

MY MOST EVENTFUL VOYAGE

By William C. Gibney

It was on my second trip aboard the SS JOHN HANSON that I changed from a happy go lucky trusting boy into a serious responsible man. On our previous trip, we had landed in New York and I remember getting a few days off to visit my mother, father, and sister Helen who lived there. Returning to the ship with the other officers, I was surprised to hear the Captain tell us that although we were going to Boston to load up, we were going to sign the trip papers here in New York. The First Mate being older and less trusting, refused to sign and left the ship. When I asked why, he told me he did not trust the Captain and we were undoubtedly going to carry ammunition on this trip. After he left, I asked the Captain if this was so, he said no and that he just did not want to be bothered with it in Boston. I believed him and stayed with the ship.

On May 7th, 1945, our small convoy left Boston and headed for Halifax, Nova Scotia. As Second Mate, I came on watch at 12 midnight and was surprised to find that we were the convoy's leading ship and the Canadian Naval commandeer was on board down in the Captain's cabin having a drink. Because my First Able-Bodied Seaman who was very capable was at the wheel, I was able to pace the Bridge as chief lookout. At 2:00 a.m., my second A-B came on watch and relieved the first A-B. When he told me that he had never steered a ship before and would I please teach him, I became a little nervous. He told me he was a chicken farmer from New Jersey and, although he had only spent six weeks at the Naval Training Station at Great Lakes in World War I, because of the shortage of merchant seamen now, they had given him the A-B rating. I spent the next 10 minutes showing him the difference between the compass and the ship's heading and as the fog started to come in, I left him saying if he got in trouble to call me. I then proceeded to pace the bridge and keep a sharp lookout. Soon we were completely enveloped in fog.

About 2:45 a.m. as I started to walk toward the port side, the ship to the left of us suddenly appeared out of the fog. I could see that we were turning rapidly towards him and would ram his side if we continued. I then glanced back at the helmsman and saw that he was frantically still turning the wheel to the left. Instinctively I rushed at him and hit him on his shoulder, driving him away from the wheel. I then turned and grabbed the wheel and spun it with all my might to the right. It was at this moment that the Captain and Canadian Naval Commander rushed up on the bridge and stood with mouths open watching me perform. We came within 30 to 40 feet of the other ship before we began to pull away and go back to our original position in the convoy. I don't know from what nation the other ship came from as I didn't recognize the loud statement they shouted at us, but I guessed crazy Americans must have been included. The Captain got his voice back and shouted, "I don't ever want that man on the wheel again." I quietly said to him, "If he doesn't steer who will, you or me?" John the A-B and I became the best of friends and he soon became very competent at steering the ship.

We landed in Halifax the morning of May 8, 1945, which also was VE day ending the war in Europe. As a much larger convoy was to leave for England that night, the Captain went ashore to attend the meeting of all the ships' captains for instructions and information on how the convoy would be run and what our position in it would be. After the meeting most of them stayed in town to celebrate VE day. Our Captain stayed too long and had to be carried back on board ship.

When I came on watch at midnight we were the fifth ship in the starboard column. With the two locomotives we were carrying on each side of our forward deck the ship seemed slightly top heavy to me, and with the ten foot swell coming from our rear I hoped I would not have to alter our course to starboard of port. For three and three quarters hours of my four hour watch everything remained calm, but suddenly the giant transport ship at the head of our column threw on his out of command lights and stopped dead in the water. I had to make a decision to either try to sneak by him or turn to the right, permitting the following swell to hit us broadside. It was then that I wished the Captain was available to help me make this decision. Knowing that he wasn't, I was forced to do it myself and I came right.

As I feared the swell hit us broadside. The ship started to rapidly roll to port and I held my breath. With the roll all of the dishes on the tables below fell off and were smashed on the floor. The roll and the noise brought the First Mate running to the bridge, but the Captain slept through it all. With the help of the chief mate we were able to get back to our position. This incident was very important to me because with it I lost respect for the Captain which helped me when the next emergency decision had to be made.

The rest of the voyage across the Atlantic was uneventful until we reached the English channel and picked up an English pilot at Southampton. As we proceeded north under the command of the pilot, the Captain came to my room and asked me to accompany him to the stern of the ship. He explained to me that something was wrong with our propeller and he was afraid it would fall off. Although I could hear a slight noise, I didn't think it was going to fall off. The Captain promptly radioed to the British Admiralty his fears and asked to be put into one of their dry docks to have it repaired. They told us to proceed to our destination which was Antwerp, Belgium and unload our cargo. They would look at it when we came back. We proceeded to our anchorage which was just off the White Cliffs of Dover. As we were anchoring, however, and we had just dropped our hook and were proceeding slowly astern, the Captain suddenly ran to the telegraph and signaled for the engines to stop, taking the command away from the pilot and stating that we were about to run into an English minefield. The Captain then took the English pilot, who was very upset, down to his cabin to have a few drinks and to forget about it.

From the chart room I watched the two of them drinking for several hours and when the captain got up to go to the bathroom, I reached in and told the pilot to please stop drinking as I needed him to pilot us into Antwerp. I told him it wasn't his fault and I felt the Captain was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I put on a pot of coffee and began to give it to him and told him to lie down and get some rest, which he did.

At midnight as I came on watch I stopped in the chart room, got the pilot, and proceeded to the bridge. The Captain had passed out in his cabin so we decided not to disturb him. When orders came on our radio we pulled up the anchor and proceeded slow ahead in two columns. Just as we cleared the port submarine nets, the Captain appeared on the bridge. He was furious at me and the pilot and after calling me a, Ayoung snotnose who wasn't even dry behind the ears,@ he proceeded to say that he was taking over and we were leaving the convoy. He went to the telegraph and signaled full speed ahead and told my helmsman to turn the wheel hard right.

Knowing that such an action would surely sink the ship because the English had mined both sides of the channel, I instinctively ran to the telephone and told the Second Engineer to disregard that order and to keep it slow ahead. I turned to the helmsman and told him to hold his original course. I then turned the command back to the pilot. The Captain with clenched fists started toward me only to be stopped by the gun crew Navy Lieutenant and the Army cargo Captain, who each grabbed an arm and led him below saying, ACome on Captain, Bill has everything under control.@"

The next morning while proceeding on our way to Antwerp, I decided to get some fresh air on the boat deck. Suddenly, from the bridge a loud voice yelled down at me, AHey You!@" When I ignored it the voice more quietly said, AHey Bill.@" Looking up I saw the Captain who gestured me to come up to the bridge. When I arrived he said, AI was only fooling last night.@" Because I felt humiliated by the names he had called me the night before, I replied, AYou don't fool with the lives of everybody on this ship.@" I then turned and walked away from him. Looking back at the incident I sometimes feel that if I had only accepted his statement, we might have avoided the future problems that occurred.

When we arrived in Antwerp I was approached by the Third Mate. He said that because he had promised his new wife that he would not go ashore in a foreign port, he was willing to stand my watch from 5 P.M. to midnight. When I returned I would take over from midnight to 8 A.M. I remember being very pleased with this arrangement as I loved the chance to listen to good music.

Returning to the ship at 11:30 P.M., I was surprised to see that there was no one at the gangway. Thinking that he might be in having coffee, I then checked the mess hall. Again nobody was there.

Going up to my room, I passed by the Third Mate's room only to see that his door was closed. Thinking that he had probably just turned in early, I proceeded to my room and changed into my khakis. Taking my flashlight with me, I then proceeded to make my rounds of the ship, checking the mooring lines, etc. As I came on the forward deck I noticed a seaman standing on the starboard side in the dark looking up at the stars. I continued to the bow, checked the lines and came back on the port side only to find another seaman standing in the dark by number three hold looking up at the stars. I then noticed that the door leading down into number three hold was slightly open and the light above the hold was out. I opened the door, turned the light on, closed the door and locked it. As I did the two seaman simultaneously exclaimed, AOh my God!@

It was then that I finally realized what was happening. They were robbing the cargo. I then remembered that there was over five million dollars of American cigarettes in number three hold and at twenty dollars a carton on the black market, they all wanted to become rich. My first instinct was to get the key and let them out of the hold. But my better judgment took over when I realized that because I had no way to protect myself, they would probably kill me. I also remembered that the Boatswain had a key and they would use it to get out. I also felt that with the cargo light turned on there would be no cigarettes stolen that night. I then went up to the flying bridge so that I could check that they did not get out of the hold with any cigarettes. When one of the lookouts yelled, ASomebody is up on the bridge,@ I was forced to duck down to my room. The next morning when I asked as to who had the gangway watch, no one seemed to know.

After unloading our cargo in Antwerp, we then sailed back to England. We were placed in the Royal Navy's Tillsbury Dry Docks where they repaired our damaged propeller. I had a very pleasant three days in England, even getting to visit London and Covenant Gardens. I found that the English loved to dance and I had a ball meeting many nice people. One incident stands out in my mind. As I was returning to the ship after going to church in Graves End on Sunday morning, I was stopped by an elderly gentleman and his son. After finding out that I was an American, invited me to come home and dine with them. It later turned out that he was a retired English Army Major whose best American friend was an instructor at the New York Maritime Academy from which I had graduated. The Major gave me his card and asked would I please give it to his friend and ask him to write him. This I was able to do when I returned to the States.

On the evening of June 9, 1945, we left the dry dock and proceeded down the English Channel and headed for home. I came on watch at midnight. As second mate and ship's navigator, I had already set the same great circle course from England to New York as the S.S. TITANIC had thirty-three years earlier. With the war in Europe over, it was the first time our ship was sailing alone without a convoy.

Around 12:30 a.m., as we left Southampton and headed out into the Atlantic Ocean, we were suddenly surrounded by a heavy fog. The Rules of the Road require that during peace time when it becomes foggy and visibility is limited, all ships operating in international waters are required to blow their fog horns every two minutes to avoid collisions. It is also customary to inform the Captain of the situation and request permission to blow the fog horn. Knowing that he did not like to have his sleep interrupted, I hesitated to inform him.

It was at this time that I reached into my pocket and took hold of my Rosary Beads and started to pray. When I finished one decade of the beads I asked the Lord what I should do. At that moment the word came to me. Blow the fog horn without asking permission, which is what I proceeded to do.

Within twenty seconds, the Captain appeared on the bridge in his stocking feet, asking what was the matter. I proceeded to tell him about the fog condition and the Rules of the Road. His exact words were, AYou stupid ass! What do you expect to meet here in the Atlantic Ocean?@ My reply was, ANothing, I hope Captain, but the Rules of the Road require me to blow the fog horn.@

Mumbling to himself, he went below and put on his shoes and heavy jacket and hat. When he returned to the bridge, he told me to go out on the starboard wing in the freezing cold and listen. I told him I felt I could be more helpful by staying inside the heated bridge and sticking my head outside the window. We should also blow the fog horn every two minutes. This brought on another string of curses

and stupidity remarks from the irate Captain.

Suddenly, there appeared almost dead ahead about one point off the starboard bow, a large deep sea fishing vessel. We heard four whistles indicating that he was going full speed astern. We missed him by barely fifty feet. The Captain never said another word for the rest of my watch.

Although the Captain and I were not on speaking terms, things remained quiet for the next several days. On the morning of June 13, however, while the Captain and I were in the chart room, the radio operator gave him a radio gram. He read it and threw it in the waste basket. After he left, I picked up the pieces, put them together, and saw it was a warning about icebergs that were in our area. It advised all ships to change course, head south and go around them.

It was during my watch that we passed through the ice field. I remember standing on the bridge peering through the fog, my hand on the telegraph, sweating it out. To say that I was upset would be putting it mildly. The fact that he had completely ignored the warning and had not even reduced our speed added to my anger. Luck was with us, however, for after several hours we made it safely through.

I recall how unpleasant the whole return trip was for me. I sensed how the crew and the Captain resented me and would like for me to disappear from the scene. Each night I kept out of dark spaces and locked my door before going to sleep. I felt that my only friends were the two flies that I kept locked in my room for company. The Captain used every excuse to find fault with the manner in which I stood my watch and fulfilled my responsibilities. One incident really got to me. I was off watch reading in my room when the Third Mate knocked at my door and told me that the Captain wanted me immediately on the bridge. He was waiting for me as I got to the top of the stairway. He started screaming at me that I wasn't doing my job right. The ship had just changed course and the gyro compass repeater on the starboard wing of the bridge didn't show it and he wanted to know why. Taken off guard, I screamed at him, "How the hell do I know until I look at it!" We stood there for several seconds glaring at one another. He finally turned away and I went down to the master gyro, found the problem and fixed it.

When we reached New York the Captain found out that the American pilots are not as timid as the English pilots. Because our docking was a very ticklish situation, the pilot chased the Captain off the bridge when he tried to interfere. Instead, he came roaring back to where I was supervising the putting out of the mooring lines at the stern of the ship and started yelling commands at my men. As I had already decided that I was leaving the ship, I let him do it without challenging him. Just before I left the ship one of the crew attempted to start an argument with me, but I refused to argue and walked around him.

At the end of the voyage I was an entirely different man than when I had started. After all of these years I've had time to calmly reflect on the actions of the Captain and to finally understand why he acted as he did. I now know why he did everything he could to keep from going in a convoy from England to Antwerp. On that trip we ran into the mines that the Germans had planted the night before, and, although we made it through safely, ships all around us were sunk. The young forget, the old remember. All the way across the ocean it had been playing on his mind, hence his trying to get the ship into dry dock before delivering the cargo and then, being frustrated in that, his violent actions when he tried to take control from the pilot and make us leave the convoy. If only I had accepted his statement that he was only fooling.

By putting the ship into the English dry dock he lost three days of shipping time and he could have been in trouble with the company. This could have put pressure on him to make up the time which he did by steaming directly through the icebergs instead of going around them. Although I made another trip before retiring from the sea, in which our ship took some of the first troops directly into Tokyo Bay, it had none of the excitement experienced on my last Atlantic crossing.