

Experiences of Walter Schwartz
US Merchant Marine 1944 through 1946

After volunteering to serve in the US Merchant Marine, I was assigned to the San Mateo, California Cadet Basic School early in 1944 as an Engine Cadet Midshipman US Naval Reserve, Merchant Marine Reserve. Since I had a Chemical Engineering degree from Carnegie Tech, I was to complete basic training and six months sea time as a cadet midshipman and then sit for my third engineer's license rather than return to the US Merchant Marine Academy at Kingspoint NY after sea time to study for a marine engineering degree.

SS Sea Pike

After completing basic training I was assigned to the *SS Sea Pike* which was a C3 cargo ship converted to a troopship. My duties were to perform administrative and maintenance functions under the cognizance of the Chief and First Engineers. After 1500 army infantry personnel were boarded, the *SS Sea Pike* sailed February 19-1945 from the Oakland Army Base destination unknown. After two weeks without escort we landed briefly at Finnschafen, New Guinea and then proceeded to Hollandia, New Guinea where a convoy of about 40 ships was formed. The convoy proceeded to Leyte Island in the Philippines and then on to Manila Bay to discharge the troops who were to supplement the troops coming south from Lingayen Gulf to liberate Manila. Although the rumors were that we were to sail to Okinawa, the *SS Sea Pike* returned to Leyte.

About 450 mentally disturbed (shell-shocked) GI's, to be shipped back to the states were brought aboard. Many were so in shock that they had to be hoisted on deck in litters or on pallets by the cargo cranes. A convoy was formed of the *SS Sea Pike*, the *Noordam* (a Dutch passenger ship converted to a troop carrier) and two destroyer escorts (DE's). Two or three days out two Japanese submarines were encountered. The DE's dropped depth charges and ordered the ships to disperse. Shortly thereafter we were alone with two submarines in pursuit. We accelerated to a speed of 20 knots which resulted in violent vibration and rupture of the main condensate pipe. We lost vacuum and after taping with duct tape could only proceed at 5 knots. Although the subs followed for a few days, they did not try to overtake or engage us. That period of time was made more hectic because the troops were not to be made aware of our predicament. There were no alarms or communication over the loudspeakers. The troops were kept below decks. The subs eventually broke off and we proceeded to Enewetok for repairs. Since the repairs were not adequate, we sailed into Pearl Harbor. By that time the war was over in Europe. Pearl Harbor was full of ships and troops anticipating the invasion of mainland Japan.

The *SS Sea Pike* returned to the Oakland Army Base where the troops debarked. We then sailed across the bay to San Francisco where provisions were loaded and June 2-1945 headed south to the Panama Canal. It was rumored that our orders were to pick up troops at Marseilles and head through the Mediterranean Sea and Indian Ocean and sail to the Pacific Theater. Actually we sailed through the canal to Le Havre, took on troops and discharged them in New York on July 11.

Since my six months of cadet-midshipmen sea duty was completed, I expected to take a test for a 3rd engineer's license as previously agreed and continue sailing. The powers that be unfortunately decided that I should go to the academy and finish my marine engineering training. Since the war was still on and further education would not benefit me or the war effort, I resigned from the US Merchant Marine Academy.

SS Pan Georgia

The US Merchant Marine was under the cognizance of the US Coast Guard. They agreed that if I would serve in one of several unlicensed engine-room positions for three months I could sit for the 3rd engineer's license. I was tested for these positions, passed the tests and signed on the *SS Pan Georgia* as a fireman-watertender. The *Pan Georgia* was a small tanker which, I was told, had been a Hog Island freighter during the first World War and had been sunk, sunk again during World War Two and then converted to a steam turbine driven tanker and fitted with two boilers from the *Morro Castle*. We sailed out of New York for Beaumont, Texas on August 7 and returned to Boston with a load of oil on September 1.

I continued sailing as a Junior Engineer in the Atlantic Theater as follows:

Sept. 4 on the *Brandon Victory*, Boston to Le Havre to Boston.

October 2, Boston to Le Havre to New York on the Liberty Ship *SS Kemp P. Battle*.

December 12, New York to Brazil and return to New York on the Motor Vessel *Cape San Antonio*.

The return from Le Havre to New York on the *SS Kemp Battle* was probably weatherwise the worst experience of my short career. Five hundred of General Patton's troops were aboard for return to the states. Although we were to sail the next morning, all ships were suddenly ordered out of Le Havre. A bad storm was brewing in the Atlantic. About half the engine room crew were left ashore. My rating suddenly changed from maintenance engineer to oiler. The storm was so intense that we were driven fifty miles northeast in the English Channel. A number of ships ran aground. Since we were not carrying cargo or ballast, the ship rode high and was difficult to maneuver. The two aft cargo holds were partially filled with sea water to serve as ballast and so improve the maneuverability. Since the sloshing of the water in the holds caused an unusual rocking sensation, the holds were pumped dry.

Since the large reciprocating engines of the liberty ships were manually oiled, the oiler's job was especially demanding under normal conditions. The oiling can would have to be raised and lowered in synchronism with the movement of the cranks or the can would be knocked out of the oiler's hand. With the ship gyrating so wildly oiling was especially demanding. Also under the storm condition when the ship went into a trough the propeller would be uncovered. With no water resistance the engine would accelerate wildly. Between oilings the oiler would alternate with the engineer on watch to operate a large butterfly valve to reduce steam to the engine when the prop came out of the water. A normal ten day trip across the Atlantic took us thirty hectic days.

Since there was a shortage of electricians in the Merchant Marine, the Coast Guard requested that I take a course that would lead to a Chief Electrician's rating. This was preferable to the 3rd engineers rate. After successful completion of the course, in order to get electrician experience, I signed on the Motor Vessel *Cape San Lucas* May 28-1946, and sailed two trips to Venezuela as an assistant electrician.

SS Creighton Victory

On August 12-1946, I signed on the victory ship *SS Creighton Victory* as a Chief Electrician. The ship carried 500 draft horses to replace those stolen from Poland by the Germans during WW2. We completed three trips from Montreal, Canada to Gdynia, Poland. This effort was sponsored by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration.(UNRRA).

Since there were many outstanding contract grievances that had not been resolved during the war, the Masters, Mates and Pilot's Union went on strike. The *SS Creighton Victory* was diverted into Savannah, Georgia where she was tied up for the duration of the strike. On October 14, 1946 I signed off and went to Washington to receive an honorable discharge from the US Merchant Marine. Many years later I also received veteran status and a discharge from the US Coast Guard.

Walter Schwartz