clergy), but considered neither belief well-founded.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3)

<sup>968</sup>. He thought this belief might have been reasonable, as the name-change might have been made because the vessel had developed an unsavoury history.

<sup>969</sup>. Baker, 38-46 discusses jinxes and lucky vessels at some length. Among the former are listed the "man-eaters" who "killed a man on every voyage"[Baker, 43] but no such beliefs were discovered among the interview data. Cf. also Bassett, 431.

<sup>970</sup>. Cf. Bassett, 431.

<sup>971</sup>. Baker, 30-31; Bassett, 399-403; Beck 23-25, Sherar, 38.



misfortune. Ten informants mentioned unlucky vessels, and six mentioned unlucky people.<sup>972</sup> A Chief Engineer said “luck” was merely a matter of a ship’s being properly run, so as not to break down and said to avert a vessel’s ill luck, one must “work damned hard and cure all its [the ship’s] faults.”(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 3) One respondent mentioned a “jinxed” cargo, but basically recalled simply that some days were good and some bad. He felt it difficult to recall “the good stuff” in a one-on-one interview and felt that a group interview situation might better have jogged his memory.(HMC 89-3, TTC p. 1) Ten respondents likewise mentioned lucky vessels, and eleven mentioned lucky people. “He’s a lucky guy, good to sail with.” Perhaps this is based on nothing more than pulling through a difficult situation unscathed.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3) “I don’t know, but there are some charmed vessels,” said another, listing ships which, to his knowledge had “gone through two world wars and went to the breakers”<sup>973</sup>(HMC 91-7, TTC pp. 7-8) Fred McKamy said “Tokyo Rose” had reported one American vessel as a “lucky” ship. She was nicknamed “The Galloping Ghost of the New Guinea Coast”, and the nickname was even painted on her side for a while, before it was removed by official orders.(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 3)

There are “good” ships and “bad” ships; it is atmosphere, feelings, invisible things. “You could go on a bad ship or a good ship and you couldn’t put your finger on anything, but it was there. This is true, this. There’s nothing you could say -- ‘A ship is a ship is a ship’ -- but it isn’t. It’s like a car is a car is a car, but it’s not. I even say that even cars got personalities -- ships the same. And there’s no -- what’s the answer -- don’t know. ... You could

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<sup>972</sup>. John Dagleish told of a Master who was always unlucky -- not incompetent, although he became so at the end of his career through the effect of the “bad joss”, and he could not be faulted for any of the misfortunes that befell him.(HMC 92-23, TTC pp. 2-3) Capt. Michael Curtis said some people seemed to attract accidents, and told a similar tale.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 2) As no names were mentioned, it is unclear whether or not both were speaking of the same man.

<sup>973</sup>. This indicates that they had come through the wars unscathed and eventually been sent to the breaker’s yard to die a ship’s “natural” death of old age.

get an unlucky ship all right -- and you could get a lucky ship -- or you could get all lucky ships.”(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 6)<sup>974</sup> Ships with such reputations are now usually called “happy” or “unhappy” vessels. Many hard luck ships get that way by accident and then spend their entire lives with a reputation as a “Jonah”.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 4) During the Battle of Leyte Gulf, the Master of the *William S. Ladd* refused to tie up next to the *Marcus Daly*, calling her a “bad luck ship” because she had received bow damage in a previous attack which prevented her anchoring properly. It was the *Ladd* which was sunk in the following attack, however, and the *Daly* returned to the States for repairs and ultimately received the Gallant Ship Award from the government.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 2) Vessels are like people; some are lucky; some are not.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2) Alan Peter considered that he himself had “led a charmed life”, but when directly questioned about luck, said although he had heard of Jonahs, he never believed in anything but living one day at a time.(HMC 92-34, TTC p. 5)

Capt. Derek Belk felt luck pertains to people more than ships, though there could be a lucky ship. Some people are lucky. The last Captain Belk sailed under before getting his first command wished him “the best of luck”. He thought the man was “bein’ a bit funny”, but he was quite serious. He said, “This job is fifty percent ability and fifty percent luck. I know you’ve got the ability; I’m just wishin’ you the luck. I’m not bein’ funny.” He then cited some cases of Captains who were “bloody unlucky” -- people with bad luck which could not be blamed on lack of foresight or on navigation problems, but just bad luck. If one suffered in that way, it eventually resulted in overcaution. “I’ve never actually -- can’t recall any ship that I thought was particularly unlucky.” He knew of no beliefs about ways to change one’s luck, however. “I think this ‘sailors’ superstition’ is a bit overdone, perhaps. I used to reckon every third or fourth voyage would be a battle. That was a, there’s a, maybe a

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<sup>974</sup>. In de Hartog, 134, the vessel of which the title character is Master is described as a “bitch” and a “wicked ship”.

superstition, if you like. ... But only when I got to be Mate and Master did I start thinking along those lines, y'know. 'Gawd, I've had three good voyages, this is bound to be a bad one.' And it usually was. You could call that superstition, I suppose." He called it "being prepared" for bad luck, rather than "begging for" bad luck.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 6) Tom Thornton has been very fortunate. His wartime ships sunk after he had left them. When his ship was attacked by air, a cannon shell hit the gun "pit" [tub] he was in, ricocheted down past the bridge to the gun port below and the shrapnel hit someone else. "The way I look at it is, I don't go to church, I'm not a very religious person, but I think there's somebody up there lookin' after me, and it's fate, I survived so much."(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 6) And Capt. George Bryson considered himself lucky.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 5)

Capt. George Jahn opined that there were no superstitions during the Second World War, as "we didn't have time to think of that stuff";(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 2) however, a few other North American interviewees cited the dictum "One trip, one ship" as a generally held notion. This was a contemporary motto of the Second World War, indicating that, all perils taken into consideration, more than one voyage on the same vessel was pressing one's luck.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3) Robbie Owen, an ex-Chief Engineer from Savannah, Georgia said "One trip, one ship" was a rational guideline which he followed himself. He would take a new Liberty ship to the United Kingdom and back to New York, then return to Savannah, register at the union hall, take a two or three week break, and start all over. "'One trip, one ship' was just a common rationale at the time."(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 2)<sup>975</sup> British respondents were unfamiliar with this dictum, and their responses on hearing of it ran the gamut from seeing the rationale behind it, especially on the North Atlantic

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<sup>975</sup>. Capt. Richard Connelly never really heard any superstitions except "one trip, one ship", although some geographical areas of North America were clannish, and Gulf [of Mexico] sailors said it was unlucky to sail with "Yankees". He considers neither of these "suspensions" well-grounded.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3)

convoys,(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 2) to the one who said, “No, if anything, the reverse.” His reasoning was that, shipping out of the Pool, if one were assigned to a good feeder, with good accommodation, and a good skipper, one wanted to stay with her as long as possible.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 4) Capt. Michael Curtis, however, said that although “one trip, one ship” did not apply to them, the British Merchant Navy did speak of men who “did eleven voyages -- one out and one home.”(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 2)

During the war there was a job to do, regardless of the circumstances. Men knew their lives were always in danger, but there were only so many aboard to get the work done; if one failed, all the rest were jeopardised, so they paid no attention to superstition. At home, David Leary heard “all grades of superstitious tales”, but aboard ship, he was only determined to do his personal best.(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 4)

Roy Williams sailed on HMS *Middleton* with a man who might have been termed a “reverse Jonah”. He had been a temporary replacement for a man who had become ill. The story was circulated that he had been temporarily assigned to five ships previously and each had been sunk or seriously damaged immediately after he had left. The *Middleton*’s Captain would not let him go, convinced that as long as he was aboard, the ship would not meet with harm. She remained untouched as long as Williams was aboard, and was later damaged, but he did not know if the “reverse Jonah” had left by that time. He said the prevailing attitude was that “it would never happen to us”.(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 7)

Well over ten percent of those interviewed mentioned lucky misses or near misses. In these cases, some happenstance or coincidence prevented a person from shipping on a vessel which was subsequently lost or from being in a location aboard which was hit. Although not all these testimonies have been examined in depth, those which involved premonitions and/or dreams will be investigated later in this Section.

An Engineering Officer with Matson Lines, remarked that their ship, *Malolo*, was a “hard luck ship”. He had been told the problem might have been her name, since the Hawaiian word *malolo*, meaning “flying fish”, was considered by Hawaiians to be an unlucky name for a ship, but he then said the Hawaiian people were great practical jokers and he would not have put it past them to have started such a rumour just to have a laugh at Matson Lines’ expense.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1)

By far the most commonly held view expressed in the interviews was that there was no time for superstition aboard a modern merchantman. An old whaling Captain colleague of Fred Lewis’s father, in his nineties when Fred was a small child, referred to superstitious beliefs as “bilgewater”. Another informant thought perhaps older seamen might have been more superstitious than young ones. The younger seamen were “smarter” than the old -- this is still true today and is the natural state of affairs -- and “didn’t buy” superstition.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 2) A third said, “There were a lot of green crews, but after a few months on those ships, you became an old salt before you knew it.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 3) A fourth respondent, however, although he remembered nothing specific, maintained that everyone has superstitions, like “Don’t walk under a hanging boom,” and said there was an abundance of material.(HMC 90-58, TTC p. 2)

Nonetheless, two men interviewed during the fieldwork for this study specifically mentioned the practice of carrying a caul<sup>976</sup> to prevent death by drowning, and one had, himself, been the carrier.<sup>977</sup> The notion that the

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<sup>976</sup>. A caul or membrane sometimes covers the heads of newborn infants. It is this item, dried for preservation, which is meant here.

<sup>977</sup>. Bill Fortune met men who carried cauls, usually their own, not purchased. His wife’s father had one. You were supposed not to drown if you carried one.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 6) J.H. Shackleton’s mother-in-law had a brother born with a caul, which is supposed to be lucky to sailors. He did not carry it with him and was lost at sea. It was then given to Shackleton himself, who carried it and survived two ships lost to mines. One of the uncle-in-law’s brothers had had the caul for a while. On the one trip when he did not carry it with him, he was lost on the *Artist* in World War I.(HMC 92-43, TTC p. 3)

ownership of such an item, whether one's own or one acquired specifically for the purpose, will preserve the owner from a watery grave is not new. It is mentioned in most older collections of sea lore<sup>978</sup> and appears in some more modern works as well.<sup>979</sup>

A few other scattered beliefs emerged. Cats<sup>980</sup> aboard were considered bad luck by some,(HMC 90-20, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3) while others believed that if the ship's cat deserts it is a bad omen(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 3)<sup>981</sup> or that to kill a cat is bad luck,(HMC 90-14, TTC p. 3) and one Merseysider told an elaborate tale of a rat-infested vessel, which acquired a cat that went mad<sup>982</sup> and was thrown overboard in a bag by the Chief Engineer. "And these Scotchmen were gonna kill the Chief Engineer -- gonna murder him -- over this cat. 'We'll have no luck at all! We'll have no luck!' That night they went on the rocks rescuin' this tanker. That's true, that." And the cat-killer had to take a week's home leave to escape the crew's vengeance.(HMC 92-44, TTC pp. 7-8) The only respondent from the Royal Canadian Navy said he himself did not take folk belief seriously, but that it was said that seagulls following a ship were a good omen and that if a vessel sailed without its animal mascot, that ship would not return.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5) Of course most people have heard that: "The only thing was rats. They always said if a rat left

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<sup>978</sup> e.g., Bassett, 459-461.

<sup>979</sup> . Anderson, 141-142, mentions the sale of caulks in the markets for use by mariners. Baker, 10 and 77-78. Pages 76-80 describe a variety of talismans carried by sailors. Beck, 231 (where he compares it to the mermaid's mantle) and 304, (where he, like Anderson, notes public sale of such items).

<sup>980</sup> . Beliefs regarding animals were found in Bassett, 429-430.

<sup>981</sup> . He said in the old days they usually had a cat aboard. Ship's cats were seldom ratters; they mostly lay by the galley door, and the Messboy kept their box and fed them. Then he grinned, and remarked, "They never had to take their turn at the wheel."(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 3)

<sup>982</sup> . The informant stressed the point that the cat was not rabid, but "mad".

the ship.... That was the only thing.”<sup>983</sup> Ships always had rats, and they always had cats aboard -- they always had a ship’s cat.(HMC 92-45, TTC pp. 5-6)<sup>984</sup>

A Welsh respondent had once sailed with a Master who was both “very superstitious” and “very henpecked”<sup>985</sup> and who believed the colour green to be unlucky.<sup>986</sup> They were on the London-New York run and whenever they docked in London, the Captain’s wife spent time aboard. On one of these visits, she fitted out his cabin with green curtains. He “had a face as long as a fiddle” and as soon as she stepped off the gangway leaving, he ripped the new curtains down and changed back to the old ones, but he never would tell her.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 6)

Further animal superstitions involved dogs, rats, monkeys, and birds.

Peter Rogers said:

“Yeah, they reckon if an albatross lands on your ship, deck, it's unlucky. On the *Trevanyan* we had three albatrosses landed on us, threw ’em over the side, and the next thing, we was captured. It’s a superstition.” He then described an albatross gliding in and becoming entangled in the stays because of its immense wingspan. “The only thing to be done is put a tarpaulin down, get them on it, throw them overside. They can pick themselves up on the waves.”(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 6)

Another Canadian informant’s mother used to tell him “folklore stuff” because she was “a nineteenth-century woman”.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 7)<sup>987</sup> A number of beliefs of Canadian fisherfolk were current amongst Newfoundland and Canadian merchant seafarers as well, such as that it was unlucky to wear grey mittens or to use the word “pig”<sup>988</sup> aboard. When referring to the animal,

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<sup>983</sup> Bassett, 450-451. “An old work tells us the instinct of rats leaving a ship is because they cannot be dry in it. ... ‘It is a well-authenticated fact that rats have often been known to leave ships in harbor previous to their being lost at sea. Some of those wiseacres who want to convince us against the evidence of our senses, will call this superstition.’”

<sup>984</sup> See Chapter Three for a story about rat-catchers from the Los Angeles Harbor Board and also note footnote <sup>115</sup> above.

<sup>985</sup> Both terms are the informant’s.

<sup>986</sup> Almost all printed sources state some areas of the English-speaking world in which green or blue, as the colours of the sea itself, are thought to bode misfortune.

<sup>987</sup> Again both terms are the informant’s.

<sup>988</sup> Bassett, 429-430.

other terms were always used, in the same way theatre people use “The Scottish play” rather than the title in reference to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 7; HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2) Piers de Neyrac, a U.S. Navy journalist, asserted that her mother, an official with the Australian Department of Agriculture during the war, had to ship swine by air, because American merchant seamen would not have pigs aboard ship, saying “You put pigs aboard ship, and the ship’ll sink like a rock ... It’s bad luck. You just don’t do it.”(HMC 191[65]-2, TR p. 3) Merseysider Tom Killips affirmed that “fishermen were the worst for luck beliefs” and cited a taboo on the mention of rabbits<sup>989</sup> aboard, similar to the ban on the word “pig”.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 8) “Shack” Shackleton, concurred, saying although he himself held no such beliefs, the trawlermen did. If they saw a cross-eyed girl on the way to the dock, they would not sail, nor would they sail on a Friday. In deep-sea sailing, however, everything was “all in a day’s work”, and the men were not superstitious, but more “cosmopolitan”. It was not like the old sailing days when seafarers were at the mercy of the wind, and needed superstition for hope. On big ships one had no worries.(HMC 92-43, TTC p. 1) Beck lists, in one paragraph, an immense variety of the sorts of things that might be observed as augury of future events or luck, and follows it by a paragraph hypothesising about the possible reasons why some of these creatures, items, or events might be thought to affect the well-being of a ship and/or her crew.<sup>990</sup> Although his tripartite division -- things detrimental to the ship, things which do not frequent the sea, and things supernatural -- is not unconvincing in its presentation, there is little firm ground on which to base these conjectures, and only the tradition-bearers themselves are truly capable of offering a viable alternative. Since few primary sources have indicated they give credence to any such foundations for

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<sup>989</sup>. Most printed sources apply this ban to hares rather than rabbits, but many people “in real life” do not make such a distinction.

<sup>990</sup>. Beck, 310-311.



their beliefs, I consider it prudent to refrain from attaching them to any definite rationale.<sup>991</sup>

Jack McGinty discussed St. Elmo's Fire and Jonahs,(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3) while "Tex" English declared that if ball lightning touches you, you are marked for death, even if it does not hurt you. Once in the Pacific, on a very dark night, on a blacked-out tanker, Tex was on the way to stand bow lookout when there came a sudden light, a ball running up and down the mast. If submarines had been lurking about, they would have seen it, but one could not have done much to prevent it, and it finally dispersed. A man was lost off that ship and no one knew what happened. Asked if it was because of the ball lightning, Tex replied, "I don't know. I don't think it touched him."(HMC 90-74, TTC pp. 5-6) A retired Master from Northern Ireland said it had been believed by some that a man once torpedoed and reassigned would be a "Jonah", bringing ill luck to his new ship, but that he personally put no credence in such tales. In fact, he himself was "hammered" three times, and a friend of his was torpedoed twice in the same day.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 2) McGinty said most superstitious belief had died out and the merchant marine is now much different.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3)

I had many times heard the old story of the sailor who decides to give up the sea and so walks inland carrying an oar (or an anchor) until he meets with people who do not recognise the item he carries. He is then prepared to settle down, knowing he is far enough from the sea to resist its lure.<sup>992</sup> This

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<sup>991</sup>. A further commentary on trends in folkloristic scholarship will be found in the concluding chapter.

<sup>992</sup>. William P. Mack and Royal W. Connell, *Naval Ceremonies, Customs and Traditions*, (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, c1980), 368 indicates that this story, whence, for some reason, they derive the term "swallowing the anchor", appears in Homer's *Odyssey*, Book XI. It is also the subject of a chantey-like and most entertaining song by Tom Lewis, entitled "Marching Inland", which appears as cut 1, Side B of his audio tape "album" "Surfacing", which is self-produced and numbered ASM-101C from his then current home address in Salmo, British Columbia..

common tale was told me by only one interviewee during the fieldwork.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 6)

If there was bad weather for several days after a crew was made up, it was said by Merseysiders that someone aboard “had not paid the woman”,<sup>993</sup> someone on the ship had not paid for what he had received. This belief was not confined to ratings, but might be cited by the Captain, if the weather was bad enough. “Say you were stuck in bad weather for sometimes three days, four days and you didn’ see no end to it, the Captain’d come out and he’d say, ‘Find out some bastard they never paid the...’ And it would go round the ship.” Barney Lafferty did not know where or how this belief had originated, but thought it must be quite old. He also said that the anti-whistling edict was part of the disciplinary code aboard Royal Mail Lines ships before World War II and an offender could be officially “logged” for this infraction. “And that was the company, not just the seamen. Whistlin’ before the mast.” Again, he felt it must have been an old tradition.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 6)

Such long-held beliefs, dealing with producing favourable and unfavourable winds, have become “endangered species” since modern methods of propulsion have replaced sail. Similarly, the tradition of placing coins beneath a mast when it was stepped to ensure a ship’s good fortune as a commercial carrier, seems to have transmuted itself into the more modern tradition of the “golden rivet”,<sup>994</sup> a custom-based-on-belief with a character widely disparate from its antecedent.

Although little, if any, extant superstition appears to surround ships’ bells in the Merchant Service, the ringing or clinking of glasses, as in a toast,

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<sup>993</sup>. It was readily apparent that, although he avoided using the word in my presence, the term was properly, “somebody hasn’t paid the whore”. Cf. Chapter Eight, Section C, where Tom Brunskill avoids using the word bastard by saying “the old father-and-mother-weren’t-married” and remarks in Chapter Six about the use (or avoidance) of rough language by seamen, especially in the presence of females.

<sup>994</sup>. This is described more fully in the Section on Fools’ Errands, below.

has twice been mentioned to me as an omen of a seaman's death, but in neither case was the source from the sample interviewed for this project or of the appropriate age range to be so. Both instances were simply casual remarks by friends of mine who were not involved in the fieldwork. A Cornishwoman mentioned as one of her native traditions that if people clinked glasses holding water, rather than other potables, a sailor would be lost at sea<sup>995</sup> and a Deck officer in the Canadian Merchant Marine said he had heard in a dockside tavern that every time glasses were clinked in a toast a sailor drowned.<sup>996</sup> The only bibliographical reference I could find was that "drownings will follow if a glass rings with a bell-like note in a sailor's home or a naval mess."<sup>997</sup> This implied, to me, at least, that the glass rang for no apparent reason or was struck accidentally, rather than that it had been struck (or clashed in a toast) intentionally. Lovette, in his tome on naval traditions, only lists the order in which toasts are offered on formal occasions in the mess.<sup>998</sup>

It was mildly surprising to discover no legends of phantom ships or seamen during the course of the fieldwork, although I had previously heard of several. One was of a shipbuilder (or builders) who were accidentally sealed in an airtight compartment during the construction or repair of a vessel (often a submarine) and whose ghostly hammers were heard knocking by the crew members until other workers opened the compartment, at which time his (or their) bodies or skeletons were discovered.(HMC 191[65]-2, TTC pp. 9-10) I believe this legend once formed the basis for an episode of television drama on one of the early series of paranormal fantasy -- *Outer Limits* or *Twilight Zone*.<sup>999</sup>

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<sup>995</sup>. Sarah J. Thatcher, personal communication, late 1980s.

<sup>996</sup>. John Peck, personal communication, late 1980s.

<sup>997</sup>. Baker, 36.

<sup>998</sup>. Lovette, 119-125, and an Admiralty Fleet Order regarding toasts on p. 323.

<sup>999</sup>. This story is apparently also told of the much earlier, but likewise double-hulled ship *Great Eastern*. Beck 28-29, 37.

Another, the story of a phantom vessel, was told me by a passing acquaintance, even whose name I cannot now recall, during an automobile trip at a time when I was not actively involved in folklore or ethnography.<sup>1000</sup> It regards the harbour at Bath, Maine, where there is a long-established U.S. Navy base. According to the story, a phantom ship, the *Dart*,<sup>1001</sup> had regularly appeared in the harbour since her loss in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century.<sup>1002</sup> The phantom had appeared during World War I. During the Second World War, there were a number of naval vessels in the harbour when suddenly a blip appeared on the radar. A schooner in full sail then hove into view and bore down on the anchored vessels to the horror of all who saw her. Instead of colliding, however, she went straight through all ships she encountered until, disappearing from the radar screen, she also disappeared from view, sailing directly ashore. Research during this study has gratified no attempts to verify this story or its provenance in any way, nor has it been mentioned to me by anyone else. A brief allusion to the *Dash*, which may or may not be the same vessel, is made in Beck's *Folklore and the Sea*, but it is not nearly so detailed as the account I was given.<sup>1003</sup> It would require much more research to ascertain which of these variants is the more prevalent in the area, or if they are, indeed, two separate stories. The only mention of a “ghost ship” in the fieldwork data regarded Cunard’s *Bactria*, which, shortly after the war, in about 1946, lost one chef outward and another homeward bound and was ever afterward known as “the ghost ship”.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 6)<sup>1004</sup>

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<sup>1000</sup>. It is unfortunate that I was unable to take full particulars of this story at the time, which was in the early 1980s in mid-coast Maine, travelling from Rockland to Portland with a carload of medieval re-enactors.

<sup>1001</sup>. Perhaps the same as the *Dash*, mentioned by Beck.

<sup>1002</sup>. During the War of 1812, according to Beck, see following footnote.

<sup>1003</sup>. Beck, 402-403 says she appeared in Casco Bay, near Harpswell, Maine, as a death omen for the families of the crew members aboard her when she was lost and that she sailed backwards, implying that she no longer appears, since the immediate families are now all long deceased.

<sup>1004</sup>. See above in this Section for “The Galloping Ghost of the New Guinea Coast”, which was not, in fact, a ghost ship, but a lucky one.

Despite reluctance to admit to any “superstition” several interviewees in the current study have mentioned paranormal, “sixth sense” or “second sight” experiences, such as premonitions, odd dreams shared by family ashore, or miraculous escapes.<sup>1005</sup> These they did not term superstition, apparently feeling that such phenomena held less of a negative stigma of “irrationality” than reluctance to sail on a specific date. Even Beck, in *Folklore and the Sea*, admits early in his chapter on Superstition, Custom and Belief, that “Perhaps the largest single body of lore concerns the supernatural and, in particular, the dead.”<sup>1006</sup>

Despite agreement that some ships or people seemed dogged by bad luck, there appeared to be singular lack of expressed belief in “Jonahs”.<sup>1007</sup> The word “hoodoo”, an old-fashioned seafaring term for a bringer of ill luck, never occurred in my fieldwork data. A time or two a man who had been sunk once or twice laughingly said he had thereafter been teased about being a Jonah, but it was apparent from his manner that it had never been a serious cause for concern on his part or anyone else’s. Respondents mentioned Finnish shipmates with no hint of the onus attached to the “Russian Finn” in earlier folklore collections.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-11, TTC p. 3)<sup>1008</sup> The most momentous reference to a Finn aboard came from an American interviewee who said he had once served in a Liberty ship under a Finnish Captain “about eighty years old” who had come out of retirement to assist the war effort and whose accent, when he asked, “Ver iss der Common-dore?” was deemed

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<sup>1005</sup> . HMC 90-21, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-42, TTC p. 4; HMC 90-75, TTC p. 1; HMC 91-8, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-15, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-29, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-34, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-35, TTC pp. 3-5; HMC 92-45, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-47, TTC p. 2; and HMC 92-69, TTC p. 3; all of which testimony is given in full in Section B-2 of this chapter.

<sup>1006</sup> . Beck, 280-281.

<sup>1007</sup> . Bassett mentions Jonahs on page 428.

<sup>1008</sup> . Baker, 92, Beck 220-225, although the latter holds that the term was Gaelic in origin, meaning ‘small’, and only later became attached to residents of the area called Finland because of the association with Lapps. This is curious, as he also refers to them as “muckle men” and muckle means large. See also Bone, 39, where a fictive incident involving a Russian Finn is cited.

amusing by the crew.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 4)<sup>1009</sup> One British respondent, however, did say that a couple of Finnish Firemen had got into a fight in Buenos Aires in 1941, with the result that one had knifed the other. Asked if he had ever heard Finns were Jonahs, he said he had not, but it could be -- and he repeated the words "could be" several times in a thoughtful manner.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 7)

It is worth noting that Beck concludes his chapter on Seals and Muckle Men:

During the decade following World War II, in Rockland, Maine, there was a shipyard where the best lobster boats on the coast were thought to be built. Anyone "goin' lobsterin'" who could acquire one of these boats was considered most fortunate. The builder was a man whose family were from Finland and he was known generally not by his name but his heritage -- The Finn. "If yew want a good bo'ot, go see The Finn. He's the best they is." And so perhaps even the magic of the Finn still remains.<sup>1010</sup>

During the five years I lived in mid-coast Maine, near Rockland, I, too, heard The Finn mentioned in reverent tones by local fishermen and boat lovers. A few had boats which had actually been built by him, a few had seen them or sailed in them, but one or two had actually worked or trained at the boatyard under the tutelage of The Finn. I never heard him called anything else.

Harry Kilmon was never directly involved with enemy action, and began to believe he was personally lucky for the ship. He told his shipmates, "Relax, I'm here. You're as safe as in the arms of Jesus." The only time a vessel he was on was hit was through "friendly fire", when a neighbouring ship fired a three-inch gun at what it thought was a U-boat's periscope, and the shell ricocheted off the water and hit the gun tub of Kilmon's vessel, but no

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<sup>1009</sup>. Accents were often found amusing. Cf. "Wassy" Williams, in Chapter Eight, Section C, where the man's nickname derived from the Welsh accent in which he often inquired 'Was he?'

<sup>1010</sup>. Beck, 225.

severe damage nor injuries resulted. There was bombing in English ports. Kilmon's convoy would arrive and all action would cease, but as soon as they sailed, the town would be attacked again. He thought he must "have a halo around my head or something", because he saw no direct action.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 5)<sup>1011</sup>

Like Kilmon, William Krasnosky saw a great deal of action during his World War II maritime career, but he never lost a ship or was on a ship that lost a man. Word spread around the hiring halls to this effect. Men who wanted to ship with him for luck ended up on the *R. Ney McNeely*, bound for Murmansk in "coffin corner" -- and returned safely. Krasnosky's theory, stated somewhat tongue-in-cheek, is that all Irish have good luck, so add an O' to your name -- "O'Krasnosky". The ships he was on were lucky because he, an "Irishman" was aboard. "As long as you're Irish," he said, "you've got it made."(HMC 90-7, TTC p. 1-2)<sup>1012</sup>

Capt. Steve Browne was "never so fortunate" as to be hit during World War II, but admits that if he had, he would have another story to tell -- and he "would probably have to get clean drawers, too".(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 3)

Although he did not consider himself a sceptic, Capt. Browne thought most superstition baseless. He had often sailed the area known as the "Bermuda Triangle", and never knew of its reputation until he read about it later in books. If some vessels were more susceptible to accidents than were others, he felt this was not a matter of luck, but of circumstances and the proficiency of the crew.... "If you do something often enough, you are bound to make a mistake."(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>1011</sup>. The personal luck, especially of high-ranking people, and the way it affected those with whom they sailed is dealt with in Bassett, 428.

<sup>1012</sup>. The theory that being Irish was a positive factor was also voiced at Sailors' Snug Harbor, a home for retired mariners, where Capt. Evald Larsen, Norwegian by birth, said in reference to co-interviewee William Dennis, an American of Irish background, "Us Irish gotta stick together." (HMC 90-56, TTC p. 1)

Occasionally an informant would opine that “everybody knows” women aboard are bad luck, but would add that since there were no women at sea they had had no opportunity of testing this belief,(HMC 90-39, TTC p. 1) or that “nobody wanted to haul a woman”, but some Soviet ships had female crews, so that dispelled that notion.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 1)<sup>1013</sup> This contemporary attitude, although fairly widespread, is curious, as it was not uncommon in the nineteenth-century for a ship’s captain to be accompanied by not only his wife but his entire family; at least one wife even assumed command on the death of her husband;(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 3) female passengers have been sailing aboard merchant vessels for centuries; and at present there are not only Merchant Navy wives and female passengers aboard most large vessels, but also women serving within the mercantile marine, and in fact the military Navy itself in nearly every capacity. In the Merchant Service, these range from the lower echelons of the Stewards’/Catering Department to Captains of large deep-sea vessels.<sup>1014</sup> Recently, if not presently, a woman was Master of a vessel which plied a regular route between the Pacific Coast of the United States and Hawaii, and the scuttlebutt<sup>1015</sup> was that she was in command whilst in a heavily pregnant condition and her husband sailed with her as a Marine Engineer. These last two assertions have not been verified by research, but are strongly supported by the testimony of various Pacific Coast seafarers.<sup>1016</sup>

Barney Lafferty, as should now be evident from earlier chapters, was one of the most articulate and vivid of the speakers interviewed, whose words are quoted frequently throughout this study, because he says so much so well, and gives such graphic descriptions. His testimony here touches on several

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<sup>1013</sup>. Keith Marshall heard no parsons (or “sky pilots”) should be carried as passengers, although he was once on a vessel which carried some without incident.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 6) Cf. above, where it is the naming after, not the carrying of, women or clergy which brings ill luck.

<sup>1014</sup>. W.H. Hoyer had always heard it said “no women aboard ship”, but he never paid any attention, as there were stewardesses, and female passengers aboard the liners on which he served.(HMC 92-45, TTC pp. 5-6)

<sup>1015</sup>. Common usage amongst seafarers for “gossip”.

<sup>1016</sup>. Women (or clergy) aboard are mentioned as bad luck in Bassett, 427.



areas already covered, but it is more meaningful at this juncture to focus on the person rather than the informant, and conclude this subsection with another morsel from his largesse.

There was “always a bit of superstition at sea”. Seamen were always superstitious. They did not like sailing on Friday the Thirteenth, and “even reversing the date to a lucky one, there was still superstition in it. They weren’t just brushin’ it aside.” Still superstition was not too strong during the war, “only the old little standard ones ... simple little things....”

“You might see an older fella, gen’lly the older men’d, say, see the cat goin’ off the ship or somethin’.” All ships had a cat. If the cat disappeared ashore in port it would be considered bad luck. “The cat disappeared, because ... well sometimes, it was a tomcat -- sometimes he’d go like some of the sailors and o’ course he wouldn’t bother to come back. He missed -- the ship’d sail before he came back.” Such superstitions were not looked on as serious. During the war one had no time to worry about such things. If one dwelt on superstition, it was not good.

As far as things to change luck for the better, there probably were, but Lafferty could not remember any. They could not have been very serious or well-known or he would have remembered, he said. In general seamen -- and all Lafferty’s family and his wife’s were Irish, and thus born and bred to be superstitious -- often learned superstitions because older men would say something was not right and then explain, but they [the superstitions themselves] were not “paramount” and so would not be recalled. (HMC 92-55, TTC p. 6)

## **2. omens, premonitions, and ghosts**

The words “jinx” and “Jonah”<sup>1017</sup> were familiar to virtually all those interviewed during the fieldwork, but accepted more “with a grain of salt” than in solemn earnest by the respondents. Capt. Paul Brick said some ships or men are “Jonahs” and the crew will say, “We only had bad weather because the Jonah was aboard.” There are a lot of Jonahs, and the term is not an insult.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 4) Dick Playfer recalled no lucky omens, but he did remember Jonahs. The term was generally used in a joking manner; a few may have been serious, but certainly not the majority.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 4) Once, Alan Kingdom was himself half-jokingly accused of being a Jonah, when the

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<sup>1017</sup>. Bassett, 428.

*Ashantian* was hit and then his next ship struck a mine. It was not taken seriously, however, and despite being damaged neither ship was sunk.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 2)

Most “fright tales” from the fieldwork ran on the lines of the following, a verbatim quote from a letter written 1 April 1990 by an eloquent correspondent whom I never met in person:

Aboard the *Henry M. Stephens* in 1944 in the Tasman Sea, I was on the *Flying Dutchman* for a few hours. We had a deck cargo and the only way to the bow was on a narrow wooden walkway built over the cargo. That dark and stormy night I went to the bow lookout about 8 pm. When I had been there a while I realized that I could not see the horizon. It was the darkest night I have ever experienced. I could not see my hand. I was finally relieved and started aft. I heard footsteps approaching, but because of the scream of the wind, could not [tell?] how close I was. We walked full into each other. He was in the gun crew going forward for his watch. I then went up to the flying bridge. When I got up there I noticed the aerals. I realized that the ship was glowing with green St Elmo’s fire. I bent over the railing where there was a spot of the fire but could not see anything but that beautiful glowing spot.

I could understand how that sea superstitions got started, coming upon another ship afire with light would be enough to scare anyone who had no knowledge of static electricity.<sup>1018</sup>

A number of “ghost” stories emerged from the research, but only one dealt with an actual paranormal experience, and that will be covered shortly. The others all involved men thinking they had or might have such an experience. Beck maintains that, “Living as he does a hazardous life where no man can be sure of seeing the sun rise on the morrow, it is only natural that the sailor should be inordinately concerned with the spirit world, and this concern is augmented by sea conditions, where fog, ice, mirage, exhaustion, bad food and isolation from normal living enable a man to see, to hear and to feel things not ordinarily experienced by other mortals.” Contending that “fear of

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<sup>1018</sup>. Corrections made by the letter’s writer have been included without note and typographical errors likewise. In all other respects except the inclusion of the word “tell”, the text is unaltered.

oblivion has always been a driving force in human life”,<sup>1019</sup> he attributes the seafarers’ predilection for a wide range of experiences (and apocryphal tales of spurious experiences) to this same fear, and I am inclined to agree. From the humorous anecdotes immediately below, through innumerable tales of how a supposed spectre turned out to be something (or someone) quite natural, to stories of the actual paranormal, like those of “Tex” English’s dream or Alan Peter and “Canada”<sup>1020</sup> seamen seem to produce an infinite range of PENs on ghosts and related topics. Joe Brooke stated that comic relief was necessary to alleviate the “misery of shipping”. A ship was sunk off Baltimore, with the loss of all hands, including one Carl Jackson, but there was another Carl Jackson shipping on the Great Lakes. The second Jackson came to town<sup>1021</sup> and was seen by a man named Arturo Reyes, who had read an obituary for “Carl Jackson” in the *SEAFARERS’ LOG*<sup>1022</sup> -- with the wrong man’s photograph. Reyes thought he had seen a ghost and ran. (SHLSS #3 (24 May 1985), HMC TTC p.1) A retired Master cited a pre-war ship whose skipper had died aboard. The wheelhouse had a loose door, and one night, as it swung open, the Mate on watch said, “Good evening, Capt. Pratt! Come in!” The wheelsman paled and responded, “Please don’t say that! One of these days that’s gonna be him!” (HMC 90-53, TTC p. 3) Yet another interviewee thought he had seen a ghost, but it turned out to be a stowaway. (HMC 92-37, TTC pp. 1-2) Interestingly enough, two separate interviewees had “ghostly” encounters with what turned out to be albatrosses<sup>1023</sup> flying alongside the bridge of a blacked-out ship at night.

Born on Friday the Thirteenth, Tony Wrench was not inclined to superstition, but as an Apprentice, on the 12-4 watch on a vessel sailing independently in the Indian Ocean, he was on the

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<sup>1019</sup>. Beck, 280-281.

<sup>1020</sup>. The complete stories are found below, but the interesting aspect is that Peter repeatedly denied belief in ghosts or superstition of any sort, while maintaining firmly that his experience was real, actual, and neither a dream nor a figment of the imagination.

<sup>1021</sup>. The “town” is not specified.

<sup>1022</sup>. The official newspaper of the Seafarers’ International Union.

<sup>1023</sup>. Bassett, 449. Cf. also the earlier mention of the albatross which Chinese crewmen wished to eat.

long wing of the bridge, “thinking of the Flying Dutchman and things like that”, when suddenly a phosphorescent light loomed up beside him, and gave him quite a fright. He went into the wheelhouse, saying nothing, and looked again; it had gone. When he went back out, it happened again. He had seen St Elmo’s Fire, but this was not the same. Lookouts carried signal torches with a red lens. He took the lens off his torch and when the “thing” returned, he shone the torch on it. It was an albatross, which, as it flew, turned its white breast toward the ship. It was a very spooky experience.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7) and Tom Thornton, describing a similar encounter, concluded by saying the albatross is said to be a source of bad luck.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 6)

Unlike these men, Alan Peter had what he believed to be a genuine ghostly visitation from a shipmate,<sup>1024</sup> whom he called “Canada”.<sup>1025</sup>

They were homeward bound to England from Halifax, Nova Scotia, across the North Atlantic in the cold, and “Canada”, when on night watch, was often known to open the fiddley door over the boilers to “thaw out” in the hot draught of air. Peter, the Bosun, was asleep, but just after midnight a sailor knocked on his door to say “Canada” had not relieved him<sup>1026</sup> and could not be found; it was hoped he had not gone overside in the heavy seas. They established that “Canada” had been on the middle two hours’ lookout.<sup>1027</sup> Peter went to the fiddley door, which was missing its inside handle and could only be opened from the outside; he opened it and shone a torch inside to see “Canada” lying across the boilers below him. He was dead, so his body was left in Peter’s private messroom overnight. In the morning, the Old Man came and saw “Canada”’s body, badly burned on the face and hands. “Now here is the amazing fact” - - Alan Peter does not believe in ghosts, but when he went back to sleep, he suddenly woke up, switched the light on, and there was “Canada” standing by his bunk. Peter said “I thought you were dead.” “Canada” said, “I am. Don’t touch me or I’ll disappear. Palmer did it -- shut the door on me. I tried to climb down to get out, but couldn’t. I was overcome. Palmer did it.” Then the apparition vanished. Peter could not believe it, and sat up, thinking how strange it was. It was a most peculiar feeling. He still does not believe in ghosts. He tackled Palmer, who looked sheepish, then he told the Old Man and the Mate, who said he was dreaming. “Poor, old ‘Canada’ -- a nice, inoffensive man.” Of course, the Old Man would not say anything.... Peter, as Bosun, had no one to help him prepare the

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<sup>1024</sup>. Such paranormal experiences are relatively common in seafaring tradition. See Beck, 286 ff.

<sup>1025</sup>. Or perhaps “Newfie”, his testimony varies between the two, so the man may have been either a Newfoundlander or a Nova Scotian. Peter described him as “a fine man, very nice”.

<sup>1026</sup>. Another of the ABs, Palmer, had never got on well with “Canada”, and was in the watch he would have relieved.

<sup>1027</sup>. The first wheelsman had the first two hours of the watch at the wheel and the last hour as lookout. The first hour lookout had the last two hours at the wheel. That left one man on lookout the middle two hours and on standby the first and last hour.

body for burial.<sup>1028</sup> He sewed the body up in canvas with weights, then got a hatch board and the red ensign, and they were ready. The Old Man said they could not ease the ship off for the burial as in convoy they were required to maintain speed and position; nor could the Old Man come off the bridge at that time, so Peter and the Mate said a short prayer over the body. It was very blowy, but as they said, “we commit his body to the deep”, the wind stopped and it became calm. They tipped the body over, and as it drifted astern and sank, the wind and sea resumed. It just let up long enough for the actual burial. He was about the only Canadian AB Mr. Peter ever sailed with, ... but he had signed on in Liverpool, and was somewhere in his mid-thirties -- one of the oldest men aboard.(HMC 92-35, TTC pp. 3-5)

“Tex” English, wrote an article on what he believes to have been an “out-of-body experience”, entitled “AWOL”, which was published in *Fate* magazine.<sup>1029</sup> He was on a Liberty ship anchored off Halifax, Nova Scotia for repairs. While dreaming (or in a trance) he imagined vividly that he flew home rather like Superman flies, saw his mother, and kissed his sister. His mother and sister dreamed exactly the same thing on the same night -- that he had come home and kissed his sister. He maintained that this was completely true, although acknowledging it to be very strange.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 1)

The one other dream experience cited, was neither paranormal, nor did it occur to the respondent himself. He had three uncles who were commercial fishermen, and one was fishing with a cousin of the interviewee. They set their nets and lay down in the boat to sleep. The uncle dreamed a big dog was trying to bite him. The cousin dreamed he was in a fight with a big black man. The uncle “kicked the dog” in his dream and literally kicked the cousin out of the boat.(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 4)

Far more prevalent than these types of testimonies were those about premonitions.<sup>1030</sup> Men thus warned were prevented from signing on vessels

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<sup>1028</sup>. See the next section on custom for the description of another burial at sea, from HMC 91-4, TTC pp. 4-5, which includes the placing of the last stitch in the canvas shroud through the nose of the corpse.

<sup>1029</sup>. *Fate* 43:9 #486 (September 1990), 68-69.

<sup>1030</sup>. Bassett, 430 and 455.

which were subsequently lost, and a few foresaw the demise of other ships in their convoys. Frank Niedermeier was sent to the *Russian Victory*, but liked neither the name nor the galley crew; then the Captain and Chief Engineer quit, so he quit himself. This premonition was "God's gift -- his guardian angel" -- for the *Russian Victory* exploded in Kwajalein and all hands were lost. Later on the television programme, *Victory at Sea*, Niedermeier saw the explosion. He is convinced his life was saved by his refusal to sail. He had several premonitions in his life which led to narrow escapes.(HMC 90-21, TTC p. 2)

2) Tom Burton also had a number of premonitory experiences, one on his birthday, 11 July, in the Bay of Biscay, in a troopship. There was a concert in one of the messhalls, but he felt he did not want to go down. During the concert, the ship was bombed and twenty-two men attending the concert were killed. If he had gone to it, he might well have been one of the eleven crewmen and eleven airmen "passengers" who were lost.(HMC 91-8, TTC p. 2)

Alan Kingdom, on his way to stand his watch in the radio shack while in convoy, stopped to speak to the Second Mate, who pointed out a torpedoed tanker afire on the port side. Kingdom said, "We're next!" and, sure enough, they were.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 3)

Tom Brunskill, trapped beneath forty feet of oil and saltwater under a grating, and already saying a farewell to his wife in his mind and heart, suddenly had a vision of an escape route, vaguely remembered from his days on the vessel while she was under construction at the shipyard, and thus eluded death.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4)

He also told of a possible premonitory incident involving a Chief Engineer who was a great wireless enthusiast. At anchor in Port Said, when it was known that Chamberlain<sup>1031</sup> was going to make a speech, Brunskill and the Chief Steward were invited to the Chief Engineer's room to hear it on his wonderful wireless set. When it was announced that Britain was at war with

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<sup>1031</sup>. He said Macmillan.

Germany, the Chief Engineer stood up and two great tears rolled down his cheeks. At this point, Brunskill took the Chief Steward to his own room, to give the other man privacy for his emotion, and the two agreed not to mention it to anyone else. Whether it was a premonition or not, Brunskill did not know, but he was transferred from that ship when they returned home, and two voyages later, the Chief was in his room when the ship was torpedoed and caught fire. It was a nasty death, and Brunskill had liked the man. Had he had a premonition?(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 2)

Alan Peter told “an interesting little story” about the *Scottish Star*. When she arrived in London, all the friends he had signed on as ABs wanted to go home, so he let them sign off, but he himself was going to sign on again, as Bosuns were kept on Articles. He was in the saloon, pen in hand, when he suddenly decided he had had enough. He put the pen down, despite coaxing from the officers, whom he liked, and left her 11 January 1942. She proceeded to load goods for South America and set sail. On 20 February, she was torpedoed east of Barbados en route from Liverpool to Montevideo, and men were lost, including the man who had taken Peter’s place.(HMC 92-34, TTC p. 5)

During the Dunkirk evacuation, Peter’s ship was next to that of the Commodore, leading one inside column of a four-abreast convoy heading for the Channel while magnetic mines were being dropped from the air. An American tanker which had been handed over to the U.K. was outside. On the Second Mate’s watch, about three o’clock, they “got word” of magnetic mines ahead, which they expected to reach in about an hour. They then formed two columns, and the outside ships should have dropped behind inside, but the tanker sprinted ahead, and Peter said he [the tanker] was going to get blown up. About five minutes to four a man climbed up into “the crow’s-nest affair at the top of the mast” and within minutes there was a tremendous explosion,

the tanker blew, her bow reared up, and the man tumbled out.(HMC 92-34, TTC p. 5)

W.H. Hoyer recalled that some men “had a bad feeling something was gonna happen” and did not sign back on the *Laconia* on her final trip. Also, when Hoyer was looking for a job, he visited the cargo/passenger ship, *Oropesa* at Stanley Docks, but found the companionways on this vessel were not straight, as they were on Cunard ships, and the crew’s quarters were cramped. This gave Hoyer an uneasy feeling of being trapped, so he did not take her. She also was torpedoed and sunk.(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 6)

The night before he sailed, Urban Peters told his mother he had a “funny feeling he would not come back”. He was sure he was not going to die, though. He never thought of being taken prisoner, but was just sure he was not going to come back from that voyage. His mother “wasn’t pleased”, but he was taken prisoner on that voyage. He had had another premonition, as well. His ship was laid up so he went to sign on the *Lancastria* as a volunteer. Just as was going to sign on Articles, he changed his mind and decided not to go. About 5000 souls<sup>1032</sup> were lost on that ship. How does one account for these events? He did not have to go, as he was volunteering and still had his own ship, but he knew a good many of the crew. He also had two brothers who were soldiers -- one got home from Dunkirk and the other should have boarded the *Lancastria* at St-Nazaire, but did not -- so two of the family missed being sunk on the *Lancastria*. Speaking of fate, Mr. Peters said, “Something tells you, ‘Don’t do it’ and you don’t do it.”(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 2)

On the *King Lud* the crew had become complacent because nothing happened for so long, and they figured nothing ever would happen. That was how it worked out until the last voyage. It would have been Fred Williams’s thirteenth voyage, but it was unlucky for the ship, rather than for him. She

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<sup>1032</sup>. This term, “souls” rather than “lives” is a standard, though rather outdated nautical usage. At present it would be found most often in balladry, poetry, and Victorian prose. It was Peters’s own usage.



disappeared. Williams was actually quite lucky, as the circumstances under which he left the ship were so trivial. "That's the difference between life and death -- a decision that you make on the spur of the moment." They had made a very bad trip from Halifax, Nova Scotia, in quite a large convoy. The weather was terrible, the ship kept losing station and straggling a lot, they were constantly "getting shouted at" by the Navy, and about 200 miles off the Irish coast, there was an "unearthly crash" from the Engine Room and they had a major breakdown. It was early morning, and Williams had just come off watch. At that time -- 0400 -- they were still in position in the convoy. They were completely blacked out; it was not good weather; and there were ships "all over the place, barely visible" when he turned in. What woke him was not the crash - - he heard about that afterwards. It was the silence. He lived over the screw and was so accustomed to the sound that the silence was noticeable. He got up and went to investigate. The ship was powered by what was called a "camshaft drive", with one component rather like a huge bicycle chain with links about a foot across, which had broken and the loose end had whipped round, destroying all the lubricating oil pipes inside its casing, then tied itself in a gigantic knot. They could do nothing as the convoy left them behind. "They just buzzed off and left us to it, y'see." Nothing could be done -- everything was completely destroyed -- so they drifted round aimlessly until daylight when a corvette turned up and asked over the loud-hailer what had happened. They were in a vulnerable position as regarded radio silence, and so were left drifting. They only found things out by hearsay; no one told them anything; the Old Man never came off the bridge to give them the lowdown; they just did not know. They put extra lookouts on and drifted for three days. The area was terrible, but the weather had begun to moderate a bit. Eventually a deep sea tug from the Clyde towed them in, because they could not repair the damage, and that took a further three days. It was February and cold. These motorships were intended for use in the Tropics, and their heating was grossly inadequate. The men lived two to a room, with a small electric heater on the bulkhead, but it was so cold ice was still forming on the ship's side so thick you could dig your fingers in and chip it off. When they arrived in Britain, the Superintendent, with whom they were on good terms, came aboard and asked how things were, and if they would be signing on for the next trip. They said yes, but asked for better heating, and he basically refused. At this, Williams left, went back to Liverpool and returned to the Pool. Long afterward, he discovered that, after repairs, the ship was attacked by a Japanese submarine on the run through the Mozambique Channel and went with all hands on 16 June. When Williams looks at the Merchant Navy War Memorial in London, he sees the names of those who did not leave the ship when he did -- people he knew well. If they had put the heater in, he would have stayed. "Strange the way things happen." (HMC 92-69, TTC p. 3)

Coincidence figured in near misses, even when men were not superstitious. One Third Mate on a tanker was just out of the California

Maritime Academy, and his total sea time was four hours, from embarkation at Richmond, California, to getting blown up at the pilot station outside San Francisco. One SUP [Sailors' Union of the Pacific] member was sailing on an NMU [National Maritime Union] ship. It was his own SUP ship which was destroyed. His replacement was killed, as well, and the pilot was thrown off and disabled. It was all luck or coincidence. Jim Cunningham held a Swedish as well as an American union book. He signed off a Swedish ship in early August 1941, and tried for a Danish one, which would not accept him, as the U.S. was still neutral. Eleven days later, the ship was hit near Iceland and there were only three survivors. The repeal of the Neutrality Act in October had saved Cunningham's life. Another time he decided against a ship because she was a trooper, and she was sunk near Fiji. Most of the crew escaped, but a number of troops were lost. Cunningham named five other vessels which went down after he had left them, and mentioned some friends who were not as fortunate. "Some guys had it lucky -- some didn't."(HMC 90-10, TTC pp. 3-4)

Fred Lewis also avoided sailing on several vessels which met with disaster,(HMC 90-12, TTC p. 3) and David Leary's escape story(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 1) was told in Chapter Four. Capt. William Ashton was Third Mate on the *Politician*, but that was in 1937, some time before her sinking in the incident which gave rise to the cinefilm *Whiskey Galore*,<sup>1033</sup> and she was still called the *London Merchant* when he was aboard. One of Capt. Ashton's pals was a Cadet aboard her when she did go down, though.(HMC 92-37, TTC p. 1) The divine or supernatural is often credited for narrow escapes. Capt. Vincent Finan, who just missed running his ship on the beach after a buoy had been moved without notifying an inbound convoy, said, "God was on my shoulder."(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>1033</sup>. The title for American distribution was *Tight Little Island*.

Although the following datum is not precisely an omen or premonition, it seems better suited to this section than anywhere else, so it has been chosen as a closing. Jack Sharrock and his brother were on the same ship when she was run down and cut in two by a tanker, and the officers only found out at roll call that they had two men called “J. Sharrock”, James and John. On arriving in port, they were split up, as no two from a single family were allowed to remain on the same ship.<sup>1034</sup> As my informant was the elder, he was asked to make the decision as to which would be reassigned. Since the “grapevine” said the damaged ship would never sail again, but be turned into a harbour defence, he decided to leave his brother aboard, where it would be “safer”, and volunteered for reassignment himself. “Safer? -- HA!” Much later, in Iceland, the remains of a convoy hobbled into harbour after a severe mauling -- the escort was that very same vessel! When the convoy settled down, Sharrock got permission to visit his brother, who pretended to be furious, saying he had been left on that vessel “on purpose”. He had done three Russian convoys!(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 6)

### **3. charms, amulets, tattooing and earrings**

Few references to tattooing or earrings occurred in the primary fieldwork data on which this study is based, but several were located in transcripts of research tapes made during my undergraduate fieldwork and also in transcripts of interviews by other researchers, as well as in bibliographical references. Some of these are cited below. It is curious that so few mentions were made during the more recent interviews of either form of body art, considering how the average person tends to identify both with the seafarer, and the fact that a fair number of informants sported visible tattoos, although

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<sup>1034</sup>. Cf. Chapter Four, Section B. 2. c), where the same rule applied to U.S. vessels because of a case involving five brothers who were all lost in a single sinking in the Solomon Islands.

none involved in the 1990s fieldwork wore earrings.<sup>1035</sup> Although it is not at all uncommon for men, young or old, to be seen in earrings in the 1990s, a man with an earring or earrings was, for a century or more, assumed to be either a Gypsy or a sailor.<sup>1036</sup> Tattoos were also a badge of the seafarer, as for some time they were not easily available in the Western hemisphere (or at least in most parts of Europe and North America) and thus connoted a world traveller<sup>1037</sup> and somewhat of an unconventional or eccentric personality, daring to differ from the ordinary and to wear such differences openly. The following testimony is from an interview transcript discovered in the archives of the Paul Hall Memorial Library at the Seafarers' Harry Lundeborg School of Seamanship in Piney Point, Maryland:

And one of the AB's broke out a tattoo set and he tattooed everybody -- for free -- including me. So I have one tattoo -- a dragon.

Do you know anything about tattoos? Do you know what they mean? Have you ever seen 'H-O-L-D F-A-S-T' on a man's knuckles? That's so you won't fall from aloft.<sup>1038</sup> Have you ever seen a man with blue stars in his earlobes? That improves your vision. Did you ever see a man with a rooster tattooed here...and a pig tattooed there? (on the ankles) Neither a pig nor a rooster has much to do with water; it means you'll never drown. It's...magic.<sup>1039</sup> If you see a man with a chain tattooed around his wrist, it means he's made a voyage around the world. And then a lot of old time seamen always had a cross tattooed on them somewhere, so that they'd receive

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<sup>1035</sup>. No direct questions about either were asked as part of the routine inquiry in this research. If such questions had been among those asked on a regular basis, there might well have been enough response to make significant conclusions possible.

<sup>1036</sup>. Capt. Frank Conley said he was in Sumatra in World War II and men who were trapped on a small island pierced their ears and inserted earrings so as to pass for natives. After the war they formed The Order of the Golden Earring and swore they would never remove the earrings as long as they lived. (HMC 191[65]-1, TR p. 8)

<sup>1037</sup>. Baker, 80-82 on tattooing. Compare with first-hand testimony below.

<sup>1038</sup>. Beck, 197, does not recognise the symbolism of this tattoo, but only lists it with several other word combinations, as having been popularly tattooed on the backs of sailors' fingers.

<sup>1039</sup>. Beck, 197, "On old-time sailors it was fashionable to tattoo a pig on one foot and a rooster on the other. An old-time bos'n claimed that anyone so marked could not drown, for these creatures despised the water. Another old salt told me that anyone so marked would never starve aboard ship, for he carried with him two sources of food -- ham and eggs. Anyone conversant with folklore will immediately recognise far older and deeper-seated significance in these symbols." He does not elaborate further.

Christian burial; this is the old old days. They didn't bury a Protestant in the same cemetery.<sup>1040</sup>

So when I see these silly kids going around with black leopards on their arms and all this stuff...silly. But if a seaman wants to get one.... You see, the middle class has a prejudice against tattoos; middle class kids don't get tattoos. In fact, if you took 20[sic] kids say, up to the age of 25[sic] naked in a room, I could pick out the different classes they were in. Those with tattoos: working class. Those who picked up something to read, and weren't tattooed: middle class. Those who spit on the deck: working class.

Some guys carry it too far. I've seen these tattoos tattooed all on one man. We had a man who had a foxhunt tattooed on his back, with the tail of the fox just sticking out of his asshole.<sup>1041</sup> I remember this guy who had been in the Klondike goldrush; he had a string of blue swallows tattooed just on his collarbone. He made them fly by shaking his ()[sic] up and down. But then again, tattoos were mostly something done by the deck department; most of the steward's department weren't tattooed. You see in those days...there's always been differences in seamen...in the depression era of the '30's we had what we called 'depression sailors' -- guys who went to sea because they couldn't make any money doing anything else. And...they didn't go in for all that stuff. And, as I say, the steward department didn't go in for it very much, especially in the passenger ships there was a different breed of cat; a lot of them had worked in hotels. They weren't truly seamen. You could go to sea for years and not really be a seaman; it was just a job. They'd never hung around the waterfront, never been in seamen's bars, or rooming houses where seamen hung out. Now they're all like that. There's men who boast they've never been in the 'dog house'.<sup>1042</sup> They go to the shipping hall, register, and they ship out. Then they come in and go home to God knows where. 80[sic] days later they show up to ship out again. Things are entirely different now.<sup>1043</sup>

In Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) Frank Niedermeier and a shipmate went to a barber shop where they were tattooed "by a Hindu with a chicken feather". Sailors get tattooed as identification,<sup>1044</sup> so they listed all the places they had been and Mr. Niedermeier got a tattoo of a peacock also. Mr. Niedermeier's tattooed itinerary included: Switzerland, New York, Panama, California,

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<sup>1040</sup> Howard Bethell [transcript of interview by Mike Gillen, from SHLSS], (n.d.), p. 46. Probably late 1970s or early 1980s.

<sup>1041</sup> The foxhunt tattoo, as well as the rabbit chase, where the tracks of the rabbit led to the navel, with only the scut protruding, were mentioned in Beck, 198.

<sup>1042</sup> According to "Tex" English, this term is applied to a rooming house or seamen's centre devoid of union connections.

<sup>1043</sup> Howard Bethell [transcript of interview by Mike Gillen, from SHLSS], (n.d.), pp. 46-47.

<sup>1044</sup> Cf. the Newfoundland testimony below.

Eniwetok, Okinawa, Japan, Hawaii, France, India, and Australia.(HMC 90-21, TTC p. 2) “Tex” English got most of his tattoos before he joined the merchant marine. He got one in Texas when he was going to sea and was going to get a big one on his chest in Panama, but found no design large enough to suit him. “You oughta see my son’s”, he boasted. He thought about getting an earring; but “never had the nerve”, although “many ‘Limey’ sailors did, especially in the Royal Navy”.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 7)<sup>1045</sup>

Beck devotes the last five pages of his chapter on Art to tattooing, describing it as a “fading art form ... which belongs almost exclusively to the seafaring profession.” He details its history and the high risk of sepsis in the earlier times, its use for identification purposes, and the changing popularity of certain patterns and pictures.<sup>1046</sup> After reading his exegesis combined with Gillen’s Bethell papers, I was reminded that none of the men I had interviewed had elaborated on the subject matter of their tattoos and, in fact, that none but Frank Niedermeier and “Tex” English appeared to display theirs with any pride. The others seemed to be so used to theirs that no discussion was necessary. Perhaps this is a gender-related circumstance, and had I been an impressionable young man or a peer with whom comparison might have been an issue, we would have reviewed the relative merits of savage panthers vs. dripping daggers, or compared ribald notes on the erotic charms of half-clad or unclad “hootchy-cootchy” dancers wriggling their buttocks and breasts over our biceps.

The fact remains, however, that one of the major functions of the tattoo was to serve as identification, and it has so served in innumerable cases of drownings and losses at sea. Tony Wrench sailed with Newfoundlanders who

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<sup>1045</sup>. This subject did not arise with the Royal Navy personnel interviewed during the fieldwork, but none had earrings and I believe only one or two might have been tattooed and at least one of those spent the majority of his seafaring life as a merchant seaman.

<sup>1046</sup>. Beck 196-201,

had their names and “addresses”<sup>1047</sup> tattooed on their forearms for identification in case they were killed. He described seeing a small group of them come aboard and sign on Ship’s Articles with bloodied tissue paper still covering these freshly-acquired tattoos. “As far as I can recall,” he wrote in a letter after the interview, “the Newfoundlander seamen came over in 1941. If it was 1941, it was on the Lowther Castle[sic]. If it was later, it may have been on the Empire Stuart[sic] in 1944. Anyway whatever ship it was -- we found that they were excellent seamen, and the crew we got decided to have their names and addresses tattooed[sic] on their forearms!!”<sup>1048</sup> After this testimony from Wrench, I asked several other interviewees about Newfoundlanders with tattoos, and Alan Peter said he believed “Canada”<sup>1049</sup> had a similar tattoo.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 4) Dick Chilton thought the idea of Newfoundlanders with names and outposts tattooed on their forearms “rang a bell”, but could not recall whether or not he ever met any.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 7) Asked the same question, another interviewee ignored the actual query and responded that Filipinos working aboard U.S. ships often wore jackets with insignia and slogans, such as “Back to Bataan”.<sup>1050</sup> The informant appeared to think this was foolish, or perhaps mad.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 8)

People did carry lucky charms like St. Christopher’s medals, rabbits’ feet, and the like.<sup>1051</sup> Catholics wore crosses and crossed themselves on going into action.(HMC 89-5, TTC pp. 4-5; HMC 92-13, TTC p. 3) “Or maybe they were lucky enough to have Harry Kilmon on their ship, but they didn’t know that at

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<sup>1047</sup>. Actually the names of the small outpost towns in which their homes and families were located.

<sup>1048</sup>. The original remark was made after the tape-recorded interview had concluded, as I was leaving his home, but Mr. Wrench confirmed it in a letter dated 23 April 1992.

<sup>1049</sup>. The subject of the PEN in the preceding section, dealing with a paranormal experience.

<sup>1050</sup>. I was unable to ascertain whether these resembled more the satin “bomber” jacket which became stylish in the States during the 1950s or what was colloquially known as a “fuck-you” jacket (a corruption of a Vietnamese term) by American Armed Forces personnel during the Vietnam War.

<sup>1051</sup>. Beck, 304-305 lists the amulets of Sts. Christopher, Elmo, and Nicholas, along with less religious items, such as otter skins, seal paws, certain beans or nuts, “lucky stones”, and crab’s “bones”.

the time.” Harry was often teased about being the real Kilroy,<sup>1052</sup> because of his surname.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 5) One interviewee, however, said there was not much in the way of wearing charms or amulets.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 2) Another was given a small religious medal by his mother, who obtained it from a priest whose church had been bombed out. Since her son was taken prisoner on his next voyage, he said, “there was not very good luck in that medal”.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 2)

Informant Bob Parr “had once found a mermaid”.<sup>1053</sup> He said he had a fishing line and caught this mermaid north of Aden in the Red Sea -- “There are lots of mermaids there” -- and had had her shrunk before bringing her home. When he showed her to me, ‘she’ turned out to be a metal charm, about two-and-a-half or three inches long, with a jointed tail. The body might be pewter, but the tail appeared to be brass, and there was a small brass ring attached to the head. It was unclear whether the item was originally intended as a fishing “sinker” or something like a watch-chain ornament, but it was quite an attractive little curio.(HMC 92-2, TTC pp. 2-3)

Richard Aldhelm-White, who was in the Royal Canadian Navy, said some RCN sailors did wear an earring in their right ear as a good luck charm. The senior officer of his own vessel would not allow the practice, however.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 8) Beck elaborates on the practice of wearing such earrings:

Pirates and old-time sailors are so often pictured with earrings that this ornament has become a kind of identifying characteristic of the group. But the earring is prized not as[sic] much as an ornament as for its therapeutic value. Among sailors there was a belief that by piercing one ear you would improve the sight in the opposite eye. To this end, sailors had both ears pierced to improve their usefulness on watch, and the

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<sup>1052</sup>. “Kilroy” was a strange little character drawn with his nose peeping over a fence or wall, and accompanied by the slogan ‘Kilroy was (or wuz) here.’ This ‘logo’ appeared anonymously in the most unlikely places throughout the war and well afterward.

<sup>1053</sup>. Beck devotes a full chapter, pp. 227-253, to mermaids.



skipper pierced the ear opposite to the eye used for the telescope.

Earrings are still worn by sailors, and in North America and the British Isles they are worn by those who have crossed the international date line or the equator.<sup>1054</sup>

In a somewhat dilettante-ish lexicographic work on nautical terms entitled *Scuttlebutt*, Teri Degler confirms the latter allegation, saying:

“Tradition has it that sailors who wore gold earrings were those who had *crossed the line* -- the *line* being nothing less than the equator. Although there may have been other reasons why sailors wore gold earrings, there is no doubt that they would have wanted to carry some proof with them that they had made their way across the equator at least once.”<sup>1055</sup>

This reason for wearing earrings was not mentioned in any of the first-hand collected data used in the current study, however. The reasons cited most often by those sources were that the gold originally provided the price of a Christian burial or simply that the earrings identified the wearers as audacious ‘sailormen’. There was of course Capt. Frank Conley’s story -- mentioned at the beginning of this subsection -- that they were worn by his specific group to mislead the enemy into thinking the wearers were natives, but this again appears to have been a unique instance, if not a ‘sea story’.

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<sup>1054</sup>. Beck, 309-310.

<sup>1055</sup>. Teri Degler, *Scuttlebutt... and other expressions of nautical origin*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1989), 24 [italics Degler's]. See also the section below on Line-Crossing Ceremonies.

## C. LINE-CROSSING CEREMONIES<sup>1056</sup> AND OTHER TRADITIONS

The decline of custom and tradition amongst seafarers in the twentieth century is noted in Baker's *Folklore of the Sea*, which says of the period covered by this study:

Two world wars added to the influences for change. More customs succumbed to economic necessity. It is difficult to imagine many shipping companies today painting a narrow blue 'mourning line' around the hulls of their vessels to signify the death of a prominent member of their firm, yet the practice was known until 1939 and even later. Navies too were changing: 'big ships' were disappearing; after 1945 submarines became capital ships and such ceremonies as 'Rolling Home' came to an end.<sup>1057</sup>

Despite the fact that functioning folk belief was found to be nearly extinct among those interviewed during the fieldwork, a few customs have survived, such as Crossing the Line ceremonies, sending first-trippers on fools' errands, and "the black pan".<sup>1058</sup> All of these practices appear to be in good health and will be covered here and in Section D, which follows.

Ceremonies attendant upon "Crossing the Line"<sup>1059</sup> have historically been almost as unavoidable an item of seafaring custom as those undertaken upon the launching and naming of a newly-built vessel. This does not appear invariably to have been the case aboard modern merchant ships in wartime, as will become apparent. The earliest mentions of such a ceremony indicated it was of a purely religious nature. "Not long, however, does it stay so; within a

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<sup>1056</sup>. Much background work on this subject as well as collection of documented data from printed sources has been undertaken by Harry Miller Lydenberg, coll. *Crossing the Line: Tales of the Ceremony During Four Centuries*, (New York: The New York Public Library, 1957) and Henning Henningsen, *Crossing the Equator: Sailors' Baptism and Other Initiation Rites*, (Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1961). A good deal of the material in this chapter was also presented as a paper entitled *Traditional Drama as Displayed in Shipboard "Line-Crossing" Ceremonies* which was delivered at the Conference on Traditional Drama hosted by the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield on 3 July 1994.

<sup>1057</sup>. Baker, 12. "Rolling Home", as a custom or practice, was not described.

<sup>1058</sup>. See Glossary, Chapter Eight. This custom will be treated near the end of this Section.

<sup>1059</sup>. The "Line" alluded to is almost invariably the Equator. Variant initiations of similar type will be dealt with later in the Section.

few years it is accepted as normal and natural, hallowed by time and by general observance.”<sup>1060</sup> Although the origins of these rites cannot be precisely determined, the first real written reports of them date only to the first half of the sixteenth century, but since that time the tradition has continued essentially unbroken.<sup>1061</sup>

Scholars treating folklore from many different standpoints have noted how, throughout history, man has developed initiation rituals to mark solemn events, status changes, and developments in his life cycle. It is not, therefore, surprising, that seamen should inaugurate some such ceremony<sup>1062</sup> in accordance with their unique calling and its mysterious nature as viewed by landsmen. Although the Equatorial ceremony is by far the most common, there are also similar and not unfamiliar rites connected with the crossing of the International Date Line (180th Meridian) and the Arctic Circle. Less well-known passages are sometimes commemorated in like fashion.<sup>1063</sup> It is difficult, if not impossible, to locate records of similar ceremonies associated with voyages to the Antarctic, airborne crossings of the Equator, or Equator crossings from south to north, but no specific reason for this paucity of data is readily apparent.<sup>1064</sup>

Horace Beck approaches the entire corpus of crossing rituals as the residuum of a tradition of human sacrifice to the gods of the deep. While the possibility of such antecedents for the modern rite is indisputable, a firm connection is difficult to establish. Nearly all rites of passage have at their heart a symbolic death and rebirth, whether the squire’s lonely pre-knighthood vigil with his armour, followed by a symbolic cleansing, the coming-of-age

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<sup>1060</sup>. Lydenberg, 8.

<sup>1061</sup>. Beck, 117; Lydenberg, 8-9.

<sup>1062</sup>. Lydenberg, 7.

<sup>1063</sup>. My late mother and I underwent an official, though informal, initiation on crossing the Straits of Belle Isle between Newfoundland and Labrador in a Marine Atlantic ferry.

<sup>1064</sup>. Lydenberg, 6.

ceremonies of African tribes, or the *kiva* rituals of the Pueblo Indians in North America. Although any or all of these traditions may have involved an actual sacrifice at some time in the distant past, it would be overly risky to presume such a link solely on the basis of what we now know and the fact that blood sacrifice for the propitiation of deities was known to exist.<sup>1065</sup> Rather than seek such tenuous bonds, therefore, this study simply examines the reported experience of the ceremony from the mouths of those who underwent its discomforts and embarrassments within their own lifetimes.

Lydenberg's *Crossing the Line* chronicles Equator-crossing ceremonies through four centuries, ending with the year of the book's publication -- 1957. Of those dated later than 1923, the vast majority were enacted aboard military vessels, and the author quotes extensively from bibliographical sources on both British and North American military custom and tradition.<sup>1066</sup> Most line-crossing rituals enacted under United States Navy auspices, and some aboard North American merchant vessels, include the kissing of the "Royal Baby", (e.g., HMC 90-65, TTC p. 5) always a person of gross obesity, usually with the initiate blindfolded, apparently aiming to convince him that he has kissed the "Baby's" posterior when, in fact, he has kissed the man's belly.<sup>1067</sup> British

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<sup>1065</sup>. A number of past scholars have pursued such pet theories and later been proven to be largely mistaken, among them Frazer, Graves, and Müller. Consider only Schliemann's search for Troy.

<sup>1066</sup>. Leland P. Lovette, *Naval Customs, Traditions and Usage*, (Annapolis MD: United States Naval Institute, 1939) and a British Admiralty publication titled "Crossing the Line" which was issued in September 1946. NB: No Royal Baby appears in the cast of characters listed in the British pamphlet, but one is listed in Lovette.

<sup>1067</sup>. A big heavyset fellow ... took the part of the "Royal Baby". He had trunks on underneath and then a diaper made from a tablecloth and smeared with mustard, etc. for "realism". Pots of spaghetti were dumped on peoples' heads, as well as food colourings, which could be removed easily. All the leftovers were dumped on the Royal Baby after the ceremony concluded. (HMC 90-65, TTC p. 5)

The biggest, fattest sailor was chosen and lips painted on both his belly and his backside. Blindfolded "feebies" were made to kiss the man's belly, but when the blindfolds were removed, they saw his buttocks. "It was a long, long day...." Each initiate was taken, blindfolded, and told he was talking to Neptune. A stick was slowly pushed into his stomach. "Neptune" was smoking a cigar. The stick was suddenly removed and smoke blown into the neophyte's face simultaneously, so that he inhaled a deep lungful of cigar smoke. While each man was still blindfolded, an item was put into his hands, then taken away and placed on the deck. He then had to feel around until he found it. All were naked and were paddled with boards when they bent over. "It was a pretty bad scene" which he will certainly never forget. (HMC 90-43, TTC p. 1)

data infrequently(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 6) list such a personage among the cast of characters, although female characters such as “Queen Neptune/Amphitrite” or “Thetis/Neptune’s Daughter” appear quite often.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 2; HMC 91-1, TTC pp. 5-6; HMC 92-3, TTC p. 2) These “ladies” are found much less frequently among the cast of characters in the rite as performed upon North American-flag ships.<sup>1068</sup>

Teri Degler offered a tongue-in-cheek description of the ceremony:

... whenever a ship neared the equator, the fun-loving fellows aboard had a little initiation ceremony for first-time crossers. In its worst form, the initiates had soap crammed into their mouths and their heads held underwater until they were nearly drowned.

More civilized ships, though, made the ceremony into something a bit more picturesque. ... one crew member dressed up as King Neptune ... adorned with necklaces made of barnacles, a flowing seaweed beard, a trident, and a makeshift golden crown. Another ... played Queen Amphitrite, Neptune’s wife. Others dressed up as an evil-looking surgeon, a barber, guards, nymphs, and -- for some unknown reason -- bears.<sup>1069</sup>

... this ... motley crew would ... “hold court” ... close to a large canvas bath ... filled with seawater. Neptune would summon the initiates. Each one would be “attended” by the surgeon and the barber. Following these ministrations, which varied in sadistic intensity from ship to ship, the initiates would be dunked by the bears.

Many good-hearted captains issued official certificates to the initiates after the ceremony was over so the young sailors would never have to endure the rite again.<sup>1070</sup>

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<sup>1068</sup>. When Geoffrey Arnold was an Apprentice his ships carried few passengers, but a tank about twenty feet square, like a garden pool with four feet of water was rigged on the foredeck from canvas and heavy timbers, with “a long sausage thing to let the water out”. They did “all the usual things”. The Barber, Neptune, and his Wife took part, but there was no Royal Baby. They made the Queen’s curly wig from rope yarn/sisal and used old bunting for the costumes, which were made new every time. They wore crowns and Neptune carried a trident. Much fuss attended the occasion. Initiates were shaved with a large wooden razor, and the “soap” was “some bubbly stuff that the lamptrimmer would get hold of.” It was not soogee-moogee, which was a dreadful stuff made from Gossage’s powdered soap. Passengers got certificates for crossing, but crew did not, as “Apprentices were not worth it.”(HMC 91-1, TTC pp. 5-6)

<sup>1069</sup>. Bassett, on page 419, states, “...among the usual features of the procession during the early part of the present [last] century, was a trio composed of two bears led by a triton. ...some explain this as a representation of Ursa Major and Ursa Minor, disappearing under the guardianship of Arctophylax (Boötes).” The name of the latter star means “bear watcher”.

<sup>1070</sup>. Degler, 24-25.

Only one mention is made, in all of Lydenberg's data, of a line-crossing in a merchant cargo ship. This is a passage from Louis Slobodkin's *Fo'castle Waltz*, telling how first-trippers were teased and tormented for days about the tortures they would endure on crossing the Equator. However, it concludes:

The Neptune brigade didn't show up.

In the hot mess at supper the Maverick and a few others bellyached: What did them lousers up on midships think -- the crew was going to carry on the ceremonies on their own time? Nuts! If midships didn't have the decency to co-operate and cut down the engines and give the crew time off when we hit the Equator -- t'hell with them. There'd be no ceremonies. And there wasn't.<sup>1071</sup>

Capt. R.A. Simpson has seen and been involved in line-crossing ceremonies since acquiring his first licence, but there was "no such joviality" when he was a young Apprentice.(HMC 92-6, TTC p. 1) Joseph Elms, in the Catering Department, complained that he had to work and was not allowed to "join in the fun". He was not even ducked or anything; that was all for the passengers.(HMC 92-1, TTC p. 1) Ed Richards, however, considered that he "was spared" a line-crossing initiation by always going to relieve the wheelsman when the rites started. He did see others get initiated, though.(HMC 90-61, TTC p. 5) "Pig-Eye" Watson had worried about the ceremony all the previous night, but escaped it as he "had to work"; he got his certificate anyway. Others were not as lucky as he, and were covered in black grease and fish oil.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 3) Capt. Dick Britton likewise avoided the "festivities", although each of the other neophytes was made to "drop his pants" and the perpetrators "took a big scoop of grease and 'gave it to him' in the behind."(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 1) A Northern Irish respondent also escaped:

I got clear o' that. I tol' 'em I'd been over the line before, so they -- two of the Deckboys and an Ordinary Seaman, they got dipped. But I managed to get clear of it. ... I was too crafty for that. ... They just threw 'em in a big tarpaulin filled with

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<sup>1071</sup>. Lydenberg, 203-204.

seawater between Four and Five hatch, if they'd no swimming pool aboard.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 5)

On Capt. Vince Finan's first crossing, there was no ceremony, but a certificate was presented. He has another certificate from his first command on which a rite was performed and the initiates' heads were shaved. The Captain was the barber's first victim, but had enough regrowth on reaching his home port to be married without incident or embarrassment. He said it was "fun" and there was a special dinner.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3)

Fieldwork interviews for the current study clearly indicate that a preponderance of wartime merchant vessels observed no line-crossing ceremony at all, although all those who sailed aboard them, initiate or no, appear to have been aware of the existence of such rites. The most frequently cited reasons for non-observance were firstly that there was no time for such frivolities in war, secondly that there were so few old-timers and so many "green hands" among the crews that such rituals would have been almost impossible to enact, and thirdly that these practices only took place aboard passenger boats or military vessels, but cargo ships were too "businesslike" to participate in such trivial pastimes -- completing the circle and returning the attention to the first reason cited above.

"Johnny" Johnston has a certificate for crossing the Equator and the 180th meridian simultaneously in 1943. Skippers sometimes change course specifically to accomplish this, making the initiates of the resultant ceremony "Golden Shellbacks". (HMC 90-65, TTC p. 5)<sup>1072</sup> One long-standing form of fool's errand<sup>1073</sup> was encouraging first-trippers to bring their cameras and take pictures of the place where the Equator crossed the International Date Line, as

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<sup>1072</sup>. According to Lydenberg, quoting Henley E. Combs, *Shellbacks: Sons of Neptune*, (New York: Pageant Press, 1951), "The Golden Dragon is to the Eastern waters what Father Neptune is to the Western." All certificates I have seen for crossing the Equator and the International Date Line simultaneously were adorned with a Golden Dragon.

<sup>1073</sup>. This subject is discussed fully in the next Section.

if there were some sort of floating marker there,(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 3) and Bob Hiller indicated that it was relatively easy to disregard the ceremonial aspect during wartime, because “There’s no bump when you cross the Equator”;(HMC 89-6, TTC p. 1) therefore the crossing itself, if not marked by ritual, is indiscernible to most of those aboard. In addition, a colleague informed me that he had once read in a children’s book, that on some cruise liners, telescopes were specially marked with a line representing the Equator to fool gullible passengers.<sup>1074</sup>

The reasoned doctrines against such frivolities on a working wartime cargo vessel might range from indifference to contempt, as displayed by the following”

On the Blair, the other OS [Ordinary Seaman] and I went into the messroom where the bosun and some others were playing cards and said that [we] were crossing the equator. The bosun himself said “Get the fuck out of here.” On other ships the gun crews would have some kind of initiation and include any of the merchant crew that wanted in. There was not much playing done in wartime.<sup>1075</sup>

At the other extreme, some respondents recalled the rites with obvious relish, and recollected the regulations made by official authorities in an attempt to maintain some control:

“They crowned ya. Y’ got baptised.” One was dunked and sometimes shaved. One had to eat soap, and yes, one had to kiss the Royal Baby. “They done all kinds o’ tricks, but that was only when you crossed the Line at the Equator. When they come to the International Date Line, they had another ceremony. The skipper made sure you didn’t cross it on a Sunday. You never got two Sundays in one week. They made sure.”(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 6)

About half the respondents recognised the existence of such a ceremony, but many had been initiated before or after, rather than during the war itself. About twenty of those interviewed had received cards or

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<sup>1074</sup>. Andy Pearce, personal conversation, 25 March 1994. He said the book may have been one of the Willard Price Adventure Series and he read it *circa* 1970.

<sup>1075</sup>. John B. Wilson, from a letter dated 19 March 1990.



certificates of some kind for a crossing. Nearly a third said no such ceremony was held during the war. Two or three had been on vessels which observed no ceremony, but had nevertheless received certificates. Four said there had been a ceremony for crossing the International Date Line,<sup>1076</sup> while four said there had not, and two of those four initiates had received certificates. One informant recalled an Arctic Circle ceremony, while four did not, but three of the latter group received certificates just the same.<sup>1077</sup> Three remembered Equator-crossing ceremonies as being always designed for passengers with no crew involved except amongst the cast, one received no certificate, half a dozen never crossed the Equator at all, and one described an elaborate ploy instigated so a vessel could claim to have “gone ‘round the Horn under sail”.<sup>1078</sup>

Books of early nautical collectanea indicate that ruder features of the ceremony were dropped in more recent times and only baptism (dunking) and a mild penalty were retained.<sup>1079</sup> This may be inaccurate, however, as several fieldwork data seem to indicate that, at the very least, efforts were made to humiliate the new initiate, often through inducing him to vomit, or at the very least to feel queasy. Capt. Fred Steele mentioned being fed a concoction laced with ipecacuanha, an emetic,<sup>1080</sup> and a number of those interviewed have described being fed, or at least forced to take in their mouths, substances which were nauseating to a greater or lesser degree in flavour, aroma, or appearance, or foods presented in the guise of matter far less palatable, such as faeces, urine, or undesirable portions of dead animals. At no time did any

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<sup>1076</sup>. Capt. Frank Waters made twelve round-the-world trips between the time he first signed on as a Cadet and the time he retired as a Master. He thus “lost twelve days of [his] life”. (HMC 90-1, TTC p. 2)

<sup>1077</sup>. Such certificates were often signed by Boreas (the North Wind) and his daughter or consort Aurora Borealis, rather than Neptune and his lady.

<sup>1078</sup>. Richard Aldhelm-White described how they had rigged sails on HMCS *Uganda* for this purpose and received certificates to the effect that they had rounded the Horn under sail.

<sup>1079</sup>. Bassett, 417. But cf. Brinkley and a few others’ testimonies.

<sup>1080</sup>. Capt. Steele is my stepfather, and I probably first heard this in the early 1960s.

informant state that these actual items had been forced upon him, but several specifically cited such repellent and unpleasant stuff as diesel oil and soapsuds.(HMC 90-1, TTC pp. 1-2; HMC 90-4, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-6; HMC 90-13, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-70, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-28, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-57, TTC p. 2)<sup>1081</sup> Anthony Abela said he and his fellow initiates were made to eat spicy food such as pepper cookies and to drink mustard-water from [new] bedpans.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 2)<sup>1082</sup>

One man described being blindfolded and stripped naked, then having a string tied about his penis. He was next handed a very heavy cleat and told it was attached to the end of the string and he must now throw it as far as possible. Needless to say, had it been true, this was calculated to cause mental anguish if not physical harm to the participant. Of course the cleat was not in fact attached to the string which was tied to the man's penis.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 2)<sup>1083</sup> A goodly number of informants also mentioned having been required to "run the gauntlet" between shipmates armed with wooden paddles, who belaboured them throughout, being "shaved" by a mock barber with a wooden razor, or having their bodies daubed with repellent concoctions. Some actually had their heads either partially or completely shaved. Most were "dunked" or made to "walk the plank", and some were sprayed with seawater from fire hoses or doused with buckets.

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<sup>1081</sup>. Capt. Steve Browne described the nasty things they were forced to eat as "piss and punk".(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1) I thought no more of this wording until I noted that Beck, 121 defines "piss and punk" as no more than bread and water.

<sup>1082</sup>. This put me in mind of an incident read of and described to me by my ex-husband, Stíofáin Goff, in which one of the Behan brothers (Brendan or Dominic, both well-known Irish writers) was interned and, whilst in the prison infirmary, took bets (collected in Guinness stout in a sterile bedpan) that he would not circumnavigate the building outdoors, clad only in a cap, scarf, boots, and socks. Legend would have it that he won the bet and was then seen drinking strange-looking black stuff from a bedpan by a horrified new guard who resigned on the spot.

<sup>1083</sup>. Men were painted and paddled, made to "walk the plank" and "hit" with the fire hose. There were some silly things in the ceremony, such as crazy haircuts, but no lasting damage was done. Although not himself made to eat odd things, the respondent had heard of making initiates "eat crap" -- not in actuality, but making them think they were eating unpleasant and noxious substances. He understood the ramifications of the use of ipecac in such a ceremony and felt that the story of the man with the string tied to his penis was accurate, in that it was intended to frighten, not actually to hurt.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 1)

Pat Brinkley described his initiation as harrowing and dangerous because it “got out of hand” when the neophytes were being sprayed with a high-power hose and resulted in their having to clutch a “live” steam pipe to avoid being washed overboard, causing severe burns to their hands.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 1)<sup>1084</sup> Jack E. McGinty said that although the violence in the Equator-crossing ceremony has gradually died out and it is now little more than the presentation of the actual certificate, the *Steel Worker* had a “brutal” initiation, involving tar, axle grease, stuff in the hair, and walking the plank, but for the most part nobody bothers with such initiations anymore.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3)

A British respondent, like Brinkley, was disgruntled at the question:

The Crossing the Line ceremony, yes -- not of happy memory. We did have a Crossing the Line ceremony ... the usual business of Father Neptune comin’ aboard and havin’ y’ bloomin’ head shaved off and soft soap rubbed in y’ mouth and covered with red leadin’ and shoved into a bath of water, and hauled out and you became one of Father Neptune’s men from there on and.... At a later date, unless you could produce evidence that you had Crossed the Equator, it might happen again. I did, somewhere, have a little certificate made by some member of the crew sayin’ that I’d been accepted into the Territory of Father Neptune as regards the Crossin’ the Line.(HMC 92-50, TTC pp. 8-9)

Two respondents had served on the staff of the California Maritime Academy. One of these men said there were always line-crossing ceremonies for Cadets on the training ship, but the ritual was much more important to the U.S. Navy than to the merchant marine, as the latter “didn’t have time for such foolishness”.(HMC 90-2, TTC p. 1) The other said there were “too many greenhorns and not enough old-timers” to make a ceremony worthwhile when he first crossed the Equator near the end of the war. Although he was “never initiated for crossing anything”, he was given a certificate for the Equator crossing. He agreed with his colleague that the United States Navy “makes a big thing of it” -- the Equator, the International Date Line, the Arctic Circle.

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<sup>1084</sup> He said the ritual was terrible and should not happen; their hands were sore for three months; some were so terrified they almost went into shock.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 1)

He added that some recent “schoolship” initiations have “gotten out of hand”, especially with sexual harassment of women students, but concluded that “schoolship politics” is entailed, as the ritual has always involved sexual harassment of the male initiates.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 2) I should hardly describe the “cleat on the penis” or having one’s genitals anointed with grease, tar, or other unpleasant substances as anything less, so why sexual harassment of women under the same circumstances should carry with it a threat to ultimately curtail or discontinue the ritual entirely is beyond my ken.

Older men, like Capt. Laurie James were more phlegmatic. When he first crossed, his ordeal involved “just a bucket of engine oil”. It was not as bad as he had feared, but was still very messy. He did not like it, “but it had to be.”(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 2) This was the prevailing attitude of most of the oldest of the fieldwork interviewees -- it was not a particularly pleasant experience, but was regarded as necessary -- as a true rite of passage. Initiates felt a superiority to non-initiates. There was a pride in bearing the title of “shellback”.

Two U.S. Navy Armed Guards said officers were careful to keep the ratings in line during the ceremony, although they [officers] were also initiated, getting the same treatment as ratings. It was just pranks, though; the intention being not to harm, but to make the victims look foolish.(HMC 90-4, TTC pp. 1-2)

All line-crossing initiations described in either interviews or bibliographical sources followed a typical pattern of reversal of authority. Ratings, rather than officers, were temporarily and superficially at least, in full charge. Temporary assumption of authority often features in mock rites of passage, while in true rites of passage it is more often actual and permanent. Little of the ritual involved in line-crossing ceremonies, could easily be

described as “fun” for the novices, and only the most brutish could derive pleasure out of so victimising his shipmates. Instead it was more a matter of “getting level” and settling of scores, an actual attack under the guise of tradition in cases where lowly ratings could harass persons of official status without much fear of serious reprisal.<sup>1085</sup> It was thus that some of the time in World War II convoys was passed with inventive wit and humour, allowing the crew (and passengers, if there were any) to cope with the constant stress of danger.

Some escaped being casualties of the rough play by being on watch at the time of the festivities. The wheelsman could not be forcibly removed from his post, although in some instances the man at the helm requested a substitute to fill in for him so that he might participate. The complete, if temporary, authority of those in control of such festivities and the way protocol might be manoeuvred to punish or reward participants can be illustrated by two excerpts from the fieldwork data. First was an amusing instance when a man avoided the worst of the rough play:

Fred McKamy enjoyed his own initiation. Although on watch at the time, he insisted on being initiated with the rest. But on one Equator-crossing ship he was on, “a little Frenchman” was the ship’s Baker and made extra goodies for the crew above and beyond what they would usually have received. As they neared “The Line”, he informed Mr. McKamy<sup>1086</sup> that he was “sensitive” about his body and “would not appreciate” being smeared with grease and stuff. Mr. McKamy approached the “ringleaders”, telling them they were jeopardising a good thing if they treated the baker too roughly. When it came time for the initiation, one perpetrator put a little grease on his finger and dabbed it on the Baker’s cheek. That was his entire initiation. The rest of the first-timers got “the whole works”. The crew would have lost their treats, too, because the Baker was production superintendent for a large

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<sup>1085</sup> There was a Crossing the Line ceremony with a canvas swimming pool about twelve feet square, collapsible, but nicely made, and they had aboard a naval Lieutenant, “a portly gent from the Stores Department. ... This Navy fellow had never been across the Line and neither had a lot of ’em and he reported us in Sydney for ‘dangerous horseplay’. Of course nobody took the slightest bit of a notice of him in Sydney. He wasn’t particularly liked. I s’pose the barber shaved him a bit roughly and just lathered him a bit profusely and....”(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 6)

<sup>1086</sup> Officers other than the Captain are properly addressed as “Mister”, and I have attempted to follow this protocol.

commercial bakery when he entered the merchant marine, and would not have hesitated to stop providing the extra baked goods.(HMC 90-28, TTC pp. 1-2)

Although one printed source declares flatly that the ceremony is now merely “a pastime among sailors, only on crossing the equator, and officers and passengers are rarely troubled,”<sup>1087</sup> the fieldwork data for this study gave ample evidence that officers and/or passengers were more often involved as victims than were merchant crewmen. Even snobbish female passengers were not immune from the rough play and this case, much the opposite of the incident cited above, illustrates the reversal of authority and the “getting level” aspect of the ritual:

Max O’Starr crossed the Equator eight times. Troops on one Army Transport Service vessel had a “pseudo-ceremony” in which Army officers and war brides were also initiated. O’Starr recalled one particularly condescending woman, disliked by most of those aboard, who had a white two-piece bathing suit (perhaps the first real “bikini” he had ever seen). A large tin of chopped spinach was dumped down the back of her bathing suit bottoms before she was paddled -- hard. It probably ruined the suit.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 1)

Once initiated, a former victim could take part in the ceremony as one of the official cast of characters.<sup>1088</sup> These perpetrators themselves, however, occasionally found themselves in trouble:

On passenger ships “Shack” Shackleton acted as the Barber’s Assistant, who applied the lather.<sup>1089</sup> The mixture of flour and water was all right for the male victims, but made a terrible mess of the women’s hair, causing knots and snarls when it dried. When they initiated the Stewardesses aboard, the “actors” were disguised, and he hoped he would not be recognised. On watch, he went to the door of the working alleyway for a breather and met one of the Stewardesses, who

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<sup>1087</sup>. Bassett, 418.

<sup>1088</sup>. You only did the ceremony once yourself, and could then “beat the pulp” out of the others.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 2) After one has one’s own certificate, one can “torment and torture” others.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1) Those who had crossed the line before took roles in the “court”.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 5) Tom Brunskill himself acted in other Line-Crossing ceremonies. He was one of the policemen once, when he was Second Engineer. The older ones (Chief Engineer and Master) do not take part. Let the younger ones have their fun.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 6)

<sup>1089</sup>. In those early days it was usually something resembling the “gunge” of today’s televised celebrity immersions. At my own initiation, however, the “lather” consisted of whipped topping and was tasty enough that I received a whack on the tongue with the “razor” (a cake-icing spatula) for attempting to lick it off the area around my mouth.

complained bitterly about the horrible people who had messed her hair. He expressed sympathy, but, unfortunately, was recognised and “had to leave rather abruptly”. There was always a party, with a special meal and a dance. When they dressed up for the dance, the girls wanted to look their best, but their hair was “ruined”.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3)

A Merseyside informant said the ceremony was held in abeyance “for the duration” but resumed afterwards. He himself, a Catering Officer, and his wife, once acted as King and Queen Neptune in a postwar ceremony.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 2) Beck, however, describes briefly but fully “a boarding during World War II” which manifested all the basic ceremonial requirements and used both the term “shellback” and the term “pollywog” as noted below. After describing the rite, as experienced by the seafarers themselves, the text notes: “Similar treatment is afforded the passengers.”<sup>1090</sup> To illustrate the fact that there was no moratorium on line-crossing ceremonies aboard military vessels during the war either, I quote here from a newspaper clipping dated December 29, 1942:

### **King Neptune Went to Fight the U-Boat**

Men of the British destroyer Vimy, which has just reached home after a long commission abroad, are probably the only ship’s company who have been called to action stations while celebrating the “Crossing the Line” ceremony.

The U-boat alarm was sounded as King Neptune was performing his rough-and-ready rites of initiation over an improvised bath on the quarter-deck.

“We were all in fancy costume,” said an officer, “‘Guns’ rushed to his weapons in his flowing robes as King Neptune. ‘Chief’ was semi-nude, with ‘I love Susie’ scrawled across his chest.

### **No. 1 Celebrates**

“No. 1, in token of his recent marriage, was hampered by a great mock ball and chain in his rush to the bridge.

“But no Nazis turned up, otherwise Neptune would have given them their equatorial baptism with far greater realism than usual.

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<sup>1090</sup>. Beck 118-119.

“I do wish we’d discovered a U-boat and taken some prisoners. Then they would have been finally convinced that the British were uncontrollably mad.”<sup>1091</sup>

Most North American respondents agreed that the term for a successful initiate was “shellback” and for a neophyte “pollywog”.<sup>1092</sup> Most of the British sample recognised the former term, but did not necessarily associate it with line-crossing ceremonies, simply taking it to mean an experienced seaman of long standing. Few, if any, British interviewees were familiar with the term “pollywog”. One American used the term “mossback” or “mossyback” for a neophyte, (HMC 90-1, TTC pp. 1-2) and another the word “feeb”, although this latter was probably part of his personal vocabulary, rather than sanctioned nomenclature. (HMC 90-43, TTC p. 1)

A representative sample of fieldwork data will include everything from complete absence of a line-crossing ceremony through general descriptions to elaborate and specific details, with every ramification between. Respondents who indicated such ceremonies were rare, especially during the war, came equally from the British and the North American samples and constituted a little less than a third of the total interviewees. Typical responses of this type were:

There was a makeshift quasi-ceremony more for the military “passengers” than the seamen, but what was actually done is difficult to recall. It was not for the merchant seamen. Crossing the line means nothing to them; they paid no attention. (HMC 90-72, TTC pp. 6-7) It was only on troopships. (HMC 92-2, TTC p. 1) Some vessels crossed the Equator or the International Date Line without notice, claiming they were too busy or hurried, but the interviewee did not really understand why they could not have taken time for such a small thing as a line-crossing ceremony. (HMC 90-12, TTC p. 2)

“Not during the war. That’s more of a naval tradition than merchant marine. It was done on passenger ships for

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<sup>1091</sup>. Thomas, photo section between pp. 184-185. The caption in the book says “Called to action stations while crossing the line” and the source given for the clipping is J.A. Lucas-Garner, but the name of the newspaper is not given, although the clipping says “Page 3” at the top.

<sup>1092</sup>. Beck, 116-119, uses both terms in this way. Lovette, 43 says, “Those who have ‘crossed the line’ are called ‘shellbacks.’”



amusement, but virtually ignored on cargo ships. We weren't there for play." (HMC 90-69, TTC p. 4) Line-crossing ceremonies were held purely for commercial/passenger reasons, to entertain. Joe Cunningham had seen them on cargo/passenger ships, but had more serious work to do. Crossing rites are "childish". (He appeared to feel it was a class thing, inappropriate to a serious working man.) (HMC 92-7, TTC p. 2) Line-Crossing ceremonies were not held for crew members, just for passengers, and not many even then, except when "cruising". No "real" ceremonies were held during the war, even with troops. The numbers of people were just too great. (HMC 92-8, TTC p. 5)

John Dalglish, "strangely enough", did not undergo such an initiation, and agreed with others that perhaps seafarers were too busy with wartime business for such frivolities. Troopships and passenger ships often had them, as there were plenty of spare people with free time aboard such vessels and the rituals helped pass the time. There were also rites for passing the Arctic Circle, but he had no first-hand knowledge of these. (HMC 92-23, TTC p. 1) And Capt. W.L. Ashton commented that the Line-Crossing ritual was never observed on cargo boats, but was organised on passenger boats to keep passengers busy and interested and give them something to do. There are a minimum number of crewmen on a tanker or cargo ship -- no spares. All have jobs to do, and except for some "day workers" who get overtime, it is not an eight- but a twelve-hour day, especially for the officers. The Chief Officer does not have a minute to himself. (HMC 92-36, TTC p. 5) In other words, there was no time for "fun and games".

As for those with personal experience of such ceremonies, the testimony covered a wide range, but all reports were basically similar in character.

Rather than attempting to give statistics, it has been decided to insert here a large mass of fieldwork data and only to attempt to keep redundancy to the minimum possible:

At the appointed day and hour, King Neptune (or Father Neptune) came in over the bow -- an old<sup>1093</sup> fellow dressed up in all his regalia, with a rope yarn beard -- and captured the neophytes, whose faces were lathered with some gooey mixture and shaved with a wooden razor. Formulaic words were spoken (Capt. Tom Goodyear still has the script) and each blindfolded victim was dunked or tipped "overboard" into a swimming pool or tank erected for the purpose, (HMC 91-6, TTC p. 2) but it was all in fun. They were made to bow before Neptune and were charged with "offences".<sup>1094</sup> Everyone was prancing around, all painted up, and "the initiates were made to take a bite of this or that." (HMC 90-1, TTC pp. 1-2; HMC 90-6, TTC

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<sup>1093</sup>. Old is used here in the familiar, rather than the chronological sense.

<sup>1094</sup>. See below for some typical examples of the sorts of "offences" with which neophytes were charged.

p. 1) A makeshift pool was built on the deck and first-trippers had to “walk the plank”. They were covered with mustard and ketchup. It was all in fun. Herb Wilson himself made the “Jolly Roger” which was flown during his ceremony. He kept it for some time afterward, but eventually gave it away.(HMC 90-20, TTC p. 1) On one ship, they tied a line around each initiate, just under his arms, and ducked him over the side, then lifted him straight back aboard. Initiates did not have to eat anything disgusting, nor were they shaved with a wooden razor; there was just the ducking.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 3)

Sometimes naked initiates were made to “run the gauntlet” or paddled with a pierced paddle while wet, which was exceedingly painful; electric shock was also involved. Their heads were shaved and they were smeared with unpleasant goop. The tougher you were, the worse you were treated, but the idea was to embarrass, not damage. The worst “cocky” fellow had his belly and pubic area painted with tar. They were blindfolded and one ship put their neophytes in “stocks”.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 2; HMC 90-13, TTC p. 3) During Ed Stanko’s initiation, his hair was cut off, he was chained to his bunk, his face and testicles were greased, he was made to feel jellyfish in a bowl and was paddled.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 3) They sometimes had paint mixtures that would take weeks to get off, as well as “walking the plank” and “giving the hot seat” with electricity. It was not as rough for passengers, but many skippers ameliorated the ceremony anyhow. In the Navy it was pretty rough. (HMC 90-65, TTC p. 5)

William Finch’s, on the other hand, was a “nice”<sup>1095</sup> ceremony, and the role of Neptune was taken by a man with multiple tattoos, who wore only his shorts. As individuals’ names were called, they had to report to No. 4 hatch and undergo an “ordeal” to pass through Neptune’s domain. A long tent was built, about twenty feet long and two feet high, strewn with garbage and detritus on the deck, through which novices had to crawl before receiving their certificates.(HMC 90-26, TTC p. 1) An emulsion mixture of oil and water was used on the engines and could make things slimy and slippery. It was often sluiced over the decks to make barefooted, blindfolded candidates slither. After they had been “shaved” by the “barber”, water was dumped over their heads. Nothing in this ceremony compares with fraternity “hell week” initiations; it is much tamer and there is nothing mean or vicious.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 1) Fred Lewis, although he does not remember much about the ceremony, had looked forward to it and would not have minded most of the “shennanigans” anyway, as it was all funny and there was nothing “brutal”.(HMC 90-12, TTC p. 2) Under Capt. E.S. Wagner it was “the usual thing”. “It’s a hair-raising thing, he said, “I never got that punishment myself, but was part and parcel of it. They all wanted to go through it. I enjoyed it, but I’m glad I wasn’t one of them.” He insisted on knowing what went on and commanded that no one must be damaged. Some were really scared, and if anyone was really terror-stricken, he stopped it. If anyone were to be hurt either psychologically or physically, “they could forget about it”.(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 6)

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<sup>1095</sup> . The choice of word was his.

They did all sorts of funny things. Tom Brunskill came off watch, “turned over”,<sup>1096</sup> had a shower, and put on a clean white suit -- this was before the war. He then “walked out to view the landscape” and before he got far “was jumped on by a couple of ruffians” and manhandled into the messroom where the Second Engineer, a fat fellow called “Blood Red Bill”, sat at a desk. One had to “watch one’s-self” when dealing with this Second, but Mr. Brunskill did not “watch himself”. On the contrary, he spoke up and had “something sickening” stuffed in his mouth. (It turned out to be bearing grease). He was whacked as well, until he finally learned to keep his mouth shut. He was asked a series of impertinent questions which he declined to answer. He got belted if he did not answer, but grease if he opened his mouth. He was finally declared guilty and sentenced to “the vat”, where he was thrown in in his beautiful clean white suit (of which he did not have many). It was icy cold, but this he did not mind so much, as the weather was hot. He was then hauled out (or at least allowed to partially come out of the water) and requested to sign a chit to treat the rest to a round of drinks. Refusing, he was dunked again; his head was under water half the time. Finally he agreed to sign and was allowed out and all were friends again. He was told to go and get dressed, so he “bent on” another clean white suit and returned to the mess where “his” beer was presented, for which he had signed the chit. He believes the whole idea of the ceremony is to get free drink.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 5)

Bill Kirby’s “shellback certificate”(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 1) and a photocopy document given me by Jack and Sadie Sharrock,(HMC 92-3/HMC 92-4) indicate that novices were charged with such offences as:

Not keeping the beer fridge stocked up.

Wearing short black socks with a white uniform.

Leaving large paw prints on illustrious Chief Engineers log book.

Shooting shit. (i.e., embroidering the truth)

and a more modern addition:

Breach of the unwritten law of the sea that tape recorders are to be played 1,000 yards astern of the vessel or not at all.

Photographs shown me of the rite presided over by the Sharrocks included pictures of them in their robes (made from window curtains) as King and Queen Neptune; the attendant “bears”, with blackened noses; and a victim, with what looks like strawberry custard(or melted strawberry ice cream) poured over his head. This was probably a coloured mixture of flour and

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<sup>1096</sup> That is, turned over his responsibilities to the man who relieved him.

water, or possibly emulsion paint -- “something that would wash off -- eventually”. I was told “they always made a party of it” on Silver Lines.(HMC 92-4, TTC p. 1)

A large number of respondents, including all those interviewed who held certificates for crossing the Arctic Circle, had made their crossings without ceremony and only received the certificates afterward. Frank Brown received a “Blue Nose” certificate after the war for having crossed the Arctic Circle, but there was no ceremony -- only the certificate after the fact to prove he was a North Russia veteran.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 6)<sup>1097</sup>

Noticing Alan Peter’s Arctic Circle certificate, I asked about ceremonies. They never bothered with the Arctic Circle on merchant ships, although they sometimes had a ceremony for crossing the Equator. Such festivities took place mostly on passenger liners and naval ships. The Old Man and the Mate “would not have heard of it” [it would not have been sanctioned].(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 6) And a Royal Navy sailor said, about Christmas 1943, the “cox ‘flogged off’ Blue Nose certificates at sixpence each”, although there was no ceremony.(HMC 92-21, TTC p. 2)<sup>1098</sup>

Beck notes that the present line-crossing ceremony, while little more than horseplay, “still suffices to ease tensions and to afford a vent for frustrations that build up on a long voyage”.<sup>1099</sup> This was doubly necessary in the tension-inducing situation of a wartime convoy, the two most notable characteristics of which, as we have seen, were boredom and grave anxiety. The ceremony has changed little during the last century, except that the rough play is not quite so rough as it once was, and it is no longer possible to buy one’s way out of the “rough stuff” with coin.<sup>1100</sup>

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<sup>1097</sup>. I have a vague recollection of someone -- not one of the respondents -- once telling me there was an Arctic Circle ceremony welcoming candidates into the realms of Boreas, which consisted primarily of dumping a scoop of ice cubes inside the initiate’s clothing.

<sup>1098</sup>. The reader is reminded that ‘to flog’ is British slang for ‘to sell or peddle’.

<sup>1099</sup>. Beck 119.

<sup>1100</sup>. Beck 119.

“Years ago, when voyages were longer, there were many more ceremonies, some religious and others merely horseplay, but as voyages have become shorter, men more sophisticated and devices for entertainment, especially on big ships, more elaborate, most of them have been forgotten -- with, perhaps, the dubious exception of the dead horse ceremony, which is still remembered in name at least in the United States Navy.”<sup>1101</sup> Despite remarks such as this, the fieldwork for this study has concluded that ceremonies such as “paying off the dead horse”<sup>1102</sup> are today marked almost entirely by verbal expressions alone, and role-reversing Christmas festivities remain only aboard a handful of military vessels. Even a World War II cargo ship, however, might hoist an evergreen to the masthead at Christmastide, if one was available in port, although even this modest tradition was more often honoured in abeyance than by observance.<sup>1103</sup> Unlike the Royal Navy ships-of-the-line, neither the United States Navy’s warships nor most merchant vessels carried liquor for the crew’s consumption, so the grog or rum ration issue was not applicable to most of those interviewed, nor were traditional toasts observed. According to Barney Lafferty:

There was no “booze” on ships -- until the war, when merchant seamen began getting a ration. On bigger ships there were canteens, but on cargo ships they were allotted two to four cans of beer a day, no more; the amount tended to be universal. That was the first time Lafferty saw “booze” aboard for the crew.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 6)<sup>1104</sup>

Some customs were not only tradition, but safety precaution as well.

“No seaman didn’t have a knife,” said Artie Lee. Even if a neophyte was

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<sup>1101</sup>. Beck 119.

<sup>1102</sup>. Baker, 101-102. This ceremony marks the cancellation of a debt and indicates the crewmen are now working for personal gain. A straw-stuffed effigy “horse” symbolising the debt would be constructed, dragged about the vessel’s decks, subjected to both physical and verbal abuse, and then “executed”. See Chapter Eight.

<sup>1103</sup>. I learned this from my stepfather, Capt. Fred A. Steele, some time in the 1960s. One year my family sent Christmas cards portraying a vessel thus bedecked, and a photo of a dredge with such a tree at its masthead is shown in Gordon Newell, *Pacific Tugboats*, (Seattle: Superior Publishing Company, 1957), 146.

<sup>1104</sup>. See Section A of this chapter, where the making of alcoholic beverages for consumption is listed as a shipboard recreational pursuit.

straight out of a training facility he should have a knife and it was the character's ignorance, rather than the rude language of the "sailor without a knife" story discussed in Chapter Eight which disturbed him most. The knife, he said, was one of the most important things in a seafarer's possession.(HMC 92-48, TTC pp. 1 and 7) When Hank Adams was Bosun, he always insisted all seamen coming aboard with knives have the points broken off and filed down to make them round, insuring their usefulness for work, but not for fighting.(HMC 90-15, TTC p. 2) Even one of the DEMS gunners noticed, when sailing aboard a Blue Funnel ship, that when a new crew signed on, the Bosun inspected their knives and broke the points off if necessary.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 2) Beck describes "drawing the watch" as a ceremony when all hands mustered aft at the onset of a voyage, when the Mate would give a speech and choose the men for his watch and says a similar ceremonial was "when the crew were mustered and surrendered their knives (as much a part of the sailor as his arm or leg) to the blacksmith, who broke off the points to make them less effective should mutiny occur or individual courage rise".<sup>1105</sup> The World War II reason for a sailor carrying a knife on his belt was that if the ship were torpedoed he might have to cut the falls to the lifeboat in order to abandon ship.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 6)

Like the carrying of cauls, mentioned in an earlier Section, another of the more archaic practices of maritime lore also cropped up amongst the fieldwork data -- this one in connection with burial at sea -- the taking of the final stitch through the nose of the corpse, when sewing it into a shroud of weighted sailcloth or canvas.<sup>1106</sup> The original intentions, of course, were to

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<sup>1105</sup>. Beck, 120.

<sup>1106</sup>. Baker, 108; Beck, 137. Tristram Potter Coffin and Hennig Cohen, *Folklore from the Working Folk of America*, (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1973), 183. This practice is also listed in Lovette, 38-39 (citing Melville's *White Jacket*) as well as its successor, William P. Mack and Royal W. Connell, *Naval Ceremonies, Customs, and Traditions*, (Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 175.

verify/establish/confirm that the supposed cadaver was, indeed deceased,<sup>1107</sup> and also to make sure he and the weights would not slide about within the shroud. Additionally, an E-mail correspondent wrote that a World War II merchant seaman he met in a San Juan bar thirty years ago had said the practice was also followed "...as a final act ... of 'closure'" which allowed shipmates to better accept the death and somewhat alleviated the grieving process.<sup>1108</sup> Here is the testimony from the field interview transcript.<sup>1109</sup>

Well before, probably on our first or second trip up ... north, our butcher died, ship's butcher. Was an old man. I say an old man now, he 's not as old as I am now but to us he, he might have been fifty or sixty. ...in those days there was no pensions and it was common to see fit people, as long as they could do something and I suppose earn their keep, they were kept on. Anyway Alec<sup>1110</sup> died and our lamp-trimmer ... was an old sailing-ship man, he'd sailed with ... square-riggers out of Glasgow and, ... when they finished up he went into steam.... [A]nd ... sometimes he would revert to a sailmaker ... because these were things he used to do in his >[No. 20.] younger days. Anyway when Alec died came along to me.... ...a small man -- a great handlebar moustache -- used to stutter and this day he came up, he says, "A-a-a-alec is dead." I says, "Yessir." "We got to bury him tomorrow." "Yessir." He says, "I've got to ... prepare him," he says, "Go see the bo's'n and tell him I want you to help me." So I went and saw the bo's'n and he says, "All right go ahead." So when I came back ... we go down to his room where he was, straightened out on the bunk, now he said, "We get a bottle of rum and a dollar for preparing him." Now I don't know why he said a dollar, but that's what he said because what he meant was five shillings. Now he said, "You take the five shillings; you don't drink rum do you?" I said, "No sir." He said, "And ... I'll have the rum." So -- suited me fine. So ... we got a clean white sheet and we put poor old Alex on the sheet -- folded it over, and then we rolled him over onto some firebars we'd gotten from the engine room. We lashed him onto the firebars with a small rope ... what we call three-point rope. Lashed him onto the ... firebars, now to me this was a kind of a gruesome thing, and I'd never seen it done before. I don't know if I'd ever seen a corpse before. But by this time Alec[?] had ... had two or three good drinks of rum and ... he was quite cheerful about it and he was telling me what to do and I did what I was told and when we got ... him ... lashed onto

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<sup>1107</sup>. Not only was there a possibility of rousing the supposed corpse by the sudden pain, but once the action of the heart has stopped, extensive bleeding is impossible, so if blood actually flowed from the wound, the "mortal remains" were, in effect, still mortal!

<sup>1108</sup>. Bill Wells <bwells@CapAccess.org> though MARHST-L discussion list, 6 August 1995.

<sup>1109</sup>. Numbers embedded in the text indicate location of the testimony on the tape.

<sup>1110</sup>. NB: Throughout this episode it is unclear whether the name "Alec/Alex" appertains to the dead Butcher or to the living Lamp-trimmer, although I believe it to be the former.

the firebars, we rolled him over onto a piece of canvas which he brought and ... folded the canvas over and he got out his palm and needle and beeswax and he waxed the twine, and he made the first few ... stitches and he ... asked me if I knew how to sew canvas. I said, "Yes, I've been ... on sailing ships. I know how to, not very well, but I can do it." "Okay, go ahead." So I-I sewed him up and when I got up so far he showed me how to fold the head, the top part down across, ... the feet first ... fold it up across the feet and you'd stitch that up and then he took the head part and he folded it over like you would a parcel with paper, and started to sew, and when we got down to the V he says, "Now," he says, "You know what to do now?" I says, "No, wha-what do I do now?" He says, "You got to put the la-la-la-last stitch through the nose," he said. Jeez I didn't want to ... it was awful. Anyway I, I couldn't do it. He ... feeled around under the canvas and he got the nose. "Now," he says, "P-p-p-put it," he says, "through the soft part of the nose." I said, "No sir. Can't do it." And he said, "Get out the goddamn way," and he took the needle and he fiddled around and pushed it through. "Now," he says, "You do it." Had to put it through three times, so I did the next two and then ... we cut it off, cut the twine and he was ready for burial. At which time he sent me up to the bridge to tell the Captain the corpse was ready. So >[No. 62.] ... "All right, ... tell the bos'n, muster the crew," so the crew were mustered and in their best clothes, those off watch, and a platform was built up of liferafts level with the rail and poor old Alec was laid on top and on top of him was the British flag, the Union Jack, the red ensign. And Captain [?] appeared with the officers and at a certain point -- now the war was still on -- uh, he raised his hand and the Fourth Officer on the bridge ... rang the telegraph to stop engines. And by this time the Captain had read through the burial ceremony and he says, "Now we commit this body to the deep." Now this is at about the time when he said, "Stop engines." So ... we had Alec on a hatchboard and I was on one end of the hatchboard and, uh, somebody else was on the other and the bo's'n was behind me and when the Captain said, "Now we commit this body to the deep," the bo's'n said to me, "And hold onto that goddamn flag" he said. So we tipped him up and away went poor old Alec and the, uh, engine was put down to full speed ahead again and away we went. First experience of burial at sea. ... I put the last stitch. Alec put the first stitch through the nose and I put the last two, awful experience. But we did it many >[No. 84.] times after and ah, Alec always got his bot-b-b-b-bottle of rum and I got my dollar. ... 'Cause you know ... in the Tropics in particular when you have a death you'd have to get rid of them as quickly as possible, for obvious reasons and ... carrying troops the way we were, ... every once in a while you'd have somebody who died for some reason or other.(HMC 91-4, TR p. 9)<sup>1111</sup>

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<sup>1111</sup>. Amusing anecdotes about death at sea earlier in the century come from Beck, 285-286, "I never thought to see the day that granny would go through hell in a two-reef fores'l!" and "I never thought the old lady would have to carry her own coal to hell". These reinforce the indication that many seafarers prefer to make light of circumstances most landsmen would take very seriously.



A tradition which illustrates the sort of familial solidarity that drew crews together, even though it were only for a single voyage, is that of the “blanket or tarpaulin muster”, a nautical way of “passing the hat”. In this custom, a blanket, sheet, or tarpaulin would be spread upon the deck in the forecastle or messroom and the crew would file by, each tossing onto it a few coins or notes, in the way passers-by toss money into the instrument-case of a busking musician. The resultant yield would then be dispersed to the appropriate recipients, often, though not always, a deceased or injured shipmate’s family ashore. Other possible incentives for such a collection might be a shipmate’s wedding or retirement, or a child’s birth or christening.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-7, TTC pp. 3 and 5) The Royal Navy had a similar, but not identical tradition. Theirs was an auction.

“If a sailor got killed or died, ... all his uniform and effects, apart from personal things which were sent home to his family - - y’know the entire uniform, everything, was auctioned off to ... the crew. ... We weren’t very well off, let’s face facts, the Navy pay was poor, but you’d pay p’r’aps a pound for a man’s lanyard -- you could go and get one for tuppence -- and then you’d throw the pound in, then chuck the lanyard back in and somebody else’d buy it.” A piece of orange peel once sold for ten shillings. “Aye, they’d buy anything and just throw it in ... I’m talkin’ now y’know in ... the 1940s, they’d two and three hundred pounds from the lad’s [??] and sent it to his parents.” I asked if this custom had a name, but was told it did not.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 1)

One or two of the merchant seamen in the fieldwork sample indicated that blanket musters had, in the early days of the war, been held for the benefit of the poorly-paid military gunners aboard. My stepfather, Capt. Fred Steele, however, said he had never heard of such a practice for any purpose and that there was adequate insurance to cover most eventualities. Of course, he was an officer and those who maintained the custom had been observed by their shipmates were ratings, so this may explain the discrepancy.

One man, interviewed not by me, but by a labour history researcher for the Seafarers’ International Union, had a rather interesting piece of

information that I had never heard before. He contended that when a man was to be fired, a bar of soap would be placed on his bunk, signifying: “You’re all washed up; wash your clothes and git!”(SHLSS #2 (24 May 1985), HMC TTC p. 1) This datum has come to light in none of my personal investigations, but I found it curious and intriguing. It appeared to be the sole datum of its sort to be discovered during the entirety of the research, both the archival and field corpora.

Food played as large a part in custom as it did in the seaman’s daily life and welfare.<sup>1112</sup> I was told by one respondent that it was “common practice” during the war, after a few weeks at sea, for Firemen and Sailors to march along together to see the skipper and complain about the food. “It was almost a ritual.” Seamen used to joke a lot about it, because skippers and Chief Stewards seemed to have a uniform answer -- “I’m eatin’ it -- and I find it all right.”(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 3)

In the Norwegian ship in which one man served, they had a huge kettle, of perhaps three gallons’ capacity, with a fishmouth spout in which a cork was placed. After pouring out one’s own coffee, one would add more water and replace the cork. When this kettle was full of grounds, it was dumped, and the process began again. He described the coffee as surprisingly good.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 5) This information was not so surprising to me, as I had a great-uncle of Norwegian descent who made the world’s best coffee, and it was boiled rather than percolated or filtered, in a manner quite similar to that described by my informant.<sup>1113</sup>

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<sup>1112</sup>. See Chapter Three, under “Conditions Aboard”.

<sup>1113</sup>. Beck, 67-68, noted a similar custom amongst fishermen, the major distinction being that in his variant custom, the discovery that the kettle was filled with coffee grounds (or tea leaves) was a signal to head for home.

The most interesting and pervasive of the food customs was that of the “black pan”,<sup>1114</sup> which only surfaced in the British fieldwork and was apparently unknown in North America. The first mention made of it in the research data was by Capt. R.A. Simpson, who said that the “stokehol’ gang” got a regular treat from the Cook when they came off watch -- usually a pan of rock cakes. As an Apprentice, he used to “nick” these treats occasionally, as he was always hungry and the rest of the food was terrible. He never understood why the “black gang” were entitled to extra ‘goodies’, as all the crew worked hard, and Apprentices harder than anyone else, because they were “company personnel” and union rules regarding work hours did not apply to them. I suggested it was perhaps because the Stokers burnt off extra calories in the oven-like atmosphere of the Engine Room, but he said sometimes as an Apprentice Deck Officer he had had to work in the stokehold to keep up speed on coastal convoys.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-6, TTC p. 1)

A few days later, I interviewed a man who had been a member of galley staff on large passenger liners and he clarified the situation. “In the old days” before the war, when ships were mostly coal-burners, all the galley ovens were coke-fired and had to be bunkered by the lower Engine Room ratings, like the Trimmers, so they got an extra treat in recompense. Some oil-fired ships retained the coke-fired ovens and the Trimmers still bunkered them during the day and would come down after their evening meal for things such as ice cream, pie, or fruit. On one ship this informant had trouble because the Stokers still demanded the “black pan”, although the ship had electric ovens. The African Bakers who had been there before him had been doling it out, but he felt no “black pan” should be given without reciprocal cause and he stopped it. The decision to end this tradition caused some ill feeling, but this man had always been a rebel, having come from Scotland Road, Liverpool, where many

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<sup>1114</sup>. See the glossary in Chapter Eight.

of the Firemen lived. He knew how to fight and to defend his own decisions.(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 4) Barney Lafferty also said the “black pan” was originally only for Firemen on the 4-8 watch, usually only on passenger boats, who would coal the galley. When they came off watch, “out of all the little scraps left, they got a bit extra”. One ship was notoriously “a bit tight on food” and even the “black pan” was a bit skimpy, but they would give an egg each, “and a bit of bacon and perhaps a chicken carcass or two”. Sometimes the name “black pan” was attached even when it went to the Deck crew, but it was originally intended only for Firemen. Deck crew could relieve one another on watch to get their tea [supper], but Firemen could not do so because of the nature of their work.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 7) Dick Chilton concurred that the “‘black pan’ was a Firemen’s thing”. (HMC 92-57, TTC p. 3) Yet another man said:

The “black pan” was leftovers from the officers’ and passengers’ tables which were given to the sailors to share out between them when they came off watch at midnight.<sup>1115</sup> The passengers’ food included eggs, chops, cheese, etc. One looked forward to the “black pan” and lived like a lord on the passenger boats, but there was no “black pan” on cargo boats. “Black pan” was on the 4-8 watch. “Coming up”<sup>1116</sup> at eight, one got food and a dish. When signing on, one would always ask the Chief Engineer,<sup>1117</sup> “Put me down for the 4-8”. Often one was too late, as all wanted this preferential watch.(HMC 92-58, TTC p. 5)

Some recalled the “black pan” simply as a treat for the men on the 4-8 watch, without specifying Departments, or thought it was given both Deck and Engine crew to make up for them not getting their evening meal until eight o’clock. “That’s what the night watch got.” They could help themselves to whatever was available in the galley and “do a fry-up”. It was given to both Deck and Engine crew.(HMC 92-48, TTC p.6; HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4) Dick Chilton,

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<sup>1115</sup>. Note that he immediately switches this to the 4-8 watch, which would be coming off watch at eight, both a.m. and p.m.

<sup>1116</sup>. This indicates up from the Engine Room. Deck crew would not come “up” off watch.

<sup>1117</sup>. Again, although not put into words, one would be asking the Chief Mate or Chief Officer if one were joining the Deck Crew.

mentioned above, also recalled a “sort of general scouse [stew]” prepared for the 8-12 watch from passengers’ leftovers on big ships,(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 3) but Barney Lafferty, telephoning me after his interview, called this “hoodle” and again specified that the recipients were Firemen.<sup>1118</sup>

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<sup>1118</sup>. Further information on similar customs is found in Chapter Four in the Section of ‘Favourite Watches’.

## D. FOOLS' ERRANDS<sup>1119</sup>

In order to test the mettle of the ignorant, unwary and gullible newcomer in an established situation, innumerable nonexistent items, imaginary jobs and fictitious characters have been invented. When a new person enters a small, intimate group, such as a ship's crew or any other work gang, many facets of his or her personality must be investigated in order to discover how he or she will react under given conditions and also how successfully he or she will interact with the group as it already exists. To this end, however unconsciously or unintentionally, the fool's errand for the newcomer, especially in the workplace, has developed the character of an initiatory rite.<sup>1120</sup>

Fools' errands are quasi-initiations used to test the character and knowledge of new apprentices in factory work, new recruits in the armed forces, new members of the secretarial pool, new convicts in prison, new members of sports teams, clubs, and societies. There is almost no small, intimate group which does not engage in the practice to one extent or another. Educational institutions perhaps carried the custom beyond acceptable boundaries in many cases, such as fraternity and sorority initiations and the practice of "Frosh", "Rag", or "Hell" week<sup>1121</sup> in high schools, prep schools, colleges, and universities. It is unfortunate from the standpoint of tradition that some students were unable to restrain themselves from actually endangering or injuring their fellows during these activities to the extent that

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<sup>1119</sup>. This subject, fools' errands for greenhorns, especially aboard ship, was my personal favourite, and much of this material was sent to Jim Jump for printing in *THE SEAMAN*, the newspaper of the Rail, Marine and Transport Union Shipping Division and also to Craig Arnold, of the San Diego Maritime Museum, for the newsletter, *Mains 'l Haul*.

<sup>1120</sup>. My supervisor, during one of our talks while this thesis was being written offered the intelligence that such trials had been set and performed 'since Pontius was a pilot (Pilate)'. I considered this bit of folk speech so germane to my work that I could not resist inserting it here.

<sup>1121</sup>. "Frosh Week" and "Hell Week" are North American terms, while "Rag Week" is British.

such rites are being universally abolished by the authorities and are now in danger of total extinction.<sup>1122</sup>

If one sends a greenhorn (usually male aboard ship by tradition) on a fool's errand, what information about that "tenderfoot" can one reasonably expect to receive from his reaction? Is he gullible? Is he tolerant enough to accept a joke on himself? Is he clever enough to realise he is being "put on" and find a way out of it? In other words, is the "fool" going to be able to handle the strain of the job and still interact as a worthwhile member-in-good-standing of the group? Further information to be acquired thus is: How much inside knowledge does this person already have about the situation he is entering? How familiar is he with the tools, duties, traditions involved? How much does he know about what will be expected of him? Perpetrators of such pranks ascertain not only how much prior knowledge the newcomer already has, but also how well he will get along with them, how fast he can learn, how he deals with stress, how well he "thinks on his feet," and many other things as well. In the case of a vessel's crew, whether merchant or military, the basic question answered in the long run is: "Will he (or more recently she) make a good, reliable shipmate?"

Among the errands listed by those interviewed were:<sup>1123</sup>

Bring some red (or green) oil for the port (or starboard) running lights. (6)

Find Charlie Noble<sup>1124</sup> (or Lee Scuppers<sup>1125</sup> or Matthew Walker<sup>1126</sup>) and send him to the bridge, or some other location, or tell him to report to one of the officers. (3)

Look for eggs in the crow's nest. (1) (Beck, 68, 116)

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<sup>1122</sup>. In the final days of writing up this study, I was informed by my colleague, Dr. John Ashton, that the Canadian Armed Forces recently (1995) suffered a scandal based on such "hazing" practices, which investigation resulted in the disbanding of one entire unit of paratroops.

<sup>1123</sup>. Bracketed numbers following the "errand" indicate how many respondents gave this answer.

<sup>1124</sup>. A nickname for the galley smokestack.

<sup>1125</sup>. The guttering on the leeward side of the vessel.

<sup>1126</sup>. A type of knot -- Only found in Beck, 68.

Go to the Bo's'n and get  $n$  fathoms of Plimsoll (water, chow) line. (none in this fieldwork, but it is widely recognised from earlier fieldwork and bibliographical references)

Get the longshore crew to set up a sky-hook to unload No. (1, 2, 3, 4, 5, etc.) hold. (5)

Get a plate (board, tray, tin hat, etc.) stretcher. (5)

Find (polish) the golden rivet.<sup>1127</sup> (12)

Bring a steam wrench, (a left-handed monkey-wrench, rubber hammer, rubber bucket, rubber bugle, etc.) (18)

Get me a stick of oil. (1)

Fetch a bucket of (striped paint, steam, mucket, revolution oil, watch oil, etc.) (16)

Get a bucket of 'Sparks'<sup>1128</sup> (3); another "newbie" was sent for a bucket of "burnt fuel oil", when the actual substance desired was soot. (1)

Bring a tin (or a lump) of elbow grease. (1)

Go get a bottle of bulkhead remover. (2)

Fetch a bubbliator valve for the strudifier.(1)<sup>1129</sup>

Go to 'Chips' (or another responsible crew member) for a long stand (or a long weight [wait]). (14)

Go and bring an item (particularly the fog dispersal gear) from the fog locker. (6)

Go stand watch on the port (starboard) bow and keep a lookout for the mail buoy. (9) (Beck, 68)

Get the key to the (keelson, the locks of a particular canal) (8)<sup>1130</sup>

Take the time from the chronometer and bring it back. (1)

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<sup>1127</sup>. Arthur Credland of the Town Docks Museum, Hull, Humberside, asserted that this was not always a fool's errand, as "in the old days" ships were often completed with a gilded (rather than actually golden) rivet driven by a royal or other eminent personage.

<sup>1128</sup>. 'Sparks' is, of course, the nickname for the wireless operator.

<sup>1129</sup>. Beck, 68 mentions other made-up terms, such as scrudgeon and blivitt, which will be discussed below.

<sup>1130</sup>. "They tried to send me down into the Engine [Room] to get a key to the keelson.[pronounced kelson] ...a great big, heavy spanner [wrench] ... with a head like that. [shows with his hands]" He did not get "taken". "But this key to the keelson, you had to rig, er, if you wanted it at all, you had to rig yourself a tackle [pronounced take-ull] and pull it ... on a two-fold purchase. You had to pull it up. It was very heavy."(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 1) They had all sorts of funny things. The "key of the keelson" was one. The victim would be sent to the Captain, thence to the Chief Engineer, then "Chippy" and on and on until someone thought he had had enough and would give him a hatch-locking bar to take to the Chief Officer.(HMC 92-39, TTC pp. 2-3) All agreed this item was a huge tool which could not be manipulated by one individual, but they seemed to lack conformity as to its actual description.



As can be readily observed from this list, there is almost no limit to the lengths to which fancy can be stretched in devising such pranks. The perpetrators' imaginations provide the only limits to the creative thought involved. The examples immediately below, each unique in its own right, displayed remarkable ingenuity of concept. In the first, the unwitting dupe was dispatched as crew delegate to the Captain to complain that the officers had been given all the white meat from the duck at the preceding meal. "The Captain, one Henry Chester Sweeney, responded by telling the South Boston Irish bastards to behave themselves or face the music." (HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1)

One informant, a Messman at the time, had a camera and wanted to climb to the crow's nest to exercise his photographic skills. He obtained permission and climbed the mast, spent ten minutes or so taking pictures, and was just climbing out to come down, when a telephone rang. He climbed back in, found the phone in a watertight box, and answered it. It was the bridge officer, who asked who he was. "The Messman." "That's okay, but you come down now." So he got out and started down again, when the phone rang a second time. He returned again, undogged the watertight phonebox and answered it again. "Aren't you down out of there yet?" He did not remember whether or not the phone had rung a third time, but he did not go back again. Later, either the wheelsman or the Third Mate asked him if he had "had trouble up in the crow's nest" and it finally sank in that he had "been had". (HMC 90-72, TTC p. 7)

A slightly less innocent case occurred on the Great Lakes. There was always a "Deckhand" who was often the son of another crewmember. In this particular instance, the boy's shipmates took him to a bordello and, when they returned aboard, asked him if he had "taken precautions". When the reply was in the negative, he was asked, "Didn't anybody tell you about the grease?" Several people were involved in this "scam", including the Second Mate, who dispensed all medication aboard ship. They told the youth to smear his genitals thickly with the grease they used for screwing things down on the hatch covers. He "was a mess for about a week", but was actually getting sick with worry when they finally admitted it had been a joke. (HMC 90-68, TTC p. 4)<sup>1131</sup>

Similar to this, but less emotional and more physical in nature was a prank first mentioned to me by an unknown "neighbour" at a caravan site on the Atlantic seaboard of the U.S.A., but

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<sup>1131</sup> Sexual subjects, although they have often been a part of fools' errands, seldom surfaced in the interviews, probably because of my gender. One respondent had a shipmate who had previously been to Japan and had "a perverted picture" which he showed the Messboys, convincing them that the Japanese "had it crosswise". (HMC 90-22, p. 2)

later described in detail by a Newfoundland respondent.<sup>1132</sup> It took place on a trooper, built as a cargo/passenger ship, but with the cargo decks converted to troop decks, as was common. Toilet facilities (and this applied to all British cargo ships used as troopers) were erected on the outboard side of the well deck, a wooden house seven feet high, six or seven feet wide, and twenty feet long. This latrine was secured to the hull, deck, and ship's side, and on the outboard side were a number of stalls where men could "squat and strain" without seeing their neighbours, although the stalls were adjoining. Underneath the "squatting position" was a metal trough, fifteen inches wide and six or eight inches deep, which ran the length of the "house", and as the ship's "washdown system" was always in action, there was a constant flow of water through the latrine, discharging over the side at the after end. One trip, early on in the war, there was a Liverpool Bosun who was a practical joker. The forward end of the latrine was near the forecastle<sup>1133</sup> head and the carpenter shop. One morning the informant was in his favourite spot on the bridge. He could see the Bosun coming on deck with a piece of wood about ten inches by three or four inches, with three or four candles on it. Breakfast was served at 0700, and this was about an hour later, around eight in the morning. The Bosun put the piece of wood in the water, and as it floated down beneath the latrine, it singed all the bottoms. If the injured parties had ever discovered the Bosun's identity, he would have been "dead", because they were all hardened old soldiers. He only did it once per trip, but he did it once on every trip. The Captain never knew -- no one ever told him, but the interviewee knew, and the time he was on lookout "it was somethin' to see!" He has since been aware of similar pranks on more than one occasion.(HMC 91-6, TTC p. 1)

Escapades ranged from the totally innocuous "long stand" or announcing the crossing of the Equator for those who wish to take pictures<sup>1134</sup> where the dupe merely feels foolish; through the "burnt bottoms" trick, where the victims were hurt, but not really injured; to an extreme where the prey could become an emotional sacrifice, as nearly happened with the boy and the bordello, and as seems to have actually occurred with a few of the "mail buoy" episodes. Almost never did the shipboard pranks become physically damaging.

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<sup>1132</sup> . The unknown man had been in the U.S. Navy, and in my next interview, "Tex" English said merchant ships' construction precluded such "monkeyshines", but the ship on which it was described as having happened was a trooper.

<sup>1133</sup> . He pronounced the word in its entirety, rather than the verbal abbreviation in most common use.

<sup>1134</sup> . The idea was to see how many "suckers" rushed to the rail with their cameras.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 3)

“A lot of tricks were played on young kids just out of the hills.” The usual aim, however, was “a lot of tomfoolery, but nothing to jeopardise anyone.” The idea was only to make the victim look foolish, and “when the next batch came aboard, they were worse than the ones before.”(HMC 89-5, TTC p.5) Almost never was an individual singled out and “picked on” by a group. The intent was to initiate all “green” hands aboard, whether the numbers be large or small.(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 2) Some preferred to avoid practical jokes altogether, as they were unappealing, being so often cruel.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3) Another man said the Navy could afford such skylarking as they were heavily overmanned, but the merchant marine could not. He remarked that the Canadian Legion (and by inference, the American and British Legions) “is full of guys who do their sailing over a barroom table and their copulating at sea.” Despite there being times for lightness and laughter, war is damned serious, and what few little tricks were played, were just testing you to see if you were a good sport. The stories commonly published in nautical humour magazines,<sup>1135</sup> he described as “horse crap”. Skylarking is “out” as, even with the best good humour, it is only funny the first time.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 4) Fools’ errands “are played by kids on other, less experienced, kids; the saltiest salts in the world are the ones who have only made one trip.”(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2)

Articulate as ever, Barney Lafferty observed, “So little pranks, men were really ... entirely different, ‘cause you lost all your serious worries of ashore and your mind become a lot clearer and I think you resorted to a little child, erm, you went back to the child, to a certain extent. And you, well, childish things entertained you, put it that way.”(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 2) Of course the age median was low at the time. It was not difficult for grown men in their twenties to revert to childhood, but some of both the masterminds of

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<sup>1135</sup>. One such, available in Canada, is called *Salty Dips*.

these elaborate tricks and their victims as well, were actually children by right -- boys of fourteen and fifteen -- especially on the British training ships.

Geoffrey Arnold was sent on fools' errands and remembers it well. He did not fall for "green oil for the starboard lamp", but went docilely to the Engineers for a "stick of oil" only to be told to "shove off -- it's a leg-pull". Probably the reason it did not happen to him more often was that he had been trained aboard the *Conway* and learnt some of the tricks there. New Cadets on the *Conway* always lived in the fo'c'sle first -- then they were moved to the main, fore, or mizzen tops -- by height. The tallest went to the foretop, medium height boys went to the maintop, and the smallest were sent to the mizzentop. Mr. Arnold, a short man, is still surprised that, although he has not grown much, he was sent to the maintop then. They were given a fortnight's leeway (or grace) on first arriving aboard the *Conway*. None of the older boys were allowed to "pester" them. They were left alone and looked after by the Gunner, whose cabin was right aft of the forecastle top. But when that first fortnight was over, they were "ragged to death" and bullied. All were quite small as they were too young to have undergone the natural growth spurt common to male adolescents. The "QB's" or "quarter boys" were the leaders, and held "quarter boys' sessions" where "the new chap" was made to do something foolish -- "the usual schoolboy stuff. It never did us any real harm. I got kicked down a hatch I know, but I didn't get broke, I didn't break anything. You bounce easy."(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 6)<sup>1136</sup>

R.J. Warren also spent time on a training ship, but the *Vindicatrix*, prepared boys to be ratings, rather than officers. His experience differed from Mr. Arnold's. "It's very difficult to remember, but there was quite a number of tricks were played on young seamen, or young trainin' seamen at various times, by, specifically, the instructors, because, I think you must remember that we were all boys together, really -- some of them were more senior than others. ... but there wasn't a lot of hassle that went on in those places -- this regardless of what people might think." He specifically recalled people being sent for the "long stand" and also a "rubber hammer".(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>1136</sup> Some avoided being the butt of further practical jokes because other, more experienced Cadets, rather than victimising the newcomers, clued them in.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 4) Capt. Derek Belk said, "I don't remember any, actually.... I heard all about them; I think mebbe I was helped a lot be the other three -- there were four of us, you see, four middies on the ship, and the others were all experienced, so.... They weren't gonna let one o' their mates down."(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 2) "Fish" Ramsey, on the other hand, was wise, but still got caught a few times. Nobody's foolproof.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 3)

Horace Beck observes:

Lest this discussion be thought too gruesome, there is often a lighter side to the art of marlinspike[sic] seamanship. When salts get together they enjoy swapping yarns and watching skills. They also enjoy gulling the “pollywog.” A great source of amusement is to ask the young fellow what he knows about knots. Depending upon his sagacity, he may then be sent to find Matthew Walker, a stopper knot, or feed the camel, a kind of fender; or someone may inquire if he has been on China station. He is then asked if he can make the most useful of all knots, the dragon bowline. When the answer is in the negative, some old salt will sigh, get up, tie a bowline and hand it to the neophyte. “There it is.” “Why, that’s only a bowline.” “That’s right. Now drag it.”<sup>1137</sup>

Jansen, quoted in the previous chapter with regard to the Esoteric-Exoteric Factor in Folklore, links this Factor to fools’ errands, saying:

The esoteric part of this factor, it would seem, frequently stems from the group sense of belonging and serves to defend and strengthen that sense. Evidence for such an assertion might be found ... in the traditional pranks played upon apprentices by master craftsmen or -- less seriously -- in the college fraternities’ informal initiation rites.<sup>1138</sup>

The fool’s errand, it thus would seem, can be a serious mechanism to promote group identity and bonding between members. But all fools’ errands in any given occupational group need not pertain specifically to that group alone. Although the search for “Charlie Noble” is specific to the seafarer,<sup>1139</sup> the “long stand” is not. It is found throughout the broadest spectrum of occupational traditions in Great Britain and more frequently ashore than at sea in North America. Nor did every seafarer who was the dupe in such a case, experience his embarrassment at sea. Many who were too clever to be fooled aboard ship had learned to be wary because of a previous indoctrination shoreside, either in a shipyard, or while putting in an apprenticeship in a craft which later took them to sea. One of the latter was a Chief Baker, who in his

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<sup>1137</sup>. Beck, 193. No further explanation of “China station” is given, but it may allude to dishwashing. Cf. also “camel” in the glossary.

<sup>1138</sup>. Jansen, “The Esoteric-Exoteric Factor,” 46.

<sup>1139</sup>. Allied forms, however were common with only the specifics changed. In my undergraduate youth, it was common to announce at a gathering that Miss Helen Hunt had found a wallet in the women’s toilets -- “So ladies, check your handbags, and if any of you has lost her wallet, she can go to Helen Hunt for it (go to Hell and hunt for it).”

youthful days was once sent from his bakehouse to another after hours for the “spare oven key”.(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 5) And a large number of respondents said that although they themselves could not recall having been the butt of such jokes they did recall seeing others taken in or, in fact, that they had been the perpetrators. Artie Lee was one of these. He said Liverpudlians were “noted for being devilish” and he “sorted the others out” by sending them for buckets of steam and long stands. “It was a laugh; it was good.”(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 1)

Even experience did not always protect the gullible, as Peter Rogers recalled tricking a wartime shipmate who had previously served in the Royal Navy, and who, in fact, was a licensed Engineer, with the “long stand”.<sup>1140</sup>(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4) Another Engineer said, “Never cross the Cadets, because they could get back at you; they were clever and played tricks.”(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 1) And not all of what appear to be fools’ errands are what they seem. A colleague on an e-mail discussion list wrote:

I had a friend in the merchant marine who shipped out on an oil tanker or two. Seems they move the load around in various compartments and flush out others. To see if a compartment is clean, according to him, they lower a man into it on a harness. If he starts laughing uncontrollably, the vapor concentration is still high.

They call the victim “The Canary.”<sup>1141</sup>

The fool’s errand differs from the story of foolish ignorance, in that, in the former (the “errand”), the butt of the horseplay sometimes “gets his own back” very well. The foolish story only tells of a stupid or ignorant blunder. The punchline is either “I sure put one over on that idiot!” or “How could anybody be that DUMB?” On the other hand, the following two stories

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<sup>1140</sup>. Again during my undergraduacy it was common to enquire of a classmate, “Do you know how to keep a (insert the name of a group popularly assumed to be gullible -- i.e., Polack, Irishman, Newfie, etc.) in suspense?” The questioner would then maintain complete silence until the dupe realised what was going on, which often took some time, even with the brightest and best of university students.

<sup>1141</sup>. Lawrence Curcio from Folklore Discussion List (FOLKLORE@EARN.TAMVM1), Wednesday, 16 December 1992. This would appear to be accurate fact, although it has not been verified.

illustrate the fools' errand being turned back upon the perpetrator, each in a similar manner to the other. In both cases, the prank backfired, with the original victim outwitting his tormentor -- a case of "outfoxing the foxes."

The First Assistant Engineer gave the new Wiper a bucket and sent him for a bucket of steam. The Wiper took the bucket to the steam valve near his fo'c'sle, from which steam was obtained to heat water for washing. He put the bucket under the valve, turned it on, went into his room, and lay down on his bunk. A short time later, the furious Engineer found him and demanded to know why, since he was still on watch, he was not working. "But Sir," replied the lad, "The bucket isn't full yet." (HMC 90-16, TTC p. 1)<sup>1142</sup>

Another youth, while his ship was in port, was sent to find a left-handed monkey-wrench [spanner]. After making preliminary enquiries of the usual people (Quartermaster, Carpenter, etc.) the young fellow went ashore on a pub crawl. Returning much later, somewhat the worse for drink, he was questioned about why he had gone ashore when he was supposed to be working, and said he had been unable to find the proper wrench aboard, so had gone ashore to check local hardware stores for the desired item. (HMC 90-69, TTC p. 4)

Some youngsters, rather than turning the trick back on the perpetrators, simply proved they had created an educational opportunity from what had begun as a deception. One respondent<sup>1143</sup> recalled a Cadet who, ordered by the Chief Engineer to get a left-handed monkeywrench, casually inquired exactly what it was and where he might find it. The astounded Chief remarked, "Someday that kid will be an Engineer!" (HMC 90-42, TTC p. 4) Another interviewee was reminded of a bookish Engine Cadet sent on a similar errand. After at least three trips to the storeroom for the wrong item, the frustrated young man "made sure" his tormentor "didn't want" the wrench he had brought, and threw it overboard. It cured them of sending him back and forth on pointless duties. The informant, himself a Deck Cadet at the time, claims he was never caught out, being "too wise". (HMC 90-50, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>1142</sup>. The furious Engineer gave the new wiper the job of cleaning bilges next -- the lowest and dirtiest job aboard. As revenge, the wiper cut open a pillow and sent the feathers down through the ventilator over the First Assistant and an Oiler as they consulted by the desk. No one informed on him.

<sup>1143</sup>. The incident stood out clearly in the mind of the informant, who is left-handed himself, and has several tools, such as scissors, constructed for left-handed people.

The dumbbell story, on the other hand, would be something like the one which involved the officer on watch ordering “Full Ahead Bendix” because the metal label with the manufacturer’s name (Bendix) was located at the extreme end of the Engine Room Telegraph, just beyond the words Full Ahead. Nothing about this story indicates cleverness on the part of anyone involved. The most popular version ends with the Ordinary Seaman who is operating the mechanism, no brighter than the junior officer, moaning, “But Sir, I can’t get it to go into Bendix.”<sup>1144</sup> A similar story, also from the U.S. Navy, and one which purports to be factually accurate, involves a small fire aboard a destroyer and the Officer of the Day, an Ensign, saying the Fire Party could not be called out to extinguish it, as they were on holiday routine, it being Sunday.<sup>1145</sup>

Tales of fools’ errands may be told “on themselves” by people who have gone far beyond their greenhorn days, as a generally laughable situation. On other occasions there occurs what may be termed the “fool’s put-down.” These usually involve an “insider-outsider” relationship in which the seafarer gets the better of a landlubber. Often these “fools’ put-downs” are the result of young seafarers’ attempts to impress young women in port. Examples of the fools’ put-down” are found in Chapter Six, Section A and involve the lad who tries to convince girls he is the “Captain of the Port of \_\_\_\_\_”, using his seaman’s identity card as “proof”, the “Norwegian Undersea Air Force”, and the several shipmates who had all tried to “snow” a dockside barmaid by each telling her he was Third Mate on the same vessel. Another respondent recognised such pranks, although he did not attempt them himself, saying he had never tried to convince anyone that USMS [United States Maritime Service] stood for “Under Sea Maintenance Service”.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 7)

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<sup>1144</sup>. Joseph Fulcher, HMC 191-3, 16 April 1965, TR p. 8.

<sup>1145</sup>. Floyd Moore, HMC 191-3, 16 April 1965, TR p. 8.



Both the story of cleverly outwitting the fool's errand and the "fool's put-down" can backfire, however, as the following example shows:

Jim Moore was asked to go to the Bosun and fetch a "hank of yarn." Having been in the U.S. Navy a fair while and believing this to be a fool's errand, he went away for a while and on returning told the Machinist it was not available. The Machinist became quite annoyed and told Moore to stop fooling around and bring it, because the Bosun was his roommate, he knew it was there, he had signed the chit, and he needed that yarn!(HMC 90-9, TTC pp. 1-2)<sup>1146</sup>

A slightly greener young U.S. Navy recruit was told to go to the Bosun's locker for a "monkey fist". He "tore the place apart" looking for the dried partial arm of a monkey, when what was actually required was a piece of line with an elaborately weighted knot on the end, slightly smaller than a baseball or cricket ball, which is used to facilitate throwing a heaving line ashore or to another vessel. The weight makes it easy to aim, throw, and catch. Many Bosuns take pride in making their own "monkey fist" at the proper weight and size for their own hand -- rather like having one's own pool/snooker cue, bowling ball, or darts -- or a carpenter having a hammer of the proper weight with the grip of the handle wrapped to suit himself.

A final example in the lighter vein concerns the monkey fist. This is a lumpy knot worked into the end of a long light line, like a sash cord, the purpose being to add weight to the end of this cord, called the heaving line ... which is attached to a larger line ... which in turn is affixed to a hawser. The bos'n throws the light line ashore, where it is picked up and hauled in.... Heaving lines are made by and are the special property of the bos'n's mates. No one else is allowed to use them, and considerable care is taken in their preservation. To perfect his aim and his distance, the bos'n would spend a good deal of his time throwing the line and suppling it up, for stature was to be gained by the man who could throw longest and straightest. The heavier the monkey fist the further it would go, and it was always a temptation to "arm" the fist by inserting a heavy object inside. Navy regulations forbade such actions, as the monkey fist then developed characteristics akin to the blackjack.

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<sup>1146</sup>. Note: both the Machinist and the Bosun were warrant officers, and the commodity in question was "rope yarn", which is the teased-out fibres of (usually sisal) rope, used for the same purposes as twine would be ashore. Some victims, as in this instance, were suspicious, but they were seldom certain it was a trick, as there were so many unfamiliar terms in use aboard.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 2)

During World War II, I was on a ship that tried to get alongside a dock in the Canal Zone. A second-class bos'n's mate threw two heaving lines to a longshoreman. The distance was great and the lines barely reached their destination and, since the longshoreman was not zealous in catching them, they fell overboard. At this point the first-class bos'n stepped up with his heaving line, in which was secreted a six-ounce ball bearing. The monkey fist sped like David's stone and smote the indifferent longshoreman squarely between the eyes. Down he went like a poled[sic] ox. With a twitch of the wrist the heaving line was off the dock, freed of the messenger and stowed in Davy Jones' locker. When the Port Authority came aboard to find who had knocked out the man on the dock and prefer charges, the bos'n admitted the heave with great pride, and showed the officer another unarmed heaving line.<sup>1147</sup>

The "fool's put-down" in its nautical aspect is not limited to actual seafarers, either, but has its place in the traditions of maritime researchers as well. A colleague whom I met at the San Diego Maritime Museum told me the story of a scholarly gentleman whose strong point was his knowledge of marine architecture and the various types of ships. At a reception, he was interrupted in conversation with a fellow academic, by a woman who tugged at his sleeve and queried, "Sir, would you tell me what is your favourite type of vessel?" Without missing a beat, he turned to her graciously, replied, "The walking-beam submarine, Madam", and returned to his discussion. She walked away, apparently mollified, without the vaguest notion that he had named a vessel which not only was imaginary, but whose very existence was impossible.<sup>1148</sup>

My personal pet among the items requested in the fool's errand is a container (can, bucket, etc.) of "relative bearing grease." What makes this such a delight is the fact that both "relative bearing" and "bearing grease" are entirely feasible concepts, if not commodities, and it takes a bit of fast and

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<sup>1147</sup>. Beck, 193-194.

<sup>1148</sup>. A walking beam, found most often on "sidewheeler" steamboats, is rather like a big brother to the pistons that drive the wheels of an old-fashioned steam locomotive. It could not function in an underwater environment.

clear thinking to realise that the two are widely disparate and that while bearings can be greased, one's relative bearing<sup>1149</sup> most emphatically cannot.

Perhaps the most popular North American fool's errand with the widest distribution, both in U.S. Naval circles and in the wartime American merchant marine convoy, was and is the search for the elusive "mail buoy". Newcomers were, and still are, told to get their letters ready to mail, as the ship is approaching the buoy and is due to reach it at a given (though approximate) time. Victims are then 1) advised to give their letters to an officer or petty officer for bagging, 2) told to prepare to receive mail from home, and/or 3) delegated to go to the bow and keep lookout in order that the buoy not be overlooked. In its mildest form, the result of the "joke" is that the "postman"<sup>1150</sup> simply keeps the hurriedly-written letters and posts them in the normal fashion at the first port of call, while the victims, if they do not immediately realise they have been duped, are let in on the secret that there is no mail buoy after a brief period of suspense and discomfiture. In the most complex versions, the "postman" who collected the letters, and his henchmen, actually opened, read and answered the letters, complete with censorship cut-outs and deletions and kept the poor "suckers" dangling just as long as was humanly possible.

This particular fools' errand, or a variant thereof, was still in use in the mid 1990's. A documentary screened on British television during the yuletide holidays of 1994-1995<sup>1151</sup> showed a cargo vessel, the M/V *Geestbay*, of Boston in Lincolnshire, sailing from Barry, Wales, to the Windward Islands for bananas. The presenter, one of eleven passengers aboard, noted that a first-tripper Cadet, identified only as "Cameron", was sent to the bow in mid-

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<sup>1149</sup>. Relative bearing is the position of a vessel, person, landmark, or object, in relation to another object.

<sup>1150</sup>. The Purser, Bosun, Junior Mate, etc. to whom the letters have been given.

<sup>1151</sup>. "Banana Boat", produced by Tadpole Lane for 13 WNET.

Atlantic to watch for “The Mail Helicopter”. He was given a sack of mail to exchange for the one the “chopper” would bring and was equipped with sound-protective “ earmuffs”, then left to stand in the sun and wait. At intervals the officers would hail him from the bridge with the news that the helicopter had been delayed. After several hours, apparently with all the passengers and crew in on the joke, but poor “Cameron” still none the wiser, they informed him that the helicopter would not be coming and allowed him to seek shelter from the sun and take some refreshment. One presumes that by the time he was relieved of his “duty”, he realised that he had been duped.

It is to be assumed that the reason this trick was so popular amongst North Americans sailing during the Second World War and even later, was that many came from inland homes and had seen trains picking up and dropping mailbags on gallows’-type frames at small rural stations whilst scarcely reducing speed. It was easy to convince these rustics that a ship might do similarly. Tom Lewis, an ex-Royal Navy submariner who is now a professional musician and songwriter, once wrote a song in which he describes his own ignorance when he first shipped out by saying, “I thought that when the sun went down, we’d anchor for the night.”<sup>1152</sup> The mail buoy trick seems to rely on the same kind of “green”-ness. A similar naïveté was illustrated in a previous chapter by the youth who believed the ship would make better time sailing “downhill” to Africa than it would on the “uphill” return leg of the voyage.

In the fieldwork data, the following items also occurred with regard to the mail buoy. “Greenhorns were told to get their letters ready and give them to an officer to be dropped off.” (HMC 90-4, TTC p.1) The purser wrote answers to the letters supposedly sent that way. The radioman would say that Axis

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<sup>1152</sup>. This song, entitled “Watches”, is on the same *Surfacing* tape album mentioned in Section B of this chapter, and is cut number 5, Side A.

Sally had intercepted the crew's lonely letters to their girlfriends.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 1) The one wife who had herself sailed (in the Stewards' Department) said naïve passengers were told they could leave mail off at the lightship when leaving port.(HMC 90-53, TTC p. 3) There really was not much in the way of tricks on greenhorns, but sometimes they really "rode" the young ones until a few went over the side.<sup>1153</sup> There was more of the light-hearted stuff in the U.S. Navy than in the merchant marine, but the mail buoy was popular.(HMC 90-5, TTC p. 2) One man, now a Master, who was taken in by the Mail buoy ploy on his first voyage, said, "They'll try to catch you if you look gullible."(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3) Another recalls "at least one man" falling for the 'mail buoy' story". The term "tray stretcher" also rings a bell for him. (HMC 90-46, TTC p. 2) They once tried to fool "Tex" English. As his tin hat was too small he was told to take it to the NAG Lieutenant, who had a "hat stretcher", but "Tex" was too clever to do so.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 2)

A reader of *THE SEAMAN* wrote, after seeing my brief article on fools' errands:<sup>1154</sup>

It reminded me of a prank which the junior, and some senior, officers played upon an unsuspecting junior electrical officer on the passenger liner S.S. Oriana[sic]. ... I worked aboard Oriana for 2[sic] years as junior electrical officer and was involved, to some lesser extent, in setting the scene for this particular fools errand.

The role was for a "WHALEWATCHER"[sic] have you heard of this one? bet you haven't! [sic]

The Oriana carried a sacrificial anode ... an aluminium wire ... wound out (25 yards) over the stern of the ship each time we left port and [a] ... current was passed through this and the theory was that it would waste and ... prevent corrosion to the ship's hull, propellers etc.

Now the WHALEWATCHERS[sic] job was to guard the anode when the ship passed through any sea areas with high whale populations or areas that are known to have 'rogue' whales which delight in attacking sacrificial anodes.

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<sup>1153</sup>. "Going over the side" is in this instance a circumlocution for desertion and not an indication that they were driven to suicide.

<sup>1154</sup>. This was copied verbatim from his letter.

So how does a whalewatcher stop a rogue whale from biting a trailing anode? The solution is to arm him with a spear gun, of course, and in case of a whale resisting arrest whilst speared, the whalewatcher had to wear a lifejacket, over the top of his blue uniform complete with cap and dicky bow and badge -- this was after all a P.& O.[sic] vessel and any other dress would have been frowned upon.

The victim's name was Charles Oxley and everyone knew about the plot except him[;] even the bridge was in on it as Charlie had to make 15 min. reports to the bridge during his watch via the tannoy system. Everything went to plan and Charlie took the bait and did his one hour tour of duting.[sic] We did, of course, join Charlie on the aft mooring deck during the course of his watch and took several photographs which I have in front of me now and can forward to you if requested.

There is a small twist to the end of the story of Charles Oxley whalewatcher which remains in my memory as the hardest thing that I have had to say to another human being.

I'll leave you guessing on that!<sup>1155</sup>

By far the most common item in the British data on fools' errands seems to have been the "long stand"<sup>1156</sup>. In this trick, the victim is told to go to someone, usually the Bosun or ship's Carpenter, but sometimes to one of the Mates or Engineers, and ask for a "long stand". Often an intricate tale is involved to effectively explain why the sender wants the item (it holds his tools, he keeps his pipes in it, it is a prop for a piece of machinery, etc.) When the victim arrives and delivers the message he is kept standing and waiting for an extended period and if, as usually happens, he finally says he must return to the sender, he is told to do so, as he must have "stood (or waited) long enough". This particular datum appears to present itself with moderate regularity within apprenticeship situations throughout the British Isles, both asea and ashore, but is far less pervasive in the North American material.

As a fifteen-year-old apprentice, R.A. Simpson, nicknamed "Titch" because of his small stature, was "under the wing" of the Second Officer on the 12-4 watch -- "a nice man". All the same, he was sent to the Chief Engineer for an elaborate version of the "long stand". After describing it in detail, he

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<sup>1155</sup>. Letter from Robert Chambers of Ormesby, Middlesborough, dated 17 December, 1992. As for the final subject -- I am still guessing, unless it was, "You've just been had, Old Son."

<sup>1156</sup>. Or the "long weight", which translates into a "long wait".

expressed surprise that I, a North American, would even have heard of this trick.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 2)

“No, never, ever. They were all, they were different, Newfoundland people, they didn’t seem to go in for that sort of thing, but I did experience it after.” On one of his last ships, a Scottish ship, a Newfoundland first-tripper was sent by one of the Engineers to the ship’s lounge where the Second Engineer was playing solo whist with other officers, including Tom Goodyear, for a “long stand”. After waiting for an uncomfortably long time, he was told, “Well, I think you’ve stood long enough now. Go down and say yes, you’ve had your long stand.” This was the first time I had heard of the use of this particular fool’s errand aboard ship.(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 7)

Beck mentions riddles and clever answers to first-trippers’ foolish questions in almost the same breath as fools’ errands. He gives the answer to “What’s that?” as varying from “Cat fur for kitten britches.”<sup>1157</sup> to “Layovers to catch peddlers” and the answer to “What are you doing?” as “Making a scrudgeon” (a rudder for a duck’s arse) or a “blivitt” (ten pounds of shit in a five-pound paper bag).<sup>1158</sup> The riddle cited by Beck is a familiar one to any living near a place where sailing vessels or small sailboats gather: “The wind was West and West steered we. The wind was aft. How could that be?” The answer, of course, as Beck puts it, is “West had the hellum.”<sup>1159</sup>

Unique specimens of fools’ errands appear as well as the more common variants. Emerson Chodzko was aboard a ship which carried 2,000 Australian linnets as cargo. He was put in charge of the birds and told he would be “docked” a dollar of his pay for every bird that died, and must put any dead birds in a bag for counting. A loss of half the birds was actually expected, but young Chodzko was not informed of this until he tremulously presented his bag of bodies at the end of the voyage.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 3)

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<sup>1157</sup>. In my youth I too encountered this answer from my grandparents, but to a different question: “What fer [for]?” The answer was always “Cat fer [fur] to make kitten britches.” My second husband was also prone to answer the question “What should I do?” with “Mildew [mill do]”.

<sup>1158</sup>. During my undergraduate days, a picture of a three-prong, two-slot blivet (an optical illusion, an impossible construction, looking rather like a three-tined tuning fork, in which the slot of the original becomes an additional prong) was an essential piece of wall decor in any student’s lodgings.

<sup>1159</sup>. A man named West was the steersman. Most of this paragraph is drawn from Beck 68-69.

Dick Playfer vividly remembered being hoodwinked, because it made him so angry at the time, although in hindsight it amused him. They had had severe weather for seven or eight days, and when it abated, the Third Mate told Playfer they could now have regular Sunday religious services as usual, and directed him to go down and ask the Chief Engineer if they might have steam on the organ for the hymns. When he did so, Playfer discovered he had been duped. The steam needed for the non-existent calliope was nothing to what seemingly issued from Playfer's ears on discovering he had been cozened.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 1) Among the fools' errands listed by Beck is: Ask the sextant to give a prayer.<sup>1160</sup>

Thirty-three interviewees recalled few (or no) fools' errands perpetrated upon newcomers aboard ships in which they served. One observed that much horseplay of this sort depends on the individual personalities of those involved.(HMC 90-2, TTC p. 1) Others said, as they had of the Line-Crossing rituals, that they had a job to do and such goings-on were too frivolous to be of any consequence. Some of the remainder were never asked, but most were, and most recalled something of the sort occurring during their time at sea.

One of the oldest and best known (though least frequently practised in modern times) of fools' errands is the search for the "golden rivet".<sup>1161</sup> There was a period of time when the final nail or rivet of a warship was usually gilded and driven in by a personage of note to symbolise completion.<sup>1162</sup> Where and how it came to be a standard fools' errand to take newcomers down the shaft alley of a modern vessel, get them to bend down to examine or "polish"

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<sup>1160</sup>. Beck, 68, 116.

<sup>1161</sup>. See Beck 12-13, where the golden rivet is compared to placing a gold coin in the keel or elsewhere during the vessel's construction. Also mentioned Beck, 116.

<sup>1162</sup>. Much in the same way that the "golden spike" was ceremonially driven when the Southern Pacific and Union Pacific railroad tracks joined in America, linking the two coasts transcontinentally.



the rivet, and then sexually harass them in however mild or symbolic a form, is unknown.<sup>1163</sup> Nonetheless, from amongst the earliest interviews for my undergraduate sealore project to the most recent interviews at the end of the fieldwork for this study, it has been cited with great regularity.<sup>1164</sup> In one of my first interviews aboard the *Jeremiah O'Brien* I was told (with a sly leer) the golden rivet was “the last rivet that went into the ship. It’s down the shaft alley. I’ll be happy to take you down there and show you.”(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 5) American seamen universally specified that the rivet was in the shaft alley. The golden rivet was always in the shaft alley. It was a pretty confined space.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 3) Those from the remainder of the sampling said the “golden rivet out in the tunnel” (HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4) A few only mentioned the item in a negative connotation, a frivolous waste of time, stressing the day-to-day activities of the job, as has been previously mentioned: “There was never any ‘looking for the golden grommet’ or anything like that. The Merchant Navy was a job, and the job continued although there was a war on. It was not like the Forces, because you were doing the job anyway. You just acted normally.”(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2) Capt. Ed March considered the golden rivet a different type of datum from the fool’s errand. He remembered there were such things as fools’ errands, but did not recollect what they were, and doubted if anyone nowadays would fall for being asked to fetch a “bucket of steam”.(HMC 90-68, TTC p. 3)

Unlike the U.S. Navy, where traditions of this sort are fostered, in the Royal Canadian Navy some vessels were too regimented for fools’ errands, whilst others were lax. Most people on corvettes at the beginning of the war

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<sup>1163</sup>. These assaults have been described by bibliographical, literary, and fieldwork sources as ranging from paddling, “goosing”, or giving a sudden unexpected squeeze to the neophyte’s genitals, through a symbolic pseudo rape, to actual male rape in a few isolated cases.

<sup>1164</sup>. HMC 191[65]-2, TR p. 2 and HMC 92-71, TTC p. 1. A modernised form used by the U.S. Navy is “The Sea Bat” -- a box full of sand covered by a bucket in which the old hands purport to have captured a creature which is part fish, part fowl, quite a “mythical beast”. It is placed low on the deck in such a position that the victim has to bend over to look, at which point he is whacked with a large wooden paddle.(HMC 191[65]-3, TR p. 5)

were Voluntary Reserve. Very few were experienced and they had accidents and various mishaps, so anything that might lead to further such accidents was scrupulously avoided. Some ships were also too “pusser” for any skylarking or horseplay.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 2)<sup>1165</sup>

An occasional instance cropped up from time to time in which a newcomer had enacted a practical joke of his own, usually without incident, but often in the most blatant ignorance of a potentially hazardous outcome. Several of these testimonies were made by the individuals involved, some fifty years after the event, and one or two seemed still to be blissfully unaware of the disaster which might have resulted from their actions. One Messman pulled several such ill-advised pranks. He whistled down the ventilator shaft into the Engine Room, upsetting the entire group “down below”, who spent some time trying to unearth and repair the “engine problem” and were very confused about why “it just stopped”. Although he never used the prop wash for laundry, he played with a little wooden airplane on a string, which he dangled over the side and into the water. This was harmless enough, but it led to his removing the small spare inflation tubes from the inflatable lifejackets, puncturing them, and inserting them into tightly capped leftover bottles which he had saved from the galley. These he also towed behind the ship on a string to watch the resultant explosion. Not only was it dangerous for any individual to play with such items, but it was also potentially life-threatening to his shipmates to remove the inflation tubes from the lifejackets.(HMC 90-46, TTC p. 2)

Billy McAulay served on a naval landing craft, and once, when he took his “trick” at the wheel, discovered that they were constantly “chasing the

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<sup>1165</sup> The word “pusser” in the British (and Commonwealth ) naval terminology, although its exact meaning is simply “Purser”, signifies a very finicky, strait-laced, regimented and “by-the-book” attitude.

compass”.<sup>1166</sup> It transpired that someone had placed a bit of steel near the magnetic compass to set it off. A compass will follow even a knife with a magnetised blade, and can be quite deceptive. On many ships, when a man went to the wheel, the officer of the watch would ask if he had anything magnetic on his person. If he carried knives or marlinespikes in a belt sheath,<sup>1167</sup> he would have to remove this for the duration of his two-hour stint at the wheel. The Old Man ordered that under no circumstances was anyone to be allowed on the bridge or in the wheelhouse near the compasses and chronometers with anything made of steel that might distract them. With modern instruments, like gyrocompasses, this is no longer a problem. “I mean you could have a dozen knives around and it would never detract them at all now. This was old magnetic compasses then.”(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 6)

One “kid” on a Great Lakes boat near the Fourth of July, had a number of fireworks. The vessel was a hand-fired coal-burner and most of the Firemen were elderly immigrants, “long-timers”, but superstitious. The kid threw a “cherry bomb”<sup>1168</sup> down the fiddley<sup>1169</sup> and the Firemen all ran out onto the deck and refused to go back until the Engineer on watch investigated. Even after it was discovered that nothing was wrong, they still refused to go back. Steam was down and the ship was slowing; the Deck crew was getting angry. It finally got sorted, and the boy avoided punishment, but he learned his lesson and never did anything like it again.(HMC 90-68, TTC p. 4)

Another pyrotechnic prank which might well have caused injury concerned the “Assistant Sparks” (Radio/Wireless Officer), “Yorkie”, who was a smoker. Both the Radio Officers’ accommodation and the wireless cabin (radio shack) were on the lower bridge, and the latter contained a smoking-stand with a top which closed. Into this, the “Chief Sparks” (who should have known better) put the major part of the powder from a lifeboat flare. When the rookie put his cigarette out, there was a bright flash and the

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<sup>1166</sup>. The compass needle would not settle, no matter how the course was changed.

<sup>1167</sup>. See Artie Lee's comments on the "frogs" in which knife, fid, and marlinespike were carried.

<sup>1168</sup>. A type of large firecracker.

<sup>1169</sup>. The stokehold and funnel casing.

room filled with smoke which then poured forth from the entire bridge.

“Yorkie” was the sort who never learned, however; the entire wireless cabin was full of smoke and he was trying to keep the Old Man from finding out about it.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 6)

There seemed no appreciable difference in the numbers who were and who were not taken in by the “bamboozlers”. Bill Fortune said he could not remember what he was sent to hunt for, but “every kid gets it” and he had seen such tricks pulled on green hands throughout his seafaring career. Although he asserted that “they always try it on kids” it is just possible that he escaped being duped, as there were only three men (one of whom was his father) and himself, a boy, in the Irish fishing crew with whom he first sailed, and his father was not a “joker”.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 4) Alan Peter’s father had been a Master Mariner, his brothers and many family friends had gone to sea, and he “knew all the gags beforehand”. Nobody tried to pull a “bucket of steam or a “long stand” on him, but he saw others taken in.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 6) “No, I was either fortunate or I was wise; p’r’aps I was drilled by my father.” Gordon “Bill” Bates knew of such tricks, although he never was their victim.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 5) Capt. Michael Curtis said “strangely enough” he was never so deceived. Not that he was not gullible, he admitted, but he just did not recall it ever having happened.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 1) Such tricks were not often tried on Junior Radio Operators, as pranksters were usually warned off by the Chief Radio Officer and told not to mess about. (It was not that Roy Caine was too smart for the perpetrators.) In any case, you had a job to do and were not an errand boy. With Cadets it was different, they were “gophers”. Cadets were always fooled.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 5) Capt. William Ashton as a first-tripper, on the other hand, was sent for “a bucketful of steam” down in the Engine Room -- and he fell for it. He really was obliged to go, though, as the Chief Mate had ordered him to do so. He was also sent for a “long stand” in

the corner for about an hour, but those two tricks were all he was fooled by.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 5) ”They were the usual jokes at sea.” “Go and get the fog-clearance outfit from the fog locker.” At sixteen George Bryson, now a retired Master Mariner, was generally the youngest on the ship, so green and “the bait for them all.” He got taken in, a couple of times at first, definitely.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 1)

Some fools’ errands were devised specifically to fit an individual victim, but that did not mean that the tricks were played only on the defenceless. As has been noted, some who should have known better were vulnerable to the well-devised prank.

On one tanker there was a Chinese Engine Room rating who always said “Me look see”. This was a sign he was inquisitive and wanted to find out what the others were talking about, but he was a likeable sort. Everyone called him “Me Look See”. He did not speak much English. An Engineer fixed up a bottle of oil with a trigger to squirt, then got Me Look See to look at it and squirted him. It was a trick, but harmless.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 6)

There was a tea urn for hot water in the alleyway near the galley. Peter Rogers, who did the Engineers’ “dhobying” for extra money and gifts, once advised a shipmate to boil his overalls in the urn. The man did so and later could not find the overalls anywhere, although he looked and looked. They had been removed when the others came to make their tea, of course. They “always had laughs and jokes”. When I remarked on the term “boiler suit” for overalls and also quoted “who threw the overalls in Mrs. Murphy’s chowder?” Rogers found both remarks quite amusing.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4)

Asked if they had managed to fool him, Barney Lafferty replied, “Oh, yes.” He was taken in by the long stand and the key of the fog locker. “For some reason I sorta believed that for a minute. I thought it was some part of the ship where there was something that they locked up in the fog locker.” There probably were others he will remember later. People just made things up. The long stand and the key to the fog locker were relatively common, but other people made up more ephemeral items.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 2) Fred and

Vera Williams refer to the locker/cupboard/wardrobe in their home as the “fog locker”, and so carry on the tradition.(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 1)

## CHAPTER 8

### SEAFARING LANGUAGE: USAGE, TERMINOLOGY, SAYINGS AND NICKNAMES

Virtually every occupational group has some sort of associated slang, jargon, or specialised terminology, and the mercantile marine is no exception.<sup>1170</sup> Capt. William Dennis said, “Seamen have their own language that touches every nationality.”(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 4) Beyond generalised seafaring terms are more limited categories pertaining to the Second World War and to convoys specifically, and under those rubrics lie a plethora of further delimiting classificatory areas -- terms specialised to shipboard departments, terms used by North American or British seamen only, geographical terms used only in Atlantic, Pacific, Mediterranean, or Indian waters. Occasionally a single term crops up in two venues or with different meanings to men with different backgrounds or in different circumstances. The glossary in this section is an attempt to rapidly define all such terms which came to my attention during the archival and field research for this specific project.

Beyond specialised terminology and nicknames for people, places, and things, there are ways of speaking and pronunciations which are sometimes distinctive to a type of usage. Among seafarers many geographical names relating to foreign places have these peculiarities. Port Said, for example, is pronounced “Port Sed” more commonly than it is pronounced “Port Sayeed” and Lourenço Marques is usually rendered “Lorenko Marx” rather than

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<sup>1170</sup>. “The process of self-segregation is evident in certain symbolic expressions, particularly in the use of an occupational slang which readily identifies the man who can use it properly as someone who is not square and as quickly reveals as an outsider the person who uses it incorrectly or not at all. Some words have grown up to refer to unique professional problems and attitudes....”[Becker, (1963), p. 100]

“Lorenzo Marquez.” This is not a matter of ignorance on the part of the modern merchant mariner, but more a continuance of tradition. The South American Rio de la Plata (Silver River) has been “The River Plate” to Anglophone seafarers for centuries, and probably will remain so until they fade into oblivion. It is exciting for the dialect scholar to note, in contrast, that names of Pacific islands and ports of call which were seldom frequented by merchant shipping prior to the Second World War have been assimilated into the seaman’s vocabulary with pronunciations that far more closely parallel those of the native residents than have places with a long history of frequent visits. The one foreign place name which appears most often in mariners’ vocabularies with a common [mis]pronunciation before and during World War II is Novaya Zemlya -- always rendered “Nova Zembla” by my respondents (e.g. HMC 91-3, TTC p. 3) and spelt thus or similarly by most cartographers of the period.

Buenos Aires was occasionally interpreted as “Bonus Arras”, but often abbreviated simply to “B.A.”, as Montevideo became “Monte” and Gibraltar “Gib” (pronounced “Jib”). It was curious, however, that there was a geographical division between chosen abbreviated terms for the Mediterranean. While North Americans inevitably called it “The Med”, Britishers called it “The Medi”.<sup>1171</sup> It was clear, however, that all considered “Mediterranean” too long-winded a word for use in common conversation. Another nautical pronunciation of which I was unaware until the British fieldwork was underway was the name of the training vessel *Indefatigable*, which was always rendered “Indy-fatigue-able” by Merseyside respondents unless called by her shortened “nickname” of “Indy-fat”. (HMC 91-4, TTC p. 10)

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<sup>1171</sup>. Bradley Creevey, an Australian nautical archaeologist familiar with Greek and Cypriot waters and with British and American colleagues, says it is currently known universally as “The Med”, so time appears to have eliminated the difference in terminology.



It is worth noting in this context that many well-known and long-lived nautical terms are oral abbreviations of their originals (bosun for boatswain, fo’c’sle for forecastle, spanker for spinnaker). It is understood that seafarers at work on deck, or even in the engine room or galley, have always found themselves in situations where, separated by what seems a short distance, they find difficulty in making themselves heard and understood, due to the sounds of the elements or of working machinery. It has therefore always been necessary whilst working at sea to get as much as possible said and understood in the fewest, shortest, and clearest words possible.

One patently noticeable usage from respondents on both sides of the Atlantic, from men of all ratings and ranks, all social and educational backgrounds, whether military or merchant seafarers, was the word “hairy” to describe a situation which was distressing or potentially hazardous. More than two thirds of the men interviewed chose this adjective to describe such a situation or their feeling about it, either during the actual interview or in conversation before or after the tape-recorded session. Until this fieldwork, I should have considered the word a more recent addition to the public vocabulary, tentatively dating it to the late 1950s or early 1960s, and probably a usage restricted to North American parlance, as well.<sup>1172</sup> A number of the British sample, mostly retired officers from T. and J. Harrison’s or Blue Funnel, also employed the term “awkward cuss” to describe someone disruptive to normal shipboard life and procedure.<sup>1173</sup>

About a dozen respondents stated, when asked, that they could recall no relevant terminology, but several even of these added words to the glossary below. Others referred me to books,(HMC 92-27, TTC p. 1) said they would consider the matter later and write to me,(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 3) or simply

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<sup>1172</sup>. One British example is in HMC 92-53, TTC p. 3.

<sup>1173</sup>. A typical such instance is in HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2.

apologised, saying age had affected their memories and it was too difficult to recall.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 6)

“Tex” English spiced his entire interview with interesting remarks on terminology, professing a long-standing and keen interest in slang, dialects, nicknames, and words in general.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5) Joe Cunningham, throughout his interview consistently used stage sailormen’s terms, such as “blow me down”.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 4) Such usages were not typical of any of the other interviewees, but did not appear, even in this isolated instance, to be a conscious effort to impress. I believe he may have developed an “old sea-dog” vocabulary as part of an impressive seafaring persona in his early life and continued to use it without remaining aware of the fact. Tom Thornton used “Oh, aye” and “Oh, hell, aye, yes” several times in his testimony,(HMC 92-56, TTC pp. 2-3) and this again appeared to be an unpremeditated choice of words.

All the Newfoundlanders interviewed used their regional dialect to some degree. Beyond these, no other North American respondents employed notably regional vocabularies, although pronunciation and inflection naturally varied with the area of geographical origin or long-term residence, and one Native American interviewee had noticeably inflected speech patterns. This sort of speech differentiation was not as evident in the British sampling, because so many were not only currently residents of the Merseyside region, but natives of that area as well. Those from the South exhibited no strong regional pronunciations or vocabulary<sup>1174</sup>. All but one of those born in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland, as well as the Swiss-born interviewee, had strongly retained the accents of their birthplaces, and the Northern Irish as well had a conspicuous regional dialect, but the Swansea-born informant appeared entirely to have lost any trace of the Welsh speech rhythms and one

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<sup>1174</sup>. With the exception of Frank Brown in the story about the barrage balloons in Chapter Four, Section B, where he reverted to his regional Somerset accent when upset or excited.

of the Irish born Merseysiders could have passed for almost anything he chose, dropping readily from “Scouse” to generic North American without difficulty.(HMC 92-56)

The vast majority of respondents used such standard nautical pronunciations and usages as “farrard”, meaning forward or toward the forepart or bow of the ship, “gunnels” for gunwales, “fo’c’sle for forecastle,<sup>1175</sup> “bosun” for boatswain, etc.<sup>1176</sup> Such nautical usages as “hard right” and “hard left” were employed when giving directions in their own homes -- telling a visitor where to find the “head” or toilet, for example. And at least two spoke of leaving harbour in convoy and going “northabout” or “southabout”.

One informant told me that he had been greatly affected by being told never to say ceiling, floor, or wall, but deckhead, deck, and bulkhead. “You’d never think of saying walls at sea.” And of course port and starboard, rather than left and right.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 6)

Fred Williams, whose wife, Vera sat in on our interview and participated to a degree, said, “You get into a seafaring way of talking.” If he slops water around the bathroom, Vera reminds him there are no scuppers<sup>1177</sup> in there. Since he has come ashore permanently, they regularly use nautical terms around the house. The ceiling is the “deckhead”; the walls are “bulkheads”, etc.<sup>1178</sup> He still thinks in those terms, and believes one would have to go to sea to really know what a seafarer thinks, as “They’re a race apart, really.” Fred recognises the influence of the seafaring environment on his and Vera’s lifestyle. In a seafaring environment, if one uses land terms, he

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<sup>1175</sup>. One Newfoundland respondent, however, pronounced all three syllables clearly and this is so noted in his testimony..

<sup>1176</sup>. Note previous remarks on these “compressed” forms of pronunciation.

<sup>1177</sup>. Drainage gutters along the edges of a vessel’s deck.

<sup>1178</sup>. Mr. and Mrs. Williams also refer to the locker/cupboard/wardrobe in their home as the “fog locker”.(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 1) See the final Section of the foregoing chapter for more about this term. My great-grandmother, of New Bedford, Massachusetts, Quaker ancestry, began a tradition in our family of referring to a certain cupboard as “the multitude-of-sins box”.

is the odd one out, so one develops a seafaring way of speaking. Seafaring terms have become so universal even ashore that many people use them regularly without being aware of the fact. (HMC 92-70, TTC p. 5) This tendency of the seaman ashore and his family to use seafaring terms and of the general public to take them up was noted in *Folklore and the Sea*.<sup>1179</sup> Few people today who use terms like “getting things squared away” or “to cut and run” even realise their nautical origins.

The one wartime use of language which seems to have been altogether unique and to have pertained only to seafarers, is the use of Biblical allusion in radio/wireless communication.<sup>1180</sup> None of my informants gave first-hand testimony on this practice, but it occurred in several printed contexts, so it seems worth mentioning as a practice which was not altogether uncommon. One source informs us in reference to an RN escort vessel that:

“They have a fondness for Biblical allusion, born of much bandying of signals to and fro, and someone suggests that next time perhaps the E-boat will find Job xv. 21 fulfilled:

‘A dreadful sound is in his ears: in prosperity the destroyer shall come upon him.’”<sup>1181</sup>

And in a second printed context, actor Alec Guinness, states:

In the spring of 1943 I was in command of one of the brand-new LCI(L)s which crossed the Atlantic, as a squadron, to North Africa, prior to the invasion of Sicily.

In Norfolk, Virginia we were encouraged to camouflage our ships with paint in any style we fancied. I devised a pattern of pale blue and white rectangles, rather like a Braque painting. My fellow officers complained that I had made mine look like a hospital ship and far too conspicuous; but when we were out on the ocean they equally complained that they couldn’t see me. If they really couldn’t see me some mornings, it was largely the fault of the steering-gear, which was electrical and had a nasty habit of seizing up, so that for hours, on two nights running, I found myself doing small circles in the middle of the Atlantic.

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<sup>1179</sup>. Beck, 72--75.

<sup>1180</sup>. Although this practice seems to have been more common amongst British than North American seafarers, there is no reason to believe it was limited to them exclusively.

<sup>1181</sup>. Rutter, 193. Thanks to Richard Collins the younger for obtaining this reference for me after the loss of my booknotes.

In command of the squadron was a delightful RN lieutenant commander who had a gentle, dry wit and was a dab hand at sending Biblical signals. On the morning after one of my individual night manoeuvres, as soon as I was recognized[sic] on the horizon as a pale blue smudge, he flashed his Aldis lamp, in Morse code, ‘Hebrews, Chapter 13, Verse 8.’

A watchkeeper was sent immediately to fetch a Bible. It was a lovely sunny morning and the breeze tugged exasperatingly at the India paper pages until I found the right place and got the signal: ‘Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever.’<sup>1182</sup>

Similar, but not quite identical was the situation reported in a British government booklet, where a Master who had been “signalled to raise heaven and earth to get started, replied by Aldis lamp: ‘Have raised heaven and earth; am now raising hell!’”<sup>1183</sup>

Seafarers’ language has been noted for well over a century<sup>1184</sup> as a distinctive form, worthy of conservation. Numerous dictionaries and glossaries have been published during this time,<sup>1185</sup> both for the seaman himself and for the devotee or academic who studies his lifestyle and career. Books for the latter note the jargon’s singularities, both historical and contemporary, while those for the former deal primarily with terms necessary for promoting the efficiency of the work of merchant shipping both asea and ashore.

In the interests of simultaneously preserving a unique vocabulary which might otherwise be lost and of elucidating the terminology used in the remainder of this study to facilitate its use by others, it has been decided to include a glossary of seafaring terms, many of which are specific to convoys or to the Second World War, but a number of which are broader in application. This has been incorporated into the text itself, rather than affixed as an

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<sup>1182</sup> Libby Purves, *All at Sea: True and tall tales trawled by Libby Purves*, ([no loc.]: Fontana Paperbacks, 1984), 79-80.

<sup>1183</sup> *Merchantmen at War*, (London: HMSO, 1944), 95.

<sup>1184</sup> Even the famous diarist Samuel Pepys remarked upon a few seafaring terms.

<sup>1185</sup> During the final days of writing this study, I was informed of yet another which I have not yet had the pleasure of reading: Marshall Uran, *Sea-Say: Salty Stories and Seamen’s Slang*, (San Francisco CA: Muran Productions, 1995).

appendix. The substance of the information involved was considered to be part and parcel of the work itself and not a mere addendum.

## A. GLOSSARY OF GENERAL TERMINOLOGY

**Abandon ship kit** -- A small suitcase containing "Chanel No. 5 and fingernail polish, long green woolies, chocolate bars, etc." "You would probably have forgotten it in the long run, but it was comforting to know you had it." Cf. **Allah band, getaway bag, panic bag.** (HMC 90-10, TTC p. 4)

**Abduls** -- A term sometimes used for Asian seamen (Arabs or Lascars).(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 3)

**Able(-Bodied) Seaman (A.B.)** -- An experienced seaman, competent to perform the usual and customary duties on deck. In sailing ships had to be able to hand, reef, and steer. In Merchant Navy has to have served satisfactorily on deck for three years. In Royal Navy has to have served a specified period at sea and satisfactorily completed certain courses of instruction.(C.W.T. Layton, *Dictionary of Nautical Words and Terms*, (2nd ed. rev. by Peter Clissold -- Oriental pirate ed., undated), 2) A definition of the term by U.S. standards is difficult, as the unions, the U.S. Coast Guard, and (at the time) the War Shipping Administration all had a part in the decision-making, but the lifeboat certificate played a major role in the promotion from Ordinary to A.B. A ship's Captain could also promote a man if he chose.(Capt. Fred Steele, 14/VIII-1995) The U.S. Navy equivalent was Seaman First-Class.

**Air Gap** -- The mid-Atlantic area which was too far from either side to be adequately patrolled by Allied aircraft for most of World War II.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 1) See also **Black Gap, Black Hole.**

**Allah band** -- Asked directly about terminology, Tom Killips said, "Only one, but this one's a cracker, this!" There were two Firemen on the Dutch ship in which he served, who on every watch wore a huge "waistband" into which they would put a big sandwich, their papers, money, watches, jewellery, and "a drop of brandy". They called it the "Allah-band" -- a sort of handmade money belt made of flannel, rather than canvas, as it was necessary to absorb sweat when working in the "stokehol". Cf. **abandon ship kit, getaway bag, panic bag.**(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 8)

**all hands and the cook** -- Everyone.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 3)

**all standing** -- "To turn in all standing is to lie down fully dressed.(Layton, 12) See also **to sleep all standing.**

**Anzio Annie** -- A gun on a mountain near Anzio. It had a seventy-two-foot barrel and a twelve-inch bore.(SHLSS #3, HMC TTC p. 1)

**Apprentice** -- A minor who has been bound by indentures to serve for a specified period -- usually three or four years -- in return for instruction in the duties of a deck officer, together with food, accommodation, and such money payments as may be agreed. Terms of apprenticeship are governed by Merchant Shipping Acts.(Applies to British/Canadian only).(Layton, 21) On U.S. ships usually one formally in officer training who has been taken on through

the shipping company and not from an academy or “schoolship”.(Common knowledge)

**armchair sailor** -- One who claims seafaring experience to which he is not entitled.(HMC 92-54, TTC pp. 7-8)

**Armed Merchant Cruiser** -- Ocean liner taken over by Admiralty in time of war, armed with guns, manned by naval officers and ratings and employed on active service.(Layton, 23)

**'ash-slingers[hash-slingers]** -- Stewards.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 4)

**Baccalao** -- Salt fish as eaten for breakfast.(Barney Lafferty, telephone)

**back door to Russia** -- The Persian Gulf.(SHLSS #2, HMC TTC p. 4)

**back garden** -- A seat in a “bit of a square” on the flying bridge extending aft from the midship accommodation on a tanker. Men sometimes sat there and chatted at night, especially in hot weather.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 3)

**backslider** -- Straggler from a marine convoy.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 6)

**bad feeder** -- A vessel or shipping company which provides the crew members with poor quality food or scant supplies thereof. A “good feeder” would be just the opposite, with plenty of hearty, well-prepared victualling.(Common usage)

**barber pole squadron** -- An RCN escort group which met convoys from the US off Newfoundland.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5)

**barrack-room lawyer** -- One who tries to bend the rules by niggling and looking for loopholes. See also **sea lawyer**.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)

**Bible** -- A large holystone.(Layton, 45.)

**bilge-diving, bilge rat** -- The dirtiest, most menial jobs aboard ship -- the person who does them (low man on the totem pole). The name derives from the filthy oil-scummed water in the bilges.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 3)<sup>1186</sup>

**Black Gap, Black Hole** -- The mid-Atlantic area where no air cover existed. See also **Air Gap**.(Ron Webb [rlwebb@netnebr.com] on MARHST-L 10 September 1995 and HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5)

**black pan** -- Extra food, a sort of generalised fry-up of leftovers left for the late watch Engine Room ratings by the Catering Department, especially on passenger ships. No longer applicable in many cases, this custom derived from the days when galley ovens and stoves were fuelled with coke from the ship's main bunkers and was reciprocity to the Stokers and Trimmers for “bunkering” the galley.(HMC 92-9, TTC p. 4 Less accurate or less detailed sources: HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-48, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4. See also Chapter Seven for a full discussion of the custom.)

Originally only for Firemen. The Firemen on the 4-8 would “coal the galley” and when they came off watch (usually only on passenger boats) from all the little scraps left they would get a bit extra. In the *Reina del Pacifico*, a well-known passenger liner out of Liverpool on the South

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<sup>1186</sup>. I myself once worked as a dockside bilge rat for a tugboating firm, Sylvester Towing, of Morro Bay CA.

American run, they were “A bit tight on food”, and even the black pan was “not marvellous”. Still they would be given an egg each and a bit of bacon and perhaps a chicken carcass or two. That was really the “black pan”, but it would sometimes be called that if it went to the Sailors, although it was originally intended only for Firemen. Sailors would get their tea (evening meal) normally whenever they could while on watch, relieving one another for the purpose, but Firemen could not do so.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 6)

**blanket muster** (see also **tarpaulin muster**) -- A nautical way of “passing the hat”. A blanket, sheet, or tarpaulin would be spread upon the deck in the forecabin or messroom and each man would toss onto it his contribution, in much the same way that passers-by toss money into a busking musician’s instrument case. The resultant yield would then be dispensed to its proper recipient(s), most often (though not always) a deceased or injured shipmate’s family ashore.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-7, TTC pp. 3 and 5 and cf. also HMC 92-65, TTC p. 3)

Similar custom in Royal Navy -- “If a sailor got killed or died, ... all his uniform and effects, apart from personal things which were sent home to his family -- y’know the entire uniform, everything, was auctioned off to ... the crew. ... We weren’t very well off, let’s face facts, the Navy pay was poor, but you’d pay p’r’aps a pound for a man’s lanyard -- you could go and get one for tuppence -- and then you’d throw the pound in, then chuck the lanyard back in and somebody else’d buy it.” A piece of orange peel once sold for ten shillings. “Aye, they’d buy anything and just throw it in y’know and ... in the 1940s, they’d [get?] two and three hundred pounds from the lad’s [??] and sent it to his parents.”(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 1) No name was given for this latter custom.

**blood** -- A Steward or Waiter who had food and tidbits held back for him by a Cook -- usually in return for a gratuity of some kind. Cooks would say, “I’ve got five bloods.”(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 7)

**Boatswain (Bosun)** -- The oldest rank of officer in shipping. Originally was the ship’s husband and master. In RN is a commissioned officer. ... In MN is a trustworthy and experienced petty officer who is foreman of the seamen. (USN rank is more similar to MN than RN).(Layton, 52, and personal knowledge). In US merchant marine, usually the most experienced AB.

**bogies** -- Towboats that took ships through the Panama Canal. Perhaps so-called because there was some resemblance to “bogey stoves”?(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 4)

**bottom** -- Any commercial carrier of the merchant marine. **working bottom** -- Any such vessel in use.(Common usage)

**boxheader** -- One of Scandinavian background. See also **squarehead**.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 3)

**boxing the compass** -- Reciting the points or quarter points of the compass in correct order, starting from any named point.(Layton, 58)

**brought up with a round turn** -- Bringing someone up short or stopping them in their tracks, a reference to snubbing a ship to a bollard when she had way on, sailing ship term. The informant’s wife now uses it as well.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 3)(cf. Layton, 63, **brought up all standing**)

**bumboat** -- Shore boat that comes alongside ships in harbour with provisions for retail sale. (Layton, 65)



**bumped** -- Torpedoed.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7)

**bumped up** -- Promoted to the next rank or rate above, because someone of higher rank or rate has left.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 6)

**burgoo** -- According to a Newfoundland informant, British people, especially seafarers, call porridge **burgoo**, but only one British informant gave me the same datum.(HMC 91-7, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-49, TTC p. 6) Seaman's name for oatmeal porridge. First mention in Edward Coxere's "Adventures by Sea." (1656).(Layton, 66)

**burndown** -- A bad discharge or "blackball".(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1)

**button on** -- When a ship joined a small coastal convoy, it was said to "button on". The derivation is apparent.(Common usage)

**CPR** -- The Canadian Pacific Railroad, owners of a major shipping line as well as railway stock, are usually so designated. One informant told me they were "always" called by their initials,(HMC 92-32, TTC p.5) but another called them "Canadian Pacific" throughout the interview.[cf. previous reference](HMC 92-70, TTC p. 1)

**CPR strawberries** -- Prunes (cf. also **Morgan Line strawberries** below).(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 5)

**cabin tea** -- A superior type of leaf tea often served to officers and passengers, while ratings were given an inferior type.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 3) See also **crew tea**, **timber ponds**.

**camel** -- Aid to salvage, usually employed in pairs. A hollow vessel[sic] that is filled with water and sunk under a vessel. When the water is pumped out, the buoyancy of the camel lifts the ship.(Layton, 72) (HMC 89-2, TTC p. 1)

**canteen messing** -- (RN) A "galley staff" of one Leading Cook and one Cook did the actual cooking in the mess, but the Admiralty provided only "spuds". Meat and all other stores were bought ashore by the men, and all preparation was done by them. The cooks "would only put it in the oven, burn it, and give it back to you." Canteen messing was unpopular because it provided only two meals a day, dinner and supper; breakfast consisted of "a cup of tea and a fag".<sup>1187</sup>(HMC 92-64, TTC pp. 6-7) See also **general messing**, **pot mess**.

**'cattleman's crude'** -- A petroleum product carried during wartime and described by the informant as "a kind of paraffin ... white stuff", although I should have imagined it to be black and more like plain crude oil.(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 2)

**changey-changey** -- A nickname for the Lend-Lease agreement.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 2)

**Channel Money** -- A special type of **danger money** or hazardous duty pay. During the war, whenever a British ship entered the English Channel, no matter how briefly, the crew accrued thirty shillings (£1.50) additional **danger money** because they were sailing under the range of the enemy's guns. It was a lot of money in those days, but it was not necessary to apply for it, as it was conferred

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<sup>1187</sup>. One and ten pence per man per day was allotted by the Admiralty -- about the equivalent of nine new pence, said one informant, but I believe he meant ninety. If the mess overspent, the excess was taken out of the men's pay; if they spent less than the amount allotted, it would be credited to their mess.(HMC 92-64, TTC pp. 6-7)

automatically.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 8)(cf. also Layton, 85 -- “Advance payment of money due to a seaman 48 hours before being paid off. It is £2 , or one-quarter of wages due, whichever is the lesser.)

**Charlie** -- A Filipino term for a Chinese, which the Filipinos themselves consider very derogatory and insulting. “Never call Filipinos ‘**Charlie**’.”(HMC 90-17, TTC p. 2)(cf. also the use by U.S. troops of the word **Charlie** as a code name for the Viet Cong during the Vietnamese War.)

**Charlie Noble** -- The galley smokestack. The informant said this term came from England.(HMC 90-55, TTC pp. 3-4)(cf. also Layton, 85, with spelling “Charley”)<sup>1188</sup>

**Christmas tree** -- A mast above the bridge and wheelhouse, specially constructed to display [convoy] communication lights.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-26, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-40, TTC p. 3)

**clamp the lids down** -- Batten down the hatches, especially and specifically to close off the tanks of a tanker if she had been damaged, so as to keep her afloat.(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 3)

**clobber board** -- A device designed to divert acoustic mines and torpedoes away from a ship’s screws by trailing behind her and making noise to attract the weapons.(HMC 91-3, TTC p. 2) See also **rattler**, **foxer gear**.

**cocky watchman** -- See **shore Donkeyman**.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4)

**cocoa cans** -- The grenades or explosive projectiles intended to be fired by compressed air from the “steam gun” or Holman projector. They are so-called because of their shape and size.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 4)

**coffin(s) corner** -- Last vessel position in first or last column of a convoy, some informants specified portside; most said starboard. The position was so-called because it was where a vessel was most exposed and vulnerable to attack by enemy submarines. It was also a convenient position from which tankers could refuel escorts if necessary, even in bad weather, and this was done in the later stages of the war.(HMC 90-7, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-42, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-43, TTC p. 4; HMC 90-56, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-65, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-40, TTC p. 4) (See also George H. Evans, *Through the Corridors of Hell*, (Antigonish NS: Formac Publishing Company, 1980), 30-31.)

**colony boats** -- Those which sailed on the Australia-New Zealand run.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 3)

**come ashore** -- To come ashore indicates one has given up seafaring as a career. See also **swallow the anchor**. This is not to be confused with **paying off**, which is leaving an individual vessel at the end of a voyage or specific term of service.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)

**comforts** -- A term universally used by World War II seafarers for the knitted jerseys, pullovers, socks, mittens, waterproofs, reading material, etc., provided by shoreside benefactors. More common in British than North American usage.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>1188</sup> . Beck, 66, says the term is American and “dates back to the eighteenth century, when the British admiral Charles Noble is said to have insisted that his stack be kept polished. The sailors resented the task and gained their revenge by naming the piece after him.”

**Compass Rose** -- Graduated circles, on a chart, that indicate direction of true and magnetic North, and angular values from these points.(Layton, 101)

**Condition Red** -- All watches available for duty simultaneously.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 3)

**‘Connie-Onnie’** -- Tinned sweetened condensed milk.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)(cf. Beck, 68, where the term for this substance is given as “tinned teat”.)

**convoy fatigue** -- a specific type of battle fatigue affecting wartime mariners, it often required **R-and-R** periods ashore, and in its worst form necessitated psychiatric counselling. See also **torpedo nerves**.(Common knowledge)

**convoy stems/sterns** -- Visible damage to those portions of vessels, resultant from collisions caused by station-keeping errors in convoy.(*British Coasters*, 42.)

**coolies** -- Chinese or Indian crewmen.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 6)

**‘Corned Beef’** -- The Chief Engineer, from rhyming slang for Chief.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4)

**cracker hash** -- On big ships there was always corned or tinned meat. When “spuds” ”went off” in hot weather, the Cook would break and soak softened ship’s biscuit and mix it with the meat as the starch element of the meal, frying the result. It was comparable to a tinned meat version of “fish and brewis”, an Atlantic Canadian dish.(Barney Lafferty, telephone; HMC 92-57, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-68, TTC p. 4)(cf. also Layton, 109, where as both “crackerhash” and “crackerjack”, it is defined as “hash made of reserved meat, broken biscuit and any other available ingredient.”) Bone, 146, in a fictive conversation between two gulls (the souls of deceased seamen) has one mention to the other “our time o’ cracker ‘ash an’ salt ‘orse!”

**crash boats** -- Small craft sent to rescue pilots who missed an aircraft carrier’s deck.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 1)

**creeping coffins** -- Liberty ships.(HMC 90-41, TTC p. 1)

**creeping defence/creeping attack** -- An anti-submarine tactic devised by “Johnny” Walker of the Royal Navy.(HMC 91-3, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-64, TTC p. 4)

**crew** -- Although officers are “crew” in the legal sense, the word in common usage appertains to ratings only.

**crew tea** -- An inferior type of tea, consisting mostly of stalks, and served to ratings when officers and passengers were given a superior leaf tea.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 3) See also **cabin tea**, **timber ponds**.

**crowd** -- British/Canadian/Newfoundland synonym for “crew”.(HMC 91-12, TTC. p. 4)

**cruiser stern** -- A rounded stern; an older form than the more modern square stern.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 3) (cf. also Layton, 113)

**Curley lifebuoys** -- A style of lifebuoy which had some useful attachments, such as a knife and a light which lit automatically when the buoy was inflated in the water.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 2)

**D.F.-ing** -- Electronic direction-finding. See also **HF-DF**, **huff-duff**.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5)(cf. also Layton, 123)

**danger money** -- Hazardous duty pay.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-71, TTC p. 5)

**Davy Jones' Locker** -- Cape Hatteras.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3)(cf. also Layton, 117, "The bottom of the sea, where Davy Jones [an evil spirit of the sea who lies in wait for seamen] holds drowned seamen and foundered ships.") Beck 92 and 281 also indicates that this was a euphemism for Hell or the Devil, but in my experience it only means "the bottom of the sea" and has no malevolent implication.

**day men** -- Those few aboard who worked regular hours and had the night off rather than being watchstanders.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3)

**'dead horse', paying off the** -- An archaic ceremony now more often ignored than observed, marking the cancellation of a debt. In the past, especially the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seamen's shoreside boarding houses were run by "crimps" who also acted as hiring agents. When a man who had spent his pay and pawned most of his belongings was again signed on Articles, he would take a "draw" against his wages to pay the crimp and perhaps to purchase necessary gear for the voyage. The draw usually consisted of the first month's pay. When the first month at sea was over, an effigy called a "horse" was constructed and hanged, drowned, and/or burned with great ceremony to indicate the men were now working for their own gain and no longer to pay off their debt. The reason why this effigy represented a horse has never been successfully explained to me, but the term "flogging a dead horse" is said to derive from the custom.(Personal knowledge from my youth.)<sup>1189</sup> (cf. also Layton, 118, "Performance of work that has already been paid for.")

**'death watch'** -- The 12-4, the Chief Mate's watch, known as **middle watch** in the Royal Navy and sometimes also called **graveyard watch**.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 4)

**deckhand** -- A seaman, not an officer, who serves on deck. One of seventeen years of age or over with at least one year's sea service.(Layton, 119)

**deckhead survey, (to do a)** -- The deckhead is the ceiling of a shipboard compartment, and to "do a deckhead survey" means "to have a lie-down" or rest.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 6)(cf. also Layton, 119, "Deck Head. The underside of a deck.")

**decky** -- Deckhand, Deck officer.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 5)

**Decline to Report** -- When this was stamped in a seaman's discharge book under "Conduct and Ability", it essentially constituted a blackball.(HMC 92-7, TTC p. 1)

**degaussing** -- Neutralising magnetic effect of steel or iron vessel by encircling her with wires carrying electric current. Used as protection against magnetic mines.(Layton, 120)

**departure** -- In the Merchant Marine context, this means one's last known position before beginning an open sea voyage.(HMC 90-60, TTC p. 1)

**dhobying** -- Hand laundry, more common in British than North American parlance.. The first informant listed below used to charge the Engineers thirty shillings for doing their dhobying for an entire voyage, both outward and homeward bound.(HMC 92-49, TTC pp. 3-4; HMC 92-64, TTC p. 6)

**discharge book** -- Continuous record of a seaman's service at sea. ... Contains names and particulars of ships served in, rating, reports on character and ability.(Layton, 125)

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<sup>1189</sup>. See also Beck 119-120; Lovette, 49.

**Distressed [British] Seaman** -- Seaman who, through no fault of his own, but through some event in his employment, is in need of assistance to maintain himself and to return home or to a proper return port. Often abbreviated **DBS**.(Layton, 126 and personal knowledge)

**ditch** -- To throw overboard.(Layton, 126 and personal knowledge)

**ditty bag (box)** -- A small canvas bag or small lockable wooden box in which a seaman keeps small stores, impedimenta, and sentimental valuables. So-called because it is "ditchable".(Layton, 126-127, and personal knowledge)

**Divisions** -- A formal RN inspection.(HMC 92-17, TTC p. 5)(cf. also Layton, 127 -- "daily morning muster of ship's company in R.N. Men muster by divisions and proceed to prayers.")

**Dixey** -- Big pots that sit nested one on top of the other, like a double-boiler three or four tiers high, held together and the lid held on with a bail handle, used for carrying food from galley to messroom.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 4)

**"Do and mend"** -- Sundays in the Royal Navy were given over to repair and construction of gear and clothing. The naval term was sometimes applied to time set aside for similar tasks on a merchant vessel.(cf. "make and mend")(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 2)

**dockyard matey** -- Shoresider, landlubber. This may be an exclusively Royal Navy usage.(HMC 92-21, TTC p. 1)

**Doctor Pepper raids** -- Were so named because they were at 10, 2, and 4 o'clock, or virtually continuous. Dr. Pepper is a soft drink (soda pop) made in the U.S., and the original advertising logo was a clock face with those three times enumerated, indicating that it was good "round the clock".(HMC 90-45, TTC p. 2)

**doghole** -- Small coastal outpost.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 2)

**dogwatch or dog watch** -- The official term for the evening 4-8 watch, it usually applies to Deck personnel only. When they had Quartermasters who worked only as steersmen, they steered for two hours and were on lookout for two hours. There were only four people aboard doing this on different watches. If they continued in the regular pattern, one pair would only sleep from 12-4 at night and would be on watch from 8-12 and from 4-8. To avoid that, they broke the 4-8 watch into two dogwatches (4-6 and 6-8). There were two bells in the first and six bells in the second. One pair of Quartermasters would stand each dog watch. Why the word dog is used has never been satisfactorily explained to me.(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 1)(cf. also Layton, 128)

**Donkeyman** -- Known in the U.S. as a **Deck Engineer**, this Petty Officer level rating was responsible for the maintenance and operation of deck machinery, such as winches, cranes, etc., on a cargo vessel. The equivalent position on a tanker was **Pumpman**. On many modern ships the position has been replaced by that of the **Electrician**, since most deck machinery is now electric rather than steam-driven.(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 2)(cf. also Layton, 129)

**donkey's breakfast** -- A palliasse of straw in a rough ticking cover, used for bedding by seafarers in bunks from the days of sail until the Second World War, and so called because donkeys eat hay. See Chapter Three.(HMC 91-4, TTC p. 10; HMC 91-6, TTC p. 2; HMC 91-12, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-8, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-44, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-56, TTC p. 2)(cf. also Layton, 129)

**dry stores** -- The staple foods supplied to Apprentices and other seafarers beyond their actual meals -- a weekly provision of tinned milk, coffee, tea, cheese, pickles, and jam, as well as a daily ration of bread.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 3)

**duff** -- A bread or steamed pudding, probably from a mispronunciation of the word dough. (cf. Beck, 67)

**duster** (also **red duster**) -- The ensign of the British Merchant Navy, as opposed to the Royal Navy's "white ensign". The former was a red flag with a "Union flag" at the upper inner canton, while the latter had a white ground with a red St. George's cross, and Union in the upper inner canton.(Layton, 303 and 422) One informant, when asked about terminology, immediately recalled that the flag was always called "the duster" -- "Bring down the duster", etc. On one ship, the Captain was very particular, and if he saw the flag touch the deck when it was being handled, he became very annoyed. "Don't let the duster touch the deck."(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 4)

**E-Boat Alley** -- The Wold Channel off England's East Coast, so-called because of the danger there from Nazi E-Boat raiders.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-62, TTC p. 3); the North Sea.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 4)

**Efficient Deck Hand (EDH)** -- Seaman over the age of nineteen, who has passed an examination entitling him to rank as a competent seaman.(Layton, 137)

**fall away** -- To be blown to leeward. **falling off** -- Movement of ship's head to leeward of her course.(Layton, 146)

**fanny boats** -- possibly same as **bumboats** from North American usage of **fanny**, meaning buttocks in same context as British usage **bum**.(HMC 92-45, TTC p. 4)

**fecky, fecky shop** -- The Confectioner and confectionery kitchen on large passenger vessels.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 3)

**feeding fish, feeding seagulls** -- Vomiting.(Bob Hiller, MH field journal for Tuesday, 19/XII-1989)

**fid** -- Large conical piece of wood used for opening strands of large rope. Often has broad base so it can stand vertically when rope is worked over its point.(Layton, 149)

**fiddley** -- Stokehold casing and funnel casing.(Layton, 149)

**field days** -- A scheme whereby seamen put in an extra unpaid eight hours in their off-watch time to make up a sixty-four-hour week. This consisted of two-hour periods four mornings a week. See also **rope-yarn Sundays** and **housework**.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-42, TTC p. 3; HMC 92-50, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-56, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-72, TTC p. 2 and cf. Beck, 66.)

**finished with engines** -- The order given when the "plant" is closed down as the ship comes into a berth in port. Often used by engineering officers to indicate physical exhaustion or dying. Memorials to deceased Marine Engineers frequently incorporate the phrase.(HMC 90-25, TTC p. 2)

**fish, fished** -- From "tin fish" = torpedo, hence fished means torpedoed.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)

**flaming onions** -- A sort of cross between a rocket launcher and a blunderbuss, which was loaded with all sorts of rubbish and nets to trap enemy planes near the end of the war.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 6)

**flight deck** -- A tanker's spar deck where deck cargo of Jeeps, crated aircraft, DUKWs, etc. was carried.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-67, TTC p. 1)

**flip-flops** -- The "points" or "switches" for the container guides on a modern container ship(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 1)

**flying bridge** -- A raised wheelhouse from which a ship is steered, it also has "wings" where lookouts may be stationed on an exposed deck area to each side. Machine guns were often mounted on the wings of the bridge during World War II.(HMC 92-67, TTC p. 1)(cf. also Layton, 156) See also **monkey island**.

**flying light** -- Going "light ship", sailing empty, deadheading.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 4)(cf. also Layton, 156)

**fog eater** -- A seafarer who can navigate well in foggy conditions, almost by instinct.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1)

**Foreign Going (British)** -- Ship trading to ports outside the British Isles and other than ports between Elbe and Brest inclusive.(Layton, 158)

**Foreign-going (Certificate)** -- A Master's Certificate (Foreign-going) is the highest rank available to the merchant seafarer in Britain or Canada. It is equivalent to the American Master's License(Unlimited).(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 5)

**four-stacker, four-piper** -- An old destroyer of World War I design with four funnels or smokestacks. Most of these were of U.S. manufacture and were given to Canada and the U.K. by the Lend-Lease agreement to be used as convoy escorts early in the war.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 2)(cf. also Carse, *The Long Haul*, 35)

**foxer gear(s)** -- A long steel cable with a device which supposedly made more noise than the screws to "confuse" acoustic torpedoes or mines. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it did not.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 4) See also **clobber board**, **rattler**.

**frantic Atlantic, the** -- World War II seafarers' nickname for the Atlantic ocean.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 33)

**frogs** -- A sort of scabbard to hold tools such as fids and marlinespikes, this attached to the belt, rather like a knife sheath.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 7)

**fruit salad** -- vari-coloured ribbons and decorations on a naval officer's (or anyone's) uniform.(de Hartog, 137, *et al* and personal experience.)

**Galley Sports Night** -- This was the Catering Department's term for a major "cleanup and polish" of the galley and associated cooking facilities of a ship on the night before landing at the end of a trans-Atlantic passenger run. It was designed to leave the staff free to go ashore on landing.(HMC 92-8, TTC pp. 3-4)

**gazooter** -- Same root as kazoo? A musical instrument fashioned from a comb and a piece of tissue paper.(HMC 92-50, TTC p. 11)

**general messing** -- On Royal Navy cruisers, carriers, and battleships they had **general messing**, where the Cooks prepared and served everything -- they did the lot,

the crew just ate it. Except the “spuds” -- you still had to peel your own “spuds”. On submarines, destroyers, corvettes, and the like, you did your own and all the Cook did was cook it. One respondent recalled a shipmate trying to cook a rasher of bacon by sticking it to the mess table with four drawing pins [thumbtacks] and ironing it with an electric iron.(HMC 92-64, TTC pp. 6-7) See also **canteen messing**, **pot mess**.

**gesundheit mine** -- an imaginary mine which supposedly emits a charge of black pepper. If the response to the resultant sneeze is ‘Gesundheit’ it blows up, but if it is ‘God bless you,’ it sinks back to the bottom.(Peter J. Crowther, personal communication, spring 1992)

**getaway bag** -- See **abandon ship kit**, **Allah band**, **panic bag**.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 4) A good description is found on Side B of the tape between 7.10-7.44 of a 32-minute recording. The luggage which is pre-packed for taking in emergency situations, such as abandoning ship.

**gloryhole** -- A communal forecandle accommodation for ratings.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 1)(cf. also Layton, 170 = “Any small enclosed space in which unwanted items are stowed when clearing up decks.”)

**good feeder** -- A ship that provides high quality food and good cooking; see also **bad feeder**.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5)

**Gooseberry Harbour** -- A quay constructed of sunken ships filled with concrete. These were designed and constructed to augment the **Mulberry Harbours** during the D-Day landings.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 1) See also **Mulberry Harbour**.

**graveyard watch** -- The middle watch, midnight to 4 a.m.(Layton, 173) The 4-8.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 9)

**grease monkeys** -- An epithet sometimes applied to the Engine Room staff by the Deck staff.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 4)

**Greaser** -- Engine Room rating whose duty is to attend to lubrication. (U.S. parlance is Oiler.) 2. Old-time nickname for the Mate.(Layton, 173)

**the growler** -- The kettle to make the tea. In merchant ships one was always looking for the “growler”, so-called because it could never be found when it was wanted, so the seeker growled.(HMC 92-14, TTC p. 5)

**gulpers** -- A double tot of one’s own rum ration or someone else giving you his full tot, which was unusual.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 2) See also **neaters**, **sippers**.

**Gut-robbers** -- Ships, shipping lines or Catering officers that are “bad feeders”, usually to their own advantage.(HMC 90-69, TTC p. 1)

**H.O. rating** -- A Royal Navy system which accepted men for “hostilities only” and released them at the end of the war, but kept them on “Z” reserve for a given period afterward in case of emergency.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 2)

**‘Hailstones and duck shite’** -- Curry and rice. With the addition of bread, that was the usual fare -- all you got on most ships -- “the main product”, and one had to eat it. [The first time, the informant said “muck” instead of “shite”, but he then changed it.](HMC 92-49, TTC pp. 3 and 6)



**Hamburg-Tokyo ferry** -- A container shipping run so heavily travelled that it has acquired this name. Cf. **Western Ocean sailor** for earlier parallel terminology.(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 2)

**hammer, to get hammered, to get the hammer** -- To be torpedoed, to lose a vessel through being struck by an explosive weapon.(Common usage and HMC 91-2, TTC pp. 2 and 4; HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7)

**The Happy Time** -- A period in 1942, when German submarines engaged in Operation Drumbeat ran amok off the Atlantic Coast of the Americas and devastated much Allied shipping, especially tankers.(HMC 91-12, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-61, TTC p. 2) See also **The Turkey Shoot**.

**Harry Tate** -- The Chief Officer. Rhyming slang for "Mate".(Barney Lafferty, telephone)

**Harry Tate's Navy** -- Unconnected with the above item. Used to refer to Armed Trawlers and Armed Merchant Cruisers used as escort vessels, as crews were largely merchant seamen on T124 or T124X Articles or fishermen unaccustomed to RN discipline and "spit and polish". Reference to awkward, unprepossessing character played by music-hall comic Harry Tate.(Arthur Credland, Hull Town Docks Museum).

**headache** -- The code name for a system of monitoring enemy transmissions used during World War II aboard Royal Navy ships.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 6)

**hedgehog** -- Whereas in the early days depth charges were set for a certain depth with a pressure fuse and then rolled off the stern of the vessel, so it had to be moving quite fast to get out of the way before they exploded, this threw them off in a set (diamond) pattern and they would explode simultaneously. Cf. **limbo, squid**.(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-64, TTC pp. 3-4)

**Hellfire Pass** -- The Russian convoy route was occasionally so-called.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 4)

**HF-DF** -- High Frequency Direction Finding. See also **D.F.-ing** and **huff-duff**.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5)

**Holman projector** -- A device rather like a mortar, fired by compressed air, which was intended to send an explosive missile against low-flying aircraft, but was more often used to fire potatoes or empty fifty-cigarette tins for the mariners' amusement.(HMC 92-38, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-69, TTC p. 7)

**Holystoning the deck** -- Scrubbing down the deck with an abrasive mineral probably derived from pumice stone. The term may derive from the fact that such scrubbing must be done on one's knees, like praying.(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 3) See also **Bible, Merchant Navy Bible**.(cf. also Layton, 189, "Holystone. A piece of soft white sandstone used for cleaning wooden decks by abrasion. To clean with holystones.")

**Home Trade Limits (British)** -- Coasts of Great Britain, Northern Ireland, Eire and Channel Islands and coast of Europe from Elbe to Brest, both inclusive.(Layton, 190)

**Home Trades (certificate)** -- A British or Canadian officer's "ticket" may entitle him to work at one rank in "Home Trades" (waters near his home country), but relegate him to the next position subordinate if "Foreign-going" for reasons of aptitude or service time. A Standard Chief Mate's papers would allow him to sail as a Master in Home Trades.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 5)

**hoodle** -- A dish made by the Firemen on the 8-12 watch on big ships. They got meat, but very little “veg”. The Trimmer would put it on and it was eaten when the watch was relieved at midnight.(Barney Lafferty, telephone) A second respondent recalled the tradition without the name, as “a sort of general scouse prepared for the 8-12 watch from the passengers’ leftovers on big ships”.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 3) cf. **black pan**.

**horse and cart of the Atlantic, the** -- The T/S/S *Iroquois*, a Standard Oil Company tanker, which was equipped to tow a bargeload of oil in addition to her own cargo.(HMC 92-40, TTC p.2)

**housework** -- see **rope-yarn Sundays, field days**.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 6)

**housey-housey** -- A game, almost identical to “Bingo”, which was also called “tombola” in the Royal Navy. It was played with the same type of cards then as now, printed by Bernard’s at Harwich. The only gambling game allowed naval ratings, it was played by Seamen and Stokers in the seamen’s messdecks, but communications ratings were “above it”. There were clever stock names for the numbers called, for example the number nine was known as “doctor’s orders”<sup>1190</sup> and ten “[??] breakfast”, because the numerals resembled a sausage (or a rasher of streaky bacon) and an egg. Some of the numbers’ nicknames “were not repeatable”.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-65, TTC p. 6)

**huff-duff** -- a vocalisation of the acronym **HF-DF**.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5) See also **DF-ing, HF-DF**.

**husband (ship’s)** -- owner’s representative who formerly went with the ship to take charge of stores, arrange for repairs, and transact ship’s business. Was once the job of the sailing master.(Layton, 194) A **supercargo** does a similar job for the cargo, acting for the shippers.

**icebox commandos** -- see **refrigerator commandos**.

**in a suitcase parade** -- Fired and sent ashore.(John Marshall Dallas, HMC 89-4, TTC p. 3)

**inside the Straits** -- Sailing in Mediterranean waters, past the Straits of Gibraltar.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 166)

**Irish hurricane** -- A flat calm.(Beck, 66)

**Irish pennant** -- A piece of frayed rope caught in something so, although it may be functional, it looks untidy.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2) (Beck, 66, a trailing line; cf. also Layton, 202 **Irish pendant**)

**jalap** -- “The strongest laxative in the world”.(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 3)

**jazzies** -- Cockroaches.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)

**John Ls** -- Long winter underpants, named for John L. Sullivan, the fighter, because he used to wear tights in the ring, thus the same origin as **longjohns**. Although they were issued to men on Arctic convoys, some never wore them, even in the bitterest cold, because they could not stand wool next their skin.(HMC 92-67, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>1190</sup> British doctors are trained to ask their patients to say “ninety-nine”, rather than “aaaah” in a throat examination.

- Jolly Jack** -- "Jolly Jack Tar", the stereotypical Royal Navy rating or matelot.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 6)
- jungle show** -- An outdoor (or open but covered) cinema theatre erected on one of the Pacific islands or atolls for the entertainment of servicemen and merchant seamen.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 176)
- junk** -- Salt beef, possibly because it is stored in "chunks", which are pronounced "junks" in several predominantly seafaring areas.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 4)
- jury-rig** -- To build or repair something in a haphazard fashion from whatever is available to hand.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 1)(cf. also Layton, 208 "Temporary and makeshift rig in place of rigging carried away or lost.")
- Kaiser's (creeping) coffins** -- Liberty ships, especially those of welded construction built by Kaiser Permanente-owned shipyards.(HMC 90-45, TTC p. 2; HMC 91-2, TTC p. 6) Liberty ships were also called "bone-shakers".(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 7)
- "kangaroo" planes** -- A rumoured Axis weapon, consisting of a bomber carrying a pilotless "robot plane" or guided missile beneath its belly, which, when released, would unerringly find its target. Although the concept may have been extant at the time, there was no such weapon as yet in use.(de Hartog, 326)
- keelhaul** -- A process whereby a rope line was looped over the bow of a vessel in harbour and dragged aft the length of the ship to dislodge magnetic mines.(HMC 92-40, TTC p. 6)
- kink of the watch** -- Each watch on passenger ships used to holystone the decks at night and each had an assigned area. An ordinary seaman was assigned to follow the man with the hose (the "diver") and undo the kinks. He had to be quick as they could knock off as soon as the work was actually completed.(Barney Lafferty, telephone)
- Kompot** -- A hot drink of stewed dried fruit served in North Russia at the International Club and recalled by many convoy survivors.(HMC 92-17, TTC p. 2)
- kye, (also "Pusser's kye")** -- The cocoa served aboard ship in the Royal Navy. "Naval cocoa, there's nothing like it in this world. I wish they still had the stuff. 'Kye' [he spells the word] they used to call it. It was wonderful. ... It was like a huge block, like very dark brown chocolate with white flecks of fat in it and they used to scrape it with a knife." They shaved it off and tipped it into a big can(pan?), filled the container up with water or canned milk and stirred the resulting mixture up together. One could practically stand a spoon up in it. Some did not like it, but one who did said, "Well it stuck to your ribs, that did. It was really great."(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 7) "Kye! Pusser's kye!" There was nothing similar in the Merchant Navy. "The pusser's kye was famous, because if you were on a night watch on a warship they had a big cauldron of it which was kept hot all night and you just dipped your mug in and you could have as much as you liked."(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 4)
- Lascar** -- Native of east India employed as seaman.(Layton, 216) The term was often applied to any Asian-looking seafarer.
- layer** -- The **layer** adjusts the aim of a large gun vertically, the **trainer** adjusts it horizontally, and the **sight-setter** sets the deviation (angle) and deflection (adjustment for wind, etc.)(HMC 90-71, TTC p. 2; HMC 91-4, TTC p. 6)

**leapfrog** -- the method of working a ship up (or down) the U.S. Atlantic seaboard by skips and jumps, laying over at night in safe harbours and utilising the Cape Cod Canal and Long Island Sound to their fullest extent to avoid undue exposure to possible lurking U-boats.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 35)

**Leccy** -- Electric, as in "leccy iron". Also the ship's Electrician.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 5)

**lifelines** -- Lines or ropes, fixed at intervals along the decks of a vessel in heavy weather for men to cling to for purposes of security or rescue.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 3) (cf. also Layton, 222)

**Limbo** -- The same as **squid**, but mounted on the quarter-deck and pointing aft. The main difference is that the explosion does not affect the ship on which it is mounted, although one Captain once perfected the technique of attacking stern first with the **squid**. See also **squid**.(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-38, TTC p. 2)

**live ones** -- newly paid-off seafarers, already starting to drink up their pay packets, who were easy prey for those whose money was already spent and who wanted to **rig the towline**.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 81)

**lobscouse** -- Nautical stew made with preserved meat and vegetables. See **scouse** below.(Layton, 227)(Beck, 67, gives this as "a stew of meat, biscuits and potatoes".)

**lubber line** -- "The post in the binnacle which the inexperienced sailor steers by instead of watching the sails, stars or other objects as experienced seamen do."(Beck, 66.)

**lucky bag** -- A supply of worn-out or cast-off clothing which the unfortunate sailor may use to replenish his supply.(Beck, 66. He inaccurately equates this with the slop chest [see below]. Although the two were related, they were not identical.)

**lumpy-jumpies** -- See also **woolie-pullies**. The military style pullover sweater [jumper] worn by the modern merchant marine officer with the badges of rank on the shoulders. Called **woolie-pullies** [for woolly pullovers] originally, the term "deteriorated" to **lumpy-jumpies** when the female Cadets and Apprentices began to wear them.(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 1)

**MAC ships** -- Merchant Aircraft Carriers, developed late in the war, which carried bulk cargoes, usually grain, and up to six fighter planes, which could both take off and land on the vessel's decks. Catapult carriers were less successful, as they catapulted the aircraft off the fore end, but could not recover it unless near enough to a land base to fly there, otherwise they crash-landed. Most of these vessels had Scottish names involving the prefix Mac, as well, although the name derived from the acronym.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 1) See also **crash boats**.

**Make and Mend** -- An afternoon watch during which no ship's work was done, allotted to RN seamen for making and mending clothes and other gear.(Layton, 237)

**make up** -- When ships met at any specified point, either in port or at sea, to form a convoy, it was said that they "**made up**" the convoy.(Common usage).

**'make-y'-learn watch'** -- The 8-12 watch, where the junior officer, Cadet, Apprentice, or Midshipman can be under the eagle eye of the seniors. "It's really the Captain's watch, so if there's any difficulties, the Captain's there anyway."(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 1)

**Manzland Run** -- Montreal to Australia to New Zealand, a semi-acronym.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 6)

**Maritime ack-ack** -- Maritime Royal Artillery on-ship gunners, previously known as the A.A. Guard.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 4)

**market ship** -- One which plies back and forth from Britain to Spain and similar places for fruits, vegetables and the like.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 1)

**matelot** -- French word for sailor, common British usage for military naval rating.  
(pronounced **mat**-e-lo)

**Matthew Walker** -- A type of knot.(Beck, 66)

**Merchant Navy** -- Despite the testimony of “Tony” and the evidence of E.C. Talbot-Booth, *Merchant Ships 1942*, (New York: Macmillan , [1942?]), Layton, 246-247 indicates that the terms Mercantile Marine, Merchant Service, and Merchant Navy were synonymous.

**Merchant Navy Bible** -- Holystoning the deck, the job of the Apprentice, working under the orders of the Bosun.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. 4)

**messenger** -- A light heaving line, used to haul a larger one.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 3)(cf. also Layton, 248)

**middle watch** -- The 12-4, the Second Mate’s watch. Also **graveyard watch**.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 1)

**milch cow** -- A U-boat adapted to diesel power, which then bunkered other U-boats at sea. They operated off the U.S. coast where, even if blacked out, ships were illumined in silhouette against the lights of the Eastern Seaboard. “And the Caribbean -- what a graveyard!” See also **Happy Time**.(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 2)

**mongrel** -- The word was used in reference to non-British colonial additions [late in the war] to officers’ ranks from areas such as Ceylon, Malasia, or West Africa. It is unclear whether the term infers non-whites or simply non-English. The informant did say they were probably all British subjects.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2)

**monkey** -- see **performer**, **steamboater**.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5)

**monkey fist** -- A knot in the end of a heaving line to increase its carrying power. Three round bights are made in the end leaving enough end to cross the first turns with three round turns, and then a further three turns going over the second turns and under the first turns.(Layton, 252).

**monkey island** -- An open steering and navigating platform above the flying bridge of a ship.(HMC 91-6, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-63, TTC p. 6)(cf. also Layton, 252 -- “Screened navigating and compass position on top of a wheel house or chart house.”)

**Morgan Line strawberries** -- Prunes.(cf. above, **CPR strawberries**)(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1)

**Mulberry Harbour** -- A mole and disembarkation area prefabricated of large concrete caissons for use in the D-Day landings. The sections were towed across the English Channel and sunk into position. Despite damage caused by

unusually bad weather, the system worked reasonably well.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 1) See also **Gooseberry Harbour**.

**neaters** -- The taking of liquor, specifically the naval rum issue, neat, i.e., without addition of water, ice, etc.(HMC 91-3, TTC p. 4) [cf. **sippers**, **gulpers** (HMC 92-20/92-21; HMC 92-64/92-65)]

**nee name** -- A ship's original name at launching, if it has since been changed, from a term indicating a woman's maiden name before marriage.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 2)

**night aboard** -- An in-port turn of duty when a Junior Engineer stood watch in the Engine Room and a Senior Engineer was in his cabin on call. Similar to **night-mating**, below, but often occurring in foreign ports as well and usually involving men from the vessel's own crew, not hired specifically for the purpose. Men were often "relieved to get a **night aboard** as a change from gallivanting".(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 7)

**night-mating** -- A job that might best be termed "executive night watchman". When a ship is tied up in port and her regular officers wish time off to go ashore, the union provides a relief with the proper qualifications and credentials to oversee the general running of the ship, which may or may not include loading and unloading. Occasionally, in port, when the regular watch schedule is "broken", the ship's regular officers can count the eight-hour (rather than three-watch) day as **night-mating** time. Duty times include weekends and holidays and do not, despite the name, exclude daylight hours. **Night-mating** "out of the halls" includes perks beyond regular salary, such as transportation to and from the docks, etc. Officers not actively "shipping out" may continue to **night mate** on a part-time basis, and many **night mates** are retired Master Mariners. The term itself is common amongst North American seafarers, but the job is usually called by its proper term, "relief-mating" in the United Kingdom.(HMC 90-1, TTC p. 1; 90-52, TTC p. 3) The British slang term is **night nurse**.(HMC 92-67, TTC p. 2)

**North Sea piano** --A melodeon or, more accurately, an accordion.(HMC 90-29, TTC p. 1)

**not under command** -- Out of control.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 1)(cf. also Layton, 263 = "Said of a vessel when, though some accident, she is not fully under control while under way.")

**Old Man** -- Colloquial name for the commander of a merchant vessel.(Layton, 267) NB: this term is always used in the third person. When addressing the individual directly, the proper form would be Captain, skipper, or simply Sir.

**on funnel party** -- Sitting with one's back against the warm funnel[smokestack] on the upper deck, getting fresh air. Often a man would have two or three regular companions with whom he would meet and discuss a wide variety of subject matter.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 2)

**on the beach** -- ashore.(Common usage)

**on the box** -- Reading radio signals for a second operator to log, in order to work out one's direction and distance from the sender.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 8)

**one-striper** -- A junior ship's officer with one stripe on his sleeve as a badge of rank. Cf. **three-ringer**.(HMC 92-46, TTC p. 2)

**Ordinary Seaman** -- Seaman aged eighteen or more, who has not qualified to be rated Able Seaman (A.B.).(Layton, 268)

**overboard box** -- A steel chest, padlocked and perforated with holes. In it are carried code books, navigation data, signals, etc. The log in it was not the "official" log, but a separate navigation log. The overboard box was picked up by a U.S. Navy officer with an armed guard immediately upon arrival in one's home port and was thereafter never seen again. It was probably destroyed.(HMC 90-60, TTC p. 2)

**panic bag** -- When they heard in Port Said that the country was at war and they would be going home in convoy, each got canvas and made a bag in which they placed spare clothing, cigarettes, etc. This they called the "panic bag". When the *Glenorchy* was torpedoed, Tom Brunskill could not find his panic bag -- "There was a beautiful bottle of brandy in it, too". "If you are in real trouble, you don't get a chance to grab the panic bag." Cf. **abandon ship kit, Allah band, getaway bag**.(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 2)

**paravane** -- Torpedo-shaped body with transverse and inclined plate. Towed from stern or bows of ship as a protection against moored mines.(Layton, 274)

**parish-rigged** -- Dressed in an outfit that was (or looked like it was) obtained from a missionary box or charitable institution. Occasionally a working man, such as a carpenter, might be "parish-rigged" with the tools of his trade, if he had lost them in some way, but had a job available. Apprentices were often parish-rigged with dress uniforms or foul-weather gear. Tony Wrench once sold his white uniform to other crew members in order to get shore-going money. "It's daft things like that you do as a kid and then come back to cold weather and there's a deck boy wearing your nice bridge coat and you're freezing 'cause you sold it to him. That's **parish-rigged**."(HMC 92-27, TTC p. 1)

**patrol suit** -- Like a junior officer's uniform, but just buttoned up, with no collar or tie, this was acceptable wear for the off-watch Engineer.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 6)

**pay off** -- The term applies to either men or ships. When a vessel **pays off** at the end of a voyage, each man aboard her **pays off**, as well, but this is a temporary situation and any of the men may ship out again almost immediately. Cf. **come ashore**.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)

**to pay off with a rope-yarn** -- To receive a mere pittance when one's vessel pays off, because one has "drawn" one's pay in increments before that time, usually for drink or gambling, but occasionally for a running bill at the **slop chest**.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 2)

**peashooter** -- Either of the twin Marlin machine guns on the exposed wing of the bridge.(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 7)

**peggy, peggying** -- The heavier of the household-type chores, cleaning fire irons, emptying ashes. At sea, it would have been the most menial of the tasks of scrubbing and carrying. The Firemen's **Peggy** was definitively the "low man on the totem pole" as he had not only to clean and help prepare food and serve meals, but also to clean the quarters of the men who, by the very nature of their work, were the dirtiest aboard.(HMC 92-55, TTC pp. 1-2) Another informant, who had served in this capacity described it as a sort of general "gopher"-cum-"dogsbody" to the black gang of a coal-fired vessel. Duties involved cleaning the quarters, serving the food, and "bilge-diving", as well as doing a shift assisting the Firemen in the stokehold.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 1)

**pelican hooks** -- These are described at tape counter number 077.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 1) (cf. also Layton, 276, "Name sometimes given to a slip hook" and 349, "Hook fitted with a hinged portion that can be slipped, so that a weight carried by it can be disengaged and allowed to fall off.")

**'Pepper Pot'** -- The matelot's nickname for HMS *Penelope*.(HMC 92-21, TTC p. 1)

**performer** -- A man who acts up, gets drunk, makes a lot of noise, shows off and does not do his duty, i.e., is not a seaman. A real seaman does his duty even when not feeling well, because there are a limited number of people aboard. See also **monkey, steamboater**.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3; HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-57, TTC p. 7)

**'Perishing' Gulf** -- A pun-cum-nickname for the Persian Gulf, because of its extreme heat, and the isolation of its outports in the 1940s.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 2)

**pierhead jump/leap** -- The short notice acceptance of employment aboard a ship due for imminent departure; the term derives from the occasional necessity in earlier times of actually leaping from the dock to the departing ship to secure a berth aboard.(HMC 90-75, TTC pp. 2-3)(cf. also Layton, 280 -- "The boarding of a vessel almost at the moment of sailing."

**pig trough** -- A bank of eight rockets fired electrically from within a "pillbox", which exploded in front of an approaching or attacking enemy aircraft.(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 5)

**pink elephants** -- Any imaginary "scare" rumour, the implication being that these were the result of a combination of braggadocio, creative imagination, and drink.(de Hartog, 326)(See also **will-o-the-whiskeys**.)

**plague capsules** -- One of the above **pink elephants**, these were supposedly dropped from aircraft and could obliterate an entire ship's company before they were able to fire a shot.(de Hartog, 326.)

**pogue** -- A homosexual.(Beck, 66.) This term probably arose from the Irish Gaelic for 'kiss my arse'. Beck notes on the same page that candy, "popularly believed to be the diet of homosexuals", is called **pogey bait**.

**Pool** -- Fluctuating congregation of personnel from which can be drawn hands required for manning ships, and to which can be added personnel available for manning.(Layton, 286)

**Pool Money** -- A temporary weekly subsistence allotment while a seaman was ashore with no ship, but still listed "on the Pools".(HMC 92-46, TTC p. 2)

**porridge tank** -- A hollowed "cob"(small loaf) of bread, filled with cold porridge. See Chapter Three.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 1)

**pot mess** -- On small Royal Navy ships they often had a **pot mess** with a large stewpot. Everything was put in the same pot and even with the "rolling bars" on the stove for safety, much would spill out and only two or three inches would remain in the bottom, instead of a potful, thus providing the ratings with very short commons.(HMC 92-64, TTC pp. 6-7) See also **canteen messing, general messing**.

**pound and pint system** -- See also **whack**.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 5)



**pusser** -- A Purser, but in all branches of the Royal Navy the term had an adjectival meaning of finicky fastidiousness and scrupulous adherence to regulations(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 2)

**“Q” ship** -- A merchant vessel with concealed armament and manned by naval crew that decoyed German submarines into gun range during 1914-18 war.(Layton, 296)

**QBs or quarter boys** -- Senior cadets on British training ships, with priority status in a given mess or living quarters.(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 6)

**R-and-R** -- “rest and recuperation” -- a form of organised relaxation to alleviate battle fatigue and similar psychological effects of war. By extension any short holiday from normal stress.(Common knowledge)

**rattlers** -- A device used to foil acoustic torpedoes or mines, this comprised two metal bars like half-inch rebar, secured to each other by chains, rather like gigantic nunchaku sticks. See also **clobber board**, **foxer gear**.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-18, TTC p. 3)

**“Red Stack”, “Red Stacker”** -- Tugboat belonging to the Crowley towing company of San Francisco.(HMC 89-2, TTC p. 1)

**refrigerator commandos** -- A somewhat pejorative nickname applied to the U.S. Navy Armed Guard. Charlie Baca, an Armed Guard interviewee, paid no attention and kept right on eating. He considers that he was well-fed, as he gained twenty-two pounds (one and a half stone) during his Service time.(HMC 90-23, TTC p. 1)

**refuelling the subs** -- An ironic term for a voyage to Central America in a tanker during the Second World War.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3)

**relative bearing** -- Direction of an observed object when expressed as an angle with ship’s fore and aft line.(Layton, 306)(See “Fools’ Errands” section of preceding chapter for “**relative bearing grease**”)

**rig of the day** -- The prescribed Royal Navy uniform for a given day.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)

**to rig the towline** -- the practice, when ashore, of hanging round the union hiring halls waiting for someone who has just paid off to arrive, claiming to have sailed with him, and so ‘conning’ him into spending his pay packet to buy drinks for those who are currently unemployed.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 81-83)

**rompers** -- in effect, the opposite of stragglers. These were ships which steamed ahead of the convoy rather than either maintaining their assigned position or falling behind. (Carse, *The Long Haul*, 127)

**rope-choker** -- A banteringly pejorative nickname applied to members of the Deck crew by those from other Departments. (HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2)

**rope-yarn Sundays** -- A system whereby seafarers were obliged to work extra hours without overtime pay.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 6 cf. also Beck, 66, where it is defined as “a day off”.) See also **field days**; **housework**.

**rose box** -- Raised wooden box surrounding bilge pump.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 4)(cf. also Layton pp. 314 and 371 [Strum Box])

**round-nose** -- A type of shovel used by Marine Firemen.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)

**Rounds** -- A sort of Royal Navy inspection.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)

**run job** -- A brief coastal run, often one way, such as from Liverpool to South Shields.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)

**The Rust Box** -- Ropner's *Liverpool*, which went down in the Atlantic in 1934 or 1935. She was rotten and falling to pieces and should never have gone to sea.(HMC 92-16, TTC p. 3)

**Sailor** -- A rating conferred at the discretion of the Captain or Mate and corresponding to an "AB without portfolio". In the modern system this rating has been replaced by "EDH" or Efficient Deckhand.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 1)(Cf. also Layton, 322)

**scaly-back** -- A pejorative name applied to the people of Hartlepool, in the North of England, by their inland neighbours, because theirs is a fishing community.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 6)(cf. also **woolyback**)

**scouse, Liverpool scouse**, also **lobscouse** -- A dish rather like a stew, comprising potatoes, meat, and turnips. A common dish aboard ship, it is the regional dish of Liverpool, hence Liverpudlians are called **scousers** and the Liverpool dialect is also known as **scouse**.(HMC 91-6, TTC p. 2)

**scrambled eggs** -- Gold braid on peaked brim of officer's cap.(HMC 89-5, TTC p. 7; HMC 90-14, TTC p. 2)

**screw** -- Screw propeller. Also **screw alley** cf. **shaft alley** = enclosed space with a gangway alongside propeller shaft. Used when examining, lubricating, or re-fitting bearings of propeller shaft, or when withdrawing tail end shaft.(Layton, 326)

**scuppered** -- Drunk, presumably because one is falling into the scuppers or gutters.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 5)(cf. also Layton, 327, where -- "slang term for frustrated, knocked out, or killed.")

**scuppers** -- Gutters which drain water off the decks of a vessel. If Fred Williams slops water around the bathroom of their home, his wife, Vera, reminds him "there are no **scuppers** in there".(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 5)

**sea lawyer** -- One who tries to bend the rules by niggling and looking for loopholes. See also **barrack-room lawyer**.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 3)(cf. Layton 329 -- "nautical name for an argumentative person"; Beck, 66 -- **Philadelphia sea lawyer** -- a 'know-it-all'.)

**sea smoke** -- The mist which rises from the sea in very cold latitudes where the air temperature is lower than that of the water. It resembles steam or smoke.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 1)(cf. Layton, 22 -- "**Arctic sea smoke**. Fog on surface of sea when caused by cold air moving over warm water.")

**seagoing piano** -- A concertina.(Beck, 163) Again, as with "North Sea piano" earlier, I feel this term was intended to refer to a piano accordion, rather than a melodeon or concertina.

**seaman's wallet** -- A 4.5"-5" by 6" leather wallet in which a seaman carried his papers. This in turn was usually placed in a handmade oilskin pouch which remained near the lifeboats in case of emergency.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 1)

**Senior watch** -- The 4-8, the Mate's watch.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 1)

**shack** -- The usual term for a ship's Wireless Cabin because they were originally purpose-built and not much more than a shack on the deck abaft the bridge. The Tandy subsidiary, "Radio Shack" was so-called because it was originally a purveyor of components for amateur radio operators.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 6)

**shaft alley** -- Footway alongside propeller shafting, extending from engineer room to stern gland (Layton, 336) also **shaft tunnel** -- enclosed space, between engine room and stern gland, through which propeller shaft extends and in which are the shaft bearings.(Ibid.)

**shellback** -- One who has crossed the Equator and been initiated.(Personal knowledge.) an old and experienced seaman.(Layton, 339; cf. also Beck, 68)

**Sheepsheads** -- Nickname applied to those who undertook their nautical training during the war at the United States Maritime Service training facility at Sheepshead Bay, New York.(HMC 90-26, TTC p. 1)

**shipping a 'green 'un'** -- A "green 'un" is a wave that goes over the deck.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 8)

**ship's husband** -- Person formerly carried in a merchant ship to transact ship's business and purchase stores. In earlier times, was the boatswain, and was in charge of the crew and of the fabric of the ship.(Layton, 341) Infrequently carried in modern times, and usually now replaced by what is called a **supercargo** who looks after the welfare of the cargo for the shippers, leaving the actual vessel's welfare to her Master. Often the curator of a floating museum exhibit is now called a **ship's husband**, as he cares for or "husbands" the vessel.

**shore Donkeyman** -- A relief position, rather like that of the **night mate**, but not of officer status. A relief night watchman or gangway man. Also sometimes known as **cocky watchman** because London, as a large city, was one of the first areas to enable hiring such workers ashore rather than requiring ship's personnel to perform such duties in port. I am not certain, but believe the Port of London Authority may have maintained one of the earliest Pools for such employment. "They were all retired seamen."(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4)

**sight-setter** -- One who sets the degree of elevation and correction for wind, etc. -- elevation and deflection -- for a ship's larger guns. The **layer** adjusts the overall vertical angle, and the **trainer** the horizontal.(HMC 91-4, TTC pp. 6-7)

**sippers** -- A sip from someone else's tot of the Royal Navy rum issue. The first day you draw your rum ration (often your 21st birthday) you [give sippers to everyone else in the mess?] and get sippers from everyone else in the mess.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-72, TTC p. 2) See also **gulpers**, **neaters**.

**skin boat** -- A banana boat.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 2)

**skylarking** -- Playing pranks.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 6)

**slack tank** -- A tank (usually on a tanker, but it could be a cargo vessel's fuel tank) which is partially full. It sloshes and can capsize the ship.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3)

**(to) sleep 'all standing'** -- To sleep with all or most of one's clothes on in an emergency situation. This was standard operating procedure aboard all military and many merchant vessels during World War II.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 3) See also **all standing**.

**(to) sleep 'end-for-end'** -- To sleep two to a bunk or hammock, faced opposingly with one occupant's feet by the other's head.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 8)

**slipper bath** -- A sort of a bath in which one can either sit or stand in what is shaped like a huge house slipper. They were once popular at public bathhouses in Britain.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 6)

**slop chest, slop bill** -- The ship's canteen for the purchase of sundry necessities by seamen; the bill from the **slop chest**, which was paid off when one received one's wages at the end of the voyage. Most purchases were beer, tobacco, and sweets, but soap, underwear, etc. were also sold there.(HMC 92-48, TTC p. 6)(Cf. also Layton, 350 -- **slop chest** -- "chest or compartment in which is stowed clothing for issue to the crew". Note: Beck, 66, indicates somewhat inaccurately that it is "a supply of worn-out or cast-off clothing which the unfortunate sailor may use at some expense to replenish his supplies.")

**slur** -- "The Slur" = scuttlebutt, gossip.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4)

**smart bombs** -- Used by the Axis in World War II, these could be steered by the bombardier aboard the plane throughout their descent, while the controlling aircraft stayed above FLAK range. Later the Allies developed some sort of radio masking or other protective system to combat them.(HMC 92-61, TTC p. 5)

**smokko** -- A tea break, so-called whether one smoked or not.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 5)  
Breaktime. Everyone smoked. "It was the general thing to do in them days -  
- see there was nothing else to do."(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 3)

**soogee (soogee-moogee)** [A 'soft' g, as in age, refuge, or Scrooge.] -- The name commonly attached by seafarers to a caustic cleansing compound (an English informant specified Gossage's powdered soap) used for such tasks as swabbing the decks. It was highly caustic and would turn your skin grey where it ran over your arms and hands.(HMC 91-1, TTC p. 6) Provisions acquired by one vessel in New Guinea were dubbed "**Soogee beef**" and "**Soogeeyaki**", indicating the stuff was so bad it tasted as if it had been marinated in **soogee**.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 1) "**Soogee-moogee** can't be spelled; you have to whistle it."(HMC 90-55, TTC p. 4) (cf. also Layton, 353)

**special service engagement** -- A Royal Navy system whereby one served seven years with the Fleet and five in reserve.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 2)

**special ticket** -- A certificate issued by Liverpool Wireless College, qualifying a junior Radio Officer for the duration of the war only. It required more practical knowledge and less mathematical expertise than a full certificate.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 1)

**spreaders** -- Bars or lathes, usually wooden, which flatten and spread a hammock. Without them, hammocks naturally roll to form a sort of cocoon around their contents.(HMC 92-62, TTC p. 8)

**spud locker, spud workers** -- The vegetable preparation room of a passenger ship and the galley staff who work there.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 4)

**squarehead** -- A seafarer of Scandinavian background.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3) This term may have been applied to Germans or any of Teutonic background, before it was limited to Scandinavians.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 6)

**squawk box** -- A ship's intercom, public address or tannoy system.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 179)

**squid** -- Three mortar barrels, the fore and aft pointed to one side of the ship and the middle one to the opposite side. They were also pointed slightly forward. Fired by ASDIC control, they would fire bombs above and below an enemy submarine. There were two aboard, so they fired three bombs on each side. The explosion underneath lifted the attacking ship out of the water and caused leaks. See also **limbo**.(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-38, TTC p. 2)

**“Starboard Light”** -- Ashore in South Africa, Dick Playfer was advised to try a drink called a “Starboard Light”, which, it transpired, was nothing but crème de menthe, so-called because it was green, the colour of a vessel’s starboard running light.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 6)

**steamboater** -- A **performer** who acts up, gets drunk, and is “not up to snuff” in doing his proper job. See also **monkey**, **performer**.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5)

**steel bar** -- A needle. The informant said his grandfather was “good with the steel bar”, i.e., an accomplished tailor.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 2)

**stem winder** -- A ship with the bridge back aft.(HMC 90-52, TTC p. 3)

**sticky bombs** -- Perhaps magnetic mines. [??] (HMC 92-69, TTC p. 5)

**straggler** -- Although the meaning of this term seemed evident to me, one interviewee felt strongly that it should be included in any glossary of terms dealing with convoy. It means a vessel which falls behind her fellows and thus becomes a ready target for enemy assault.(HMC 91-6, TTC p. 2)

**The Straits Shuttle** -- The run back and forth to Gibraltar when the Suez Canal was closed to use and the Mediterranean was almost exclusively under Axis domination.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 171)

**stream** -- To employ torpedo nets or paravanes, by depending them from purpose-built rigging whilst the vessel was underway.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 2)

**“Stupid Department”, the** -- A nickname attached to the Stewards’ Department [Catering Department] on some North American ships, because of the similarity in sound and the traditional interdepartmental rivalry.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2)

**suck the monkey** -- Originally to suck rum from a coconut into which it had been (illicitly) inserted, the end of the nut resembling a monkey’s face. Later, illicitly to suck spirit from a cask, usually through a straw.(Layton, 372) See also **bleed the monkey**.(Layton, 49)

**suction torpedoes** -- These apocryphal devices fastened themselves, limpet-like, to a ship’s hull and could explode days later.(de Hartog, 326.)

**summer holiday** -- Satirical term. When one was on regular Northern runs, like Russia or the North Atlantic, being given a more southerly one, like Malta, or the North Africa landings was given this tongue-in-cheek nickname. Usually such “holidays” were to the Mediterranean, but sometimes even the English channel was included.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 4)

**swallow the anchor** -- To come ashore permanently.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 2)(cf. also Layton, 375 -- To leave the sea and settle ashore.)

**sweat** -- No real definition was given, but the word was used in reference to old characters with years of sea service behind them who could tell some wild stories, but were pleasant shipmates.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2)

- sweatrag pudding** -- A sort of “duff”<sup>1191</sup> boiled wrapped in a sweatrag instead of a nice pudding bag. “A lot of dough containing scrapings of various stuff and wrapped in a sweatrag to cook.”(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 1)
- tabernacle** -- The mast locker. This is an English term.(HMC 90-55, TTC pp. 3-4)(Cf. also Layton, 378 -- “Vertical casing, having three sides at right angles, into which a mast is stepped and clamped.”)
- Tab-nabs** -- Leftover cakes obtained from the cook.(Barney Lafferty, telephone; HMC 92-57, TTC p. 3); biscuits.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4); afternoon tea with buns and the like, some of which were very hard.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 4); special treats for Sunday.(HMC 92-70, TTC p. 5)
- T.E.C. or Tail-end Charlie** -- The last one in line in a formation of ships.[cf. the same term’s use for an airplane’s tail-gunner](HMC 91-3, TTC p. 2)
- tarpaulin muster** -- See **blanket muster**. (Cf. also Layton , 381 -- “Old name for a general collection for a charitable purpose.” He derives this from the passing round of a tarpaulin hat.)
- tender** -- A term for alteration in ship’s handling because of weight shift. **Tenderness** should be corrected at the earliest opportunity or the consequences may be serious.(HMC 90-59, TTC p. 3)(cf. also Layton, 383 -- “said of a vessel having a small righting moment; so being easily moved from her position of equilibrium, and slow in returning to it.
- terrific Pacific, the** -- World War II seafarers’ nickname for the Pacific Ocean, to correspond with “the frantic Atlantic”.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 34)
- Three-ringer** -- A Royal Navy full Commander, so called because of the three rings of rank on his lower sleeve. Many convoy commodores were “three-ringers” from the RNR. Cf. **one-striper**.(HMC 91-3, TTC p. 2)
- tidies** -- Rather like hanging shoebags made of canvas and knotwork, these acted as a sampler to show off a seaman’s handicraft while at the same time being a useful object to hold his toiletries and other small items aboard. Like a little ditty-bag sort of thing with compartments “...to hang up and put all your gear in it.”(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 4)
- timber ponds** -- A nickname attached to **crew tea** (see above), because it consisted mostly of stalks, and the bits could be seen floating in it like tiny logs.(HMC 92-66, TTC p. 3)
- Tombola** -- Although now frequently a type of raffle, this was the traditional Royal Navy name for the game of Bingo. See also **housey-housey**.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-65, TTC p. 6)
- Torpedo Alley** -- Usually the coast of Florida where, silhouetted against lights ashore, few ships survived U-boat attacks until the US “got off their ass”,<sup>1192</sup> but occasionally the Windward Passage in the Caribbean(HMC 90-63, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5))

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<sup>1191</sup>. “Duff” is a sort of dumpling, usually sweet, often with dried fruit in it. The term is apparently a sort of corruption of the word **dough** to rhyme with **enough**.

<sup>1192</sup>. A reference to Admiral King’s stubbornness; he would not run convoys until some time after the U.S. entered the war. People ashore found it exciting to watch the stricken vessels exploding.

**Torpedo Junction** -- Trinidad.(SHLSS #2, HMC TTC p. 4; HMC 90-56, TTC p. 1)(cf. also Carse, *The Long Haul*, 80) There were two Torpedo Junctions; one was off the Dry Tortugas.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1)

**torpedo nerves** -- a form of battle fatigue common to wartime seafarers, it involved becoming hypersensitive to noises, especially around **torpedo time** (see immediately below) -- the time at dusk and dawn, especially the former.(Common knowledge)

**torpedo time/torpedo watch** -- The four-to-eight watch.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)(See also Chapter Four on Favourite Watches.)

**trainer** -- The **trainer** adjusts a large gun horizontally, the **layer** adjusts it vertically, and the **sight-setter** sets the deviation (angle) and deflection (wind adjustment, etc.) (HMC 90-71, TTC p. 2; HMC 91-4, TTC p. 6)

**trim** -- To do the Engine Room job of a Trimmer, using a “slice bar” to level out the bed of coals in the firebox of a coal-fired vessel and passing coal from bunker to bunker so that it is handiest for feeding the fires. There was usually one Trimmer to each Stoker or Fireman.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 4) (Cf. also Layton, 399 = **trimming**.)

**The Turkey Shoot** -- The decimation of tanker shipping on the Atlantic Coast of the U.S., 1940-1942.(Common usage and HMC 91-3, TTC p. 1)

**‘Uncle Ned’** -- Bread (and jam), from rhyming slang for the bread itself. Bread was usually fairly decent aboard. Each man got a little “cob” [individual loaf] about the size of a coffee mug or a large roll, one in the morning and one at night. “The staff of life.” Liverpudlians called them “cobs”.(HMC 92-49, TTC pp. 3 and 6)

**‘underground savages’** -- A nickname applied (not very seriously) to the Engine Department by other Departments aboard.(HMC 90-8, TTC p. 2)

**Unlimited** -- This is the highest shipmaster’s certificate available in the United States of America. It actually states its holder is entitled to command a vessel of unlimited tonnage in any waters. It is equivalent to the British and Canadian systems’ “Foreign-Going”.(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 5)

**The Veg (pronounced vedge)** -- Vegetable cook aboard a passenger liner.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 4)

**The Vultures** -- Focke-Wulf Condors, surveillance and patrol planes of the *Luftwaffe*.(Carse, *The Long Haul*, 129)

**West Country Three** -- A fancy system of “staggering” three watches so that one night in three each man would have “all night in” (once he came off watch at 2000 he would have a full twelve hours off and not have to be on watch again until 0800) but leaving the other two nights “fairly rough” without much sleep. This system was used by Royal Navy telegraphists and HF-DF operators.(HMC 92-20, TTC p. 1)

**Western Ocean** -- A British term for the Atlantic, primarily the North Atlantic.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 2)

**Western Ocean sailor** -- One who ships only aboard large passenger liners and only plies one of the North Atlantic runs between Great Britain and the United States or Canada.(HMC 92-54, TTC p.p. 7-8; HMC 92-56, TTC p. 8)

- whack** -- North American equivalent to the British “pound and pint” system of victualling.(HMC 90-66, TTC p. 1)(cf. also Layton, 420 -- colloquial name for the statutory allowance of provisions and water.)
- whammy** (and possibly “**double whammy**”) -- A **whammy** is a piece of rope yarn used to jury-rig or to secure something aboard ship. “**Double whammy**” would not be normal usage, but “put a **whammy** on that” would be a common phrase, understood by dockers and seafarers alike.(HMC 92-55, TTC p. 7)
- whip** -- A hard, strict disciplinarian, who goes by the book to the letter of the law.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 7)
- white nights** -- A reference to the “midnight sun” in the Arctic latitudes during the summer months.(HMC 92-72, TTC p. )4
- will-o-the-whiskies** -- See previous entry under **pink elephants**.(de Hartog, 326).
- wolf pack** -- A group of U-boats which attack convoys as a strategic unit rather than individually.(HMC 92-3, TTC p. 3)
- woolie-pullies** -- Military style pullover sweaters with the wearer’s badge of rank on the shoulders, now often worn by merchant marine officers as well, as part of a casual uniform. See also **lumpy-jumpies**.(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 1)
- Woolworth carriers** -- Merchant vessels fitted to act as small aircraft carriers for escort duty.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 6)
- woolyback** -- A name applied by the fisherfolk and seafarers of the Hartlepool area in the North of England to their inland neighbours. many of whom were sheep farmers.(HMC 92-11, TTC p. 6)
- Z-Buoy** -- A directional buoy off Ventnor, Isle of Wight, which was crucial to the D-Day landings. This may also have been the site known to some as “Piccadilly Circus”.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 3)



## B. “PROVERBIAL COMPARISONS” AND OTHER SAYINGS

The Merchant Service, as was stated in the previous section, has been known throughout its history as a wellspring of vivid and expressive language. Myriads of terms have been drawn into the common vocabulary from that source. Expressions like “backing and filling”, “to go by the board”, “to cut and run”, “for several days running”, and “get things squared away” are all terms which arose from seafaring roots, yet most are in such widespread usage today, that many of their users are flabbergasted when their nautical origins are disclosed. Even “off and on”, it is suggested by some,<sup>1193</sup> arose from the practice of tacking offshore and onshore in some areas. Not only such lexical contributions as these have flowed from the fountain of nautical speech, but a wealth of more substantial items as well. Pithy and passionate prose flows readily from the tongue of the loquacious mariner, while even his more laconic brethren can make their few words eloquent by the manner of usage.

In the early stages of the North American fieldwork, I was interviewing an old shipmate of my stepfather’s and he asked me to turn off the tape recorder. Since he had made this request previously in order to answer telephones or talk to his secretary (the interview was conducted at his place of business), I did not hesitate. What he then said stupefied me, as it was the best individual verbal datum of the entire field research undertaking. He told what has since proven to be a widely dispersed migratory legend capped with a pithy, if blue, proverbial comparison. After the interview concluded, as we were saying goodbye, he said, “I guess I should have let you keep the tape recorder on, shouldn’t I?” This was my first indication that I was really doing my job properly. I later told my parents the entire story. My mother, understanding my work, was as thrilled and amused as I was myself, but my stepfather, typical of many seafarers, considered it highly inappropriate that the

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<sup>1193</sup>. Layton, 266.

man should have used such language in my (female) presence. The item as I originally received is as follows, as close to a verbatim presentation as possible:

There was a young fellow who came out of one of the Maritime Service training centers and was assigned to a ship and when he went aboard the Mate said to him, "Now Sailor, I want you to take your knife and cut this line just here." Now the young fellow was really green and he didn't know he had to have a knife and he hadn't got one, so he says, "But Sir, I haven't got a knife!" And the Mate says, "You haven't got a knife, Hell! A sailor without a knife is like a whore without a cunt!"<sup>1194</sup>

This item was presented in such a way as to make it clear that the informant realised that such dicta were among the objects of my search and that he had in no way been attempting to shock or embarrass me. I later asked other informants if they had heard this, and received many positive responses. When the matter was discussed, I also made it clear that I was not becoming overly familiar or "getting dirty", but requesting a specific type of information in a scholarly context. The query also led to a British variant and to several other interesting data in which language not commonly acceptable in "polite society" was used. In the British item, the phrasing became "about as much use as a fart in a windstorm/hailstorm".<sup>1195</sup> I found the variation curious, as the first version, to my way of thinking, expressed a more complete sense of total uselessness than I could imagine resulting from any other wording or concept. The "utility" of flatulence is debatable from the outset, however, and why it should be considered more ineffectual in a storm, where the odour and sound might be borne away, but the release of bowel gas would be just as great a relief to the intestinal system, is even more questionable. In either case, however, it remains an ideal example of the sort of linguistic imagery so prevalent amongst seafarers. Similar illustrations of colourful and imaginative

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<sup>1194</sup>. Personal conversation with Bill Kirby (HMC 90-13), 29 January 1990.

<sup>1195</sup>. Beck, 66. "One who is generally ineffectual is said to be about as much good as a spare boiler or not to amount to anything 'more than a hen fart in a gale.'"

phraseology will be found in the section on nicknames which concludes this chapter.

During the course of the fieldwork leading to this study, I encountered some men, like Barney Lafferty and “Tex” English,<sup>1196</sup> whose testimony poured forth in a torrent of fascinating information, and others whose responses were brief and succinct, primarily providing substantiation for their more articulate brethren. Even these latter, however, often threw in some verbal tidbit that added savour to the researcher’s menu, not only during the collecting and the transcribing, but throughout the analysis and the writing-up of the material as well. Many of them draw a response with every hearing or reading, causing me to recollect the speaker and the circumstances distinctly.

Capt. Steve Browne, for instance, maintained that “old-timers” tell a story about the Puerto Rican run on Morgan Line. Now on Morgan Line ships, the crew ate so many prunes, that they were nicknamed “Morgan Line strawberries”,<sup>1197</sup> and they left a string of prune pits [stones, seeds] from Puerto Rico to New York. It was said that if you were lost in the fog on that route, you could “arm” the sounding lead<sup>1198</sup> and heave until you picked up a prune pit and you’d be right on course.

Another story, equally memorable, but for an entirely different reason, was told by Capt. Michael Curtis about the time he was sent, as Third Mate, to join a Lend-Lease vessel in New York:

The *Martha C. Thomas* was a Liberty ship renamed *Samharle*<sup>1199</sup> when she was given to Great Britain through Lend-Lease. The British crew went to the U.S. in the *Queen*

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<sup>1196</sup>. When asked about the “sailor without a knife” story, “Tex” responded that it put him in mind of another proverbial expression, “as busy as a whore with two beds”, see below.

<sup>1197</sup>. See Glossary in previous section.

<sup>1198</sup>. The sounding lead was “armed” by smearing it with a thick grease (originally tallow) so that it would pick up a sample of the sea floor when it hit. By the texture and composition of such samples, most older Deck officers on a regular route could establish their position fairly accurately.

<sup>1199</sup>. Sawyer/Mitchell, *The Liberty Ships*, 53.

*Elizabeth* to join her, following the Master, who had sailed the previous week on the *Aquitania*. Arriving in New York at the end of September, they were billeted in hotels, as the ship was not yet ready. The Master came to meet them with the news that the answer to his telephoned enquiry to the War Shipping Administration had been, “Hell, Cap’n, we ain’t layin’ the keel till Monday week.” They lived in New York for a couple of months, then joined the ship in Baltimore.<sup>1200</sup>

The interesting bit about this story was that Capt. Curtis, in recounting it, had put a British turn of phrase into the expression which he rendered in a “stage American” dialect. An American who spoke in this rough-and-ready working-class manner would never have said “Monday week”, but “a week from Monday”.

On a television chat show in England, an American comic who was a dialect specialist was interviewed. His name was not well-known, nor is it important, but he was asked how he managed to be so accurate in British as well as American dialects. He replied that it was not only the inflection, but also the choice of vocabulary. “For example,” said he, (in a generic British working-class accent) “If a lorry driver won the pools, what would he say? ‘Lovely!’ But if an American truck driver won the state lottery and said (in an American Southern accent) ‘Why, that’s just lovely!’ (back to the British) you’d take him for a proper pansy!” He was absolutely right. The vocabulary, as well as the accent and inflection themselves, is a mark of regional (and national) dialect speech. I notice this as, being poly-dialectal in vocabulary, if not inflection, I choose my words to suit my audience. A number of my friends and colleagues have discovered similar circumstances.

Beyond the regionalisms and nationalisms and the purely lexicographic data, phrases, and expressions, many with a proverbial inclination, have been rife throughout the collectanea. Such a broad spectrum of material has been gathered in this respect during the fieldwork, and it covers such a wide range

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<sup>1200</sup>. Capt. Michael Curtis, Heswall, Wirral, Merseyside, HMC 92-31, TTC p. 3.

of subject matter, that it is difficult if not impossible to generalise on these data, or to organise them into an easily comprehensible format for the benefit of the reader. A number of well-known sayings, some of which may well be regarded as proverbial, were among them, although they have not been checked against a proverb dictionary for comparison. On rereading these data, I have attempted to extract what appeared to be common or widespread figures of speech, many of which are at least proverb-like, in nature. They are listed below in alphabetical order of the key words, which are also noted in bold-faced type.

## List of Sayings and Proverbial Comparisons

“I did it the hard way -- I joined the Navy as an **Admiral** and worked my way down to AB.” (British)<sup>1201</sup>

“An **Apprentice** is worse(lower) than the ship’s(skipper’s) cat.” (British)<sup>1202</sup>

“This isn’t an **argument**; it’s a debate; the **argument** starts later and then the fight starts after that.” (British)<sup>1203</sup>

“Not a **biscuit’s throw** from shore.” (British)<sup>1204</sup>

“So close I could **throw a biscuit** aboard of her” (Newfoundland)<sup>1205</sup>

“With a **bone in her teeth.**” (Universal)<sup>1206</sup>

“When the **booze** got in, the wit come out.” (British)<sup>1207</sup>

“**Busy** as a whore with two beds.” (U.S.)<sup>1208</sup>

“Leave the **Canadian Navy** alone; it’ll sink itself.” (Canadian)<sup>1209</sup>

“God sends the food and the Devil sends the **Cooks.**” (British)<sup>1210</sup>

“Who called the **Cook** a Bastard?” “Who called the Bastard a **Cook?**” (British)<sup>1211</sup>

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<sup>1201</sup> William McAulay, Belfast, Northern Ireland, HMC 91-3, TTC p. 1.

<sup>1202</sup> Capt. R.A. Simpson, Ormskirk, HMC 92-5, TTC p. 6., also Rex Rothwell, Radcliffe, Greater Manchester, HMC 92-71, TTC p. 1.

<sup>1203</sup> William McAulay, Belfast, Northern Ireland, HMC 91-3, TTC p. 4.

<sup>1204</sup> Keith Marshall, Bromborough, The Wirral, Merseyside, HMC 92-30, TTC p. 7.

<sup>1205</sup> Edward Stanley “Stan” Hoskins, St. John’s, Newfoundland, HMC 91-12, TTC p. 3.

<sup>1206</sup> This expression means a vessel is travelling swiftly enough to raise a white bow wave which, viewed straight on from in front, resembles a dog’s bone. Common knowledge and Bone, 155.

<sup>1207</sup> Bill Fortune, Greasby, The Wirral, Merseyside, HMC 92-32, TTC p. 3.

<sup>1208</sup> Lewis S. “Tex” English, HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5

<sup>1209</sup> Richard Aldhelm-White, Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5.

<sup>1210</sup> Thomas Brunskill, Birkenhead, The Wirral, Merseyside, HMC 92-29, TTC p.

“**Deck officers** are only Engineers with their brains knocked out.” (British)<sup>1212</sup>

“The Merchant Marine is a bunch of sailors trying to be **gentlemen**; the Navy is a bunch of **gentlemen** trying to be sailors.” (Canadian)<sup>1213</sup>

“Proper” Royal Navy officers said the Merchant Navy joined the Navy to become **gentlemen**. (British)<sup>1214</sup>

“One **hand** for yourself; the other for the ship.” (British)<sup>1215</sup>

Fred Lavis’s motto is: “Be **happy** when you’re living; you can’t be **happy** when you’re dead.” No one can prove him wrong. (British)<sup>1216</sup>

“A **light ship** has no conscience. (British)<sup>1217</sup>

“The three most useless things on the bridge [of a ship] are a baby carriage, an umbrella, and a **Navy officer**.” (Canadian)<sup>1218</sup>

“**Oil and water** never mix.” (British)<sup>1219</sup>

“Go day; come day; God send **payday**.” (British)<sup>1220</sup>

“A **sailor without a knife** is about as much use as a fart in a thunderstorm.” (British)<sup>1221</sup>

“A **sailor without a knife** is like a whore without a cunt.” (U.S.)<sup>1222</sup>

“So **slow** she didn’t even leave a wake.” (U.S.)<sup>1223</sup>

The **wiper** is the “seagoing janitor of the engine-room”<sup>1224</sup>

“**Yes sir**, very good sir, right away sir, fuck you sir!” (U.S.)<sup>1225</sup>

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<sup>1211</sup> . Thomas Brunskill, Birkenhead, The Wirral, Merseyside, HMC 92-29, TTC p.

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<sup>1212</sup> . John Dalglish, West Kirby, Wirral, Merseyside, HMC 92-23, TTC p. 2. From his father, a Marine Engineer.

<sup>1213</sup> . personal communication, Graham McBride, staff member at Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1 August 1990.

<sup>1214</sup> . Capt. D. Mullen, Belfast, Northern Ireland, HMC 91-2, TTC p. 3.

<sup>1215</sup> . Capt. J.K. Gorrie, Grassendale, Liverpool, HMC 92-51, TTC p. 7.

<sup>1216</sup> . Fred Lavis, Plymouth, Devon, HMC 92-13, TTC p. 2.

<sup>1217</sup> . Bone, 104. A ship not fully loaded “may dance along with the propeller thrashing the water in a fine steady round, but, come a puff of wind on the beam of her, she goes to leeward like a crab, and all the pull of her half-immersed rudder is unable to keep her to the wind.”

<sup>1218</sup> . personal communication, Graham McBride, staff member at Maritime Museum of the Atlantic, Halifax, Nova Scotia, 1 August 1990. [Stated that he heard this from Capt. Paul Brick, HMC 90-??].

<sup>1219</sup> . Thomas Thornton, Stoneycroft, Old Swan, Liverpool, HMC 92-56, TTC p. 3. This expression, always used with reference to interdepartmental relations, implies that the oil of the Engine Room does not belong at sea, but this opinion has long been outdated.

<sup>1220</sup> . Bill Fortune, Greasby, The Wirral, Merseyside, HMC 92-32, TTC p. 3.

<sup>1221</sup> . “I’ve got a knife, incidentally, just a little one, but it works. The modern sailor, of course, has not very much use for a knife. A spanner [wrench] is more important now.” Capt. Derek M. Belk, Woolton, Liverpool, HMC 92-53, TTC p. 2.

<sup>1222</sup> . Bill Kirby, Merced CA, personal conversation, January 1990; Lewis S. “Tex” English, Wilmington DE, HMC 90-72, p. 5.

<sup>1223</sup> . Lewis S. “Tex” English, Wilmington DE, HMC 90-75, TTC p. 2.

<sup>1224</sup> . Joe Brooke, SHLSS #2, HMC TTC p. 5.

<sup>1225</sup> . Lewis S. “Tex” English, HMC 90-75, TTC p. 5, also John B. Wilson, personal letter dated 19 March 1990.

## C. NICKNAMES

Working-class men and those who perceive themselves to be in this category, often use nicknames as part of their jargon and these attach to various sorts of things, from tools and other inanimate items through geographical locations to ethnic, national, and regional groups, and individual persons. Using such nicknames is sometimes an expression of camaraderie, sometimes a display of in-group knowledge, sometimes it has a combined meaning and function. Nicknames and their types and functions are discussed in this section.

Many nicknames for ethnic and national groups have been traditionally used among working-class men, but such *blason populaire* is not seen as a display of bigotry or prejudice. Indeed, it seems more often to be perceived almost as an expression of esprit de corps with their workmates of different ethnic, national, and regional backgrounds. This attitude at one time was widespread among student leftists, as well -- apparently as an affirmation of membership in the proletariat. The reference to one's colleagues as "paddies", "guineas", "hebes", or "niggers" was frequently accompanied by a friendly slap on the back and was, in effect, an invitation for the person so addressed to reciprocate in kind. Rudy Jasen, a U.S. Navy Armed Guard in the Pacific theatre, reported that there was little racism aboard the ships on which he served, but that humorous ethnic nicknames, such as "paisano", "dago", and "squarehead"<sup>1226</sup> were frequently used. He said these terms of address were not taken personally and asserted that they were considered more acceptable then than they are now.(HMC 90-4, TTC p. 2) Relatively few distinct items of this type have been found among the collectanea, but certainly Polynesians working aboard ships as professional seafarers were often known as Kanakas,

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<sup>1226</sup>. A slang term for a person of Nordic descent, usually a seafarer from the Pacific Northwest, especially near Seattle.(HMC 90-9, TTC p. 2)

and as such are mentioned more than once in the tape-recorded interview material.<sup>1227</sup> The use of the term “squareheads” to describe those of Scandinavian background, especially from the Pacific Northwest, was common usage among North American seamen.(i.e. HMC 90-8, HMC 90-9)

One instance of the use of the term “pineapple” for a Pacific island native was also found.(HMC 90-3, TTC p. 2) At the time and during the whole of the fieldwork period I assumed this to be a generic term in limited circulation. Near the close of the writing-up, however, I was in conversation with a recent acquaintance,<sup>1228</sup> and was first reminded that many seafarers (and shoreside labourers) of Native American ancestry were called simply “Chief”. This brought to mind one “Chief” Dawson with whom I attended high school, whose given name was Roger. Many others were similarly so-called, both ashore and at sea. The conversation progressed a bit further and my conversational partner said, “...the way they used to call Hawaiians ‘Pineapple’.” At last the penny dropped! Kanakas were not referred to generically as “pineapples”, but the name, like “Jock” for a Scotsman, was applied to the individual islander as a transitory “handle”. “Hey, Pineapple, take another turn on that winch!”

Personal nicknames have traditionally been more common at sea than in most places ashore, perhaps because of the transitory nature of the occupation. It would appear that a number of other “marginal” vocations with transient workforces share this trait, as the American cowboy, the miner, and the long-distance trucker (lorry driver) seem to have a similar tendency to designate a workmate by a cognomen or “handle” rather than by the name attached to that individual by parental choice. Moreover there has been a

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<sup>1227</sup>. A slang term meaning Hawaiian or Pacific Islander and deriving from the Hawaiian language. The equivalent for a person of Caucasoid race would be “haole”. See Chapter Two, footnote <sup>60</sup>, and the accompanying text as well. The informant, John Pottinger, was making an unbiased reference.

<sup>1228</sup>. Tom Coons, personal conversation, 31 July 1995.



preponderance of Welsh seafarers surnamed Williams, Jones, and Evans, and other common names, both surnames and given names, have furnished additional reasons for conferring unique personal labels upon their holders to facilitate correct identification.

The largest body of nicknames incorporates those common and somewhat affectionate diminutives derived by shortening either given names or surnames, such as the nickname “Pete” attaching to someone with the given name of Peter or the surnames Peter, Peters or Peterson.<sup>1229</sup> Among British seafarers there is as well a superabundance of names derived from surnames (and very occasionally from given names) via traditional sources. These range from such easily traceable and understandable items as “Chalky” White and “Dusty” Miller to more obscure references such as “Tug” Wilson or “Wiggy” Bennett, which seem to attach themselves to the bearers of the appropriate surnames with methodical consistency, but whose origins are incomprehensible in the absence of deeply penetrating investigations. Some of these will be discussed below. The less ambiguous of such nicknames may be used ashore for others of the same surname and may from time to time be discovered in North America, while the more esoteric appear almost exclusively among British, specifically English seafarers, particularly those of the Royal Navy.

Another category of easily comprehensible nickname is that deriving from observable physical characteristics, such as height, weight, colouring, etc. These may be incorporated into nicknames in two ways, the positive and the negative. In the first case a tall man may be called “Lofty”, a thin man “Bones”, a bearded man “Fuzzy”, or a red-haired man “Red” or “Ginger”. In the second, the tall man may be called “Shorty”, the fat man “Slats”, the bald man “Curly” and the red-haired man “Bluey”. Prominent features such as

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<sup>1229</sup>. William Kirby (HMC 90-13, TTC p. 3) never had a nickname other than Bill.

noses (“Pug”, “Schnozz”, “Beaky”) or ears (“Dumbo”, “Jughead”) and handicaps such as limps (“Gimpy”) or speech impediments (“Mushmouth”, “Flannel-Mouth”) may also give rise to unique and descriptive epithets, especially if the recipient has a rather mundane and common name to begin with, such as Jim Smith, Bob Jones, or John Johnson.

Capt. Tom Goodyear said the “reversal of physical type” nicknames were most prevalent on British ships as “they have a peculiar sense of humour”,(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 6) and likewise James Crewe, when reminded of nicknames associated with physical characteristics, volunteered that men were frequently given nicknames that belied their appearance.(HMC 92-22, TTC p. 4) Although Dick Playfer readily agreed, he asserted that the all-round most common and popular form of nickname was a simple diminutive of the surname, such as “Aggy” for Agnew or “Dixie” for Dickenson.(HMC, 92-24, TTC p. 5) Although I did not mention the sobriquet “Titch”, so much in use amongst British seafarers for their shipmates of small stature, when asked if he had ever had a nickname, Capt. J.K. Gorrie responded immediately: “No. Never. There were smaller chaps than me. I sailed with a couple of Masters who had stools, y’know, so that they could see over the bridge.” Although there were plenty of nicknames, he felt most were confined to the ratings.<sup>1230</sup> “And it was obvious that a twenty-stone chap I sailed with, they called him ‘Tiny’.” Such reversals were plentiful and common.(HMC 92-51, TTC p. 3)

The Deck Boy was always known as the “peggy”. “Tiny” Woods was big and there was a “Dusty” Miller.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7) There were a fair number of nicknames aboard, but only the usual ones: “Chalky” White, “Dusty” Miller, geographical origin names, “Lofty”, “Shorty”, the common

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<sup>1230</sup> . It would be altogether reasonable to assume a higher frequency of such nicknames amongst ratings, because the transience of the unlicensed personnel, except on the Catering staff of Western Ocean liners, was much higher than that of the officers, so accurate learning and remembering of shipmates names was not as likely.

ones. The police force (of which he was a member at the time of the interview) is better at nicknames.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 5) There were only ordinary nicknames in the Royal Navy, such as “Dusty” Miller.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 4) Joe Bennett said the stokers always called the telegraphists the “intelligence department”.(HMC 92-65, TTC p. 5)

Because of the stereotypical conception of the seafarer as rough, rowdy, and rude, some seamen have chosen to encourage or satisfy this image in themselves or their mates by inventing and using nicknames based on genital size and shape, reputed sexual or drinking prowess, flatulence, fighting ability and other such controversial attributes, whether actually known or merely putative. Although very few of these were offered me during the fieldwork, I believe it may well have been a gender and age factor. The few examples I know of this sort of appellation will be found below.

One of the less frequent sources of nicknames, but one that is certainly not unheard of, is the association of a surname or an entire name with a celebrity or fictional character whose surname is the same or similar. One example of this would be a Master Mariner named O’Neil, who was designated “Peggy”, not because he had any effeminate characteristics, but after a popular song title. An Apprentice named Crosby immediately became “Bing”, after the singer; young Thomas McCoy was dubbed “Tim”, after the cowboy star, before he reached his twelfth birthday; and an Ordinary Seaman named Young was promptly christened “Brigham” after the famous Mormon leader who founded Salt Lake City, Utah. Others of this type can be found as well.

Fairly common nicknames at sea arise from the national or geographic origin of the recipient. It may be a fairly broad regional or national area, such

as “Swede”, “Geordie”,<sup>1231</sup> “Frenchy”, “Scotty”, or “Yank”. Or the individual may acquire a sobriquet based on a homeport or home town, such as “Grimsby” or “Bristol”. Like some of the terms connected with physical traits, these tend most readily to attach to those with fairly common and therefore easily confusable names. There are also combinations of physical and origin-linked names, such as “Big Mick”, or “Texas Red”. Somewhere between those names based on physical characteristics and those based on origins one might place those which are based on physical characteristics which are traditionally linked to an ethnic stereotype, such as “Ikey” for a person with a large nose, on the assumption that it imparts a Semitic or “Jewish” appearance.<sup>1232</sup> There are also nicknames which may reflect conspicuous individual habits of dress or behaviour patterns, such as “Tex” or “Cowboy” for one who affects a ten-gallon hat or Western boots as part of his shore-going kit. Beyond these common or garden-variety appellations are those which are unique to the individual and tailored to fit him by some remarkable habit or trait. A list of some of this type are to be found below.

A number of respondents themselves gave penetrating insights into the reasons for such nicknames being conceived and used amongst their shipmates. “Robby” Owen said merchant mariners were pretty well-read. Not having anything better to do, men will observe the foibles of their fellow men and attach nicknames. This activity was more pronounced in the Merchant Marine because there was so little entertainment. They had coffee and a night lunch provided, but if they did not play cards, they had to read.(HMC 90-48, TTC p. 2) Capt. Laurie James said nicknames were generally attributed to personalities. (HMC 92-68, TTC p. 3) Joe Cunningham noted that personal nicknames have to do with friendship. If someone takes the trouble to give

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<sup>1231</sup> . A British nickname for a person from the Newcastle or Tyneside area, as “Scouse” or “Scouser” is for a Liverpudlian or Merseysider.

<sup>1232</sup> . See below, where James North’s swarthy appearance caused him to be known as “Nick” on the grounds that he looked Greek.

you a nickname, they have an interest in you, and it is also to see if they can “get a rise out of you” by using the name. Nicknames were built on rapport and relationships and he himself preferred to make an impression, whether good or bad, on people, rather than simply to be tolerated.(HMC 92-7, TTC pp. 4-5)

More than thirty respondents, asked if many nicknames were used aboard, echoed Capt. Derek Belk’s “Oh, Lord, yes!” or agreed with Bill Fortune that “Everybody had one.”<sup>1233</sup> Eleven interviewees said just the opposite, or indicated that the only “handles” with which they were familiar were those extremely common ones associated with the job (“Sparks”, “Chippy”, etc.) or deriving from the individual’s physical traits, given name, or surname. There was some slight indication that there may have been more of a tendency to the general use of nicknames in the Engine Department than in the Deck or Stewards’/Catering Departments, but this was never firmly established,<sup>1234</sup> and the vast majority of those who were asked the direct question appeared to believe there was no appreciable difference. One who said there were many nicknames, said some were “pretty bad. There were quite a few older men on these ships and often you didn’t use the nickname to the man’s face.” He could not remember any specifics, but said it was like asking someone who speaks a foreign language the meaning of a word or phrase and simply being told, “Don’t say that. It’s bad.”(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 4)

A rather larger portion of the sample than expected said they themselves had never had nicknames other than those appertaining to the job, or that they had never had a cognomen that “stuck” for any length of time. Answers of this sort were like one from an American Engine Room rating who

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<sup>1233</sup>. Asked if “everybody” included officers, he amended his remark. Some officers had nicknames and some did not; it depended. There was much more distance between officers and crew than there is today.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)

<sup>1234</sup>. William Kirby believed there may have been more nicknames in use among the black gang than elsewhere.(HMC 90-13, TTC p. 3)

said he was usually just called “Gibbs”, as the Chief Engineer with whom he sailed longest was already called “Don”.(HMC 90-40, TTC p. 3) Some were always known by their surnames, as was Capt. William Dennis before he was licensed.(HMC 90-56, TTC p. 1) Others went by forms of their given names, like Frank Power, who was called “Francis” at home, but “Frank” or “Frankie” by shipmates,(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 4) and although Robert Parr had no nickname, he was pleased when officers addressed him as “Bob”. (HMC 92-2, TTC p. 1) Tom Burton was only known as “Tom” aboard ship, but ashore was called “Squibs” by his wife, although he has no idea why she chose that pet name for him.(HMC 91-8, TTC p. 5) Joseph Elms, a Catering rating, “was called a lot of things when the food was bad, but mostly just Joe.”(HMC 92-1, TTC p. 2) Jack Sharrock, a Purser and Chief Steward, said he “wouldn’t know” if he had had a nickname aboard -- I “would have to ask [his] crew.” He did admit, however, that such “handles” were almost universal and some of the names for officers were “quite creative” [cf. the list below](HMC 92-3, TTC p. 7) Fred Williams never had a nickname, and was only called “Fred”, although he supposed it could as easily have been “Willy” for Williams, if not for the rude connotation.<sup>1235</sup> Many men had no nicknames, as the average tramp’s crew in those days was about thirty (quite large by modern standards, since some supertankers run with fewer than twenty) and everyone knew everyone else by their first names. Regional nicknames, such as “Taff” and “Jock” were about the only ones in common use.(HMC 92-69, TTC p. 1)

Nicknames are very common, although Barney Lafferty never acquired a permanent one. If he were in a mixed crew, he was always called “Scouse”; that was standard, and he would call the others “Cock”<sup>1236</sup> or some other regional nickname, but personally he was always known as Barney. Nicknames were very common, though. “Some men you didn’t even know their proper first name, though.” His own name, Barney Lafferty,

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<sup>1235</sup> . “Willy” is a British slang term for penis.

<sup>1236</sup> . “Cock” was the regional nickname for a Cockney, as “Scouse” or “Scouser” was for a native of the Merseyside area and “Geordie” for a Tynesider. The word is not as automatically assumed to be a slang term for the male organ in Great Britain as it is in North America.

was “nice, quick, round, easy to get out.” And not too common.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 6) Rex Rothwell made the same assumption when asked if he had a nickname, saying “No, I don’t think so, because the name Rex is short, and there’s not much you can do with Rothwell, really.”(HMC 92-71, TTC p. 1)

With one informant I discussed the apparent propensity of the British for diminutives, through which biscuits become “bikkies”, breakfast “brekky”, chocolate “choccy”, an off-licence (liquor store) “the offy”, drink “bevvy” (from beverage), and so on. Dick Playfer said it had always surprised him how often diminutives were used in preference to people’s ‘Christian’ names. He does not believe he even knew the given names of some of his shipmates, although he can recall a few who were always known by their ‘Christian’ names, probably because their surnames did not lend themselves to shortening. A man named Stan Birrell, for example, was always called Stan.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5)

Of job-related nicknames, by far the most universally-known was “Sparks” or “Sparky” for the Radio Operator<sup>1237</sup>, with “Chips/Chippy” for the Ship’s Carpenter ranking a close second.<sup>1238</sup> Others which I was assumed to know and which were simply used rather than mentioned as specific nicknames were “The Old Man” (Captain), “The Chief” (Chief Engineer),<sup>1239</sup> “The Mate” (Chief Officer/First Mate), “Mister” (any licensed officer), “Guns” (a Gunner),<sup>1240</sup> “Boats” (The Bosun), “Lamps” (The Lamptrimmer), and “Leccy” (The Electrician).<sup>1241</sup> Rarer references scattered throughout the data

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<sup>1237</sup>. On informant who was a Radio Operator had sailed with an old man who insisted on calling him “Marky”, saying it derived from “Marconi” and was much nicer and more appropriate than “Sparks”.(HMC 91-9, TTC p. 4) Another maintained that he abhorred the “common” connotation of “Sparks” and preferred to be called “Mister”, a sanctioned title indicating that the bearer was recognised as holding officer’s status.(HMC 92-15, TTC p. 1)

<sup>1238</sup>. Beck opines that British seafarers would not respond to the term “Chips” for a ship’s carpenter because it is common usage for french-fried potatoes. This lack of association was in no way evident amongst those I interviewed.

<sup>1239</sup>. One man brilliantly emphasised the point made earlier in this work, when he said that, although he himself was a Chief Electrician, “there’s only one ‘Chief’ aboard” and that is the Chief Engineer.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 6)

<sup>1240</sup>. Specifically, in the British sample, the Leading Rating or Petty Officer in charge of the military gunners aboard.

<sup>1241</sup>. These latter two were specific to the British Commonwealth sample.

were that the Deck Engineer had been known as “Deck” and any wiper was called “Rags”(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1); that one individual, when acting as Storekeeper, had been known as “Stores”;(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 5) another, a Stoker, as “Stokes”;(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 4) that Butchers on passenger liners were usually known as “Tanky”; and that the Cook’s sobriquet was still often “Doc”, as he had frequently assumed medical duties “in the old days” but the practice was fading by the 1940s.<sup>1242</sup> On a number of Second World War tramps, however, the Cook was, not surprisingly, called “Cookie”.

A British Engineering officer said “down below”, most licensed personnel went by their rank. The Second Engineer was called “Two-Oh”, the Third “Three-Oh”, etc.,<sup>1243</sup> or the Second was sometimes called “Deucer”<sup>1244</sup>. The Chief was always called “Chief”, the Mate was “Mate”, the Captain was “The Old Man”, the Carpenter was “Chips”, the Radio Officer “Sparks”, and the Electrician “Lecky”. When personal visitors came aboard, men often found they had actually forgotten each others’ names. Given names were rarely even known. (HMC 92-42, TTC p. 4) Several others supported this last allegation as well, including a few who said they had borne no personal nicknames, or at least none of which they were cognizant.(HMC 90-10, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-54, TTC p. 6)

There were more regional nicknames amongst the British sampling than amongst the North Americans. Beyond “national” names, such as Big Swede, Dutch, Scotty, and Pat, only a few existed, some of which were not mentioned specifically as part of the responses in the nickname category. In this group would have been “Johnny Reb” (for an American from the

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<sup>1242</sup>. HMC 92-15, TTC p. 1 and HMC 92-44, TTC p. 8, confirmed by Layton, 128, which defines “Doctor” as “Usual nickname for a ship’s cook.”

<sup>1243</sup>. Americans usually called each other “First”, “Second”, and so on, rather than “Two-Oh” and “Three-Oh”, but ranks were definitely used as nicknames, and Harry C. Kilmon, Jr., was seldom called Harry unless on a long voyage when they got to know one another well. (HMC 90-72, TTC p. 6)

<sup>1244</sup>. Pronounced “Juicer” and also a play on words for “Il Duce”, Mussolini’s title.



Southeastern states), “Yankee” (for a New Englander), “Canuck” or “Canada” (for a Canadian), and “Newfie” or “Newf” for a Newfoundlander. Names of individual states, provinces, or cities occasionally were used, usually appended to a forename, surname, or other nickname, as in “Montana Slim”, “Frisco Johnson” or “Chicago Pete”, but names of this sort were less frequent amongst seafarers than amongst other “marginal” groups, such as hoboes, gamblers, or cowboys. Names of North American Indian tribes sometimes occurred, however, as most North Americans who could legitimately claim Native roots, and some who could not, did so. Names like “Apache Frank” Conley (HMC 191[65]-1) were not as uncommon as one might have surmised.

The British, however, had a strong background of regional character stereotypes already firmly in place, along with nicknames which had been in use for centuries: “Tyke” for a Yorkshireman and “Janner” for a person from Plymouth, (HMC 92-13, TTC p. 2) as well as the more common ones, such as “Jock” for a Scot or “Taffy” for a Welshman, “Scouse” or “Scouser” for a Liverpudlian, “Geordie” for a Tynesider, “Cock” for a Cockney and “Paddy” for an Irishman. Beyond this, there were regions where many families carried the same or similar surnames, and, as one informant put it, there was “not usually much imagination shown in British ‘Christian’ names.”(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5) A number of ports also had names that were easy to remember and pronounce, like Grimsby, Bristol, and Bangor, and these were readily attached to people from those areas by their shipmates. The need for nicknames was plainly apparent in ports like Liverpool, where, as Capt. Michael Curtis pointed out, the majority of nicknames were designed to differentiate between multiple Joneses, Evanses, and Williamses because so many men were drawn from North Wales.<sup>1245</sup> Men often took their place of origin as a nickname -- “Anglesey” Evans, “Bangor” Evans, etc.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 2) Two different

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<sup>1245</sup> There were many nicknames, but only if one had a common surname and there was a need to distinguish between bearers of the same one.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. )

shipping lines bore the cognomen “The Welsh Navy”.<sup>1246</sup> When Capt. Laurie James started as a Cadet, few officers on Elder Dempster Lines were not Welsh, most Masters seemed to be Welsh, Welsh was the language of choice aboard ship, and at one time he and the Chief Engineer “were the only two ‘Sassenachs’<sup>1247</sup> aboard who ... couldn’t speak Welsh.”(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 3)

Some nicknames, as has been shown, derived from diminutive forms of the holders’ forenames or surnames. Far less common in North America, however, was the practise, universal in the Royal Navy and widespread in the British Merchant Service, of deriving nicknames not from the names themselves but from their meanings or from some esoteric and little-known historical or traditional connections. The more obvious and most frequently mentioned of these were those such as “Dusty” Miller and “Chalky” White, in which the derivation was readily apparent,(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 6; HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-47, TTC p. 1) but a multitude of others, less easily ascertained were to be found.

Roy Williams showed me a dictionary-type book, where a large number of these were listed.<sup>1248</sup> Among them were:

“Tug” Wilson -- the original nickname attached to an Admiral of that surname who, dissatisfied with a ship’s anchorage location, ordered a tug to bring her in, as well as:

“Granny” Anderson,

“Bill” Bailey and “Daisy” Bell -- from the old songs,

“Ding-Dong” Bell -- an obvious connection,

“Wiggy” or “Wiggin” Bennett -- from an officer named Bennett who received a “wiggling” or reprimand “for his careless attitude”,

“Pasha” Baker,

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<sup>1246</sup>. Blue Funnel Line and Elder Dempster’s.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7 and HMC 92-68, TTC p. 3)

<sup>1247</sup>. A term prevalent (in its varied spellings) in Irish, Scottish, and Welsh parlance, the word literally means “Saxon”, but is usually intended to mean “English”, as in “the dominant society”.

<sup>1248</sup>. The bibliographical information on this book was among the data lost on the floppy discs, but I did read aloud from the work during the tape-recorded session.

“Dicky” Bird -- another obvious connection,

“Sexton” Blake,

“Nigger” Black -- the connection apparent, if not politically correct,

“Johnny” Bone -- a totally incomprehensible reference, at least to me, it says there was a man of such name who was Bosun to Admiral Cornwallis and who was in addition well known for thieving and scrounging stores.

“Chats” Harris -- the word chats is a reference to lice, but nothing further is added.

Geordie, Jock, Paddy, Taffy, Lofty, Titch, and Ginger

There were a lot of “Titch”es, as there are many short people in the Navy -- and in the Mercantile Marine. It is notable that there is a certain physical type associated with seafaring, although seafarers are not universally of this physique. The recognisable “seafarer” build, however, is on the short side, and not fat, but stocky, as if to maintain stability and stay upright in heavy weather.

“Hoot” Gibson -- after the cowboy movie star

“Sweeney” Todd -- for the infamous Barber of Fleet Street

“Dollie” Grey and “Nellie” Dean -- from songs

“Sherlock” Holmes -- for the famous fictional detective,

and “Brigham” Young. This latter was particularly interesting to me, as the nickname attached to the surname is not common in North America, but amongst the crewmen on the *Marcus Daly*, the Liberty ship my stepfather was on, and which was awarded the status of “Gallant Ship” for her efforts in action, there was a man surnamed Young, whose nickname was “Brigham”.

My stepfather himself is surnamed Steele and, in his youth, had red hair, either of which circumstances alone and certainly a combination of which would have implied the nickname “Rusty”, but he was known as “Stainless”. (All of the above nickname listings were received from Roy Williams -- HMC 92-19, TTC p. 1)

Keith Marshall never really had a nickname, although he once had a cartoon drawn of himself in full uniform, and labelled “Klassy Keith”. The only nicknames aboard were the “acceptable” (that is, “common or garden variety”) ones -- “Knocker” Light was one. (HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2)<sup>1249</sup>

Irish-born Bill Fortune, who spent most of his working life as a Quartermaster and Bosun aboard British ships, maintained that “all companies

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<sup>1249</sup> Although this particular nickname was mentioned by two different informants, no one, including Mr. Williams’s book, has adequately explained it to me and it does not appear to be self-evident.

had nicknames” as well as most people. It is certainly true that many British companies did, but the practise does not seem to have been followed to any extent in North America. In the United Kingdom, however, “bad feeders” acquired such tags as “Hungry” Harrison’s<sup>1250</sup> and “Hungry” Hogarth’s,(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7) while Lamport and Holt Lines and Shaw Savill and Albion Lines had initials which acronymically gave them “Lousy and Hungry” and “Slow Starvation and Agony”<sup>1251</sup> respectively. Pacific Steam Navigation Company, usually known by its initials, became either “Poxy Sailors Needn’t Come”<sup>1252</sup> or “Please Send New Crew” depending on how badly one felt about them.

Companies which were not in bad repute along the waterfront were either simply initialised (P-and-O, CPR, and the like) or might have nicknames based on their funnel markings. Alfred Holt’s became world famous as “Blue Funnel Lines” and Sir Robert Ropner’s was sometimes called “the old bread and jam” because of a red-and-white checked band.<sup>1253</sup> This process of nicknaming was known even in North America, where one Pacific tugboat company was known as the “Red-Stackers”. This custom could reflect on those of bad repute as well, however, for Hungry Harrison’s had two broad white stripes separated by a narrow red one on a black funnel and were sometimes tagged “Two of fat and one of lean” -- still a reflection on their poor victualling practices.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7) Two Merseyside companies who employed large numbers of seafarers from North Wales were

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<sup>1250</sup> . Harrison’s were also known as the “Nickel Ferry”.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2) Since this nickname originated in the United Kingdom, it is reasonable to assume it was conferred because the line carried the metal back and forth and not as a reference to the North American five-cent coin.

<sup>1251</sup> . Also HMC 92-34, TTC p. 1.

<sup>1252</sup> . Also HMC 92-34, TTC p. 1.

<sup>1253</sup> . (Capt.) A.G. Course, *The Deep Sea Tramp*, (Barre MA: Barre Publishing Company, 1963), 70.

independently dubbed “The Welsh Navy”<sup>1254</sup> and Sir Robert Ropner’s was called “Ropner’s Navy” because of a tendency to strict discipline aboard and the reputation gained from having two of their ships fight back when attacked during the Second World War. According to one informant, the only company he knew who had no nickname at all was CPR (Canadian Pacific Railroad) who were respected as very decent and good feeders.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)

Individuals occasionally acquired unique personal nicknames. Most of those who did so were officers and the largest portion of the list below consists of them. Also included are the nicknames of those I interviewed, of companies, of specific shipboard jobs, shipping companies, and one or two individual vessels. A large number of the officers’ nicknames in the sample below were given me by Capt. Graeme Cubbin, who had compiled the list for inclusion in a book he himself was writing on the history of the Harrison Lines vessels. He graciously allowed me to take one of his working copies for use in my own study.<sup>1255</sup>

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<sup>1254</sup>. Blue Funnel Line was at one time known as ‘The Welsh Navy’ because they had so many Welshmen.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7) “Elder Dempster’s was known as the ‘Welsh Navy’.” Most officers spoke Welsh and at one time this informant and a Chief Engineer were the only licensed personnel aboard who could not do so.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 3)

<sup>1255</sup>. All nicknames taken from the list given me by Capt. Graeme Cubbin are marked with two stars (\*\*) and his own clever wording is incorporated in most of these entries.

## List of Nicknames

“Acker” -- Derek M. Belk, a Master Mariner, never had a nickname during the war, but discovered during one voyage after he became Mate, that he was being called “Acker” after Acker Bilk, a popular recording artist of the day, who played the saxophone. The similarity of their surnames was the determinant factor. He had heard the “middies” mention “Acker”, but never until long afterward knew they meant him.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 3)

“Admiral” -- The son of one of the Marine Superintendents with the shipping line for which Joe Ramsey sailed had this nickname.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 2) The (female) secretary of the Marine Superintendent of the shipping line for which Capt. Ed March worked, and who, like all proper secretaries, was actually the manipulator of the office’s business, was so tagged.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 8) A Fourth Engineer who never went ashore except in uniform, was also known as “The Admiral”.(HMC 92-29, TTC p. 2)

“Alehouse” -- Jones. Most Welsh seamen were known by where they came from, but Jones was different. Home on leave, “[h]e’d a habit of going down to the pub and he took the baby in the pram, parked the baby outside, in a little Welsh village, no danger there, nice day, went in, had a couple o’ drinks, went home. When he got home his wife said, ‘Where’s the baby?’ That’s the story. He was known as ‘Alehouse’ Jones after that.”(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)

“Bangor” -- Williams, a Welsh shipmate from Capt. Derek Belk’s days as a Midshipman, was called after his home town.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)

“Bastard” -- Bradley. A Master under whom Keith Marshall served. Since Marshall found him “a nice guy” perhaps it was just that “someone didn’t like him”.(HMC 92-30, TTC p. 2)

“Battleship Row” -- The area in Pearl Harbor, Hawaiian Islands, where the vessels sunk in the December 1941 Japanese attack lie.(HMC 90-19, TTC p. 3)

“Belky-Baby” -- Belk. The daughter of Capt. Derek Belk (above) was so appellationed when she followed him to sea as a Cadet in the same company. Dockers in Mobile AL “...wouldn’t make fast unless Belky-Baby threw the heaving line.” She was on a small tanker running regularly to Mobile and they got to know the girl on the fo’c’s’le head.

“Bender” -- Joseph Cunningham, who, by his own admission used to, “using his ‘member’ in fulcrum mode”, bend metal bars around it as a party piece aboard ship.(Personal letter, April 1992)

“Big A from San Jose” -- Austin Montgomery -- one of Jack E. McGinty’s shipmates on the missile tracker, *Sampan Hitch*.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 3)

“Big Paddy” -- Capt. D. Mullen, as a rating, because he was a large man of Northern Irish background.(HMC 91-2, TTC p. 3)

“Bill” -- Gordon Bates was so nicknamed by his father, because the latter could not bear to hear the boy’s adenoidal best friend outside the house, bawling, “Gawdon, Gawdon” through his nose, and one day remarked in exasperation, “Oh, why don’t you just call him Bill?” It stuck.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 5)

- “Billy Bunter” -- used as a “general” nickname. Food was nearly always bad, but there was always someone willing to eat the leftovers -- “Give it to Billy Bunter.” (HMC 92-3, TTC p. 7)
- “Bing” -- Crosby. An Apprentice days shipmate of Capt. Derek Belk, so known after the popular entertainer.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)
- “Bish” -- This was short for “Bishop”, and one informant who was known to come from a rather religious family was so-called. His father ended his career as a Salvation Army colonel.(HMC 92-21, TTC p. 1)
- “Black Arse” -- Tarbottom. Young George Bryson joined the ship for his first trip, when she was in drydock in Cammell-Laird’s shipyard, quite early in the morning; he was a green apprentice. On tankers there was a flying bridge from the midship accommodation aft, with a bit of a square called “the back garden” with a seat where junior officers sat and talked at night, especially in hot weather. Bryson was standing there; the Chief Engineer was there as well, and a chap came aboard in uniform with his bags and gear and asked for the Chief, who said “I’m Chief Engineer; who’re you?” The other said he was the new Junior Engineer, and his name was Tarbottom. The Chief said, “From now on you’ll be known as Black Arse.” “And that was it. He was. Right out of the blue. As a sixteen-year-old it shook me.”(HMC 92-67, TTC p. 2)
- “Blacky” -- Tom Thornton -- “‘Blacky’ they used to call me. I was really dark-haired then, y’know. I was very dark-skinned y’know at the time -- swarthy.”(HMC 92-56, TTC p. 2) Also a shipmate of Frank Power. (HMC 91-10, TTC p. 5)
- “Blondy” -- Peter Rogers, although known as “Titch” when he first shipped out, later reverted to “Blondy” because of his colouring.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)
- “Blue Funnel” -- Alfred Holt and Company, so-called because the company ships had blue smokestacks. Occasionally shortened to “Blue Flue”.(Common knowledge.)<sup>1256</sup>
- “Bosun Bob” -- A shipmate of Dick Chilton’s, an experienced bosun who undertook the boy’s training when he was first shipping out.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 5)
- “Brigham” -- Maven Young -- so-called after the famous Mormon founder of Salt Lake City, Utah.(HMC 90-12 and HMC 90-13, several references)
- “Bristol” -- Hill, an Apprentice days shipmate of Capt. Derek Belk. From his home town. The nickname later changed to “Chuff”.(See below.)(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)
- “Buckets” -- Marty T. Hrivnak, Sr. once sailed as an Ordinary Seaman and the Deck crew was washing something down. The Chief Mate gave him the name after he had carried six or eight buckets to the crewmen.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 3)
- “Bungy” -- Roy Williams was so-called because it was the Royal Navy nickname appertaining to his surname, although he “hasn’t a clue why”.(HMC 92-19, TTC p. 1)

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<sup>1256</sup> . The list of nicknames given the HMC by Capt. Graeme Cubbin included a man whose first and second names are Alfred Holt. In the list, Capt. Cubbin remarks that he is surprised the man was not nicknamed “Blue Flue”. This was also remarked upon by a later informant.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7)

- “Butcher” -- Shaw [or Shore?] The Captain of the *Dromus*, he had acquired the sobriquet before Alan Peter joined the ship, because of his constant physical and verbal abuse of the Chinese crewmen.(HMC 92-35, TTC pp. 2 and 5)
- “Buttercup” -- an extremely cross-eyed Wiper with whom Elbert Coldwell once sailed. The reason for the nickname is unknown to Coldwell.(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 6)
- “CPR” -- The only nickname used for Canadian Pacific Railroad, a shipping company.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)
- “California” -- Max L. O’Starr, who was a native of that State.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2)
- “Canada” -- Possible nickname of a man in a PEN. May, however, have been “Newfie”.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 3)
- “Careful Con” (also “Crafty Con”) -- Roberts, a shipmaster with a fondness for detail and a desire always to know what was happening. (HMC 91-2, TTC p. 5)
- “Chill” -- Claude Hill, a Master so known because of his first initial and surname. C. Hill = Chill. This was also to differentiate between him and the company’s other Capt. Hill, known as “Chuff” or “Chuff-Chuff” (see below). When together they were known collectively as “Chuff and Chill”.(HMC 92-52, TTC p.7)
- “Chill-O” -- Richard Chilton, from his surname.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 2)
- “Chuff” (or “Chuff-Chuff”) -- Hill. Known as “Bristol” Hill in his Apprentice days, because of his home town, as a Captain, he was known to be “mad on railways”, having one entire floor of his home devoted to model trains. In North America, he would probably have been called “Chug-Chug” or “Engineer Bill”. The nickname differentiated him from the other Captain Hill who sailed with the company., the latter being known as “Chill”. (See above).(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)
- “Chookta”[?] -- A man from Stornoway or the Isles.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 1)
- “Cookie” -- Max O’Starr, who sailed in the Stewards’ Department, often as a Cook.(HMC 90-11, TTC p. 2)
- “[The] Crazy Abadam” -- Jock (or Jack) Davidson (or Davisson), a shipmate of Peter Rogers on a voyage to the Persian Gulf.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)
- “Daylight “ -- Dark never made port at night, if he could avoid it, preferring to slow down and arrive in the morning, when he could see what he was doing.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-31, TTC p. 2))
- “Dealer” -- Artie Lee was so-called because he played cards a lot.(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)
- “Ding-Dong” -- a man surnamed Bell.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 1)
- “Dutch” -- Gortz, a Captain with whom Ed March once sailed was called this, “but not to his face”.(HMC 90-67, TTC p. 8)



- “Doc” -- a nickname frequently attaching to the ship’s Cook, because in earlier days he was often responsible for the first-aid and other medical chores aboard.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 8)<sup>1257</sup>
- “Fish” -- Joseph O’Brien Ramsey acquired this nickname while still a child at the Marist Fathers grade school, because he used to swim in the Savannah River. He is still called “Fish”.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 2)
- \*\* “Flannel-foot” -- Albert Edward Jackson, Master -- “Formerly ‘Stonewall’ until the day he shot himself in the foot while cleaning a Marlin machine-gun in 1943.”
- “Geordie” -- A shipmate and close friend of Dick Playfer’s for two years was so-called because he came from Newcastle and was the only Geordie in a Liverpool crowd.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5)
- “Ginger” -- Kennedy, mentioned only as a shipmate of Tom Killips, but presumably so-called because of red hair.(HMC 90-44, TTC p. 2)
- “Glamour” -- R.J. Warren, who was quite good looking in his youth (and still was at the time of the interview).(HMC 92-50, TTC p.2)
- “Goldy” -- Golding, a shipmate of Dick Playfer.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5)
- “Guns” -- Frank Niedermeier acquired this nickname from an Armed Guard crew, because he took a practice shot with their 25-mm. Oerlikon and was the only man to hit the balloon they were using as a target.(HMC 90-22, TTC p. 1)
- \*\* “Half-a-kipper” -- Gardner, Chief Steward. See One-Egg Turner. [A “belly-robber”. - MH.]
- “Hawker” -- Hawkins from Wallasey, a shipmate remembered by Alan Peter, as another AB who “should have got his ticket but didn’t”. During the war, many deck ratings (Peter included) intended to sit for their tickets, but never found time to go ashore for the exams. The nickname doubtless derives from the surname.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2)
- “Heavy” -- a shipmate of Jack McGinty on the *Brander Matthews*. No further information was given.(HMC 90-37, TTC p. 2)
- “Hercules” -- Frank Niedermeier acquired this nickname on one voyage because of an interest in body-building and weight-lifting, which he practised on deck.(HMC 90-19, TTC p. 3)
- “Hungry Harrison’s” -- A nickname given Thomas and James Harrison Shipping Company, a firm with headquarters in Liverpool, on the grounds that they were poor providers for the seamen on their vessels. “Timy” McCoy’s father said Harrison’s was “a hungry bastard company”.(HMC 92-58, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-69, TTC p. 7) They were also known sometimes as “Toss and Joss” from the abbreviated form of the names, ‘Thos. and Jas.’
- “Hungry Hogarth’s” -- A nickname given the Hogarth shipping line because of their reputation for poor victualling.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7)

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<sup>1257</sup>. Beck, 67. “The cook was usually called the doctor and he was either a Negro or a worn-out sailor who sometimes actually did serve as the ship’s doctor. (The doctor, in American parlance at least, was called a ‘croker’ because he carried the tools of his trade in a ‘crocus bag.’ And because he was inept at the trade. The term [croak] came to mean ‘die’ when used as a verb.)”

“Jed” -- Dick Playfer was so nicknamed for a very silly reason. One young crew with which he sailed got into the habit of “playing cowboys and Indians” round the deck and all were given appropriate “Western-style” nicknames. His was “Jed”, and it stuck with him “a couple of years”, long after he had left that ship.(HMC 92-24, TTC p. 5)

“Jesus” -- A man so-called because he had a beard.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 7)

“Jimmy” -- James was so-called throughout his apprenticeship, because of his surname. After he became Captain, however, he was known as “Laurie”, presumably a diminutive form of his given name.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 1)

“Joe Number Two” -- Roy Caine. The Chief Radio Officer aboard one ship was called Joe, and the Mates began the practice of calling the Second (Caine) and Junior Radio Officers “Joe Number Two” and “Joe Number Three”. This practice continued in the POW camp where they were sent after the ship had been sunk.(HMC 92-63, TTC p. 4)

“Joss” (“Josh?”) -- Joshua Reynolds, a shipmate of Capt. Derek Belk, from a contraction of his given name. I was surprised that there was no allusion to the painter. I also have a friend nicknamed “Joss”, but his given name is “John”.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)

“Killer”, “Kill”, occasionally “Kilroy” -- Harry Kilmon, Jr., from his surname.(HMC 90-72, TTC p. 6)

“Kips” -- Thomas Killips, a shortened form of his surname.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 7)

\*\* “Lacer” -- Baldwin. -- “When he supervised the mooring of a ship alongside, security of tenure was doubly guaranteed.”

“Laurie” -- James was always so-called after he became a Master Mariner and attained a command. The tacit assumption is that his given name is Laurence, although this was never actually clarified. Before that he was known as “Jimmy”, from his surname.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 1)

\*\* “Lady” or “Lady Jane” William Thomas Owen, Master -- “Said to wear a corset to contract his tum!”<sup>1258</sup>(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2)

“Lofty” -- A generic British nickname for someone who is tall, it has no truly synonymous parallel in North America.<sup>1259</sup> Several British interviewees said they had sailed with someone whom they knew simply as “Lofty”.

“Lousy and Hungry” -- Nickname of Lamport and Holt shipping company, derived from the initial letters of their name.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)

“Lunchbox” -- Harry Lundeberg, well-known one-time leader of Sailor’s Union of the Pacific.(HMC 89-1, TTC p. 1; HMC 90-65, TTC p. 2)

“The Mail Boat” -- the weekly ship in for Cunard.(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 8)

\*\* “Me-and-the-Wife-and-the Wife’s-Sister” Norris Vivian Duff, Chief Engineer -- “Every story of ashore adventures seemed to start this way.”(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2)

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<sup>1258</sup>. This is a direct quotation from the notes given me by Capt. Graeme Cubbin [HMC 92-33] which were part of the preparatory text for his book.

<sup>1259</sup>. One of my proofreaders, Kenneth Killiany, said that according to his father the North American equivalent would be “Stretch”.

“Meathook” -- Capt. Steve Browne, a non-swimmer, actually dived for a large piece of beef which fell overboard, gaining himself this nickname.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 1)

“Moaner” (pronounced. Mona) -- Grey, always hated the port he was in.(HMC 92-23, TTC p. 1).

The “Monkey Boats” -- Elder Dempster Lines. Elders and Fyffes banana carriers were sometimes called “skin boats”, as well.(HMC 92-58, TTC p. 2)

“Mutt” -- Shepherd was a close friend of “Fish Ramsey”. (Perhaps because the German Shepherd is a breed of dog? Or perhaps the man resembled the cartoon character “Mutt” from “Mutt ‘n’ Jeff”?) (HMC 90-54, TTC p. 1)

“Nasty” -- a young seaman who would not bathe or wash himself.(HMC 90-65, TTC p.6)

“Newfie” -- Possible nickname of a seaman in a PEN, although he may have been called “Canada”.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 3)

“Nick” James North was so-called after “Nick the Greek”, a famous American gangster. Because of his swarthy complexion, North’s shipmates thought he was, or at least looked like he might be, Greek.(HMC 90-17, TTC p. 2)

The “Nickel Ferry” -- Thomas and James Harrison’s Shipping Company, which, at the time the war broke out in 1939, traded mostly to India, South Africa, and the United States. I am unsure whether the inference is to her being cheap, as a nickel is a small five-cent coin in the United States and also in Canada, or whether she had a regular run carrying nickel.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2)

“Obie” -- An Armed Guard shipmate of Fred Lewis, so-called because his surname was O’Brien -- hence ‘O’B.’(HMC 90-12, TTC p. 1)

“Old Busted Bulwarks” -- a nickname for the *Abraham Baldwin*.(HMC 90-65, TTC p. 2)

“Old Tom” -- Brunskill. When his subordinates were angry, they called him “that old father and mother weren’t married”, but when things were all right, he was “Old Tom”. The Marine Superintendent once took him to task for such lack of discipline and was told that it was a nicer nickname than Mr. Brunskill had expected. “Old Tom” then asked if the Superintendent knew what he was called behind his back, as the office was known as “The Kremlin”. He considered this riposte a “Touché!”(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4)

“One-Ball Bob” -- A Chief Engineer who had a habit of shutting his work drawer by “bumping” it with his hips, and one day caught himself painfully.(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4)

“One-Egg” Turner, Master -- Sailed for Alfred Holt’s “Blue Funnel” Line and purportedly ordered the Catering staff of his ship to restrict the crew to one egg each per meal. (See “Half-a-kipper” Gardner, above). The nickname “One-Egg” without a surname first occurred in the Newfoundland research, when I was told he was an “old Chief Steward”<sup>1260</sup> John Dalgleish could not recall having had a nickname, but a number of Masters had them. “One-Egg” Turner, who only allowed one egg for breakfast. We had some discussion of this, as I had encountered “One-Egg” previously in the Newfoundland

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<sup>1260</sup> . “[F]or some reason or other in his career, the crew had objected to somethin’ or other and they wanted more eggs and he insisted one egg was enough for them, so he became ‘One-Egg’ and he was ‘One-Egg’ and he’d be ‘One-Egg’ to the day he died.”(HMC 91-5, TTC p. 6)

research.[cf. above](HMC 92-23, TTC p. 1; HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-31, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)

“One-way” -- Rogers never came back on the same ship he went out on. He would go out, jump ship [usually in Australia, but really anywhere], stay a couple of months, then come back. There were always jobs on coal-burners.(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 7)

“Paddy” -- Fortune was from County Cork, in the Republic of Ireland. Once, when, as Bosun, he was given the Mate’s job of hiring and firing, he was temporarily known as “The Big Irish Bastard”.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)

“Pappy” -- The eldest man on the gun crew (about thirty-five).(HMC 90-23, TTC p. 2)

\*\* “Peggy” -- O’Neill, Master -- from a popular song of that day. A “nice old gent” when Graeme Cubbin knew him, he retired about five years later.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 4)

“Pete” -- Alan Peter, from his surname.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 2) Urban Peters, from his surname, “because my given name was so odd -- and still is”.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 1)<sup>1261</sup>

“Pig-Eye” -- Harvey L. Watson’s mother nicknamed him “Pig-Eye”, when he was a baby, so it was not a shipboard nickname. For years he was listed in the telephone book as “Pig-Eye” because no one in the community knew his real name. He was even married as “Pig”. It was okay when he was young, but not so good when he became older. He is now called Harvey outside the confines of his most intimate family and associates. (HMC 90-46, TTC p. 3)

“Pinky” -- Gordon Ellis, mentioned only as part of a PEN.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 4) “Pinky” Johnson, another so tagged, was probably not red haired, but had a tendency to flush when in a temper.(HMC 92-31, TTC p. 2)

“Pip” -- Pierpoint, a shipmate of Capt. Derek Belk, was so-called because of his surname. It was a contraction.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7)

“Please Send New Crew” -- One of two nicknames of Pacific Steam Navigation Company derived from the initial letters PSNC.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5)

“Porky” -- Ed Stanko was so nicknamed by one Chief Engineer, because he was chubby.(HMC 90-41, TTC p.2)

“Poxy Sailors Needn’t Come” -- One of two nicknames of Pacific Steam Navigation Company derived from their initial letters, PSNC.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-34, TTC p. 1)

\*\* “Puppet” Alfred Holt Thompson , Master -- Made and manipulated puppets, but as Cubbin says “One wonders how he avoided the appellation ‘Blue Flue’?” The latter reference is to the Alfred Holt Steamship Line, known as the Blue Funnel Line because of the company’s colours and the markings on the smokestacks (“funnels”) of their vessels.

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<sup>1261</sup> . Not much can be done to shorten the forename “Urban” besides “Urby”, although as a child ashore he was sometimes taunted with “Urban District Council”. His nephew, also christened “Urban”, refuses to use the name, preferring “Jim”, as his second name is James.

- “Rags” -- was so-called because he was such a dirty, sloppy dresser.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 2)  
 “Rags” was a generic nickname for any wiper.(HMC 90-51, TTC p. 1).
- “Rasputin” -- The Third Mate of the *Francis Asbury* at the time she was sunk.(HMC 90-34, TTC p. 2)
- “Red” -- A red-haired man.(HMC 90-28, TTC p. 1) Danny Shields, a shipmate of Tony Wrench.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7)
- \*\* “Rest-in-Peace” Raymond Phillips Jones, Master -- From his initials, R.P.
- “Roger” -- Cohn was so-called after the Viceroy.[?](HMC 90-49, TTC p.2)
- “Ropner’s Navy” -- the nickname for Sir Robert Ropner’s Shipping Line.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-71, TTC pp. 1 and 4)
- \*\* “Sahib” Reginald Francis Phillips, Master -- Addressed others by that epithet.
- “Sally” -- The nickname of Jesse Lyles, a fellow Carolinian who, like David Leary, remained aboard the *Olney* in Bizerte. Leary does not know why this nickname was attached to the man.(HMC 90-42, TTC p. 4)
- “Saltwater” -- Robert Owen (HMC 90-48) was called “Saltwater”. No reason was given.(HMC 90-49, TTC p. 2)
- “Salty” -- A shipmate of “Tex” English, nicknamed after a cartoon character in the NMU union newspaper.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 6)
- “Sashweight” -- So called because of the size and shape of his “appendage”. A sashweight, as the name implies, is a straight-bar anchor with no flukes used for small boats., and somewhat resembling the weights used on sash windows. (From Capt. Fred A. Steele, Jr., researcher’s stepfather, via Madeleine Beyrle Steele, researcher’s late mother.)
- “Scotty” -- James McCaffrey was so-called in Canada after he had been torpedoed, despite the fact that he is a Liverpool Irishman.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 4) Herbert Taylor, because of his Glasgow roots.(HMC 92-11, TTC p.6)
- “Scouse” (“Scouser”) -- A regional nickname for a Liverpudlian. It was always attached to Barney Lafferty if he were on a ship with a “mixed” crew (HMC 92-54, TTC p. 6) and sometimes was assigned to Dick Chilton as well.(HMC 92-57, TTC p. 2)
- \*\* “Screamin’ Skull” Harold George Skelly, Master -- “Alliterative reference to a propensity to yell through tight lips when provoked -- try it!” No question of how this nickname originated when you see the man -- roundly domed bald head, wide and prominent cheekbones, sunken cheeks, deep eye sockets, narrow jaw, small, sunken, but toothy mouth. He himself said he overheard the Second Cook call him this. It was because he was “so tight on smoking in the kitchen and dropping ash in the soup”. Checking up at about 10.30 A.M., he overheard the Second Cook say, “Douse yer fag! Here comes Screamin’ Skull!” When he mentioned the incident to the Mate, he was told they had been calling him that for weeks. (HMC 92-39, TTC p. 4)
- “Selassie “ -- James McCaffrey was so-called by the Chief Cook, but does not know why.(HMC 92-8, TTC p. 4)
- \*\* “Sergeant” S. Thomas Pim, Chief Steward -- Headed all his memos, “Attention!”

- “Seven Yards” -- Jones (according to Fred Williams) was a noted cargo broker who boasted he would get you seven yards of material -- enough to make a suit and an overcoat.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5)
- “Shack” -- J.H. Shackleton, from his surname.(HMC 92-42, TTC p. 4)
- “Shorty” -- Frank Niedermeier was often so-called because of his diminutive stature.(HMC 90-19, TTC p. 3) A shipmate of Frank Power.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 5)
- “Shorty Red” -- Ernest W. Braithwaite was always so-called by everyone.(HMC 90-50, TTC p. 3)
- “Slow Starvation and Agony” -- Nickname of Shaw Savill and Albion shipping company, derived from the initial letters of the company name and a reputation for poor victualling practices.(HMC 92-32, TTC p. 5; HMC 92-34, TTC p. 1)
- “Sniffy” -- Wells, mentioned in a PEN.(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 1)
- “Soapy” Watson -- So-called after the “famous soap firm”, I was told by Joe Bennett. Since I have never yet heard of Watson’s Soap except at this interview, the reference has completely eluded me.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 4)
- “Soldier” -- Ernest Tunnicliffe was known as “Sailor” when he was in the Army, and “Soldier” when he first came out of the Army and went back to sea.(HMC - 92-41, TTC p. 5)
- “Spanner” -- Tony Wrench, from his surname.(HMC 92-26, TTC p. 7)
- \*\* “Split-pin” Reginald Martin, Chief Engineer -- “A vital component of the Air Pump -- a split-pin -- went missing, and the ship was delayed for 24[sic] hours while another was produced. Some time later, the missing one reappeared -- in the pocket of the Second’s boiler suit, back from the laundry.”
- “Squib” -- Capt. Graham Cubbin as a boy, especially while a POW. He is unsure of the reasons, although there are several possibilities.(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2)
- “Stainless” Fred Anderson Steele, Jr., Chief Mate -- Is a clean-living man, unlike the stereotypical sailor. He has been “accused” by his late wife of having “a Boy Scout mentality” -- does not drink, smoke, womanise, or even swear much.(Personal knowledge.)
- \*\* “Steamboat” Stanley Sanford Trickey, Master -- from initials. S/S stands for Steamship.
- “Stony” -- A man surnamed Stone.(HMC 90-75, TTC p. 8)
- “Straight Deal” -- O’Hare was an Engine Room man, a black marketeer during the war, but one who always gave his clients a fair deal. He was always called “Straight Deal” and Fred Williams does not even know his given name.(HMC 90-70, TTC p. 5)
- “Taff” -- Gordon Bates. This national appellation was frequently attached to seamen from Wales.(HMC 92-60, TTC p. 5)
- \*\* “Ten-to-two” Ernest Allan, Chief Engineer -- “From angle of feet”.
- “The Terror of Tobermory” -- Commander Stevenson.(HMC 92-18, TTC p. 2)

“Tex” -- Pat Brinkley arrived at the USMS training facility in cowboy boots, hat and jeans, and was instantly “Tex”. The first time he washed his dungarees, someone wrote “Tex” across the seat in bleach. His wife would have expected “Red”, because of his red hair.(HMC 90-43, TTC p. 4) Originally from Waco, Texas, Lewis English has been called “Tex” most of his life, and still is by old friends, although he now goes by “Lew” most of the time.(HMC 90-74, TTC p. 1)

“Theodore” -- Capt. Hostetter’s legal given name is “Ted”, but when he went to get his seaman’s papers, the woman would not accept the name on the birth certificate, but wrote down “Theodore”. His union pension comes to “Theodore”, but his Social Security cheque to “Ted”.(HMC 90-54, TTC p. 1)

“Tim”[“Timy” (pronounced. Timmy)] -- Thomas McCoy, was nicknamed after a popular cowboy movie star of the day, one Tim McCoy, when he was only seven or eight years old, and the name endured.(HMC 92-58, TTC p. 2)

“Titch”/“Tich” -- The British equivalent to “Shorty”, often attached to young cadets because of their small stature, and used in much the same way that “Kid” would be in North America. R.A. Simpson was called “Tich” in his apprentice days, but does not know why, as he was taller than some.(HMC 92-5, TTC p. 3) Alf Dennis was also called “Titch”, because of his small stature(HMC 92-10, TTC p. 3), as was Fred Lavis(HMC 92-13, TTC p. 2); Peter Rogers was called “Titch” early on, “because I was small in those days”, but later “Blondy”.(See above.)(HMC 92-49, TTC p. 3)

“Toilet” -- W.C. Baxter, the first Master under whom Capt. Laurie James sailed as a Cadet, was so-called because his initials, W.C. are a well-known (although now outdated) abbreviation and euphemism for “water closet” or toilet.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 4)

\*\* “Twin-screw” -- Henry Tebbat Wells, Master -- “Proud father of Twins!”

“Two of (bloody) fat and one of lean” -- Thomas and James Harrison Shipping Company, a notorious bad feeder, was so named because of the markings on their ships’ black funnels -- two wide white stripes separated by a narrow red band. The wide white bands, say the detractors, represent white fat, and the small narrow red band represents a tiny amount of good lean meat.(HMC 92-35, TTC p. 7; HMC 92-56, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-58, TTC p. 4; HMC 92-69, TTC p. 7)

\*\* “Walk-like-me” -- Edward William Jones, Master -- “An exemplary expression calculated to discourage the Liverpool slouch.”(HMC 92-33, TTC p. 2; HMC 92-36, TTC p. 3)

“Wassy” -- Williams. In a shipping line with many Welsh employees, there was a need to distinguish between certain surnames. This Capt. Williams was “very Welsh” and had a habit of asking “Wass ‘e?” in place of “Was he?”(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 3)

“Watchmaker” -- Williams. So called to differentiate him from the above, and other Capt. Williamses and because he “played with clocks”.(HMC 92-36, TTC p. 3)

The “Welsh Navy” -- Blue Funnel Line was at one time known as “The Welsh Navy” because they employed so many Welshmen.(HMC 92-52, TTC p. 7) “Elder Dempster’s was known as the ‘Welsh Navy’.” Most officers spoke Welsh

and at one time this informant and a Chief Engineer were the only licensed personnel aboard who could not do so.(HMC 92-68, TTC p. 3)

“Wiggy” -- Joe Bennett. This is one of a host of esoteric traditional Royal Navy nicknames, of which Roy Williams (HMC 92-19, TTC p. 1) gave me a great number. Usually they are associated with famous figures in naval history. According to Joe Bennett himself, all Bennetts are called “Wiggy” because, in the days of sail, a man named Bennett was “always getting a ‘wiggling’[reprimand/punishment] off the Captain, so all Bennetts are called ‘Wiggy’”, but he was most often called “Stokes”, as he was a Stoker.(HMC 92-64, TTC p. 4)

“Wolf” -- Capt. Evald Larsen was so-called after the Jack London story. He was also “called a few things that are unprintable.(HMC 90-56, TTC p. 1)

“Wooden Shoes” -- A Bosun on the *Brander Matthews* was so nicknamed because he wore clogs.(HMC 90-37 , TTC p. 1)

“Yank” -- Frank Power was called “Yank” for three or four weeks once, as he had a facility for picking up accents when in the vicinity of their use.(HMC 91-10, TTC p. 5)

\*\* “Yankee” Albert Horace Brown, Master -- Held both British and US Master’s certificates.(HMC 92-39, TTC p. 3)

“Yaw-haw” -- Elbert Coldwell first said “I don’t dare tell you.”<sup>1262</sup>, but when at last coerced, said he had been called thus, not because of “a bottle of rum”, but from the misconstruction of the name of his hometown. The response was: “Did you say Yaw-haw?”(HMC 91-11, TTC p. 2)<sup>1262</sup>

“Yorkie” -- An assistant Radio Officer from Yorkshire, so-called because of his place of origin.(HMC 90-60, TTC p. 6)

“Zero” -- James North. who was always observant when steering and, once off England, knew airplanes were coming before they arrived, because he heard them and distinguished the sound as different from the ship’s sounds. (HMC 90-17, TTC p. 2)

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As was noted before the above listing, a large number of respondents agreed that nicknames at sea were quite common. Shipping companies, individual vessels, generalised job titles, and individual persons were given nicknames, although they were not entirely universal in any of these areas. Not all persons christened with nicknames at sea were ships’ personnel, either.

-- On a prison ship, Urban Peters met four women passengers from another

¹²⁶². Mr. Coldwell was very reluctant to tell me this nickname, almost as if it had been risqué, and I have since wondered if it might be for some esoteric reason. According to Beck, 290-291, there are malevolent spirits of drowned seamen who act as ‘wreckers’ on Cape Cod, and these are called “Yo-hos”. Perhaps there is some similar connection in Nova Scotia, as I cannot account for his embarrassment in any other way. The name itself appears innocent enough.

sunken ship, one of whom, in her sixties, was “a typical British lady who would not put up with the Germans”. Her fellow prisoners promptly dubbed her “The Duchess”. At one point she demanded toast of her captors. The German Steward was unfamiliar with toast, but, having it described to him, filled a saucer with methylated spirits, laid a slice of bread over the top, and lit it, cremating the bread. These elderly female passengers went into the prison camps along with the seamen, where the German officials appeared to be terrified of this woman, sending their British captives to deal with her, as they would not go near her themselves. All four ladies were eventually sent to Switzerland and repatriated from there.(HMC 92-47, TTC p. 3) Although this is the only instance described in fieldwork data of a passenger acquiring a nickname, it is reasonable to assume that it was a not altogether infrequent occurrence.

Tom and Rita Killips said although some nicknames existed at sea, most were to be found ashore among the dockers. They recalled “The Two-Headed Docker” (no reason given), “Splinters” (Tom Killips himself, because he “liberated” some lumber from a cargo for a DIY project at home), “Cocks ‘n’ ‘Ens” (no reason given), “Lenny the Fox” (no reason given), “The Dubby” (no reason given), “The Priest” (because he was always on his knees, inveighing his co-workers to “lower a bit, lower a bit!”), and “Compo the ‘Ambulance Man” (as soon as one disability claim expired, he would put in another).(HMC 92-44, TTC p. 7)

All the paternal side of Barney Lafferty’s family has been seafarers or dockers -- uncles, cousins, and the rest. Some of them had “names”. One was “Cakey” Lafferty and another was “Spider”. Barney had never personally met the latter, so did not know if he was tall and spidery, but the name, “just like being christened”, was accepted and never questioned. Perhaps when “Spider” was young, he was a “tearaway”, always climbing over walls and railway

embankments. One automatically went over the wall if retrieving a ball, “or even wanting something that they shouldn’t be havin’”. Barney assumes that was where the name arose. Barney once asked about “Cakey” and was told that “where other families were fed big meals of scouse,¹²⁶³ they were fond of -- their mother used to buy them cakes. ... We grew up knowin’ these names.”(HMC 92-54, TTC p. 6)

Nicknames attach themselves naturally to “characters” and “characters” are drawn to marginal occupations such as seafaring, The use of the term “character” indicates an awareness of the individual’s “deviance” in the sense in which it has been used throughout this work. “Some of the characters I’ve sailed with.... I remember sayin’ that in the bar one evening, on my last ship.¹²⁶⁴ ... I said, ‘They don’t have any characters like they used to have.’ And a voice from the back said, ‘You’re one of them now.’”(HMC 92-53, TTC p. 7)

Perhaps the final word on seafaring language in general and nicknames in specific should be the testimony of Thomas Brunskill, retired Chief Engineer, of The Wirral, Merseyside. He was eighty-nine years old at the time of the interview, and living in a Masonic Hostel for the Elderly, but he met me at the gate, “spruced up” in his best shoregoing suit -- blue with brass buttons - - looking like nothing so much as the “respectable retired professional seafarer” as perceived by the imagination of the general public. His comprehensive remark on nicknames aboard ship was: “There were lots of nicknames! ... The most common nickname was ‘What does that old blank want now?’ (Fill in the blank to suit yourself).”(HMC 92-28, TTC p. 4)

¹²⁶³. A stew-like dish popular in the Merseyside area. See Glossary.

¹²⁶⁴. It was a big 60,000-ton container ship, the *Cardigan Bay*.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

The fieldwork on which this study is based was a pilgrimage -- a search for the most substantial and authentic information conceivable dealing with men, ships and convoys in World War II in as full a context as feasible. The temporal aspect was of the essence. Although many of the men interviewed are presently leading healthy, active, and productive lives, they are no longer young and the time will come all too soon when their first-hand testimony will no longer be obtainable. For these reasons, the fieldwork was conceived and organised in a manner calculated to build a substantial archive of data for further study from as wide a sampling, both social and geographical, as possible. The complex itinerary in Chapter Two offers future researchers a network of sources, both personal and institutional, to follow and to ensure that further explorations into this area are not voyages into uncharted waters.

The principal aim of the study itself is to establish that there truly is “a folk” aboard the twentieth-century merchant ship. Despite a multiplicity of obstacles, not the least of which was an antithetical view strongly espoused by Horace Beck in *Folklore and the Sea*,¹²⁶⁵ this objective, in many ways, has been accomplished. The second goal, no less important, has been to reveal and describe the role of the merchant seafarer in the Second World War and thus to discharge my obligations to the men interviewed. This has also been achieved to a significant extent, although no single effort can contrive entirely to meet such a requirement.

¹²⁶⁵. Beck, *Folklore and the Sea*, 410-411, cited in its entirety early in Chapter One.

Beyond the points made above, there has been no specific endeavour to “prove” anything in the present study. If “ethnographers rarely begin their research with specific hypotheses”,¹²⁶⁶ that has been true of this study for the most part. The effort instead has been to explore social contexts by marking the beacons of leading occupational ethnographers and folklife scholars such as Archie Green and Bruce Nickerson, and to pilot a true course in the hopes that others would follow. Toward the end of the research I was fortunate to be asked to review Martyn Hammersley’s *Reading Ethnographic Research*, and that reading made it abundantly clear that my course was, indeed, true; the study appears to fulfil the criteria Hammersley draws. In fact, as time passes, these men’s memoirs are transcending oral history and becoming “tradition”.¹²⁶⁷

I would not wish to represent Beck as the “villain of this piece”. Although the impetus to begin the work was based on a desire to refute certain allegations of his, at another point in *Folklore and the Sea*, he aptly notes:

...a feeling current among scholars that ... (folk history) is invalid because it neither stresses the correct or important things in the historic past nor interprets them properly. Using this as a measuring stick, many histories written in the past would suffer heavily. ... But if history is the preservative of the past interpreted in the light of the historian’s culture values, then the folk come off surprisingly well, for their culture values are different than those of the intellectual.

For an item to survive -- particularly orally -- it must have a significance larger than others. ...this usually is embodied in a protagonist, be it a person or an object, a saint or a sinner. To the Anglo-American folk, the hero must demonstrate great strength, must endure great hardship, must have great courage. When he wins he may boast about it, but when he goes down, he must go down bravely, overcome by a sea of troubles.¹²⁶⁸

This is the sort of first-hand reporting of World War II experiences to be gleaned from the autobiographical works of men such as Robert Carse, who

¹²⁶⁶ . Hammersley, 8.

¹²⁶⁷ . “As messages are transmitted beyond the generation that gave rise to them they become oral traditions.” (Vansina, 13).

¹²⁶⁸ . *Folklore and the Sea*, 369.

both sailed aboard ships of that period, and had a bent for writing. Other examples are to be found in many more recent collections of PENs. It is the consequence of the attitude so prevalently marked amongst many of my informants that since “nothing exciting” happened to them (that is, they were not sunk; did not narrowly escape death, perform heroic acts, or spend long periods adrift in a lifeboat) I would therefore be uninterested in their experiences. Far from it! Sometimes “the folk” are too self-effacing and fail to realise that a later generation may be as interested in the way they spend their offwatch hours as in the adventures of a true-life “superhero”. “The goal is to save sources from oblivion, to come to a first assessment of the events/situations studied and to promote consciousness among the actors of the happenings themselves.”¹²⁶⁹

Each of us in the academic community has some pet theory, and in the arts and social sciences, where “grey areas” outnumber definite “blacks” and “whites”, most of these have some basis, although none can be assumed to be applicable in every case. We have only to look to the past history of the discipline to see the actuality of this. Just because everything did not stem from solar myth is no reason to deny the scholarship of Friederich Max Müller, nor to believe that there were not some solar myths. The same caveat applies to Frazer’s *Golden Bough* and Graves’s *White Goddess* theories. There were sufficient examples in each case to have convinced these authors that each dealt with a universal. Beck is thus transitional between the old style of generic folklore collections, such as Bassett, and the modern social history orientation of many modern scholars, in which no “generic” material is acceptable.

With this study I have attempted to bridge the transitional gap by illustrating the applicability of the generic material to the ethnographic study

¹²⁶⁹. Vansina, 13.

itself. Nickerson once personally commended me for proposing to essay a true collected ethnography based on a contemporary occupational group. Here I have attempted to fully earn that approval by presenting the work which was then no more than a mental concept.

Investigations began with Second World War convoys on a global scale and the focus of the research was then carefully narrowed. The goal was to investigate the shipboard experience of seafarers in an ethnographic manner, with the primary emphasis on the social context of that experience, as evinced in occupational lifestyles and traditions. No attempt was made to treat those aspects of history which might better be left to maritime historians. Economics, military strategy and tactics, marine architecture, and the like have therefore been excluded from the study as irrelevant to its aims, while the human context was scrutinised as minutely as was possible with the limited time and resources available.

The end result was an abundance of data collected during extensive and successful fieldwork and the creation of a major archive which preserves for posterity a unique collection of maritime ethnographic data from in and around the period of World War II to the present. More than 150 hours of tape-recorded interviews with 125 men have been conducted and catalogued. A detailed table of contents has been created for each. An annotated bibliography of more than 1500 titles has been produced, and substantial files of ephemera and correspondence have been established, all linked under the designation of the Halley Maritime Collection. The “vacuum cleaner” approach resulted in conserving not just interviews, but also bibliographical sources, museums, libraries, and a list of other academics with similar concerns -- a substantial set of references never before attempted. The study therefore has a modest claim to providing a secure foundation on which to

establish further investigations into the field of maritime folklife and the labourlore of modern merchant shipping.

The claim that this work is “unique” is extrapolated from a superimposition of the difficulties of my search for printed sources that adequately reflected serious scholarly concerns in maritime ethnography and the remarks of Henning Henningsen who noted in 1972 that:

...[M]aritime periodicals ... of international reputation ... can hardly show ... one single article that falls within our field. ...{B}y and large there is a vacuum that needs to be filled.

and also that:

We look on our task with other eyes than those of earlier researchers. We are not seeking romance, ... we take the sailors as they are and not as they ought to be. We are less inhibited by educational, social and moral prejudices: we understand the seaman's problems and his existence.... ...[T]o us, nothing is without value, even though it may be less respectable in the eyes of the world. We are only marginally interested in the heroic, but very much in the everyday, which does not shine, but which comprises the most part of life. In reality, we may justly claim that we are much better equipped than our predecessors to record, describe and understand the life of the seaman, and it is this that will be our task in future research, alongside the work of our colleagues in the culture history of other groups.¹²⁷⁰

In all aspects of this work -- the field interviews, the archiving, and the writing-up -- I have sought to fulfil these criteria, although I did not know of their existence in print until very late in the project. Although they were expressed more than two decades ago, neither their accuracy nor their applicability has been tarnished by the passage of time.

Circumstances did not permit consideration of ships and crews of nations other than those of my immediate concern (The United Kingdom, The United States of America, the [then] Dominion of Canada, and the [then]

¹²⁷⁰ Henning Henningsen, “The Life of the Sailor”, in *Ships and Shipyards, Sailors and Fishermen: Introduction to Maritime Ethnology*, Olof Hasslöf, Henning Henningsen, and Arne Emil Christiansen, eds., (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger (Copenhagen University Press), 1972), 150.

colony of Newfoundland). Other Allied nations and Commonwealth members were vitally involved in convoys and the general war effort in all theatres and it is regrettable that their considerable and commendable contributions could not be included. Ships of the Axis powers underwent experiences that paralleled those of Allied and neutral vessels, and the lives of the seamen aboard were neither dissimilar nor less worthy of study. It is to be hoped and desired that these tasks will soon be undertaken by others. The stories of both friendly and inimical associations with those whose experiences are described here should not be lost to posterity.

Limitations of time, distance, and funding made it impossible for a single researcher to conduct sufficient interviews with all the prospective informants, or to spend enough time with any one of those actually interviewed to explore fully the potential reserves of each individual's memory by means of more extensive in-depth inquiries. Despite these handicaps, a very substantial representative selection was assembled. An almost equal number of informants on each side of the Atlantic contributed to the research, but those interviewed in the United Kingdom tended mostly to be geographically localised within the Merseyside area, while those in North America were widely scattered. The numbers of Canadians and Newfoundlanders interviewed were also very small compared to those from the United States, and no Pacific Coast Canadians appear in the sample. Despite the fact that many men readily discussed relationships between various ethnic, racial, and national groups, all the British sampling were whites and only a very few non-whites -- none of whom were Canadians -- appeared within the North American sampling.

After the initial interviews had been conducted there was insufficient time to complete full transcripts of all the interview material, although extensive tables of contents were compiled for the tapes. It was necessary to

complete these compilations twice for the Newfoundland and British interviews, more than eighty separate tape-recordings, as the original disks and back-up copies on which they were stored were lost.

Had unlimited resources been at my disposal, I should have spent more time with each man interviewed and also exploited every geographical area in which informants' names were suggested. A second visit to Northern Ireland would have been arranged, Scottish and Welsh potentialities would have been explored, and many more locations in England would have been taken into account, as well as a more extensive Canadian sampling and an attempt to achieve a broader representation of ethnic and national groups throughout. The British fieldwork was almost exclusively limited to the general area of Merseyside for reasons altogether based on temporal and financial considerations. However, every effort was made to render the selection of data actually collected representative of the widest possible range of the seafaring community. With assistance, it would have been possible to make full transcripts of every tape-recorded interview as well as the extensive tape tables of contents. Anyone wishing to explore the study in more depth, however, will have the opportunity of consulting the tapes themselves, or the detailed accompanying tables of contents to which each excerpt quoted in this study is referenced.

The sheer volume of the material would have made extensive quotation of full verbatim transcripts difficult to present. It was therefore decided that the best course of action was to distil encapsulated versions of a selection of relevant testimonies so as to give the fullest possible information in abbreviated form, while retaining the essential language and spirit of the original.

As already stated, the fieldwork results produced 165 hours of tape-recorded data from 125 informants throughout North America and the United Kingdom. Such a wealth of material cannot remain the private preserve of a single scholar and depositing it in a single location would be at best unwise. For these reasons the Halley Maritime Collection has been established, with archival sites in several places, in which both the recorded data with attendant tape tables of contents and most of the ephemera collected from the informants will be permanently located. The Newfoundland tapes have been deposited in the Memorial University of Newfoundland Folklore and Language Archive in St. John's, Newfoundland. The other North American materials are to be found both at the Seafarers' International Union Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship in Piney Point, Maryland and the Northeast Archives of Folklore and Oral History in the Maine Folklife Center at the University of Maine in Orono. The British data and all the ephemera are deposited in the archives of the Centre for English Cultural Tradition and Language at the University of Sheffield. It is proposed eventually to extend the holdings of each of these reserves to include the entirety of the Collection.

In the rudimentary stages of the fieldwork, I could not comprehend the vast magnitude of raw data the collection would eventually encompass. I was likewise ignorant of the immense difficulties of coping with such a huge compendium of material. The fifty-year time gap between the Second World War and the present day has added to the overall complications, since human memory is fallible under the best of circumstances. It was the uniqueness of the subject matter and the fact that no previous ethnographer or folklife scholar had collected from these sources that rendered the task so monumental.

During the preliminary bibliographical research, I had been led to believe that I should find very little written about convoys from the standpoint of the mercantile marine. Although this was, to a great extent, the case in

North America, I discovered that much more had appeared in print in the United Kingdom. Despite the existence of such materials, however, they were often difficult to obtain, and I spent many hours in fruitless searches for items which had been recommended to me by colleagues, informants, or other sources, in attempts to take notes from volumes in restricted collections, and in later efforts to sift through notes and photocopies for essential facts and corroborative material. This task was made even more difficult by the ill fortune which placed most of the booknotes among the data on the disks which were lost. What volumes were readily available were often the work of non-professional compilers, and as such made fascinating reading, but were not organised in an easily accessible fashion. The loss of the disks, combined with severe and unexpected health problems on my part, set the actual labour involved back by nearly a year.

One of the lines of inquiry suggested to me in the earliest stages of the study was the comparison and analysis of shoreside attitudes toward the Merchant Service in North America and the United Kingdom. From my familial contacts and the preliminary reading I was led to the assumption that the general public's view of the merchant seafarer was poor in the United States, but quite good in Canada, Newfoundland, and the United Kingdom. The first discovery of moment in this line during the interviews was that in many cases shoreside attitudes appeared to vary with the degree of "foreignness" of the person toward whom they were directed. In other words, those interviewed found themselves either ignored or ill-treated at home, but entertained extravagantly on the opposite side of the Atlantic. Only a few of the United States informants had been unaware of prejudicial feelings at home, but almost the entirety of the British sample could not be constrained by any means to say further than that they had been virtually ignored at home. It was not until the final stages of the writing-up that, in a BBC *TimeWatch* episode

entitled “Forgotten Heroes”, I saw interviews with British Merchant Navy veterans who freely admitted to having experienced abuse by the general public on the grounds that they appeared to be avoiding military service.¹²⁷¹ The original approach to all such interactive social material was a purely comparative¹²⁷² one, the intention being to compare and contrast data from opposite sides of the Atlantic. It has been possible to accomplish this, although not to as great a degree or in as great a depth as had been originally envisaged.

I had been aware even before beginning this project that the men of the United States Merchant Marine who served during the Second World War did not receive from their government the official status of “Veteran” with its accompanying privileges until 19 January 1988. It was overwhelming to discover toward the end of the North American fieldwork that the Canadians had as yet obtained no such recognition and were only bringing their case to the attention of their Government in 1991. They achieved their objective in July 1992. The British in 1992, although they had been publicly lionised fifty years previously by some of the most prominent politicians of the day, as well as by King George VI himself, were only just securing government sanction for examinations for such possible war-related disabilities as impaired hearing. Such discoveries were not only noteworthy, but highly surprising. Again, the *TimeWatch* episode provided the information that British seafarers who were invited to the then Soviet Union to receive medals in the 1990s for the aid they provided during the Second World War, were forbidden to wear the same medals in their home country.¹²⁷³ It was an unhappy discovery that men’s pride

¹²⁷¹. *TimeWatch*, Post Production Script, pp. 37-39.

¹²⁷². Just prior to the submission of the thesis I was further privileged to view an American video documentary on the same subject by Maria Brooks, entitled “The Men Who Sailed the Liberties”. It was filmed aboard the other preserved Liberty ship, the *Jeremiah O’Brien*, in San Francisco, and one of the men interviewed, Joseph Milcic, had also been an informant of mine. I have been glad of the opportunity to further compare differing approaches to parallel subject matter.

¹²⁷³. *TimeWatch*, Post Production Script, p. 40.

in even such a belated recognition of service rendered was denied them by their government.

Another factor brought to light by the tape-recorded interviews was the information that more men of the British sampling had remained in their seafaring careers after the war than had their North American counterparts. This was not astonishing, but the discovery that comparatively more ratings had continued at sea for their livelihood, and more officers had taken up jobs ashore than had been expected was indeed a startling development. A far larger proportion of the British informants had also had offspring who followed in their footsteps and several of these offspring were female. This again was a surprise, and a pleasant one.

It was an even greater surprise to discover that beliefs, superstitions, and practices which had been known to me from my teenage years as a result of reading and of contacts with my stepfather and his shipmates were not as widespread amongst the convoy crews as I had anticipated. It was conversely amazing to find that certain practices as ancient as the carrying of a caul to prevent death by drowning were still followed and that men on both sides of the Atlantic spoke openly and unashamedly of having personally undergone premonitory or other parapsychological experiences which affected their seafaring careers and their lives in general. Virtually all this latter group denied being “superstitious” and, if any beliefs regarding luck were voiced in the interviews, either rationalised these or alleged that they had heard of such beliefs but did not themselves adhere to the same. They did, however, refer to “guardian angels” and the like as part of their framework of belief.

The “black pan” was another unexpected nugget of great worth. The custom had never crossed the Atlantic to the best of my knowledge, and the first mention ever made of it in my hearing was after the first foundation

stones of the British research had been laid. Following this thread and discovering the various impressions the term brought from the interviewees and the “hoodle” described by Barney Lafferty as a parallel custom was very exciting. Investigating the “blanket or tarpaulin muster” was a similar thrill, although archival and bibliographical sources had somewhat prepared me for that tradition.

Despite the fact that I knew my stepfather and his cronies to be broad-minded in most respects, I had not been prepared for the casual acceptance of homosexual shipmates by the wider range of seafarers. Somehow the combined image of the burly macho sailorman and the sly remarks made by landsmen about intimate relations with the Cabin Boy caused me to expect a harsher, darker attitude toward “gays”, if not actively homophobic, then at least viewing such behaviour and those involved as repellent or objectionable enough to warrant ostracism. Perhaps the marginal nature of the occupation itself prevents an overall view of its own members as outsiders. As a true outsider myself, however well-versed in my subject, I could not examine this more fully.

Many deviant groups ... are stable and long-lasting. Like all stable groups, they develop a distinctive way of life. To understand the behavior of such a group it is necessary to understand that way of life.¹²⁷⁴

It is to be hoped that someone else may accomplish more investigative projects in this area. The paths of investigation down which the present work has led deserve far more penetrative inquiry than has been possible under the circumstances surrounding this study itself. It is my aspiration to continue examination of the fieldwork data and its comparable documentary and published evidence in order eventually to fulfil my original intentions when first embarking upon this research. The content of each of the chapters here

¹²⁷⁴. Becker (1963), p. 79.

based on personal research could well be expanded and enhanced by more thorough and lengthy scrutiny. It would be of particular interest to me to further explore the areas of fools' errands and generic folklore of the sea, as well as those of jargon and nicknames. In addition, I would find it rewarding to make available in print many of the unusual and unexpected personal experience narratives which came to light during the fieldwork. In short, I would find it a worthwhile and personally rewarding task to produce and publish a more comprehensive collected ethnography based on the fundamental principles and prototypes established by Archie Green and Bruce Nickerson in their studies of occupational folklife and labourlore.

Although further fieldwork expanding the Halley Maritime Collection is not an absolute necessity, the filling in of some of the gaps in the original data by means of further interview material would be a worthwhile undertaking as well. As time passes, people age and none can live forever. The veterans of the First World War are almost entirely extinct now, and it behoves those of us who are called to look into the living experiences of those who endured the Second to make our inquiries now, while the participants are still capable of responding.

Ethnographic research has produced a wealth of important historical data from the lips of the men whose lives were part of that history. This abundance of collective views of what reality was like is in many ways superior to the more easily documented statistical histories which can be gathered from printed sources alone. In almost every investigation of occupational history and folklife an ethnographic survey is essential, because:

[A] feature of ethnographic thinking is a conception of the research process as inductive or discovery-based; rather than as being limited to the testing of explicit hypotheses. It is argued that if one approaches a phenomenon with a set of hypotheses one may fail to discover the true nature of that phenomenon, being blinded by the assumptions built into the hypotheses. Instead, one should begin research with minimal assumptions

so as to maximise one's capacity for learning. It is for this reason that ethnographers rarely begin their research with specific hypotheses. Rather, they have a general interest in some types of social phenomena and/or in some theoretical issue or practical problem. The focus of the research is narrowed and sharpened, and perhaps even changed substantially, as it proceeds. Similarly, and in parallel, theoretical ideas that frame descriptions and explanations of what is observed are developed over the course of the research. Such ideas are regarded as a valuable outcome of, not a precondition for, research.¹²⁷⁵

Not only are these inductive studies valuable for the insight they provide in a scholarly context, but also for their accessibility to those whose lives are the objects of scrutiny. Those who have been interviewed and have given of their time and experience can usually follow and understand a sympathetic ethnographic approach, as can their families and friends. A good ethnographic study thus serves not only as a scholarly work, but also as an historical document accessible to those who made the history and those who have a real interest in these participants themselves as individuals.

Among the informants on both sides of the Atlantic were a number who had spent relatively little time at sea during the war, having been captured and placed in camps or aboard vessels as prisoners. These men often had fascinating tales of the situations and conditions inherent in their detention, but after some consideration I decided against using the experiences of their imprisonment in this enterprise, as it detracted from the original course of the work and would have led to unnecessary complications. It is to be hoped that someone will undertake this particular ethnographic research while these informants are still available for further interview.

The necessity of limiting the primary focus to convoys in the North Atlantic gives ample scope for further exploration of wartime seafaring in the Pacific and Indian Oceans as well as the South Atlantic and the Caribbean. Even areas like the Malta and North Russia convoys, which have been

¹²⁷⁵. Hammersley, 8.

investigated with some thoroughness by others of a journalistic leaning, would benefit from a more ethnographic approach.

It has not been possible to examine the psychological, political or sociological aspects of this data and others are perhaps better qualified by background and interest to look into these areas. Certain questions were incorporated into the interviews which would augment studies in labour history, for example, as well as investigations into the general study of what sociologists term “marginal” or “deviant”¹²⁷⁶ occupations or possibly into the marital and familial relationships of seafarers. Moreover, the investigations into shipboard interrelationships and attitudes both asea and ashore which have been initiated here could well be enlarged by additional research from other disciplines. In these contexts, it should be remembered that: “...deviance cannot be dismissed simply as behavior which *disrupts* stability in society, but may itself be, in controlled quantities, an important condition for *preserving* stability.”¹²⁷⁷ Investigating this aspect of the seafarer’s marginality would be well worth the effort.

Since the mercantile marine worldwide has been in continuous decline for the past three decades, and may, in fact, be a dying industry, it would not be amiss for further fieldwork to be undertaken amongst seafarers of more recent periods as well, with the intention of comparing the analyses of such primary source data with those on which this study is based. Additional comparisons with other sectors within the sphere of modern labourlore and occupational folklife studies would by no means be excluded from the potential applications of this material.

¹²⁷⁶. Becker (1963), 7-8 and 3-4. The former says: “Another sociological view...identifies deviance as a failure to obey group rules.” Once rules can be described you know when they are violated. The latter states: “Scientists do not ordinarily question the label ‘deviant’ when it is applied to particular acts or people, but rather take it as given. In so doing they accept the values of the group making the judgement.”

¹²⁷⁷. Becker (1964) p. 15.

Acquisition of such a wealth of inimitable and irreplaceable first-hand testimony from those whose age daily diminishes the probability of their long availability as informants is a viable goal in itself. It is now available for the scrutiny of future generations of scholars. My primary efforts to analyse the data thus collected should bring both those data and this area of maritime ethnographic study to the attention of other scholars who will not only use the material already gathered, but fill out gaps and extend the database as well as continue to expand the analysis in many ways. My initial investigative work in this area has been intended not only to honour the men without whom it was impossible, but also to bring the subject to the attention of other researchers with similar areas of interest, in the hope that it will eventually receive the concern it rightfully deserves, both from those whose interests lie in nautical studies and those whose considerations lie with occupational folklife and labourlore. In 1972 Henning Henningsen posited the concept of a central institution to collect, organise, and archive all possible maritime data on a serious, scientific, and international scale.¹²⁷⁸ Perhaps a substantial collection such as this might become one foundation stone of such an archive.

Finally, but by no means least, the project was undertaken with the intention of preserving for posterity the recollections of as many seafarers as possible from a random sample of those who manned the convoys during World War II, and of presenting these men's thoughts and remembrances in a readable and accessible fashion. If, by my efforts I have honoured my respondents, all of whom I deeply respect, and left my labours as their lasting memorial, I count myself successful.

Without this work, the first-hand experiential narratives of many of the respondents would never have become available to the world at large. Some had organised documents to leave to their own families, but only a few had

¹²⁷⁸. Henningsen, 145.

made their reminiscences available to a wider public. Most of the British informants had already been interviewed by Tony Lane, but he is a sociologist, and this study illustrates how differing viewpoints on the same basic subject matter and data can produce parallel works of equal merit without substantial iteration. Without this study, there would be little opportunity for future scholars or other interested parties to investigate in depth the circumstances of men's lives aboard merchant ships in convoy during the Second World War.

In closing, I can do no better than to paraphrase Henningsen, who said the work of maritime ethnologists and ethnographers must not be carried out sporadically or in isolation. Our research must demand the respect accorded other areas of the surrounding field and comparable funding resources. And new researchers must be imbued with the same sort of spirit that has impelled questers such as Henningsen and myself, to work with us at first, and then to take up the torch as it passes to them and continue the voyage of infinite discovery.¹²⁷⁹

¹²⁷⁹. Henningsen, 150.

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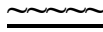
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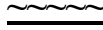
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APPENDIX A

CONCORDANCE OF TAPES AND LIST OF

INFORMANTS FROM INTERVIEWS

Totals 125 informants:		
165 tape-recorded interviews		
Abela, Anthony "Tony" (NAG)		90-
4A		
20/I-1990	San Francisco CA	
Adams, Henry K. "Hank"	5/II-1990	90-
14		
5/II-1990	Arroyo Grande CA	90-
15		
Aguilar, William H. "Billy" (Capt.)		90-
2		
17/I-1990	Napa CA	
Aldhelm-White, Richard "Dick"		90-
70		
3/VIII-1990	Halifax, Nova Scotia	
Alley, W.D. "Del"	"Key Allegro"	90-
45		
19/IV-1990	Fulton/Rockport TX	
Arnold, Geoffrey		91-
1		
31/V-1991	Dore, So. Yorks.	
Ashton, W.L.	24/IV-1992	92-
36		
24/IV-1992	Wallasey, Wirral	92-
37		
Baca, Charlie		90-
23		
22/II-1990	San Pedro CA	
Bales, Doyle	27/III-1990	90-
34		
27/III-1990	Bakersfield CA	90-
35		
Bates, Gordon "Bill"	9/V-1992	92-
60		
9/V-1992	Aintree Village, Merseyside	92-
62		
Belk, Derek M.	6/V-1992	92-
53		
Bennett, Joseph "Joe"	20/V-1992	92-
64		
20/V-1992	Mansfield (Derbs?) UK	92-
65		
Brick, Paul (Capt.)		90-
69		
3/VIII-1990	Dartmouth, Nova Scotia	

Brinkley, Pat		90-
43		
5/IV-1990	Albuquerque NM	
Britton, Richard Francis (Capt.) "Dick"		90-
52		
19/V-1990	Charleston SC	
USMMVWWII jacket -- \$100		
Brown, Frank		92-
14		
16/IV-1992	Bath (Somerset?) UK	
Browne, Stephen F., Jr. (Capt.) "Steve"	17/V-1990	90-
50		
17/V-1990	Savannah GA	90-
51		
Brunskill, Thomas "Tommy"	22/IV-1992	92-
28		
22/IV-1992	Birkenhead, Wirral	92-
29		
Photocopied typescript oral histories (2)		
Bryson, George (Capt.)	25/V-1992	92-
66		
25/V-1992	Ainsdale (Cheshire?) UK	
92-67		
Burton, Thomas "Tom"	16/X-1991	91-
7		
16/X-1991	Mount Pearl, Newfoundland	91-
8		
Caine, Roy	9/V-1992	92-
62		
9/V-1992	Kirkby, Merseyside	92-
63		
Chilton, Richard "Dick"		92-
57		
8/V-1992	Anfield, Liverpool	
Chodzko, Emerson "Red, Red Dog" (Capt.)	24/XI-1989	89-
1		
30/XI-1989	Long Beach CA	89-
2		
Coldwell, Elbert		
91-12		
22/X-1991	St. John's, Newfoundland	
Connelly, Richard G. (Capt.)	"Naples"	90-
29		
14/III-1990	Long Beach CA	
Crewe, James		92-
22		
21/IV-1992	West Kirby, Wirral	
Cubbin, Graeme (Capt.)		92-
33		
23/IV-1992	Greasby, Wirral	

Cunningham, Jim		90-
10		
26/I-1990	San Francisco CA	
Cunningham, Joseph "Joe" "Bender"		92-
7		
31/III-1992	Skelmersdale, Lancs.	
Curtis, Michael (Capt.) "Mike"		92-
31		
23/IV-1992	Heswall, Wirral	
Dalglish, John		92-
23		
21/IV-1992	West Kirby, Wirral	
Dallas, John Marshall "Marsh"		89-
4		
6/XII-1989	Arroyo Grande CA	
"My Mediterranean Cruise" document photocopy		
Dennis, A.		92-
10		
1/IV-1992	Old Roan, Merseyside	
Dennis, William J. (Capt.)	22/V-1990	90-
55		
22/V-1990	Sea Level NC	90-
56		
DeWees, Robert M. "Bob"		90-
57		
9/VI-1990	Newport News VA	
Elms, Joseph		92-
1		
30/III-1992	Rainford (Cheshire?), UK	
English, Lewis S. "Tex"	29/VIII-1990	90-
74		
29/VIII-1990	Wilmington DE	90-
75		
Finan, Vincent T. (Capt.) "Vince"	14/VI-1990	90-
59		
14/VI-1990	Washington DC	90-
60		
Photocopied documents		
Finch, William E.	9/III-1990	90-
26		
9/III-1990	San Diego CA	90-
27		
Forsberg, John	2/IV-1990	90-
38		
2/IV-1990	Apache Junction AZ	90-
39		
Fortune, William "Bill"		92-
32		
23/IV-1992	Greasby, Wirral	

Fowler, Charles	20/V-1992	92-
64		
20/V-1992	Mansfield (Derbs?)	92-
65		
Geddes, Alec	15/VII-1991	91-
2		
15/VII-1991	Belfast, No. Ireland	91-
3		
Gibbs, Donald		90-
40		
3/IV-1990	Tempe AZ	
Goodyear, T.H. (Capt.) "Tom"	15/X-1991	91-
4		
15/X-1991		91-
5		
15/X-1991	St. John's, Newfoundland	91-
6		
Gorrie, J.K.		92-
51		
6/V-1992	Grassendale, Liverpool	
Grissom, Arthur W. "Artie"		89-
3		
30/XI-1989	Wilmington CA	
Photocopies and newspaper clippings		
Grover, David H. (Capt.)		90-
3		
17/I-1990	Napa CA	
Hakam, Samuel	25/III-1990	90-
31		
25/III-1990	Huntington Beach CA	90-
32		
26/III-1990		90-
33		
Higman, James "Jim"	9/II-1990	90-
16		
9/II-1990	Santa Barbara CA	90-
17		
Hiller, Robert "Bob"		89-
6		
14/XII-1989	San Francisco CA	
Hoskins, Edward Stanley "Stan"		91-
12		
23/X1991	St. John's, Newfoundland	
Hostetter, Ted L. (Capt.) "Theodore"		90-
54		
19/V-1990	Charleston SC	
Hoyer, W.A.	5/V-1992	92-
45		
5/V-1992	Liverpool	92-
46		

Hrivnak, Marty T, Sr.		90-
44		
6/IV-1990	Albuquerque NM	
T-shirt & MEBA calendars		
Imbeau, Robert "Bob"		89-
5B		
13/XII-1989	San Francisco CA	
Photocopied documents		
Jahn, George W. (Capt.)		
89-5A		
13/XII-1989	San Francisco CA	
Photocopies of newspaper articles & documents		
James, Laurie		92-
68		
26/V-1992	Aigburth, Liverpool	
Jasen, Rudy (NAG)		90-
4A		
20/I-1990	San Francisco CA	
Johnson, Clinton "Clint"	1/III-1990	
90-24		
1/III-1990	San Pedro CA	90-
25		
Johnston, "Johnny" VI?	26/VII-1990	90-
65		
26/VII-1990	Piney Point MD	90-
66		
Kennedy, Raymond J. "Joe"		90-
47		
16/V-1990	Savannah GA	
Killips, Thomas		92-
44		
25/IV-1992	Seacombe, Wallasey	
Tape recording of previous interview from IWM		
Kilmon, Harry C., Jr.	29/VIII-1990	90-
72		
29/VIII-1990	Wilmington DE	90-
73		
Kingdom, Alan R.	7/IV-1992	92-
15		
7/IV-1992	Southampton, Hants. UK	92-
16		
Kirby, William "Bill"		90-
13		
29/I-1990	Merced CA	
Photocopied documents		
Klocko, John J. (Capt.)	20/VI-1990	90-
63		
20/VI-1990	Crofton MD	90-
64		

Krasnosky, William "Bill"		90-
7		
21/I-1990	San Francisco CA	
Lafferty, Barney	7/V-1992	92-
54		
7/V-1992	Stoneycroft, Liverpool	92-
55		
Lappin, John		89-
5B		
13/XII-1989	San Francisco CA	
Larsen, Evald (Capt.)	22/V-1990	90-
55		
22/V-1990	Sea Level NC	90-
56		
Photocopied clippings		
Lavis, Fred		92-
13		
6/iv-1992	Plymouth, Devon	
Law, Norman	2/IV-1990	90-
38		
2/IV-1990	Apache Junction AZ	90-
39		
Leach, Bob		90-
10		
26/I-1990	San Francisco CA	
Leary, David		90-
42		
3/IV-1990	Apache Junction AZ	
LeCato, John (Capt.)		90-
53		
19/V-1990	Charleston SC	
Lee, Arthur E. "Artie"		92-
48		
5/V-1992	West Allerton, Liverpool	
Lewis, Fred		90-
12		
28/I-1990	Clovis CA	
Photocopied documents		
March, Ed (Capt.)	8/VII-1990	90-
67		
8/VII-1990	Millville DE	90-
68		
Marshall, Keith		92-
30		
22/IV-1992	Bromborough, Wirral	
Mathiasin, Edward "Eddie"	22/V-1990	90-
55		
22/V-1990	Sea Level NC	90-
56		
Photocopied stories		

McAuley, "Billy"	15/VII-1991	91-
2		
15/VII-1991	Belfast, No. Ireland	
91-3		
McCaffrey, James "Jim"	1/IV-1992	
92-8		
1/IV-1992	Blundellsands, Merseyside	92-
9		
McCoy, Thomas "Timy"	8/V-1992	92-
58		
8/V-1992	Anfield, Liverpool	92-
59		
McGinty, Jack E.		90-
37		
31/III-1990	Prescott Valley AZ	
Loaned Carse book		
McKamy, Fred		90-
28		
10/III-1990	San Jacinto CA	
McMullan, Trevor	15/VII-1991	91-
2		
15/VII-1991	Belfast, No. Ireland	91-
3		
Milcic, Joseph "Joe"		90-
5		
20/I-1990	San Francisco CA	
Moore, James		90-
9		
21/I-1990	San Francisco CA	
Mullan, D. (Capt.)	15/VII-1991	91-
2		
15/VII-1991	Belfast, No. Ireland	91-
3		
MS. chronology of experience at sea		
Murphy, James Timothy "Murph"		90-
30		
25/III-1990	Huntington Beach CA	
Niedermeier, Frank	16/II-1990	90-
18		
16/II-1990	Yucaipa CA	90-
19		
17/II-1990		90-
21		
17/II-1990		90-
22		
Manuscript & photocopied typescript		
North, James "Jim"	9/II-1990	90-
16		
9/II-1990	Santa Barbara CA	90-
17		

O'Starr, Max L. 11 27/I-1990	Pacifica CA	90-
Owen, Robert "Robby" 48 16/V-1990	Savannah GA	90-
Parr, Robert "Bob" 2 30/III-1992	Maghull, Merseyside	92-
Peter, Alan 34 24/IV-1992 92-35	New Brighton, Wallasey	92-
Peters, Urban "Pete" 47 5/V-1992	Childwall, Liverpool	92-
Playfer, Richard "Dick" 24 21/IV-1992 25	West Kirby, Wirral	92- 92-
Pottinger, John 8 21/I-1990	San Francisco CA	90-
Power, Robert Francis "Frank" 10 22/X-1991	St. John's, Newfoundland	91-
Precious, Albert 90-36 29/III-1990	Las Vegas NV	
Ramsey, Joseph O'Brien "Joe", "Fish" 49 16/V-1990	Savannah GA	90-
Rehkopf, Cliff 38 2/IV-1990 39	Apache Junction AZ	90- 90-
Richards, Edward H. "Ed" 61 18/VI-1990 62	Suitland MD	90- 90-
Rogers, Peter 49 5/V-1992	Liverpool	92-
Rothwell, Rex 71 31/V-1992 72	Radcliffe, Greater Manchester	92- 92-
Rynberg, Alan "Al" 6 21/I-1990	San Francisco CA	90-

Shackleton, J.H. "Shack"	25/IV-1992	92-
42		
25/IV-1992	Wallasey, Wirral	92-
43		
Sharrock, Jack	30/III-1992	92-
3		
30/III-1992	Melling, Merseyside	92-
4		
Simpson, R.A. (Capt.)	31/III-1992	92-
5		
31/III-1992	Ormskirk (county?) UK	92-
6		
Skelly, H.G. "Screaming Skull"	24/IV-1992	92-
38		
24/IV-1992	Wallasey, Merseyside	92-
39		
Squires, Harold W.		91-
9		
22/X-1991	St. John's, Newfoundland	
Stanko, Ed		90-
41		
3/IV-1990	Apache Junction AZ	
Union booklet, MFOU		
Taylor, Herbert	4/IV-1992	92-
11		
4/IV-1992	London, England	92-
12		
MS of thesis		
Thornton, T.		92-
56		
7/V-1992	Stonycroft, Old Swan, Liverpool	
Tokarchuk, Frank		90-
56		
22/V-1990	Sea Level NC	
Tunncliffe, Ernest	25/IV-1992	92-
40		
25/IV-1992	New Brighton, Wallasey	
92-41		
Wagner, E.S. (Capt.		90-
71		
4/VIII-1990	Halifax, Nova Scotia	
Warren, R.J.		92-
50		
6/V-1992	Liverpool	
Waters, Frank Clayton (Capt.)		90-
1		
15/I-1990	Medford OR	
Watson, Harvey L. "Pig-Eye"		90-
46		
9/V-1990	East Brewton AL	

Wellman, Derek	8/IV-1992	
92-20		
8/IV-1992	Seaford, E. Sussex	92-
21		
Williams, Fred	27/V-1992	92-
69		
27/V-1992	Heswall, Wirral	92-
70		
Williams, Roy	7/IV-1992	92-
17		
7/IV-1992		92-
18		
7/IV-1992	Gosport, Hants.	92-
19		
Willner, Stanley "Stan"		90-
58		
10/VI-1990	Virginia Beach VA	
Wilson, Herbert E. "Herb"		90-
20		
16/II-1990	Banning CA	
Wrench, Tony	22/IV-1992	92-
26		
22/IV-1992	Birkenhead, Wirral	92-27

Appendix

B



A copy of this cartoon from the *Daily Express* of 14 November 1939, was given me some fifty years later by Professor Paul Smith of Memorial University of Newfoundland. He had discovered it in an archive of cartoons at the University of Sussex.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR ISLAND SECTIONS-

CONTROL No. 2

(In charge of Submarine, O.B. Special)

Steering Officer

Skipper

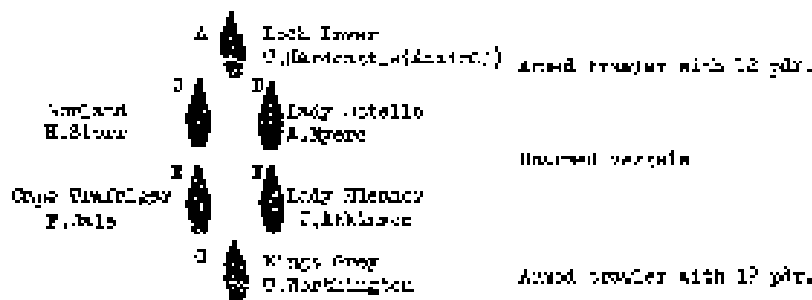
Date of Exercise 10th May, 1945

Date of Report

The following instructions are to be carried out by Island sections on passage to and from Island fishing grounds.

GENERAL FORMATION

This formation is to be maintained on passage, up to the moment that an attack develops.



The vessels in the formation should be at three ships' length apart, and it is most important that this distance should be kept day and night on passage. (When at the 12 pdr. trawlers need to be left to the discretion of the Officer in charge but should maintain the same distance should be in the leading position).

ATTACK FORMATION

(a) It is considered that a section as so formed constituted is quite capable of attacking and sinking an enemy merchant.

(b) On sighting & attacking the trawlers should at once get into single line and the leader signal a course at right angles to the line of heading of the enemy.

(c) The trawlers when forming line should do so in the following way:

If the enemy submarine is sighted at night should at right angles to the formation move, the leader and the trawlers wing ships should maintain at full speed, the others reducing speed

and forming pattern. When the line is formed the ships turn to the
 right of the leader to the course desired,



The signal for forming line under these circumstances,
 will be by day a green pennant on the masthead and underneath it the
 course to which the vessels are to turn on the right of the leader
 after they are in line.

By night the signal will be a green Very's light and
 course displayed on the lamp.

(d) Should the order be displayed on the port side the
 leader and the port wing ships continue their course and the others
 turn to starboard.



The signal for this by day is a red pennant on the
 masthead and underneath it the course to which the vessels are to
 turn on the right of the leader after they are in line and by night
 the signal will be a red Very's light and course displayed on the
 lamp.

NOTE: The object of the two different methods is to endeavour
 to interfere as little as possible with the fire of the vessels
 making the manoeuvre.

*Researcher's Note: The original of this set of diagrams for a coastal fishing
 convoy was obtained from Arthur Credland of the Town Docks Museum in
 Hull, Humberside, England in January of 1993. In the original, the armed
 escorts, which are the leading and following vessels, were inked in red and the
 fishing vessels in blue. The burgee pennants were also inked in the appropriate
 colours as named. Convoys of this sort sailed from English ports with
 regularity throughout the war. --MH*

4. H. These instructions are to be followed by the Skipper
 on completion of voyage to Sunderland, N.B., Newcastle,
 Liverpool and other ports, and other Docks, Hull.

From Capt. Edward A. March (HMC 90-67/90-68) a mimeographed document, corrections and amendments added by him later Gives some basic comparative statistics:

THE U.S. MERCHANT MARINE IN WORLD WAR II

The “money myth” : Unsubstantiated rumor has it that merchant marine personnel made huge amounts in wartime. This is not so. Official government figures provided by Congressman Schuyler Otis Bland of Virginia show that, as an example, an Able Seaman in the Merchant Marine had average annual earnings during the war of \$2,185 and that the average annual earnings of the comparable Navy rating was \$2,256, in addition to which the Navy man received all sorts of individual and family benefits that the Merchant Marine did not receive. Further, the Navy man received his pay at all times, no matter what, whereas the Merchant Marine man was not paid between voyages and if his ship was lost his pay stopped when it sank, no matter whether he spent years in prison camp or took many months to be repatriated or in hospitals. The Merchant Marine man also paid for his own clothing, uniforms, etc. The Merchant Marine man sometimes seemed to make a lot of money because he was paid only at the end of a voyage and not on a regular basis, as was the Navy man. Thus, if his ship was away for six months he received six months pay at once at the end of the voyage,¹²⁸¹ and he had only two days leave for each month at sea in which to spend it.

Casualties : The Merchant Marine had a smaller number of men in World War II than did the Coast Guard, but Merchant Marine deaths were 6,795 as opposed to 574 for the Coast Guard or 11.8 times more casualties than the Coast Guard. This does not consider the uncounted thousands of wounded.

The Army had 2.08% of its men killed, the Navy 0.88%, the Marines 2.94%, the Coast Guard 0.24%, and the Merchant Marine 3.39%. Thus, the Merchant Marine had a higher casualty rate than all of the other services.

Numbers in combat : Some 200,000 men served in the Merchant Marine in the war, of which 114,145 were awarded the Combat Ribbon, indicating that their ships were in direct combat engagements with the enemy. By contrast, only one of seven Army men were in combat. There are no comparable Navy figures. It is also interesting to note that in World War I the number of Merchant Marine men killed exceeded the number of Navy men lost despite many more men in the Navy than in the Merchant Marine.

Ship losses : The Merchant Marine lost far more ships to enemy action than did the Navy in both World Wars I and II.

The only German surface ship sunk by U.S. forces in World War II was sunk by a merchant ship, the liberty ship STEPHEN HOPKINS, which sank the German surface raider STIER on September 27, 1942, when both the Navy Armed Guard and the ship's merchant crew manned the guns.

War prisoners : Over 600 merchant seamen were prisoners of war in World War II.

¹²⁸¹. That is, in a lump sum.

Several U.S. merchant ships were lost to enemy action before we were in World War II and before any Navy ships encountered the enemy. This also happened in World War I. Twelve U.S. merchant ships were also lost by striking mines after World War II, with an additional five damaged.

From Virgil Sharpe, in a typed letter dated 30 May 1991, a graph, showing casualty statistics:

Branch of Service	Number Served	War Deaths	per Cent	Odds of being Killed
Army	11,268,000	234,874	2.88	one in 48
Navy	4,183,466	36,958	.88	one in 114
Marines	669,000	19,733	2.94	one in 34
Coast Gd.	241,893	574	.24	one in 417
Total	16,353,659	282,131	1.78	one in 56
Merchant Marine	215,000	6,795	3.16	one in 32

FROM BESSIE AND LARRY ARSENAULT
SOME COMPARATIVE CANADIAN STATISTICS:

THE MERCHANT NAVY VETERAN AND CIVILIAN WAR-RELATED BENEFITS
ACT¹²⁸²

In his testimony of 7 May to the Standing Committee, the Minister stated that, “Best of all they will be on an equal footing with war veterans of the armed services.”

Here are some comparisons:

ELIGIBILITY COMPARISON	MILITARY	MERCHANT NAVY
Salvage rescue and cable-laying vessels not on “high seas” voyage	service	VAC discretion
Ships in company with ship attacked (formerly dangerous waters or theatre of war)	service	not service
Service in dangerous waters or theatre of war, but not high seas voyage	service	not service
Dangerous waters or theatre of war	service	Korea only
Service defined	enlistment to final release	aboard ship on Articles
Service in and “actual theatre of war”	service	as if theatre of war, but high seas only
Service after assignment to a ship, home-harbour or abroad	service	only after boarding ship
Service in Northumberland Straits	service	high seas?
Service in Manning Pool, which is a contract to serve continuously in dangerous waters	no equivalent exceptions	not service
Service in lifeboat, or from gate of POW camp, or foreign port, or after shipwreck	service	not service
Service during pre-assignment training	service	not service
Service during gunnery training	service	not service
Service during travel to or from a port or ship on orders	service	not service
Service while on earned leave in Canada	service	not service
Service while ashore injured or ill	service	subject to interpretation

¹²⁸². From Annex A of Canadian Merchant Navy Association papers for 1995 meeting, as given me in photocopy by Larry and Bessie Arsenault, now of See Canyon, San Luis Obispo CA

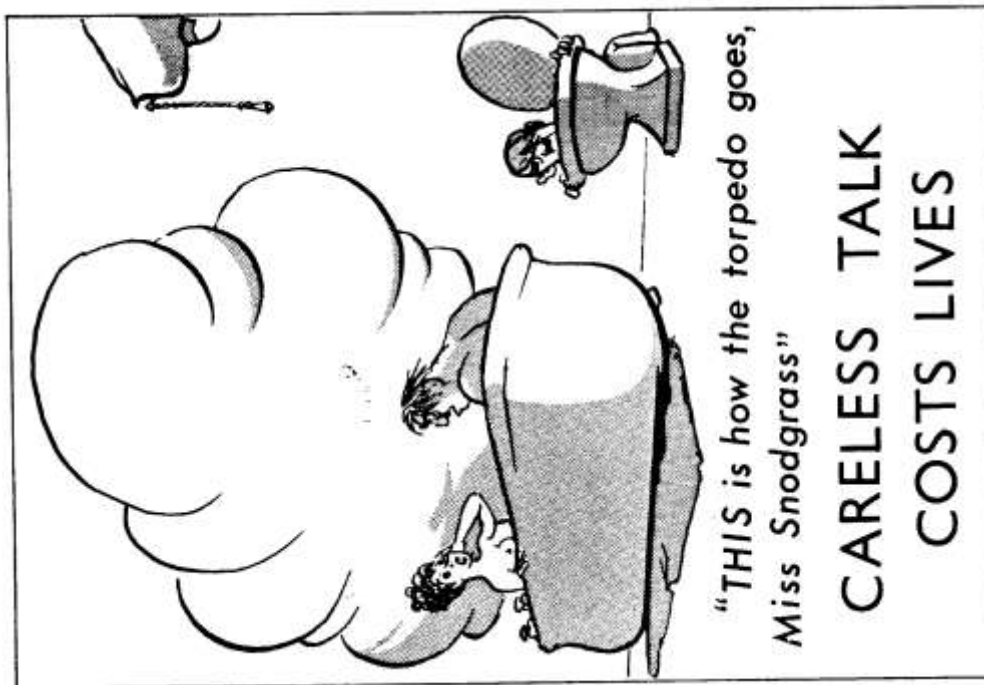
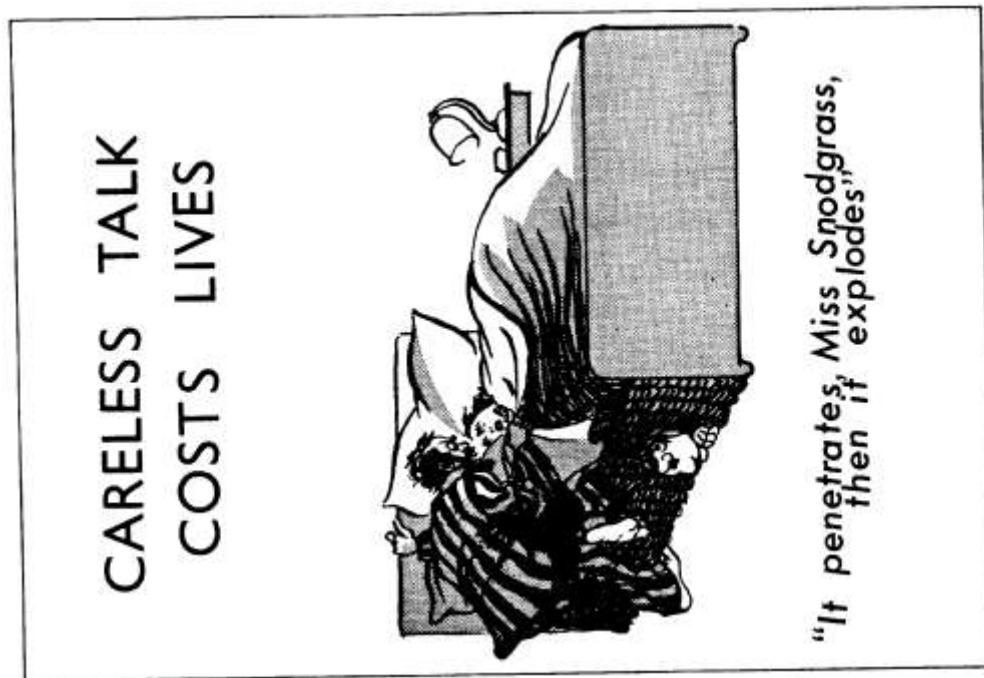
Pension eligibility, note that exposure to malaria and VD normally occurs ashore	all inclusive includes VD	<i>only while on the high seas</i> unless “attributable to”
Benefits under the Department of Veterans Affairs Act	complete	restricted by definition of service
Recognition of war dead	complete	restricted by definition of service
WVA benefits	included	similar but qualifications more rigid
Allied seamen with 10 years Canadian residence for WVA	included	excluded from all benefits
Legislation becomes effective	resistance fighters 21 July 1992	1 July 1992
Prisoner of War, liberation at prison gate	service continues to discharge	service terminates at prison gate
Prisoner of War, released by the resistance, but still in enemy territory	service continues to discharge	<u>may</u> be covered <i>if</i> deemed evader
Prisoner of War, captured after making landfall	service continues to discharge	not included
Senate and National POW Assn recommendations and Standing Committee reference to Merchant Navy POW discrimination	no response	negative response to Senate
Time-based POW compensation discrepancy ranges 1.6/1 to 8/1 against long term	3 to 30 months 3.33%/mo to .833%/mo	48 to 60 months .521%/mo to .416%/mo
Book of Remembrance in Peace Tower	done	Consultant hired July 1992

This highly convoluted legislation contains no transitional clause to protect those who might loose[sic] benefits already granted.

Some comparisons with war-related pension benefits to “civilian” groups:

GROUP BENEFITS INCURRED THROUGHOUT SERVICE INCLUDING TRAVELLING TIME	COVERED	MERCHANT NAVY
Auxiliary Services: Supervisors Helpers	during service during service	on Articles at sea only
Canadian Firefighters	while members, during service	on Articles at sea only
RCMP Special constables	course of duty	on Articles at sea only
Air Raid Precautions Workers	yes, includes training	no

Voluntary Aid Detachment	yes, includes training	no
Civilian Air Crew, RAF Transport Command	yes, from date of engagement, to termination of service	on Articles at sea only
Salt Water Fishermen	complete assignments	on Articles at sea only
Merchant Navy casualties were orders of magnitude greater than the above.		



These two cartoons were taken from Capt. Jack Broome, *Convoy Is to Scatter*, (London: William Kimber, 1972), 56-57. Drawn by Capt. Broome, who was an escort commander on the North Russia run, they are typical of many such drawn by "artistic" seafarers of the time.