

Ships

11-19-2012 by Harry Zirkelbach

On graduation for the University of Detroit in 1944 Navy Commissions were given to most we engineers who applied. Only I was sent to Fort Schuyler, New York. On completion there, I was chosen to attend Mine Warfare in Yorktown Virginia. As that class would not begin for a for a month, orders were received for duty aboard a YNS-275 (Mine Sweeper) in Boston Navy Yard, as observer.

Not bad, in the Navy two months, given a weeks too. The three weeks in Boston were akin to more vacation. Military quarters were not available in that Navy Yard and we were given a list of locals who rented short-time rooms. I obtained living accommodations from an Irishman who owned a spacious Row House at 151 Beacon Street. Attractive, comfortable, reasonable, great bed, compared to 5 years of College rentals.

Another Navy Officer has a room here, and we become life-long temporary friends, dining out most nights. He is a Dentist, his training while await a ship due into Boston that month. He chooses dinner spots, different nightly, always linen table cloths, menu choices often new to me. Here fresh fish was a norm. On an evening in this friendship we went to the toilet after dinner.

I headed to the urinal, He stopped me short,

“Where are you going?”

“To pee.”

‘Come back here and was your hands .’

Then this educational segment, in brief

“You don’t have a Social Disease, neither do I. But for hours we have handled everything imaginable, might have picked up some unwanted germ. So to protect yourself, always wash your hands before urinating. Signs you see about washing afterward, are to protect everyone else from us, and than’s O.K. Life is about protecting yourself first.”

Free useful information before I do anything!

I was to be an observer of the initiation cruise (shake-down) for a newly commissioned Mine Sweeper. These ship were wooden, 136 long, flat bottomed, bobbed like a cork.

The Crew of 50, enhanced by two Observer Officers.

All possibilities were practiced until satisfactory. High speed, sharp turns, backing, man overboard, all the natural sea checks.

Then the mission, mine sweeping. Sailing a straight line, gear extended to the unsafe waters, to widen the area safe, repeated again and again to ensure no underwater mine threat. This proved effective. The design of the YMS never changed, even when added mine threats were developed.

This YMS also possessed Anti-Submarine depth charge laying. There were two K-guns, one ether side aft midship, throwing depth charges 100 yard from the YMS, and a rig for rolling the charges off the fantail. The YMS had to maintain a reasonable speed to avoid beg victim of its blasts. Still at 50 ‘ depth, the explosion, 100 yards aft and abeam, rattled the lithe YMS.

Most sailing days from Boston were in fine weather. The flat-bottomed, shallow draft YMS ,a joy to the guests. Operations were carried outside shipping channels, the YMS cruising alone training in the unmarked Massachusetts Bay of the Atlantic Ocean.

One successful practice depth charge drop, a crewman pointed starboard aft, at the white ocean surface. The crew recognized the sight immediately. The Captain ordered reduced speed, a turn toward the area, then had the cook and another, man the ships dingy. They rowed to the “catch”. The charge had exploded near a school of cod. Bodies floated to the surface belly up. The seaman with a net began lifting Cod into the small boat. Crew and we passengers watched, fishing without hook and line. The crew now had fresh fish for a couple of weeks, and we passengers marveled at the ingenuity. For as time passed it became apparent that the school of cod had not been slain, but stunned. Even while “fishing”, white bellies had begun to wiggle, move and finally swim out of sight. The two crewmen were applauded as they returned, all smiles.

On yet another training day, a storm had began the night before. My fellow passenger and I were surprised to learn we were to sail into the Atlantic. Storm Warnings posted at the Harbor entrance ordered all ships back to port. On we sailed. That mission; since not all boats had radio, search for, notify any seafarers found, to return to port.

In the hours we searched in the blustery storm, the YMS proved very ship safe, surviving great pitch and toss on the water. It provided valuable training.

For the two passengers and a few crew, it was a day to remember.

We became sea sick, remained so most of the day.

There was no shelter from Our storm, on the fantail, engine room, lying in bunk. Some relief leeward midship, leaning against the cabin. There Howard and I hid, the ship rolling 40 plus degree to and fro. I chose to lean at a slant, almost erect when the ship was lowest to our side. Suddenly, a larger wave continued the roll. I began leaning seaward, then headed toward the railing already in the ocean, when with a heave of the ship I was thrown back to the bulkhead where I reinforced a grip on the ship.

Later when in calm water I confided to Howard, that I thought I was falling into the Ocean. Howard who had been standing beside me calmly replied, "So did I".

We had been indifferent to death.

In 3 years of Explosive Ordnance Active Duty, 25 Navy Air Reserve these weeks would be my only assignment to a ship for other than transportation.

