

VWOA NEWSLETTER

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*Dollar Steamship Line
A 502 Operating Position 1933*



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.

At 92 Years young, is he now the Dollar Steamship Line's oldest radio operator? Pictured with his equipment in the above panel is his TS-930S, FT-920, SB-230 2-mtr rig, HB ant tuner —and above his head, his HB Armstrong beam rotator.



The "PresHoover" 1933



*Robert Shrader
Dollar Steamship Lines Youngest
Operator for Seven Years*

A 1930s RADIO OPERATOR'S STORY

By Robert Shrader w6bnb@aol.com

PART 2

1937 the Japanese-Chinese War and Beyond

In 1937 the Japanese-Chinese War was well under way. The "PresHoover," as we always labeled her on messages, on my last trip on her cautiously navigated the Wangpoo River that fed into the Yangtze River, to our berth above the river frontage "Bund" in central Shanghai. We could hear rifle fire as we sailed up and then back down the Wangpoo. A week or so later, when we arrived at Manila, we were turned around and sent right back north with a

complement of U.S. Marines to deliver them to the naval ships stationed in Shanghai. We were also to take American citizens back to the U.S. and out of the war zone.

A few days later as we started up the miles-wide Yangtze River mouth toward Shanghai, the East China Sea tide was going out. The Hoover had to drop anchor and wait for the next high tide when the Yangtze River would be deep enough to allow us to sail up to the Wangpoo. All night long we could see the distant shelling of the beautiful Chinese city of Shanghai by Japanese war ships anchored either in the Yangtze or somewhere up the Wangpoo. The shelling appeared to us as little red dots moving from North to South and into the city. They were far enough away from us that it was hard to hear more than a distant rumble from the bombing and shelling.

The next morning a Japanese warplane passed overhead, apparently checking us out. An hour or so later we began hearing warplanes diving at something near by. As the bombs began to land in the water on both sides of our ship it became evident that WE were the target! The Skipper, the Chief Mate and the Quartermaster on watch decided to put a steel deck between themselves and the airplanes. Being on watch just aft of the bridge I also thought it was a good idea. So I followed them down the ladderway. One bomb made a shuddering direct hit on the top deck killing one of our mess men. Another landed right

next to the ship and did a bang-up job on the beautiful furnishings of the main salon, and injured several passengers at the same time.

The Skipper turned to me and said, "Well, Sparks, I guess you better send an SOS." So I hot footed it up the ladder, turned on the kilowatt transmitter and sent the SOS message I had to make up as I went along. This was no time for sending the dozen 4-second dashes separated by 1-second spaces that were supposed to be sent before transmitting an SOS message! Nor did I bother with the slow hand key to send at the specified speed of 18 words per minute either. Being only a few miles from the radio coastal station XSG near Shanghai and knowing what excellent operators they were, I used a semi-automatic "bug" key to send the SOS message twice at about 25 words per minute that the SS President Hoover was being bombed by Chinese airplanes. The Chief Mate had made that identification to the Captain while we were on the deck below. Those Chinese pilots probably thought we were the Asama Maru, a big Japanese passenger ship nearly our size that was supposed to be somewhere in the area. I guess they were also blind because we had a 40 foot long American flag stretched out on the top deck just aft of the bridge and radio room to be sure that no idiots would make that kind of a mistake! Incidentally, when sending an "SOS" it is supposed to be sent as one character . . . _ _ _ . . . with no spacing. It is a special distress character, not the three

Morse letters . . . _ _ _ . . . for "sos." To be printed correctly SOS should be over-lined, or over-scored. to indicate that it does not mean three letters, but the three letters are sent without any spacing between them.

Hearing our SOS, a nearby Japanese destroyer immediately came to our aid, followed by a British cruiser. We signaled the Japanese destroyer, not an enemy ship then, that we did not need their help, but requested the British ship to send doctors to aid ours. A couple of hours later a U.S. Navy destroyer came racing down from Shanghai to take our Marines up-river to that city. We never did get to Shanghai that trip. A few hours later we up-anchored and sailed directly to Honolulu at full speed.

At Honolulu on one of the radio broadcast stations they had a program about the bombing of the SS President Hoover when we arrived there. Many of the officers, and of course the radio operator who sent the SOS, participated in that broadcast.

We finally arrived in San Francisco for dry-docking and ship repairs. I had been on the Hoover for well over a year, so I decided that this was as good a time as any to take a trip or two off for a vacation. Shortly thereafter the Hoover was repaired and sailed again, without me. However, a couple of weeks later as she was sailing directly from Kobe to Manila she went aground one dark night on the tiny rocky Japanese island of

Hoishoto. Luckily the grounding of the ship resulted in no crew injuries. About four days later, after removal of all the equipment that was possible to salvage, the crew members were taken off, leaving the ship to grind itself to pieces on the rocks. Such was the end of one of the United States largest most luxurious Pacific passenger liners.

What had been my first ship, the old SS President Harrison had an interesting career eight years after my three trips around the world on her, which had ended in 1934. In early December of 1941, she was sent up the Yangtze River to remove U.S. Marines from a Chinese city as a war appeared to be in the offing.

On December 7th came Pearl Harbor. After receiving word of the attack on Honolulu, the Captain turned her around and headed for the Aleutians to try to get back to the USA. Unfortunately she was sighted by a Japanese cruiser. To prevent her from being taken and becoming a Japanese ship, the Captain ordered her to be driven up onto the rocky north shore of the Yangtze. Fifteen of the crew and passengers were lost but most made it ashore. For a while they were treated fairly well but then the crewmen were put back aboard and ordered to repair and re-float her. Eventually Japanese divers from Shanghai made the necessary under-water patches and she was floated again, but not before the Americans had thrown everything useful

overboard, theoretically to lighten her and to allow her to float. When she was moved to Shanghai her crew became the first WW2 American prisoners of war and were all sent to Japanese POW prisons for the duration.

In 1942 the Japanese commissioned the old SS President Harrison as the Kaikko Maru, but she was soon torpedoed. She was repaired again and sent out as the Kachidoki Maru.

On September 12, 1944 she was sunk by the submarine USS Pampanito, the same sub now on exhibit and open to the public at a dock near Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco.

One of the really great things about being an officer on those big passenger liners was the food. We ate the same fancy cuisine served to the first class passengers, which was as good as that served in any first rate hotel ashore. We lesser officers did not eat with the passengers but were served the same food in our officer's dining salon! Our menus were exactly the same as those read by the passengers at their first class tables.

By 1938 I was tiring of all the same Dollar Line ports. After a few voyages as a vacation relief operator on the luxury liner SS Matsonia from San Francisco to Honolulu and back, I felt that there must be some kind of work that I could do ashore that was as interesting and worthwhile as operating as a sea-going Radio Officer. Whenever ashore I put out feelers for

possible land based radio operating work.

During the last couple of months in 1939 I took a trip down to Panama on a little single-operator rust-bucket freighter, the SS Curaca. It stopped at quite a few ports on the way down and back. She would usually anchor, rather than having to pay the fee to tie up at a dock. As a result I had to take a launch to get to see the many towns at which she stopped. That was how I was able to see some of Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, Guatemala, Acapulco, Manzanilla and Mazatlan port areas. How those places have changed today!

This was my first experience with an “Auto Alarm” on a ship. An AA is a device that is made to listen for pre-distress signals whenever the radio operator is off duty. Operators were only required to stand 8 hours of radio watch a day. (Ships standing 24-hour a day watches, such as Dollar Line passenger liners, required no AA.) Single or two operator watch hours were determined by what part of the world in which the ship was traveling. When the AA receiver was turned on it was programmed to listen for three 4-sec. dashes spaced 1-sec. apart. The electronic timing was actually set for 3.5-to-4.5 and 0.1-to-1.5 sec. Such an AA signal is supposed to be sent before any SOS message (but not mine!) or any other dire emergency message that is to be transmitted. After receiving three of those 4-and-1 signals in a row the AA circuits ring bells in the radio room, in the radio officer’s

cabin and on the ship’s bridge. The radio operator was supposed to rush into the radio room and start copying the distress message.

For the first couple of days bells rang due to false alarms many times. The bridge officers didn’t like that at all, nor did I. I soon found that by reducing the sensitivity of the AA receiver, the almost continual strong static lightning noises in the tropics were now much weaker and would now only produce false AA signals and bell ringing once in a while. Everyone was much happier.

Because the food was pretty poor on that little ship and being in the tropics almost all of the voyage with no air conditioning, it was a pretty miserable trip when compared with those many voyages on all of those big luxury passenger liners I was used to.

When we docked in San Francisco in January 1939, I received the news I had been hoping to hear. A position had opened up for a Deputy Sheriff in Alameda County to work in their Communication Division under a radio amateur friend of mine, Captain Brower MacMurphy, W6ZAW, later to become W6OU. All of the deputies in that Division were also hams. I signed off of the Curaca and the next day I was sworn in and donned the uniform, badge, gun and handcuffs of a Deputy Sheriff on duty in the wild and woolly far west in Alameda County, California.

That was the end of my sea-going radio experiences. That next summer at a night school fencing class I met a pretty little fencer, Dorothy Fox. We were married in January of 1941. That summer I took on a part time job teaching the basics of sea-going radio and electricity to Merchant Marine Deck Cadets on Treasure Island in San Francisco Bay. A few months later, on December 7th, came Pearl Harbor Day and my Treasure Island teaching ended immediately.

In June of 1942 I found myself teaching Deck Cadets again, but this time as a volunteer U. S. Coast Guard Reserve Warrant Radio Electrician at the just being opened U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, LI, NY When the USCG pulled out after a couple of months I was transferred into the U.S. Maritime Service as an Ensign to continue in charge of teaching radio and electricity to Cadets. There, I wrote my first book, a radio and electricity text for our Cadet radio course.

When the war ended in late 1945, Dorothy and I flew home again but now I found that the new type of Deputy Sheriff communication work was no longer the same and was not as interesting to me as it had been. So, in January of 1946 I took over teaching the same course in which I had been a student 14 years before. I was now a teacher of both sea-going radiotelegraph and land-based radiotelephone radio operating at the Oakland Central Trade School which had been moved up to East-

Oakland, and which later become the Oakland Laney College.

In 1958 I brought out my second text book, this one for all the theory that I was teaching, entitled, "Electronic Communication," published by McGraw-Hill. In 2006 it is still in print in its 6th edition.

In June of 1969 I retired from teaching and spent three years building a home near Freestone, CA. There I wrote texts on electronics, electricity, amateur radio and, after several years as a volunteer Fire Chief, a text on Fire Fighting. The last one started when one of their fire engines had some radio trouble. Hearing that I was a radio man they brought the fire engine up and asked if I could fix it. So I was immediately inducted into the ranks of volunteer fire fighters.

When I look back, I would say I had a very interesting and enjoyable radio based life!

THE END

By Robert Shrader w6bnb@aol.com
VWOA Veteran

VWOA MEMBER NEWS

We sadly report that we have received notice recently of the following SK VWOA Members:

JOHN E. COLEMAN W6SJT
SK 08/08/2005

PAUL O KIRRKAMM K3WPZ
SK 10/07/2005

AARON WEISBROT KB2BWO
SK 11/10/2005

WILLIAM J. MCLAUGHLIN KB1CCG
SK 01/17/2006

Era Ends: Western Union Stops Sending Telegrams

Wendell R. Benson recommends that you visit the following URL:

http://news.yahoo.com/s/space/20060201/sc_space/eraendswesternunionstopssendingtelegrams;_ylt=ApuKg7ILMWHyobv8gouH.4as0NUE;_ylu=X3oDMTA3ODdxHbHBNlYwM5NjQ>>

and read about the details of the Western Union telegram service.

VISIT www.VWOA.org on the internet!!! Doug Stivison our 2nd Vice President and Web Master of the VWOA Site has recently put the SPARKS AT SEA presentation by Miles MacMahon PhD available for download and viewing. It is a great Wireless History Lesson.

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

Or

wenben@nyc.rr.com

but if you must, send mail to:

VWOA
PO Box 1003 Peck Slip
New York NY 10272-1003