

Tales of a green seaman

There is a direct relationship between long hours standing watch on the bridge of a ship and the quality of the conversation there.

It does not improve.

Seafarers don't talk sports or politics. They are too out of touch.

Company gossip, dreams of careers "on the beach," cars, land deals in the north woods and plans for upcoming time off. These are the subjects that fill the hours between watch chores.

Shipboard banter approximates bad barber-shop talk, or that shared by people stuck together in a slow elevator.

You scan the horizon, watch the radars, check the chart, mind the clock, spot-check the stern wake, scan the horizon again and worry some more about that port light in the distance. Is it getting closer or moving off?

One finds it amazing that so many long hours of repetitive exercises have been distilled into so many exciting tomes on the library shelves.

Because sooner or later, after many four-hour watches over miles of ocean, the conversation on the bridge always returns to the one subject that no one enjoys.

Seasickness.

"We were coming across the Atlantic. The ship was under water most of the time. The stewards couldn't cook. All they made was cold sandwiches. Not me. I sat down and said, 'I want pancakes. Pancakes, big and thick, buttery with syrup.' Everyone turned green." — Dennis "Slim" Hanschmann, third officer.

"Bullwhiskers. Even captains get seasick. Happens to anybody. Doesn't matter how long you've been out here." — Pete Savisky, chief mate.

Some guys said extra hot-pepper sauce was a cure. One fellow swore that smoking Marlboros, with the filters pinched off, did the trick.

The one and only time that I fell prey to the green peril came on my first morning on my first ship, much too long ago.

I had signed on the night before, at 10 p.m. It was hot on the

INSIDE TALK



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Delaware River, mid-June. We were tied up at Marcus Hook. I found my quarters, stowed my seabag and went to sleep.

That loose-everywhere feeling woke me up. Steamy sunshine filled the open porthole. Last night the ship was as still as a stone. Now the power plant vibrated through the steel.

Were we at sea? I sat up. Ohhhh no.

I dashed from my berth to the porthole and stuck my head out. I was looking straight down at — the Borough of Marcus Hook.

I think I set a world's record. I got seasick aboard a ship that not only was not at sea. We had not left the dock.

All they did was fire up some steam and I turned oyster. Just that once, though.

Messman Stoney Wilson, from Mississippi, liked to say the best thing about the South was the train heading north.

Not long after I had joined the crew, Mr. Wilson was mopping the deck. He leaned into my compartment. "We'll be passing by the mail buoy tomorrow," he told me. "Gimme yours."

"Mail buoy?"

"Oh yeah," he said. "Get your letters together. I'll give them to the captain."

We passed all sorts of buoys and towers. Why not a mail buoy? The idea seemed marvelously workable.

Until Messman Stoney started reading my mail aloud to the crew the next night at chow.

The ship held "Lazarette Court," an occasional proceeding whenever newcomers needed to be reminded not to leave tools out in the weather, or not to be

too sloppy with the paint.

Most every new seafarer became a defendant in Lazarette Court, even if no infraction were committed.

The lazarette, of course, is the stowage area at the stern. Usually spacious, it is a great place to sing. The voice booms off the steel bulkheads. Anyone can sound like Caruso.

Seated at a bench around the corner and in front of the lazarette, the defendants waited, wondering when they would meet their promised legal counsel. They grew increasingly worried.

"It will be a fair trial, won't it?" they had spent the previous week asking their seniors.

"Of course," came the reply. "Strictly by maritime law."

The defendant's shaky comfort tended to evaporate when he heard a powerful voice from the stern announce his case.

"...So bring on the next guilty bastard."

One day I gathered the nerve to ask the mate if I might go up to the bridge and relieve Iron Mike, the self-steering gear, so I could learn the helm.

I did this often, when I was off watch. But it baffled me how the rest of the crew knew precisely, down to the minute and second, when I was steering.

I was atop the bridge. They were all the way astern. How could they phone up and alert the bridge that I was giving her a little too much right rudder, maybe not enough left?

Then when I finished, and immediately after I had restored the ship to Iron Mike, a call came up saying, "Thanks for getting Baldwin off the wheel."

How'd those guys know?

Elementary. A badly steered vessel leaves a wake that looks like large, sweeping S's stacked one atop the other back to the horizon.

Iron Mike's wake is as straight as a chalk line.

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