

## **"Anchored in History - Stories of America's Navy" - Ep. 1 'Navy Deck Logs and Sailor Poetry' (DOD 110135916)**

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Welcome to the first episode of Naval History and Heritage Command's podcast, Anchored in History, Stories of America's Navy. NHHC serves our nation as the U.S. Navy's institutional memory, preserving an accurate history of the U.S. Navy. This podcast series will provide a peek at some of that history through snapshots in time and confirmed stories shared by those who have studied it, and, when possible, those who are there.

I'm your host, Cliff Davis, and with me in the studio today is Alexis Van Poole, Command Operations Report Program Coordinator and Processing Team Lead, and Anna Holloway, Fleet Histories Team Lead. Thanks for being here.

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Thank you for having us.

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

Great to be here.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

So, for our first episode today, we're actually going to talk about Navy deck logs and sailor poetry, and I'm sure this is something that people are probably going to question. Why is the Navy involved with poetry, and what are deck logs? So, Anna and Alexis, take it away and tell us the history of deck logs and why poetry?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

Well, deck logs are actually a log that every commissioned naval vessel writes that accounts for every major event that happens on the ship 24 hours a day. So if, you know, God forbid somebody fall overboard or something happens to an engine or something, it gets notated and preserved in the deck log. Those deck logs are then sent to the Naval History and Heritage Command, where we first ensure that every day of the month is accounted for and that it's been classified properly, and then we put it in some boxes and keep five years' worth on site, and then maintain ownership of 30 years' worth of deck logs.

So if a ship needs a copy of their deck log, or if, you know, someone else in the Navy needs a copy of the deck log, for whatever reason, we can provide access to those people. After 30 years, they get transferred to the National Archives, and with the 30

years' worth that we keep, we support efforts by the VA and the VBA to support veterans' claims. That's actually what deck logs get used for most often, is to support our veterans.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Okay, so what is the difference between a deck log and a COR then, or a Command Operations Report (COR)?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

Well, a Command Operations Report is an annual report. That is something every command in the Navy, of which there's over 2,100, writes every single year that documents their own history. The deck logs, comparatively, are filled out only by the ships, and those are sent to us for every single month.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

So how long have been Sailors producing deck logs?

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

Well, the earliest deck log from the U.S. Navy is held at the National Archives, and that's from the Schooner Wasp, from 1776. But the deck log tradition goes back to, of course, our Royal Navy roots, and those logs, currently, I think the oldest one that is held by the British equivalent of the Archives is from the early 17th century.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Okay, so deck logs and COR's are still being used kind of hand-in-hand, but COR's are just a yearly snapshot, and the deck logs are a daily occurrence of what's happening, correct?

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

Correct. You can think of the COR's almost as the narrative. It is the story portion of it, and the deck log, I would really consider the nuts and bolts information.

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

Yeah, no, the most important function that the deck logs and the COR's serve is to support our veterans and their VA claims, especially now that the PACT Act has been approved and going through, like, that greatly increased the number of requests we were getting from just the last 20 years. But if the Sailors and the people writing these reports don't put the information in there, people aren't going to know until they need that report, and that's 20, 30 years down the line, and there's nothing we can do to get

that information unless it's happened to have been captured somewhere else.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Where are some of the other places that you can capture information that's, if it's not in a COR report or a deck log? How do you guys find the stuff that people are requesting, saying, hey, I was at location X at time Y. I need this for reason Z.

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

Well, if it's an unclassified matter, we can go to things like All Hands or, you know, DVIDS with any articles that have been posted. For stuff that is not unclassified, I know that in the past, we've had information of, okay, so ship X was in this location on this day, and the veteran is saying we were in this location on this day. Could that ship have traveled that distance in that amount of time?

And we can do those calculations, and if it's possible, then, you know, we can go from there in support of the claim and hopefully get the veteran the benefits that they're asking for.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

So, Anna, you were mentioning that there's VA and VBA individuals embedded, I guess, with NHHC, or?

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Yes, within our office here at the Navy Yard. And so, we see this play out every day. They're just working veterans' claims, and they're using deck logs, they're using COR's, and it can sometimes be very heartbreaking because the information simply is not there, and the researchers aren't able to make, you know, a positive verification of it. And so, in terms of that type of thing, it's so important. We tell Sailors that ask us about, you know, why am I doing this? Why am I writing this?

It's like, it's for future you. You're going to need this information potentially, you know, 20, 30 years down the line, so write it for yourself. Write it for your shipmates.

So that's incredibly important. But beyond even that, the cores and the deck logs are so important for lessons learned for our current warfighters. They're looking to the past as well as looking into the future, but they're looking to the past to help inform some of their decisions, and the information included in COR's and deck logs is vitally important to that cause.

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

An example of that that one of our other historians told me that I find incredibly

fascinating is that in the early part of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, Congress or the Pentagon, I don't remember who it was specifically requested the information, but they were trying to stand up river units in one of those locations, and that hadn't been done since the Vietnam War. So they came to us to say, well, how did we do this then, and we were able to provide that information to successfully stand up those units in modern day. So that's why that information is so important.

And it's really sad that a lot of the Sailors don't know, A, why they're being asked to write these reports, but B, that they even go anywhere, let alone that they're used. I've talked to Sailors both in and out of the Navy that don't know that their deck logs come to our command, let alone that they're actually used to support veterans claims or anything else. I was recently emailing with a Sailor about the COR reports, and he expressed that same sentiment, that sometimes it just feels like another report they're having to write, and I let him know, like, no, these do actually get used most often to support veterans and their claims, and he told me that made his day, and that, you know, supporting the vets is so important, which I agree with. Both of my grandfathers were in the Navy in World War II, so I feel a personal connection to preserving the history of these sailors, because in the end, it's going to be so important to them.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Right. I feel at some point in time, you know, I've run across Sailors myself that have, hey, I'm trying to find this stuff, how do I go about doing it? And so, you pushing that importance of what they must have in them, and again, just their overall general use of their importance, do you think that influenced that Sailor to go back and tell other Sailors, hey, this is something that we need to do? I mean, or do you think it was just kind of a, okay, check in the box?

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Actually, we've had follow-up with several Sailors who have, when they realized that we didn't have the information that they needed, they said, tell us how we can do better for ourselves and for future Sailors. And so, they do make that effort.

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

Yes, it does make an impact. When we have had the chance to go out and engage with members of the fleet, just in the last year and a half, we've been trying to do more of that, and there has been a marked improvement in the COR's and the deck logs that we receive from those commands, just because they understand why it's important, not only to them, but in the bigger picture. And we are going to try, in the future, to go out and do more of that, and make it not only easier for the commands to submit, but also kind of give them a little training on this is what it would be great to see in those, and if you can just save us a copy of the stuff you're already writing throughout the year, and then

just send it to us, you don't have to reinvent the wheel every single year, because it is a big ask. You're trying to condense a year's worth of activities into a report that can vary from three pages to, I've seen ones that are 70 pages long, on the COR reports, depending on how much effort is put into them, and for them to know what it's used for, that always, always leads to an improvement, and everyone that I've spoken to, active duty through the course of fleet engagement, has been so receptive to receiving our help.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

That's good to hear.

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

You know, one other thing that we use the COR's and the deck logs for is the Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships (DANFS), and those are the official histories of ships, and those can also be used to help with veterans' claims. So again, it's another thing that we can do to tell the history of the Navy, and the Sailors are the ones that are helping us write it.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

I appreciate all that extra information, because hopefully, you know, some Sailors will be listening to this podcast, and then be able to like; "hey, hey shipmate, here's why we're doing this, and this is why it's important," because as the both of you said, it's not a matter of, for you now, importance, but 30 years of importance down the road. So when, I guess, this Navy poetry, when did Sailors start writing poems, and what's so special about that?

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Well, it goes back into the mists of time.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Okay.

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Okay, that's just the trite answer. In reality, we don't know how far back the tradition goes. The earliest recorded deck log poem, so far, is from 1926.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

And that was on the USS Idaho, correct?

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Yes, the USS Idaho, and it was written by a young ensign, whose name was Edward Vincent Dockweiler, and so he wrote it, and I just love the fact that the last couple of lines in it, he says; "if the captain ever sees this log, my God, what will he do?" And the best part is, the Captain did see the rhyming log, and the Captain wrote on the deck log sheet; "the Captain is glad to see that the old Navy custom of writing up the first watch of the year in rhyme is known to the younger members of the service. The watch stands as written."

[Cliff Davis, Host]

And so it actually has been done prior to that. Just we've not been able to find it then.

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Correct. That's the first one that is really documented, but obviously the captain's note there really makes it seem as though it is an earlier tradition. And then if you look at another deck log from 1926, or a story from 1926 from the battleship Pennsylvania, Lieutenant J.G. Arthur Agaton recalled that, he said; "the skipper was a humorless fellow who had never heard of this tradition, and sent the log back to me for rewriting in less rhythmical style." So clearly, they've been doing this, it's just we haven't been able to find it. There's been a couple of researchers who have gone through every deck log from the 1890s forward, maybe even earlier. And these are the earliest references that they've been able to find.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Wow. And it's surprising that they've gone that far back and haven't been able to find anything else. So with the poems, Naval History Heritage Command has been doing a poetry contest, I guess.

Is that what it is or?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

Yes, the command itself has been hosting the contest since 2021, where anyone who chooses to participate, it's completely voluntary, can send us a copy of the poem that they've written as the first watch of the new year on New Year's Day. And we read through all of them. The deck log team chooses what we feel are the top 10, then a triad of former or current Navy personnel from within the command or by network reviews those top 10 and picks what they feel are the top three.

And then our command director, retired Admiral Samuel Cox, he ranks them first, second, and third, and he gives that information to us. At that point, we start working on the nuts and bolts of getting the information put together on announcing the winners and putting together the prizes.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Okay, so was it always NHHHC that ran the contest before, or how long has the contest been going on?

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

We haven't determined the exact start date of the contest, but a couple of magazines back in the 60s and 70s ran kind of competing contests. The Navy's official All Hands definitely ran a contest. We couldn't determine what the prizes were.

And then the Independent Navy Times also ran contests where there was a cash prize. But the All Hands, they would print out their favorite ones every year, and some of them are quite hysterical.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

So how many poems are written a year? I mean, is this historically, there's only so many with the Idaho back in 1926. Did it gain in popularity at some point in time?

And then has this kind of ebbed and flowed, or has it waned a little bit?

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

It seems like an ebb and flow, really. I mean, you see a lot of them during World War II, which is surprising because they're in the thick of it, but they're making commentary on being away from home or commentary about the enemy, etc. You also see a huge upsurge during the Vietnam era.

But part of that could be because of the contest, and there was a cash prize. So it's hard to say if that was the impetus for the big surge in the Vietnam era. And then since, I guess, the last 20 or so years, it seems to have really fallen off.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Why do you think that is?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

Just probably a lack of knowledge of the history of the poem or the first watch being in verse, a lack of interest as society has changed and become less about the arts and more about technology and what's directly in front of you. Since we've revived the contest, I think we have seen a little bit of an uptick, at least in the entries for every year. It has steadily grown, the number of entries we've received.

And more ships participate in the tradition than participate in the contest. So I think this last year we received about 35 entrants, and the year before that it was like 29 or 30.

But the number of ships that participate in the tradition is probably closer to 50.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Okay, out of 200 plus some odd ships. So a good clip of people that are doing it. But, you know, trying to preserve that.

And I guess that gets into my next thought of why is it important to keep a tradition like this around?

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

I think it's because it is a way to connect with the past, with the entire history of the Navy. You know, in 1926, you've got this young Ensign writing. In 2023, you've got a young Ensign writing.

And there's a through line between the two of them, you know, nearly 100 years apart. But there's something that connects them together and connects them to something that's bigger than themselves.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Right. So where can people learn more about this?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

There's our website, of course. The Naval History and Heritage Command website has a page specifically dedicated to deck logs that we put together when we first decided to restart the contest, as well as the first, second place, and third finishers for 2021 and 2022. And there are several articles that are out there.

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

And then if you've got lots of time on your hands, you can go to the National Archives, particularly their website, and just look for the January deck logs. And I would say most of them are going to have something in verse. They tend to range from the World War II era up through the Vietnam era.

And it's just a nice little way to spend some time looking at these poems.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Right. Now, do either of you have a favorite one personally that you've read and came across?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

I think my favorite one right now is actually the 2022 winner from USS Bunker Hill, which did decommission in 2022. And so they made sure in their deck log poem to talk about the entire history of the ship, which I thought was very clever.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

That's kind of neat.

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

I don't know. I'm still partial to the Basilone's January 1966 one that can be sung to the tune of "Downtown" by Petula Clark.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Oh, really?

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Yes. And I'm not going to sing it.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Oh, come on. I mean, that took some talent to figure out how to do it, to sing it to the song of "Downtown".

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

I can read a little bit of it to you.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Go for it.

[Anna Holloway, NHHC Historian]

Pretend you're singing along. "Midnight has struck and here on the Basilone we're all alone, alone. The duty section here wants to wish everyone a Happy New Year, new year. But the officers have made it, followed closely by the crew. There's no one left on board to wish a happy new year to. Sad are we.

They packed up their troubles and woe and have found all the places where lights are aglow and gone, downtown. Gone where the action is, downtown. Drinking their beer or fizz, downtown where we would all like to be."

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Interesting. So have you ever been able to do any more research about the person who

wrote this and their reasoning of why to write it to this tune of "Downtown"?

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

Well, it was a hugely popular song at the time. So that's my assumption is that they just decided to do that. I haven't researched this person.

One of the authors that I have researched, though, is the author of the very first documented poem. And that's from the Idaho. And it was a young ensign named Edward Vincent Dockweiler, as I said before.

Dockweiler would later receive the Navy Distinguished Service Medal for his actions as senior Prisoner of War officer in the Philippines, where he rallied fellow prisoners and kept them calm en route to prisoner camps in Japan on a Japanese hell ship during World War II.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

So he had a very interesting history then.

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

Very interesting history.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

I know that in some of the research I've actually done on this project, one of the deck logs that I actually found really interesting was from the USS Guam when it was in the Philadelphia Navy Yard that was written by Lieutenant A.T. Emerson. And he put in the log, quote, "The French sub Casablanca and the namesake of the Yard. The latter vessel mentioned has the military guard.

The Atlanta and Savannah we must really include. Also, yard and district craft. But wait, we can't be rude.

And forget the mighty warship of our allies across the sea. HMS Lord Nelson sits in dry dock number three." So is there anything else that you guys think has been neat or interesting that you've come across reading all these poems and the history of it?

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

To me, I think what's so neat about it is that it's almost wholly an American tradition, an American naval tradition. There's nothing like it in the Royal Navy, and I'm not sure there's anything like it in any other international navies. It is a tradition that is also celebrated by the Coast Guard, where they have ships and shore stations writing poems.

And they just launched a contest.

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

Oh, great. Yeah, because we do have some Coast Guard members try to enter into our contest. And unfortunately, due to legal reasons, we haven't been able to accept those entries.

And they've all been great. But you know, Uncle Sam is very particular about who can print what.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

All right. It's interesting to know that the Coast Guard is doing this as well. Now, how long have they been doing it for?

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

I am not sure. I think it's in the past couple of years, though there may have been contests within the Coast Guard earlier on the same time period as the Navy's. But it's just a neat e-service tradition.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

And finding out that it's purely American, uniquely American, in fact, at that. So for the public that's listening, how would they be able to access these deck logs and command operations reports?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

Well, as I mentioned earlier, the Naval History and Heritage Command maintains ownership of the 30 most recent years of deck logs. So if they need a log from that time frame, they can reach out to us through our website. It does require a FOIA request.

Anything that is 30 years and older is held by the National Archives at their College Park location.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

And so for this year, I'm sure there's a contest going on. When does the winners get announced or have they been decided yet?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

So the 2023 contest winners were announced in the summer. The 2024 contest starts on January 1st, 2024, where U.S. naval commissioned ships have until the end of February to get us copies of their poems should they choose to participate. And at the end of February, we go through the review and selection process.

It does take a couple of months because we have to coordinate schedules with several different people. And then the winners of the 2024 contest will be announced probably in June or July.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

It was earlier mentioned about prizes and such. And well, the Navy don't issue a monetary prize. What is there besides the bragging rights of, hey, we did the best poem out there?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

The first place winner gets a piece of Constitution Copper, which is copper from the oldest commission ship in the world, not just the U.S. Navy. And as they refit the ship with copper, the old stuff coming off, we get pieces of it and we can use that as awards. And the deck log team gets Constitution copper for the first place winner. First, second, and third place all get a coin from our director, Sam Cox. And we get it mounted in a really nice custom frame. And those usually get mailed out by October.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Okay. So any final thoughts?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHHC Archivist]

I mean, I love the poems because it's a unique opportunity for the sailors to really write in their own voice. The Navy has a very specific set of information that it requests to be in the deck log. But the New Year's poem, they can write pretty much whatever they want in whatever way they want.

So sometimes the poems rhyme or will come in couplets and you really get a sense of the individual Sailors. And they talk about everything, you know, from what happened in the pandemic and having to stay out to sea longer because they couldn't come into port versus how they feel because their ship is decommissioning and, you know, the emotions that that evokes. And we don't get to see that quite as much in the other entries the rest of the year.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Makes me almost want to go back and look at some of my former ships and see if they participated.

[Anna Holloway, NHHHC Historian]

But they have to be uniquely creative because even though they're able to use their own voices and write in verse, they still have to include all of the information that is required

as part of the deck log. Yes. And so that means that sometimes they have to make some really tortured rhymes.

[Alexis Van Pool, NHC Archivist]

Some very interesting word choices. Yeah. I have seen ones where they just kind of tack that on to the end and it's not actually a part of the poem, but it's still in the first watch entry.

But the really good ones include it in some way.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

So now what would that first entry information be that they have to have?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHC Archivist]

A lot of systems, status, things like that, the engine.

[Anna Holloway, NHC Historian]

Who's the senior officer present afloat? Just even the tension on the cables. If they're docked, where are they getting their shore power from?

What ships are around them? What's the sea state. It's just a whole host of things that have to be listed.

There's a wonderful one, and I'm blanking on the name of the ship, but this happened during the Vietnam era where they include all this information and then they're fired upon. So there's a little bit of a fight and then they have to go back in and amend the first watch poem. And they do it in verse, but they put the fight in.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

So is there other notable ships that you've come across that have had interesting poetry?

[Anna Holloway, NHC Historian]

To me, one of the most poignant ones that we found was the first watch entry from Thresher. And the young lieutenant who wrote that did go down with the ship just a few months later. So that one kind of gave us all chills.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

Right. With ships that have, I guess, been sunk, thinking of ships, Lexington, Yorktown, Indianapolis, are there copies of that stuff out there as well? Or were they lost with a

ship?

[Alexis Van Pool, NHHC Archivist]

It would have depended, I think, on where they were in their journey. You know, if they'd been able to make port, mail those logs off to the command and get them to us before they sunk, we would definitely have those. But anything that was on board ship, if the ship was unrecoverable, chances are they would have gone down with the ship.

[Cliff Davis, Host]

For us here at Naval History Heritage Command, it's great to see that these stories, as you said, Anna, that they are bigger than one person and how they all interweave and tie us. And to quickly recap, more information about deck logs, command operation reports, Navy poems, and the poetry contest can be found at [history.navy.mil](http://history.navy.mil). Thanks for joining us today on this inaugural episode of 'Navy Deck Logs and Sailor Poetry' on "Anchored in History, Stories of America's Navy."