

# VWOA NEWSLETTER

Email Issue #11

2006



The new year has started and the following Officers and Directors have taken their positions as of January 1, 2006 for the next two years.

## OFFICERS

<i>PRESIDENT</i>	Alan M. Ehrlich
<i>1st VICE PRESIDENT</i>	Richard T. Kenney
<i>2nd VICE PRESIDENT</i>	Douglas S. Stivison
<i>SECRETARY</i>	Francis T. Cassidy
<i>ASSISTANT SECRETARY</i>	Wendell R. Benson
<i>TREASURER</i>	J. Michael Shaw

## DIRECTORS

John Chooljian  
John Dziekan  
Bernard C. Flatow  
Edward F. Pleuler, Jr  
John H. McGonigle  
Norman Mills

Bob Shrader - W6BNB recently joined VWOA and opted to join the list of previous VWOA Members who have contributed stories that reflect their participation in the history and growth of Radio and Wireless Services through out the world. In QRZ he lists his Bio as:

First licensed 1931, shipboard radio operator '33, deputy sheriff '39, Lt. in charge of Radio instruction of Deck Cadets at US Merchant Marine Academy, Kings Point, NY, then the Radio Communications instructor at Laney College, Oakland CA. Author of textbooks ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION, ELECTRICAL FUNDAMENTALS FOR TECHS, ELECTRONIC FUNDAMENTALS FOR TECHS, AMATEUR RADIO THEORY AND PRACTICE, and FIRE FIGHTING--HOW YOU MAY HAVE TO DO IT. Many articles in amateur magazines. Basically a CW operator, but use SSB, VHF FM, RTTY, etc. First rig a 210 triode Hartley osc, 250-V on plate, 40-m zepp antenna, 201A triode regenerative detector, Morse key and made own side-swiper and bug. Now use HB '85 cootie key and '33 Logan Speed-X bug, usually 160 to 20 meter bands. Ragchewer, not a DXer.

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## *A 1930s RADIO OPERATOR'S STORY*

By Robert Shrader [w6bnb@aol.com](mailto:w6bnb@aol.com)

It is interesting to think back over one's life about the many things that were seen and experienced. One small part of my life was the six years I spent as a young ship's radio operator and officer sailing around the world and to many foreign ports aboard many big luxury passenger liners and then one rusty little freighter. Lucky for me it happened to be when sea-going radio operating was most interesting with a lot of operating and generally just a great life aboard all of those big ships. .

My radio career started when I passed the test for my amateur radio operator license in April 1931 and was assigned the amateur radio call sign "W6BNB." After graduating from the Oakland California Technical High School that December I decided that it would be smart to learn more about the new and developing science of communicating by radio. So I enrolled in the Radio Communication course at the Central Trade School in Oakland. In a couple of months I was able to pass the 2nd Class Radiotelegraph and 1st Class Radiotelephone commercial license tests. Since there were no radio jobs available for young high school grads at the depth of that Great Depression era I continued at school practicing sending messages to other students in Morse code and receiving messages from them on a

"mill" (typewriter). In 1933 a Mr. Pelmulder, of Globe Wireless in San Francisco, which was owned by the Dollar Steamship Line, suggested that I might practice copying some commercially transmitted radio code. So each Friday I made the long trip from Oakland across the bay to San Francisco by train and ferry boat, then by streetcar and finally by bus down the peninsula to a spot about 15 miles south of San Francisco. From there it was a quarter of a mile hike down to the Globe radio station KTK, perched high above the Pacific. The chief operator sat me down at a mill and watched me as I copied some of the commercial code being received.

Finally, in September of 1933, on a Tuesday morning, Pelmulder called me with the long awaited news that I could sail as the assistant radio operator on the SS President Harrison if I could get the necessary uniforms and be aboard on Thursday before the 4 o'clock sailing! It took some doing but you can be assured I was aboard that ship well before departure time! This was to be my first of six around-the-world trips on either the SS President Harrison or two other similar Dollar liners! The Chief put me on watch as we left the pier at San Francisco (because there was never any real radio traffic for the first few hours after leaving port). So, out we sailed through the unbridged Golden Gate into the setting sun. I was suddenly told to advise San Francisco radio station KPH that our ship was leaving SF bound for HU, (radio

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abbreviation for Honolulu), I immediately turned on the transmitter and called radio station KPH. Unfortunately it was at 16 minutes after 5 p.m, right in the middle of an International Silence Period. There are two of these 3-minute periods starting at 15 and 45 minutes after each hour when only distress or extreme emergency traffic may be transmitted on the distress and calling frequency of 500 kHz. I was immediately told by the KPH operator to “QRT SP.” (QRT is the radio “Q” signal code meaning “Stop sending!”) What a way for a beginning young radioman to make his first commercial on-the-air transmission!

That first trip around the world on the SS President Harrison, one of the Dollar Line “502” ships (their length in feet). It had a respectable cruising speed of about 12 knots (14 mph), but could do up to 15 knots if pushed and with a following wind. What an education that was for a 19 year old kid. I soon found that once we reached port we radio operators were essentially passengers. Before tying up at a dock, or anchoring, we would sign the ship off by radio, advising the nearest coastal radio station or stations that we were “QTP.” meaning we were entering their port and shutting down. We could then change from uniforms to “civvies” and get ourselves ready to trot down the gang plank along with the (other?) passengers. In most cases we only had to be back aboard ship an hour before sailing time, even if we were in

port for three days. That’s a lot of sightseeing and free time in all those 22 ports we visited.

These were always interesting cruises. Basically there was always at least swimming out at Waikiki Beach or sightseeing around Oahu Island; then buying things on the Motomachi in Kobe, Japan, followed by a super Sukiyaki dinner served by a little Japanese Geisha girl whose only mission was to provide everything a customer wanted at that fabulous Kobe hillside Kiyomizu restaurant. We took trips to see the sights in Shanghai; then there was buying more things and riding up the hill to see the view of the cities of Hong Kong below, and Kowloon across the water where the ship was docked. In hot Manila there were two or three days for golfing around the walled city, sightseeing and a lot of loafing. Down in Singapore of course there were Singapore Gin Slings on the veranda of the Raffles Hotel. In Penang, Malaysia, we often rented a car and were driven to see the Snake Temple and their beautiful gardens, something at all English ports. From there it was sightseeing and swimming in Columbo, Ceylon followed by observing many grizzly sights in Bombay, India. There were the desert countries to see along the shores of the Red Sea and later watching the barren desert landscape moving past us as we slowly sailed up the Suez Canal. We only stopped a short time at Suez, then on to Port Said (Port “Sah-eed”)

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followed by a whole day at Alexandria, Egypt. We often rented a sail boat and explored the Egyptian coast out in the Mediterranean ocean. There were the sights in Naples with visits to Pompeii and a few days later; seeing the beautiful statuary in Genoa; Italy. In Marseilles I wandered around the town trying out my high school French. My French teacher, Madame Molle, was from Marseilles which helped my accent. After six days in New York City and Boston it was down to Havana for Cuba Libras at the hotel bars or lounges and seeing local sights, followed by transiting the Panama Canal; then up to Los Angeles and finally docking in SF for three days at home with the family. There was never a question of age when ordering drinks at any of the foreign ports because of my 6-ft-2-inch height and the fact that I was always with older shipboard officers.

On my last trip around the world I jumped ship at Port Said and took a train to see Cairo. From there I taxied over to the pyramids, climbed up a few of the 5-foot blocks of the big pyramid, rode a camel, walked around the sphinx and finally taxied back to Cairo from where I flew to Alexandria to meet the ship again that evening. The two other radio operators covered for me. As far as I know, no one else ever knew I was not on board that day We had three operators by this time and two of us used to cover for the Chief Operator when he took off for four day visits to his home in upper New York state

while the ship sailed from NYC to Boston and back. He was hardly in a position to complain about my one day off.

A well known 500 kHz (or “600 meter”) watch-standing radio receiver at that time was the old “regenerative” IP-501a. When its regeneration was increased to the point of oscillation, its normal operating state, it radiated a weak radio signal that could be heard at least 20 miles away at sea. We often heard such signals from other ships that might even be invisible below the horizon as we met or passed them. Once, just for the heck of it, I sent a QTP to station VPB, at Columbo, Ceylon, by keying my receiver’s oscillating detector’s 22.5-volt B+ voltage connection. The VPB operator, a mile or so away, couldn’t believe that a ship with such a weak signal could be sending a QTP when entering his harbor! So I turned on our 2 kilowatt spark transmitter and repeated my QTP. I wonder how long his ears rang?

My around-the-world voyages on 502s were followed by many San Francisco to East Asia trips on larger Dollar Line 535's. They only went to the ports of Honolulu, Yokohama and Kobe in Japan, Shanghai and Hong Kong in China and Manila in the Philippines with return trips via the same ports. At Yokohama there was a nice stable and riding academy up on the hill to which we often took a taxi. The Japanese personnel there were greatly

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impressed when I vaulted into the saddle on their horses! Ah-soooo. Of course, being 6-ft-2 was quite a help. But this added jumping to my basic horse handling abilities that I had learned on well trained cow ponies at a ranch near Le Grand, CA, a few years before.

There was always one lifeboat aboard all of the passenger liners that had a battery powered radio transmitter and receiver in it. One of our duties, usually in Honolulu, was to be lowered into the bay to set up the radio antenna on the sailing mast and make a radio check with both the ship and the shore station. This was always an interesting afternoon excursion for us.

It seems that all stories today must have their sexy side. But kids of the middle class in the twenties and thirties were not as free and easy with the opposite sex as they are today. In fact, the only time that sex really entered my seagoing years was once in Alexandria when a couple of young officers and I decided to check out one of the “shows” put on at one of the whore houses nearby. We sat through one of them! After that, when we looked at those greasy, dark skinned Egyptian women that turned our stomachs, we couldn’t get out of there fast enough. I believe this would have been the case with most young officers in those days. It was certainly not true of the older deck hands and the engine room gangs who usually headed

for long stays at the nearest bars or whatever, as soon as they had some free time ashore. On one trip I remember that a cute young girl, Bobbett Bailey, used to come up to chat with me in the radio shack because there were no passengers anywhere near her age aboard. We toured a couple of port cities together. But it wasn’t too long before the Skipper warned me to stay away from her.

My last Dollar Line ship, in 1936 and 1937, was the majestic, luxurious, 20 knots speed, 654 feet long, SS President Hoover, built in 1928. She and her sister ship the SS President Coolidge were the Pride of Pacific shipping at that time Being newer, she did not have one of the old quenched-gap spark transmitters like the older 502's and 535's did, but she had the same one kilowatt medium and high frequency (MF and HF) Globe Wireless Gamatron vacuum tube oscillator transmitters that all of the smaller ships had. The 500 kHz watch standing receiver was still the old 3-tube IP-501A regenerative detector and its 2-stage audio amplifier. On one trip, in Manila, we were scheduled to spend three hot days at the dock. With nothing better to do, I took our IP-501A apart, as any amateur radio operator or “ham” might do, and installed a 6CB6 pentode vacuum tube radio frequency amplifier stage in it. I used the antenna tuning circuit as the input section of the RF amplifier stage. Its shielded output was

coupled to the oscillating detector's tuned circuit. Wow! Did that ever beef up that old receiver. That RF amplifier stage also blocked the RF signal radiation of the oscillating detector. From then on we stood our 500 kHz watches using the loudspeaker only. Of course when we arrived back at San Francisco they really chewed me out for doing such a dastardly thing – but it worked so well they left the RF amplifier in the receiver. Because it no longer radiated a radio signal it would have been impossible for enemy submarines to have tracked us down with radio direction finders and sunk us as they did many ships that used such regenerative receivers in the first year of the soon-to-come war years! Actually, from 1941 on, all maritime regenerative receivers were required to have RF amplifier stages in them between their antenna input and their oscillating detectors!

*TO BE CONTINUED IN NEXT EDITION*

With Author Bob Shrader on the SS President Hoover on his last trip on her cautiously navigating the Wangpoo River and Yangtze River during 1937 and the Japanese-Chinese War and Beyond.....

## VWOA MEMBER NEWS

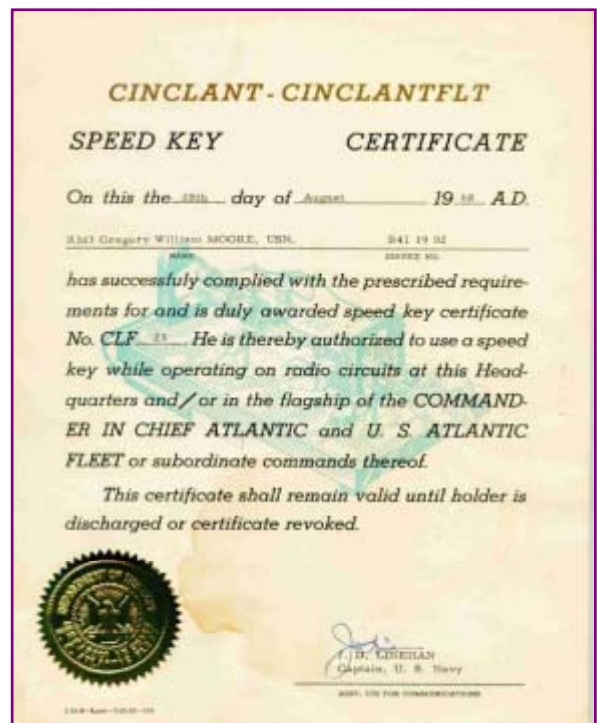
Wendell Benson, our Membership Chairman reports on a conversation with Greg "GW" Moore after we published the 10<sup>th</sup> Edition of the VWOA newsletter.

GA, OM

In the 10th edition of the VWOA newsletter, I really enjoyed the story by Hans Brakob, KOHB about his adventures sitting the 6-Bravo circuit and his speed key certificate.

I thought that it might be appropriate for you to have a copy of one, issued by CINCLANTFLT, and also of the memo by the USCG RM1 , Jim Finken, who administered the exam...

Greg "GW" Moore    **WA3IVX**  
Veteran Member



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Thanks Greg for the Speed Key Certificate!!!

We will hear more from Greg "GW" Moore in future issues of the VWOA Newsletter. He has provided us with the following expectations given to Wendell Benson.

I am working on the story of the USS America (CV-CVA-66) call sign NMIB for possible future inclusion in the newsletter, with the anecdote about my 1970 "adventure???" of being either one of the only, or the only RM to work MF from a commissioned US Naval warship to a Communist Chinese shore station. This was done to secure diplomatic permission for an aircraft from the carrier to overfly some islands which were (and are) Sovereign territory of the PRC in order to cut down the flight time of a MEDEVAC flight for a CPO who had suffered a Heart Attack, and was being evacuated to Kai Tak airport. Since USN combat vessels don't normally operate MF, and I was one of the only RM's aboard with a large amount of experience in this, having worked this mode in Argentia, NFLD (NWP) I was pressed (happily) into service, but operating with a HUGE crowd of high ranking officers, including the Admiral, pressing up against the chair, trying to roll the paper out of the mill so they could see what was being copied (while you were copying same) and tapping on the key, "Just to see what it felt like", was a "interesting"

experience. Well, no problem in contacting the shore station, and shifting down, etc, getting the message thru, and we received permission for the overflight (I was kind of amazed at this), but this victory was tempered with sadness, as Chief Kivgne, ultimately, didn't make it..... He was, though, honored, aboard, the next day.

tnx much

73  
Greg "GW" Moore  
WA3IVX/NNNOBVN

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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.

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