

(Writer's note: This paper was written for a Creative Writing Course at the University of Dayton Osher Institute for Lifelong Learning. It was written for the "uninformed" on Navy and Naval Academy life in the 1950's, so is pretty fundamental in explaining some things that may be common knowledge to others. James M. Gallagher November, 2020)

"31 Knot Burke and the Summer of 1954"

One of the favorite poems of my youth was "Sea Fever" by John Masfield

Sea Fever

*I must go down to the seas again, to the lonely sea and the sky,
And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by;
And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking,
And a grey mist on the sea's face, and a grey dawn breaking.*

*I must go down to the seas again, for the call of the running tide
Is a wild call and a clear call that may not be denied;
And all I ask is a windy day with the white clouds flying,
And the flung spray and the blown spume, and the sea-gulls crying.*

*I must go down to the seas again, to the vagrant gypsy life,
To the gull's way and the whale's way where the wind's like a whetted knife;
And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow-rover,
And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trick's over.*

Growing up principally in the mid-west I wanted to go to sea someday! I had visited the Atlantic Ocean on vacation, but had never been to sea.

I opened the door to that option when I received an appointment to the U. S. Naval Academy class of 1957, and entered the Academy in June, 1953.

After completing the grueling requirements of Plebe Year at the Academy, I thought it would be all down hill from there. Times were simpler then and the curriculum and life-style for the midshipman had changed little since the completion of World War II.

Tradition then was for all newly anointed Third Class (sophomores) or "youngsters", as we were called, and new First Class (seniors) or "firsties" midshipmen to spend two months on a cruise, learning the ropes of being at sea. The "youngsters" performed enlisted duties and the

“firsties” performed officer duties on sea-going fighting ships. We were each assigned to a flotilla of ships, assigned to different groups, each with different liberty port destinations in Europe.

This was not a luxury cruise. There was not much new ship construction since World War II, so we were assigned to ships that were older. I was assigned to the USS Macon (CA-132) a heavy cruiser. She had a compliment of over 600 officers and crew who were augmented for the summer cruise with a cadre of some 80 midshipmen, including ROTC cadets from civilian schools. She had wooden decks, and had the traditional sights and smells of a veteran ship.

Conditions aboard were cramped with the augmented crew of mostly green midshipmen. We were birthed in crew quarters, with three or four stacked high hammocks, a small locker for our personal effects, open showers and pig trough like “heads” (Navy lingo for bathroom) and absolutely no privacy. Being an old vessel, we had limited fresh water, so had to observe “water hours” for showers. Cold, salt-water showers with soap that didn’t lather were no fun. And, except for the captain and admiral’s sea quarters, and a few command post locations, nothing was air-conditioned.

The USS Macon was a special ship, however. It was the “flagship” vessel of the Commander of Cruiser Division 6, meaning we had an admiral and his staff aboard. The admiral was Rear Admiral Arleigh Burke, USN, a legendary World War II destroyer captain who earned the handle of “31 Knot Burke” for pushing his ship’s speed to an unheard of 31 knots in pursuit of the enemy in the Pacific. Would I actually get to meet the admiral?

Each midshipman on the Macon was assigned to various four-hour blocks of special duty time, called “watches,” while at sea. One of the more coveted watches, like being assigned a watch on the open bridge while underway, was to be assigned to the Admiral’s Watch. This was a four-hour block of time, when a “youngster” was assigned to follow the admiral around and be at his “beck and call”. While ships at sea are on duty “24-7” there is some down time for meals, sleep, etc. My only Admirals’ Watch was after normal duty hours, I recall from 1600 (4 PM) to 2000 (8 PM) hours, in June, 1954, somewhere in the mid-Atlantic. I relieved my predecessor standing at parade rest outside his stateroom hatch (door). I awaited Admiral Burke to engage me.

It happened! Shortly into my watch, the senior aerographer mate (Navy jargon for weather man) arrived with the weather forecast for the admiral. I knocked on his stateroom hatch and Admiral Burke allowed the aerographer to enter. I peeked into the stateroom as the hatch was opened to see what was “behind the curtain”. A whole new world!

Surprisingly, Admiral Burke asked me to come it. When I entered the flag quarters, I had entered the “Emerald City”. Do people actually live like this? I felt like I was suddenly on a luxury cruise ship. My eyes darted across the room, taking in the sights and smells—fresh coffee, a real bed (bunk) with sheets, a private “head”, conference table, a reading room.

While I was taking this all in, the aerographer completed his report to the admiral. This was before computers, so he brought large maps and charts. The admiral thanked him and I escorted him to the hatch. As he and I departed the quarters, the admiral said, “Mister Gallagher, I want to talk with you.” Wow! Was I going to be complimented for doing such a great job, or what? “What did the aerographer say?” Now the navy term for goofing off is “skylarking” and I had demonstrated it during the visit. I had no idea what was said. I learned in my plebe year at the academy if you don’t know the answer to a question the only acceptable answer is “I’ll find out, sir!” which was my response. Admiral Burke said something like “you do that!” And, my next hour or so was somewhat hellish—I raced around the ship to find the aerographer mate, eventually found him and had him go over the charts with me. I returned to the flag cabin and briefed the admiral, to his satisfaction. With a storied grin on his face, Admiral Burke said to me: “Did you learn anything, Mister Gallagher?” I responded with a hearty “Yes sir!”

Admiral Burke went on to earn his third and fourth stars and was the only naval officer in history to serve three 2-year terms as Chief of Naval Operations, the top Navy post, and was credited for creating the Navy Seals during his tenure. Interestingly, the captain of the USS Macon in the summer of 1954 was (then) Captain U.S.G. Sharp, Jr., USN. Sharp was selected to flag rank and retired as a four star admiral.

I graduated from the U. S. Naval Academy in 1957. While I ultimately enjoyed my total Academy experience, including three cruises, it turned out the U. S. Naval service was not for me. From 1947, when the U, S. Air Force became a separate service, the Air Force offered regular officer commissions to up to 25% of both West Point and Annapolis graduates. The Air quota was always filled. This continued until the early ‘60’s when the Force Academy started to fill that need. I took the Air Force commission option because of the career specialties it offered that better suited my aptitudes. Also, on smaller ships, I got seasick every time I left port. The life of a sailor! I went on to have a successful combined military and civil service career in Air Force acquisition. Paying attention to the task at hand and “I’ll find out, sir (or ma’am)” became benchmark “rules of the road” in both my professional and personal life. Finally, I still “bleed” Navy blue and gold. Beat Army!

Thank you Admiral “31 Knot” Arleigh Burke for that chance engagement and lifelong learning experience in the summer of 1954!

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