

## **ROCKS AND SHOALS – July 1980 - SELECTED EXCERPTS**

### **SHIPS AND THE BROTHERHOOD OF THE SEA**

From the beginning of recorded history, when people began to write about the sea and those who go down to it in ships, there has been a mystery about it. Like all mysteries, that of the sea has always been compounded of many parts, and, depending on the ethos of the time, one or more of these may temporarily have the ascendancy.

The Egyptians believed in strange sea gods who, normally not propitiated – or at least not adequately so – took their revenge on humans foolish enough to stray far from land by devouring them. The Greeks and Romans likewise stayed close to shore for fear of the unknown. To the Western world these were the source of history; but we now know that the Phoenicians circumnavigated Africa long before Vasco Da Gama, the Polynesians navigated by the stars before the birth of Christ, the Vikings sailed across the Atlantic long before Columbus, the Eskimos paddled their kayaks, or dragged them across ice floes, around the entire perimeter of the Arctic Ocean for centuries before anyone knew anything about it, or even the fact of their very existence.

We have known about the Romans, Greeks and Egyptians because they were the only ones who left written records to the West. But of late we have begun to assimilate some of the marks left behind by some of the others, as well. Perhaps we should have guessed: the men of the sea, who knew the sea best, were not afraid of it. But neither were the writers, or engravers of hieroglyphics. Instead, they built wonderful ships, and sailed them with consummate skill. Seemingly, the ships themselves provided them with all the artistry, all the artistic outlet, an avenue for the expression of their highest material and non-material aspirations. The ancient ships we have found, some in burial mounds but most buried in the sea, have told us a great deal, indeed, about the men who sailed them and worked them.

Foremost among the ideas thereby aroused has been that these were men of skill. Their lives were hard, but they were also spent in total, intimate, dangerous contact with one of the implacable forces of the world. To survive they had to know the sea well; they had to have an instrument – their ship – which they also knew well; they had to look ahead always for the normal perils of the sea, to be, in other words, forehanded.

It is commonplace to remark that if you scratch any sailor deeply enough, no matter what his race or creed or political belief, what you find beneath the veneer is the same the world over: salt water, and a love for the ships in which he served. Even the most hard-bitten “salt” (notice the word) will generally harbor only fond memories of his old ships. He may possibly hate his present ship with a purple passion for a number of reasons not all of which are valid – but when he leaves it the ship becomes “her,” or “she,” in ways often different from the manner in which he personified her while serving on board, and he will ultimately grow to love that old “bucket of bolts.” She presented him with a challenge to his image of himself, and he loves her for it.

We of the MEMPHIS like to say that it was the tragedy of the ship, and the loss of our shipmates, which has held us together. Not so, or anyhow not entirely so. That this constitutes a strong bond is of course true. But the bond would not be nearly so strong were it not founded on something much deeper.

And that is the shared knowledge of the sea and what it can do, plus the knowledge of our ship and what she can do. (Notice that I write “our ship,” even though I never served in MEMPHIS; but everyone reading this little polemic will understand.) So far as anyone of us knows, there is not a man who served in the MEMPHIS – or the same ship by her previous name, TENNESSEE – who is not proud of her and her abilities. Proud, also, of her history, which is a slightly different thing although not entirely.

A ship’s abilities are a combination of her own structure, what her designers built into her, and the structure and quality of her crew. But without the latter, the crew, the former is nothing at all. This is why there have been “good ships” and inferior ones; performers and non-performers; ships that habitually turned in just a bit more than was expected of them – and those that did not. Consider the OREGON at Santiago. She was our favorite battleship of the time, and she proved it by running at eighteen knots and a fraction, in a hull built for sixteen with an engineering plant to match, and actually overhauling both the BROOKLYN, our fastest cruiser, and the fleeing Spanish cruiser CRISTOBAL COLON, the fastest one of Admiral Cervera’s squadron. There were a number of reasons for OREGON’s superlative performance, among them that her builder in San Francisco put his own personal heart and soul into creating a superior ship. Also she had an inspired skipper, and an engineer officer who knew how to get the very best out of his machinery and the men who operated it. And on top of that, she had a crew who – individually and collectively both – would not stop. Down in the firerooms, every shovel of specially picked over “battle coal” was a shot against the enemy; the firemen demanded constant reports of how fast they were driving their ship; the fires were white hot, the forced draft blowers at absolute full speed, and the steam roared out of those steam drums through the wide open stops into the hungry engines, where the well-oiled and perfectly balanced pistons, connecting rods and cranks drove her tub-shaped hull at a speed no one ever imagined she could attain.

That is what anyone of the Navy means when he speaks of superlative performance and the TENNESSEE/MEMPHIS had it too. Who, who was aboard at the time, cannot well remember that full speed dash through the Straits of Magellan, in one day, because of a threatened coal shortage in Valpariso? The MEMPHIS made twenty-three knots that day, with a current of up to four knots sweeping her along so that at times she achieved nearly twenty eight over the ground. There were double watches in the firerooms and enginerooms, and on the bridge too. Earlier, sent to rescue American lives and property in the troubled Armenian sector of Turkey, she carried away hundreds of foreign civilians who were in fear for their lives and transported them, without orders, for they were not our people but simply human beings in distress and the whole thing was out of order, to a place of safety. And not long afterward, during the bad times of World War I, the entire treasury of the Bank of England was transported, in her magazines, in the form of gold bullion and under lock and key held by a Gunner’s Mate United States Navy, from England to New York for eventual transshipment to Canada.

Thus, the legacy of a ship is the spirit which she somehow bequeaths to her crew, which enables them, in their own way, to make their ship come alive. It is the brotherhood of man and the sea, and their instrument, their ship, which creates the legacy we Survivors of the Armored Cruiser MEMPHIS will carry with us always.

-----Edward L. Beach

## FROM THE CAPTAIN'S CABIN

Greetings to ALL SHIPMATES – at sea or ashore! It has been several months since our last communication, and I am sure all SURVIVORS and their friends will look forward to this issue of Rocks and Shoals.

We had a visit from the BECKMANS after their trip to Santo Domingo, D.R. They really had a rough time of it; and it occurred almost on the anniversary date of the Memphis loss. They took many photographs of Santo Domingo, and particularly of the site where the MEMPHIS was beached. They had a very interesting trip: met many people and I am hopeful they will give a full account of it elsewhere in this issue of R&S. We enjoyed their visit immensely and were happy that they returned safely. Chuck hopes to return to Santo Domingo again in 1981, and be there on August 29, 1981. More will be given to this matter in a subsequent issue of Rocks and Shoals. We also had a fine dinner together.

In November we also had a nice visit from Ned Beach – had a couple bourbons and a nice steak dinner at the near-by Black Steer. Ned had business matters to attend in near-by Evanston, and after our visit with him, took off for the East, but enroute, stopped off to see our worth Ship's Writer, Bunny Worth; where they also had dinner together. But I believe this time Bunny prepared it herself. We were indeed happy to see Ned again, and to see him in good health and good cheer! However, I am sorry to say we haven't had a word from him since! I trust that he will contribute a column for this issue of R&S. I have requested him to do so; and have also asked the Admiral to make a contribution at this time – we need HELP and NEWS.

Early this month I had a telephone call from our old "Jimmy Legs" Carl Wass, who now lives in Calif. He said he was getting along pretty well, but his legs were failing him. Well, after 90 years, sometimes they WILL give out! I've only used mine 82 years, and one of them now doesn't want to cooperate! I've asked Carl to give us old shipmates a recipe for longevity, and he said he would. Thus far, it has not arrived!

Our old gunner's mate, Al Barker, has just returned to the Navy Hilton in Gulfport, Miss. He visited with his sons in Mass. during April. Attended a couple of weddings – one of his granddaughters, Kathleen. That was a grand affair – held in the Immaculate Conception Church in Malden, Mass.; then a reception at Caruso's – a swank joint – where champagne flowed freely – and even Al had a couple of snorts (he almost never takes on alcoholic beverages), but this time he did – and also danced a lively jig!

Elsewhere, Al made a contribution to this issue of Rocks and Shoals. It is entitled: "I Wish I Were 80 Again!" I think he swiped the article from Dear Abbey, but I am giving him the benefit of the doubt.

We seem to have hit a snag in Memphis. In mid-February, I addressed a letter to the Curator of the Pink Palace, appointing him as permanent chairman of the Worth Memorial Exercise to be performed Aug. 29 of each year. I hope, before this issue of R&S goes in the mail, we may have a good report to give to you.

Sorry to report that our Ex. Officer, his wife, and mother-in-law, were in a serious accident. Mrs. Quigly had both legs broken and has been hospitalized. She is 92, and Lee reports she is getting along very well. Lee also was in hospital a week or more. Edythe was not hospitalized, but was badly shaken up. The Sunshine Committee has been alerted, and I am sure most, if not all of you, have received a report previous to this. I believe the automobile was completely wrecked. Our best wishes go out to all three of these wonderful people for a speedy and complete recovery.

I had another three weeks in the Medical Center at Great Lakes, Ill. During Feb., and Mar. Reason: High blood pressure building up. Glad to report, with about 20 pills a day, the pressure seems to be stabilized now. While in the hospital, Betty and the flu bug, and no one here to look after her. Fortunately, we have a doctor who lives across the street from us—and he gave her some prescriptions that put her on the mend. But she was sick most of the time I was in the hospital. She's back to normal, I'm glad to report. "M.J. bawled me out" for not alerting the Sunshine Committee, so they could send me get well cards. I told her I didn't want to bother my old shipmates, for some of them might be in worse shape than I—and I certainly would not want them to be telling me to get well, when, maybe, it should be me, telling them to get well.

If there are boobos in this report—you can't reprove me—remember I'm 80! You know, if we told the truth when we enlisted (I didn't), we of the survivors are 80 or better!

Yours till Sahara dampens,

El Capitan Les Kidwell