

Westward HO!

Well, not quite yet!

This story is true. It takes place onboard the USS Ponchatoula (AO-148) in Long Beach harbor. While names I used (other than my own) are fictitious they do represent actual men who were onboard that morning.

AUGUST 15TH 1956 LONG BEACH HARBOR

The day began at 0600 with the shrill call of the Bosons Pipe, over the 1MC, followed by, "Reveille! Reveille! All hands heave out and trice up, the smoking lamp is lit in all authorized spaces".

I rolled out of my rack landing with both feet on the cold green tile deck. After a long stretch, I opened my locker grabbed my shaving kit and towel and headed for the wash-room. But first I tried to wake Seaman Ryder, (a Radarman Striker) who slept in the top rack over me. He rolled over, pulled his blanket over his head and groaned. As I left the compartment I commented, "You better get your ass out of there before Smitty shows up and puts your butt on report. "Go away and leave me alone" he snapped.

I shrugged my shoulders and proceeded to the washroom. By the time I got there was only one sink available out of fifteen. Even though the washroom was good sized and held two rows of sinks it had to serve three compartments full of sailors, first come first serve! By the time I finished shaving and headed back to my locker there was a long line-up forming outside in the passage-way waiting their turn. It pays to get up early.

After making up my bunk and putting on a clean set of undress whites I prepared to leave the compartment just as the word was passed for morning sweep-down. But, before I left I decided to give Ryder another poke and told him he'd better get up. He muttered something nasty under his breath, but he finally rolled out. At that point I figured it was better not bug him anymore.

Our compartment was on the main deck Starboard side aft. To get to my work station I had to go up a ladder one deck, to the next level and walk forward past the Bakery, Post Office and Ships Office to the door leading out to the cargo deck. Once outside I had to weave my way across the cargo deck past all the booms, cables and steam wenchies to reach the forward ladders leading up to the bridge. On an

oiler there was no way to go from the aft section to the forward section, where the bridge is, without going outside.

My work spaces were three decks up to where the Pilothouse, Navigation Bridge and Signal Bridge were located. By the time I got there Jim, the other Quartermaster Striker had already begun sweep down. "I'll grab a bucket and get some water", I called out as I headed down the ladder one deck to where the water supply was. By the time I got back to the signal bridge and started swabbing the deck, we were still the only ones up there doing any work. Jim and I were the only two seamen in the gang. The rest consisted of three Third Class Petty Officers, a Second, a first and a Chief Quartermaster. Usually by the time the three Thirds would show up we were already finished with the morning sweep down. They rarely, if ever, showed up in time to help. The Second Class and First Class Petty Officers weren't required to participate.

After finishing sweep-down we heading off the bridge as the they passed the word, "Breakfast for the early watch standers". On this particular day that included both of us because we were both part of the Special Sea and Anchor detail for getting underway.

By the time we got to the Mess-decks the place was buzzing with crewmen all trying to get fed before having to go on to their assignments. I grabbed a tray, silverware, bowl and cup and got in the food line. The menu was fried eggs, bacon, hot cakes with butter and syrup, oat meal, dry cereal, fresh fruit, milk and coffee. There was so much food that the six compartment metal trays would hardly hold it all. Being that there were around 300 men to be fed before 0800, it was get your food, eat and leave, no sitting around for a second cup of coffee or a smoke.

After breakfast I ran down to my locker to retrieve an extra pack of smokes to keep me supplied for the morning, then headed straight for the bridge. By the time I reached the Pilothouse the word had already been passed, "All hands man your Sea Detail Stations. Make all preparations for getting underway". This was the day the ship was heading to WESTPACK (Western Pacific) for a six month deployment.

Sea Detail Stations

My Sea Detail station that morning was Quartermaster of the Watch. I worked from a Chart Table in the forward right hand corner of the Pilothouse. I was responsible for making timely entries in the

Ships Deck Log, including, but not restricted to, speed and course changes, orders given by the Commanding Officer or the Officer of the Deck. All entries are made in chronological order using military time for the time zone the ship is in. It's important to mention the Deck Log and my specific responsibilities that morning because of what was about to happen.

Underway

While I was busy getting set up the Quarterdeck watch brought the deck log up to me. By the time I got the log book organized the rest of the QM,s had arrived on station and the Captain and XO were on the Bridge. We were now ready to get underway.

My first log entry was when the Bosons mate of the Watch announced "All Special Sea and Anchor Detail Stations report manned and ready sir". "Very well" replied the Officer of the Deck after which he notified everyone on the bridge that "The Captain has the Con". "This is the Captain, I have the Con". Every order given after I took over the log and every order or happening from that point on had to be properly entered.

The Captain ordered, "Anchors away". The ship began to rumble and shake as the huge anchor chain was being hauled aboard. Once the report that the anchor had cleared the bottom was received the order was, "Shift Colors". The American flag (Ensign) on the fantail was then hauled down and the streaming ensign was hoisted to the gaff located on the main mast amid-ships. The Signalmen hoisted the ships call sign on the Starboard yardarm and we were underway.

As soon as the anchor was clear of the surface the old man ordered one long blast on the ships whistle which notified all ships in the harbor that we were underway. His next order was, "Left standard rudder, port back one-third, starboard ahead one third". The order was repeated sharply back by the Helmsman acknowledging he understood and was carrying out the command.

You could feel the big ship vibrate and come alive as her huge bronze screws began churning the water. Slowly she began turning to port. "All-ahead flank, steady up on course 272°", the Captain called out. Again he got a snappy response from the helmsman. The ship began picking up speed as her bow headed straight for the opening in the breakwater and the open sea.

Danger

The old man stepped out onto the starboard wing of the bridge and noticed a civilian tanker, outbound in the main channel heading for the same breakwater opening we were. We were closer to the opening so the Captain ordered two short blasts on the ships whistle. According to the inland rules of the road we were asking the ships permission to proceed ahead of her to port. The outbound ship responded with two short blasts indicating she was given us permission. The old man then increased our speed to all-ahead two-thirds and we really started gaining speed.

At this point the old man told the OOD, "keep an eye on that ship and let me know what she was doing". Then he headed over to the Navigator's table to check on the recommended course once we cleared the Breakwater. No sooner had he reached the Navigators' table when the OOD cried out, "Captain she's not altering course or speed and appears to be closing on us fast".

The Captain ran back to the starboard wing and mumbled, "What the hell is she doing". The ship was the *David E. Day*, owned by the Richfield Oil Company. She was really moving and you could see her

bow cutting a path through the water. By now the distance between the two ships was closing rather quickly and it didn't take long to realize that we were headed into harms way.

It was obvious the *Day* hadn't altered her course or speed and it was now too late for the *Ponchatoula* to change course. We were too close to the breakwater wall to allow a course change to port. A turn to starboard would have placed us right across the bow of the *Day* and get broadsided. The Captain chose to increase speed and continued heading for the breakwater opening.

Collision inevitable

The *Day* was quickly closing the gap. By now it was obvious there was going to be a collision. The only question was how serious was it going to be. The Captain ordered "four long blasts" on the ships whistle to warn the *Day* that she was on a collision course with us. The *Day* never slowed down or attempted to change course, but she did respond with four long blasts.

The Captain shouted, "Sound the collision alarm". The Navigator came running across the Pilot House to me and said, "Collins, make

damn sure you are recording all the orders including every whistle signal, don't miss anything, this is going to be very important". "Aye, aye sir"! At this point things were happening fast and furious. Everybody's adrenalin was really pumping, but there really wasn't any panic. Everyone was doing their jobs, including me.

There was a door next to the chart table and as I glanced out I could plainly see the *Day* closing in on us. Just then the Captain shouted, "All engines back emergency". What? This was a confusing order. No one could figure out why, at this point, he had chosen to reverse engines. We had just entered the channel and were ahead of the *Day* trying to out run her. All reversing the engines did was to slow us down and allow her to close the gap even sooner.

Collision

Within minutes both ships were broadside to each other. As the two ships collided side by side the sound of crunching steel was terrible and the ship shook all over. It was reported in the evening Long Beach Newspaper that the sound of crunching metal could be heard all over the harbor.

As the two ships came together everyone was holding their breath in anticipation of an explosion because both ships were carrying volatile loads. We had a full load of bunker oil, avgas and JP-4 jet fuel. The *Day* was carrying a full load of gasoline destined for Portland. If any tank on either ship was to spring a leak one spark could have blow both ships to smithereens.

Side by side like threading a needle, both ships miraculously passed through the narrow breakwater opening without hitting it on either side. I certainly gave both skippers credit for that accomplishment. As we were passing through the breakwater opening I once again peered out the door and could see the crew of the *Day* standing on the wing of her bridge. Once both ships cleared the opening and headed out to sea they separated and like two giant ghosts steamed off into the fog bank lying just off the California coast. The *Ponchatoula* headed south and the *Day* headed north.

The Captain immediately called for Damage Control Central to investigate the damage, paying close attention to any possible leaks. It seemed like an eternity before DC Central called back and reported that while there was extensive damage to the starboard side there

were no apparent leaks. Our whole crew was shook up, especially after realizing the possible disaster we averted.

The Navigator came over and asked if I had been able to get everything recorded in the log. I reported back, "Yes sir! I've got everything down just as it happened". "Good", He Said, "Because that log is going to be crucial at the Coast Guard Board of Inquiry". Later the log book was locked up for safe keeping.

As soon as damage control central had completed their preliminary inspection the Captain brought the ship back into port and dropped anchor in the same anchorage the ship had previously left. The ship now had to wait for the Coast Guard to make an inspection.

Later that afternoon the *Day* returned to Long Beach and dropped anchor across the channel from the Ponchatoula. It was reported that the *Day* had apparently sustained a small leak in one of her tanks. For the next few days the two ships just sat there like two gladiators staring each other down.

We should have been well on her way to Hawaii by now, but here we were anchored in Long Beach Harbor, bummer. Everyone in

the crew had called home the night before to say their goodbyes because it would be six months before we could call home again.

There were no cell-phones or lap-top computers back in 1957 so once the ship left the states there were no communication with home except for letters. That evening everyone who had liberty was able to call home and explain why they were still in Long Beach and would be for almost a month while repairs were made to the damaged side.

Coast Guard Board of Inquiry

The Coast Guard ordered both ships to remain in port until they completed their investigation. About a week later the Coast Guard ordered certain members of both crews to report to the Federal Court House in Long Beach where they convened a Board of Inquiry. Since I had been the Quartermaster of the Watch on that fateful morning, I was called to testify that all entries in the log book were correct to the best of my knowledge. I was ordered to reviewed all the entries and report their correctness and tell exactly how and when they took place.

The lawyer for the Richfield Oil Company attempted to make the crew of the Ponchatoula look like a bunch of amateurs because most were young and like me, and had only had been on active duty in Navy

for a little over a year. His attempt didn't work, the Coast Guard found the Captain of the *Day* responsible for failing to yield the right of way and therefore placing both vessels in harms way. This incident had been quite an experience for a young Seaman, one I will never forget.