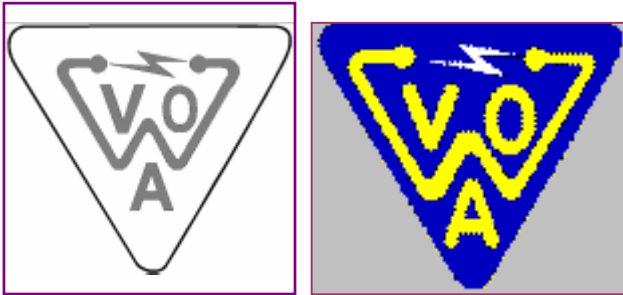


# VWOA NEWSLETTER

Email Issue #10

2005



VWOA Director, Bernard Flatow, gave a small gathering at the VWOA Business Luncheon, an interesting reenactment of the activities of the Merchant Marine. Starting with the Revolutionary War and ending with their present day service and participation in the Military Sealift Command in support of the Iraqi War. He created an atmosphere of real participation by including the attending VWOA members in a reenacting of the Boatswain Piping Memorial Presentation usually made at the Fort Greene Monument for the 11,000 mariners who died interred in the British Prison Ships anchored on the shoreline of Brooklyn during the retreat of the American Revolutionary Army from Long Island..

Bernie's presentation was very well received and he answered questions and explained various Pictures and Charts, representative of the Revolutionary War period.

Thank you Bernie for an excellent presentation, we all learned a great deal of new information about Merchant Marine history.



## *William B. Devoe, His Daughter Denise and his XYL, Helga*

We at VWOA gave you some insight to the Devoe Family in previous Email Newsletters, but the new photo introduces his daughter Denise. Bill Devoe writes: Denise has two girls, Sarah (13) and Rachel (16) who are both accomplished figure skaters and practice for competitions daily.

This figure-skating talent started with Helga. Her father taught her to skate on a tiny frozen pond in their back yard high in the Alps in Bad Hofgastein, Austria. Helga won the Figure Skating Championship for Austria long before I met her.

Helga taught Denise, who won the US Eastern F.S. Championship and now is coaching the girls. I'm not a figure skater but cheer them all on. We also have a son, Greg but he is like me and not a figure skater.

*William B. Devoe*

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*We now introduce the Author of this Civitavecchia, Italy Diary !!!!*



World War 2 U.S. Merchant Marine

Bill Devoe, Chief Radio Officer -(age 22)

## From Baltimore To Civitavecchia to New York

I had returned safely from the Murmansk run on the Liberty ship SS Joyce Kilmer arriving in Baltimore on June 5th 1944. We were scheduled to sail again in about (2) week's time.

Most of the crew from the last voyage, including the Captain, had decided that the

Maritime Service Rest and Rehabilitation program on Long Island, NY was just what they wanted and so, except for me, the Kilmer had a new compliment. I thought the ship was lucky and decided to sign on again. Captain Hiram Gallop turned out to be just as good a mariner as Captain Wilson had been.

Our cargo of mines, artillery shells and other arms of destruction were loaded at Sparrows Point just outside of Baltimore and where Bethlehem Steel had built the Kilmer.

After setting radio watch we sailed down the Chesapeake to Hampton Roads where the convoy conference was held. At the convoy conference the Kilmer was chosen to be a Radio Direction Finder watch ship. The RDF controls were in the Chartroom near the Gyro Compass. The chartroom was on the starboard while the radio room was opposite on the port - both on the boat deck. I was given the frequencies and instructions on contacting the commodore and escorts if I heard a submarine homing signal.

Early June 1944 was D-day and a few days later our armies liberated Monte Casino and Rome.

Our cargo was for the Italian campaign but we didn't know our port of discharge. This would come via a Broadcast To Allied Merchant Ships or BAMS message sent in Morse code after we arrived in the

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Mediterranean. These BAMS messages were in number groups of (5) and required decoding by subtracting a similar group of numbers and then looking up the meaning of the results using two codebooks.

BAMS messages were sent on a schedule from an Allied Shore Station. After calling CQ BAMS there would follow a long series of ships call letters. The Joyce Kilmer's was KTLR so I would listen for this call sign. Then if I heard it I would stay on frequency and copy the coded message.

The weather was good and the convoy and escorts moved along at about 9 knots. After three uneventful days the activity started. There were depth charge explosions ahead and on the port and starboard of the convoy. I stood the RDF watch in the chart room but could keep an eye on the radio shack where the assistant operators were on duty.

One evening, about 6 pm, I heard a definite homing signal. My heart was really racing as I used the TBS (Talk Between Ships, a low power battery operated transmitter) and gave the bearings to both the Commodore and the escort in plain language. All night long there was heavy depth charge activity. In the morning one of the corvettes came dashing by the Kilmer and blinked to us that a submarine had been contacted and put down. I really felt good when I read that message.

The wolf packs were out there and the convoy kept making course changes signaled by flags flown by the Commodore rather than by radio signals, which would have given our position away. No ships were torpedoed during that crossing. Our many course changes steered us around the waiting u-boats. We must have made a grand picture from our protecting aircraft.

When we reached the Straits of Gibraltar, we formed up in two columns and went past the "Rock" without incident. We had a lot of air cover this time and no enemy action. We broke away from the convoy after passing Tunis and made our way up to Siracusa, Sicily. Sicily had been taken during the summer of '43 just before the Italians had surrendered.

As we arrived in Sicily, our armies were moving up the Italian peninsula and were in the process of liberating Rome. We anchored in the circular harbor of Siracusa for a few days but no one left the ship. The balmy spring air brought some of the local girls down to the water to bath and wash clothes. We took turns with the binoculars.

Radio watch was continued as if we were underway at sea. Finally a BAMS message for KTLR was broadcast. After decoding we were told to proceed independently to Civitavecchia.

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This city is just north of Rome at the mouth of the Tigris River and is considered their port. The next day we pulled the hook and sailed through the Straits of Messina. This was very interesting because of the whirlpool. The ship proceeded straight into the moving water without changing rudder position and we did a very slow 360-degree spin before emerging from the far edge. It was spectacular.

That evening I saw Stromboli. According to British Admiralty Chart 172, this island "is formed by a single volcanic cone, 3,135 feet high and still active; by night the reddish reflection of the crater can nearly always be seen. The N.W. side of the mountain descends steeply to the coast and is barren; the N.E. side is verdant and cultivated." I was so impressed by the sight of my first volcano erupting at a distance of about 18 miles that I made a sketch of it and copied the above description from the British Admiralty chart into my diary.

Our next stop was a brief one in Naples. After the pilot came aboard, we anchored inside the breakwater. The Captain and Armed Guard went ashore and returned the same day. They had received information on the danger of floating mines so we did not depart until the next morning when visibility would allow us to avoid these floating dangers. Arrival at Civitavecchia was the

following morning. Our arrival was pretty exciting.

We picked up the pilot and proceeded past the breakwater and swung around heading for a nearby stone pier. Our speed was excessive and with engine going full astern we continued with tremendous inertia towards the stone breakwater we had just come around. There were several PT air rescue boats tied up along the breakwater. We majestically but with diminishing speed headed towards these boats. When their crews saw us heading in their direction at too great a speed there was a lot of frantic action. Lines were dropped and two of the craft were pulled along the quay out of harms way. The Kilmer, shuddering from full astern engine kept right on coming and crunched the bow into the stone pier. We must have been traveling at about 3 mph when we hit. Our forward energy was dissipated in the crumpling stem and bow. We lost the carpenter shop and the paint locker but otherwise no serious damage and no one was hurt.

Civitavecchia had been bombed and was deserted. The steep hillside was covered with ruined homes and torn up streets. There was rubble everywhere. While ashore, I found a RR station also in ruins. I poked around inside and liberated a large brass telegraph key. (Unfortunately this prize was





*H. Hans Brakob KØHB*

The Day I Learned Some Humility  
**Or**  
"Don't Ever Send QRQ To SUQ"

By Hans Brakob, KØHB

Uncle Sam kept me busy in my youth as a Navy radioman, sending me on many expense-paid cruises to all manner of exciting places, including several cruises to the Mediterranean Sea as part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet.

After a few years at sea I fancied myself a pretty hotshot Morse operator.

Some of you out there who sailed in the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet during the late 50's/early 60's may remember the famous "Task Group Commanders Circuit", commonly called "SIXES-ALFA". This was a high speed Morse net that routinely clipped along at 40WPM with busy spurts somewhat faster. It was a matter of some pride that only holders of an official "Speed Key Certificate" were allowed on the circuit, and only the best of those were qualified as NCS. (*Yes, before you could use a Vibroplex on a Navy circuit, you had to pass an examination and obtain a certificate.*)

Anyhow, as a qualified NCS on SIXES-ALFA, there was no doubt in my inflated ego that I was one of the hottest seagoing ops to ever key up a TBL. (TBL was a big black 100W MF/HF CW transmitter fitted in WW-II/Cold War era destroyers.) Certainly there was no mere civilian radioman out there to challenge my skills.

In those days the US Navy maintained a small presence in the Red Sea/Persian Gulf called the "Mid East Force". The Commander of this force was a Commodore who maintained his flag not on a warship, but on a seaplane tender (mother ship for seaplanes, which the Navy no longer even flew) docked at the Brit base on Bahrain. It was a pretty low-key military backwater. His "force" usually consisted of a couple of destroyers on loan from the 6<sup>th</sup> Fleet in the Mediterranean.

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These destroyers rotated to this duty for about 2 months by a transit of the Suez Canal.

Vessels transited the canal in convoys, northbound and southbound, which were coordinated to meet and pass at a “wide spot in the road” at the Great Bitter Lake. If there were any warships in the convoy, they were the lead ship, and the lead ship carried a UAR Canal Pilot.

Communications between the pilot and the Suez Canal Authority was via an MF (420 Kc/s) Morse circuit between the lead ship and the UAR station SUQ at Ismailia.

In early October of 1961, my ship, USS Henley DD762, drew the short straw and was sent off on Red Sea patrol.

After a last liberty port at Piraeus, Greece (remember “Fix” beer) we transited to Port Said and embarked our pilot for the trip through the canal.

The pilot had me file a departure report to SUQ and promptly at 0700 we started our transit. Periodically (at passing El Ferdan and Deversoir, if I recall correctly) he issued short progress reports which I sent to SUQ.

In due time the convoy entered Great Bitter Lake and anchored to allow passage of the north-bound convoy coming up from Port

Suez. Prior to weighing anchor for the remainder of the passage, the pilot was required to obtain updated instructions from the Canal Authority. Turned out this happened just as I was due to be relieved on watch for noon chow.

Wanting to turn over a “clean” log to my relief, I was somewhat impatient that the operator at SUQ was operating at a rather leisurely pace (perhaps “only” 25 WPM). Surely this lowly civilian operator could send just a bit faster?

So I slid the weights back to the rear stop on my Vibroplex and sent. . . .

“SUQ DE NHXW QRV QRQ K”

What happened next still causes me regret every time I contemplate that short cocky transmission. An image comes to mind of a swarthy-complexioned mustachioed Egyptian with a wicked gleam in his eye, chomping an unlit cigar, pulling the weights completely off his key, and muttering “I’ll show this gob some real QRQ”!

The crisp Morse transmission, which came back to me, was utterly off the chart in terms of speed. No operator on the vaunted SIXES-ALFA had ever even caused me to really concentrate, but I was missing every other character this fellow sent. In embarrassment, I sheepishly unplugged my

speed key, broke in, and on the pump handle sent....

“SUQ DE NHXW QRX OPERATOR CHANGE QRS”

..... and turned the circuit over to my relief.

Never again, and I mean NEVER again, has the opsig QRQ ever passed my fingertips.

73, de Hans, KOHB

## VWOA MEMBER NEWS

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**Sent:** Wednesday, November 09, 2005 11:17 AM

**Subject:** Re: Ninth Edition of the VWOA Email Newsletter

Gentlemen:

To answer your three lead-in questions today "we are getting older by the day"!

All of the clubs and groups I belong to are experiencing this problem. It is nothing that the organization is doing, or not doing, at this time. We are just going to that big Key in the Sky faster than we are renewing the flock. And, there are so many other things to do these days that you and I only dreamed of as we read the Comic Books of the day (70 years ago).

I know this won't help you much but all of us Old Old Timers are doing our best, but the pace is much slower these days. Our Best Wishes to you all.

73, Cliff Bruce-W7ER, et al.

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VWOA Directors.....

You are doing quite well. I have enjoyed the Trip Tales very much. Maybe I'll send you a squib on receiving my first msg my first day on the Clearwater/KUGD in 1935.

Bill Wilkinson/N2HOH, Princeton.

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We at the VWOA Newsletter would like to hear from you and try to pass along to the rest of the VWOA stories of events that you have experienced and that you feel the rest of the membership would enjoy hearing about.

Send us a picture or two and we will try to include it in one of our Email Newsletters.

We would prefer to hear from you by Email at: [71147.1437@att.net](mailto:71147.1437@att.net)

Or

[wenben@nyc.rr.com](mailto:wenben@nyc.rr.com)

but if you must, send mail to:

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