

An Infantry Soldier Temporarily Becomes a Sailor

by Bill Correll, 398-E

I wonder if any of you of the 100th Infantry Division Association happens to remember that little three-day hurricane we got into on the way over to France? Practically all the members of our 100th Division aboard the ship became seasick. The ship was the USS *General Gordon*. I am fortunate that I do not get seasick and know it must be a horrible feeling.

One day, the ship's captain announced over the PA system that if any soldier could do any type of sea duty, to please volunteer. I told Sergeant Manchester that I could splice rope, steel cable, and knit fish nets; and if that would help, I would like to volunteer. He got the OK from our CO, Captain Garahan, who arranged for me to talk with a ship's officer.

The officer, in turn, took me to the bridge to see the ship's captain. The helmsman was having a hell of a time keeping the ship on course. I told the captain that while living in New Orleans, LA, at twelve years of age, I would go to the warehouses and wharves along the Mississippi River at the end of Canal Street to look at the ships from various countries which were docked there. One day, my father called my attention to rope that had been spliced. I had never before seen such a thing. After looking at the splices several times over a period of days, I taught myself to splice rope, and later, steel cable. It is done differently from rope. My cousin, who was six years older than I was, taught me to knit cast nets. The captain said, "Good," and told the officer to put me to work under the boatswain's mate who was in charge of the forward paint locker and who was responsible for all maintenance work on the ship.

Guess where the forward paint locker was located? It was a large workshop under the forecandle deck. It was the roughest part of the ship to be in during a storm. It went up and down very fast in those rough seas, as if going up and down in an elevator in an eight-story building. I had never been in, nor seen waves of such height. "Black," the boatswain, who was a Chief, had a thick black crew cut. He was from the south side of Chicago, was called "Blackie," and was a short, husky, rugged, tough character, but very friendly. His crew consisted of five sailors, one of whom was absent due to seasickness. I was put to work in his place. The Chief told me that the storm was classified as a small hurricane. He also said the ship was listing 45 degrees in those high seas. It was the USS *General Gordon*, and manned by the US Coast Guard instead of the Navy. Most of the crew had never been in such high seas, which probably accounted for many of the ship's crew becoming seasick. Since I don't get seasick, they told me I should have been in the Navy or Coast Guard instead of in the Army. They called me "salty," which they told me was a nickname used to refer to sailors who had sailed the seas for years. I remained working with the crew until about two hours before we landed at Marseilles, France.

In working with the crew, I got three meals per day, ate with the crew in the ship's mess, in addition to a fresh water, instead of a salt water, shower each day. We worked hard splicing steel cable and different sizes of rope, some of which was as much as two inches in diameter. Most were eye splices. The crew informed me that aboard ship, it is not called "rope," but "line" instead. After the storm subsided, we worked "top side" on the forecandle deck, sewing by hand canvas sail material to be used for bunks and lifeboat covers.

During the storm, in order to keep from being washed overboard and in order to get from the midships compartment into the paint locker, we had to wait until the forecandle deck went completely under water, then run as fast as we could across the open deck between the two compartments before the ship's low-pitched back up again spilling all the water from that deck down onto the regular deck. When the bow went down, the screws at the stern would come out of the water and vibrate the entire ship.

One day, two of the sailors were ahead of me in line as we ran to the paint locker. The first man fell over the steel plate partition rising about a foot above the deck at the bottom of the hatch after he opened it. The second sailor fell over the first and I couldn't get in. When all that cold water showered down from the forecandle deck above, it hit me like a ton of bricks sweeping me across the open deck and slammed

me up against the steel gunwale. I almost went overboard! It scared the hell out of me, for if I had gone into those rough seas, they probably never would have found me! At the edge of the deck, at the bottom of the gunwale, were elliptical drain holes with three one-inch steel bars across them to keep anyone going out to sea. When all that water started running off the deck, it sucked me down onto the steel bars and banged up my knees. As soon as I could get to my feet, I ran to the hatch, unlatched it, and got into the paint locker, locking the hatch behind me. A sailor gave me a pair of blue dungarees to wear until he could get my GI clothes to the ship's laundry for washing and drying.

During the hurricane, those sailors would smuggle ship's food suitable to be eaten by seasick victims for me to take below to my seasick buddies.

After the storm subsided and it became calm, the Chief gave me permission to bring not more than four of my buddies up on the forecastle deck, which was ordinarily "off limits" to all but the crew. Here, they enjoyed the less-crowded deck and the nice sunshine. As we went through the Straits of Gibraltar, the beautiful saddleback porpoises would swim in front of the bow, slow down, then let the forward motion of the ship bump them high above the water. They were having a good time, and my buddies were fascinated, for they had never seen porpoises before. We also saw flying fish come out of the water and sail about thirty feet or more above the water's surface. They were beautiful!

When I had to leave my work with the crew and go back to regular army duty, I hated to leave those nice sailors, and I believe they hated to see me leave as well. While living in New Orleans, I fell in love with boats and ships and hated to leave the USS *General Gordon* but, on the other hand, I am proud to have served in the 100th and Company E, 398th.

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