A TRIP ON THE GENERAL’S SHIP

*By Fred Hobbs*

Until the age of 22, my travel by watercraft largely had been confined to the paddleboats on Denver’s City Park Lake. In the spring of 1955, I received an invitation that I couldn’t refuse: to take a free eleven-day Atlantic Ocean cruise from New York to Bremerhaven, Germany. The invitation came from my uncle, the one named Sam.

To be sure, the ship for this trip was not the equal of the Queen Elizabeth or the Queen Mary, but on the other hand, it wasn’t the Titanic, either. It was the USNS General Leroy Eltinge, named in honor of a U.S. Army General by that name. The invited passengers (some 3,000 soldiers, most of them fresh out of Army basic training) boarded the ship at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Just like the other 2,999 GIs, I was among those passengers on the troop ship, headed eventually for duty doing something somewhere in post-war Europe, probably in Germany.

The Eltinge was about ten years old at the time, originally acquired by the Navy at the very end of World War II, always for use as a transport. Just prior to the ship’s setting sail, a very small, but highly visible number of the troops aboard complained of symptoms from a most remarkable malady, considering the ship was still in the harbor. They claimed they were seasick! Maybe some were feeling the first pangs of homesickness or were experiencing stomach queasiness at thoughts of the uncertain journey ahead, or possibly, were faking the condition in some wild hope they could stay in the good old USA.

In any case, shortly after waving goodbye to Miss Liberty and realizing nothing but churning waves could be seen in any direction, the real *mal de mer*struck some of the men. My buddy, Ed, had offered second hand advice about how to avoid seasickness. It was clearly counter intuitive, but the notion was to eat normally and keep food on your stomach, particularly saltine crackers.

It seemed to work, especially while on deck. However, the idea was severely challenged when descending into the hold with its seemingly hundreds of four deep hammock-like bunks, occupied by snoring, heavy breathing, sometimes heaving and always odoriferous GIs.

In my personal situation, relief from those conditions came on the second day out thanks to a chance meeting with the Navy yeoman (clerk) on the ship’s crew. He worked mostly out of the chaplain’s office, which he pointed out is the place on board the ship “from which all blessings flow.” And, currently one of those blessings could be bestowed on a lowly Army draftee currently stuck down in the hold if he could edit the on-board daily newsletter. The clerk asked: “Do you or your friend Ed, know someone who could do that work?” As improbable as it might seem, I happened to be in the right place at the right time!

“Well, I said, not too modestly, “I have a very recent college degree in journalism and some media experience.” And, I mentioned I had just finished eight weeks in the Army’s clerk/typist school. “That seems like it might work,” the sailor replied. Seeing the disappointment in Ed’s eyes, I quickly added: “Can I have an assistant?” A short interview with the chaplain and it came to pass that Ed and I were assigned to write daily tidbits for the “Eltinge Crier” newsletter for the remaining nine days of the voyage…with the added privilege of sleeping on the floor of the chaplain’s air conditioned office.