

VWOA NEWSLETTER

Email Issue #50

Francis T. Cassidy Editor

2009



VWOA Director Miles D. MacMahon PhD

For those of you who forgot, Miles is the 1999 recipient of the **Marconi Memorial Medal of Achievement** and the 2006 **David Kintzer Memorial Award**.

Miles reports a bit of reminiscing and has decided to share some of his Memories as a Radio Officer at sea and more recently his efforts to have the Battery Conservatory Project to restore the VWOA Monuments to their place of honor in Battery Park, NY



VWOA MEMORIAL TO RADIO OFFICERS LOST AT SEA

Frank and Wendell :

I am attaching a file with an article by Willa Cather about the "Wireless Boys" on the Battery Monument. (Last 6 pages of Newsletter)

Below I am typing in some poetry that I wrote a long time ago, but that still haunts me.

1945: Thoughts in a Crow's Nest

If, from some masthead, we could scan
The surface of the soul of man,
Would it appear so ill at ease,
So troubled by each vagrant breeze,
So agitated inwardly,
As does the restless, writhing sea?

1946: Departure
Down the harbor, down to the sea
And the city lights slip by.
There is not a soul in the whole
of that town, who cares if I live or die.

Last night I stood beneath those lights
As the crowds went rushing past,
And I knew again, as I had known before
That mine was a separate caste.

I live in a different world from theirs
And their world has always been
A strange, unfriendly world, with me
On the outside looking in.

So I turn away from the lights once more,
They hold no promise for me.
Mine is the life that a sailor leads,
And my home is on the sea.

1950: To A Departed Alarm Clock

No more is your pale face before me
Through the passing day.
Now the hours, unmarked by you
In chaos slip away.

Your main concern, when through your life
You were my constant guide,
Has become a constant worry to me
Now that you have died.

And the manner of your passing,
While I dumbly slumbered on,
To wake to find your precious life
And half the day, had gone.

Has made me contemplate the chance
That I my die, like you
In dark of night, with spring ,
And hands at ten to two.

These poems were the fruit of long lonely
hours in a radio room.

The first one was the first poem that I had
published and was paid for. It was written on
the North Atlantic in January.

The second one is the first version of a piece
that I rewrote many times over the years.

The thirds one was written in the Persian Gulf
on the tanker SS Samoset.
I thought that you would enjoy these samples
from my misspent youth.

WVOA Director Miles D. MacMahon PhD



WENDELL'S NEWS CORNER

----- Original Message -----

From: "Wendell R Benson"

<wenben@nyc.rr.com>

Sent: Friday, July 17, 2009 10:23 AM

Subject: governors island - fm NY Times

<http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2009/07/17/arts/design/20090717-governors-audioss/index.html>

you may have to click on the photo on the left of page called local island getaway for the video tape to activate

Wendell

> +++

----- Original Message -----

From: "Wendell R Benson"

<wenben@nyc.rr.com>

To: "Francis T. Cassidy"

<ftcassidy@optonline.net>

Sent: Friday, July 17, 2009 7:44 PM

Subject: New maritime radio museum.

Frank:

I had fwd the email about the museum to Frank Kelley since he lives in Chelmsford and thought he might have some words to say about and would know the people involved.

Wendell

To Frank Kelley:

This exchange of email's maybe of interest to you.

73 Wendell vwoa

Wendell R Benson sent copies of the following Emails:

----- Original Message ----- From: "Sandy

To: <; "Radio Officers" >

<radio-officers@googlegroups.com

Sent: Friday, July 17, 2009 11:22 AM

Subject: [Radio Officers, &c] Re: New maritime radio museum.

Whilst on the subject of Portishead radio....Does anyone know of what happened to the Marconi Marine complex on Westway Street in Chelmsford, Essex? I assume it was converted into something else?

Is there still and GEC activity business wise left in Chelmsford? Last time I was there was in 1978! Was perusing the aerial photos of the area and couldn't get "oriented" properly.

73,

Sandy W5TVW

ex- M.I.M.Co. depot technician in New Orleans

----- Original Message ----- From: "Stan Barr"
To: "Radio Officers" <radio-officers@googlegroups.com
Sent: Friday, July 17, 2009 8:11 AM
Subject: [Radio Officers, &c] New maritime radio museum.

Hi, I've just received my copy of "Radcom" - the RSGB magazine. In it is an article on a new maritime radio museum located in Fort Perch Rock on the Wirral, North West UK. The museum houses among other things the radio installations from the ships "Lady of Man", "Forthbank" and ESSO vessel, 95% of it in working condition, plus a lot of other stuff including two Telex machines from Portishead radio.

I'm surprised I didn't know about this already as I'm only a couple of miles down the coast! I'll get myself down there to take a look, health permitting, as soon as I can.

I don't think any members of the group running the museum are on this list, but I'll pass the list info to them when I see them.

Cheers and 73, Stan Barr G0CLV G-QRP 3369

----- Original Message -----

From: "Frank Kelley"
To: "Wendell R Benson"
<wenben@nyc.rr.com>

Sent: Friday, July 17, 2009 5:46 PM
Subject: Re: New maritime radio museum.
Many thanks. I was aware of the museum and knew one of its originators who was Marine

Superintendent of Cunard Line. Anyone who has sailed into the Mersey will have passed the Perch Rock Fort on the starboard side of the entrance. I used to visit New Brighton when I was a lad and caught many crabs off the rocks there. Our ROA (Radio Officers Association) had their AGM in Liverpool last year and made an official visit to the museum.

My old colleague from Landsendradio, (Bill Waters) had a fine collection of old marine radio gear which he restored to working condition. A particular rare item was a one and a half KW rotary spark transmitter from about 1914 and which we thought we had arranged to be moved to the Industrial Museum here in Chelmsford. The curator was "very interested" but has done nothing in the last year and I just heard from Bill that he has had another stroke and must move into a nursing home. It will be a real loss if all his unique collection now goes into scrap. Have the "Channels" anticipating joining "Discovery" again on Sunday. 73's =

Frank Kelley+

From: Alan Ehrlich

Sent: Friday, July 17, 2009 1:58 PM
Subject: The Coast Watchers
Please see a very interesting article entitled "behind enemy lines".

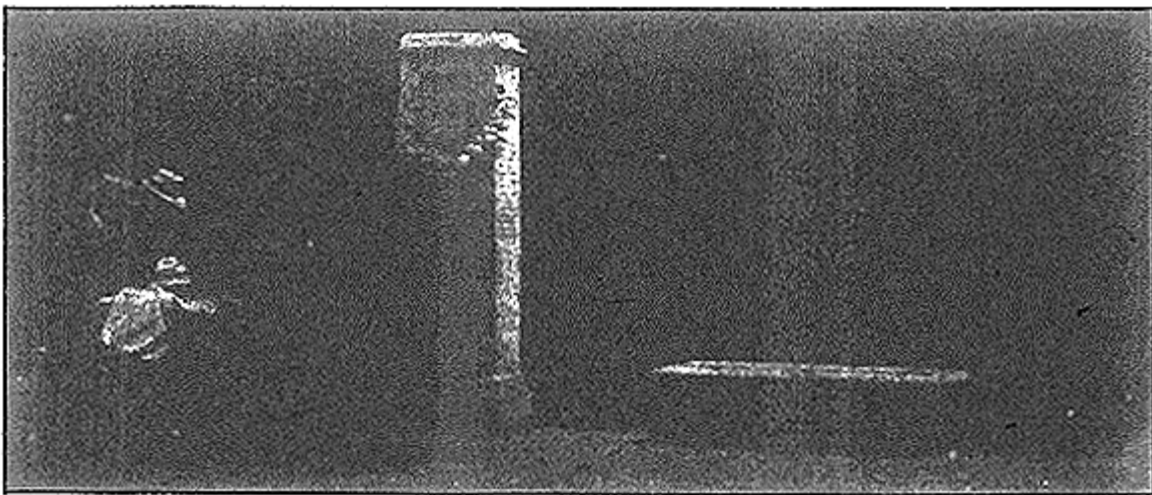
Go to: www.arrl.org and enter VK4XH

73'
Alan

From *Sunday Magazine*, 1 (August 1, 1915): 1.

Wireless Boys Who Went Down with Their Ships

By Willa Sibert Cather



On this monument are the names of ten young wireless operators who, in the midst of storm and terror, stuck to their post of duty and went down with their ships. In nearly every case, not a soul on board would have been saved but for the courage and faithfulness of the wireless operator.

ON the twelfth day of May a monument was unveiled in Battery Park, New York, to commemorate the courage of the ten wireless operators who have perished in waters about the American continent.

Two of the ten were drowned in the Atlantic, one in Lake Michigan, seven in Pacific waters, most of them somewhere in the perilous route to Alaska.

The monument is one of the most attractive and most friendly commemorative works in New York, and, unlike most of our monuments, it is beautifully placed—and humanly

placed. It is a single pilaster with a loop of sea-shells and sea-wood across the front, and the names of the wireless men. The white pilaster stands against a clump of dark green cedars, with the red brick wall of the Immigration Building behind them. On either side of the monolith is a long, low granite bench, and in front of it is a generous granite bowl with a drinking fountain.

This cheerful monument has a peculiar attraction for the children who live in the neighborhood of the Battery. They sleep on the stone benches in the afternoon and play on them all the morning, and spell out of the names of the wireless men and the ships on which they went down. These men all died in storm and terror; but their names are brought together here and abide in a pleasant place, with cheerful companionship.

THE most familiar name on the monument is that of Jack Phillips, who went down on the *Titanic*, and who stood over his instrument until every life-boat was gone, sending to the *Carpathia* directions as to how to reach the sinking vessel. But for his courage and persistence, the death list of the *Titanic* would have been 2,350 instead of 1,595.

Harold Bride, the assistant operator, was among those of the crew picked up by the *Carpathia*, and his story of Phillips' end was printed in the *New York Times* when the *Carpathia* arrived. Bride had been asleep in the cabin behind the operating-room, and had come in his nightclothes to relieve Phillips. Neither Bride or Phillips had felt a jar or shock of any kind, when Captain Smith appeared at the door of the wireless house and said: "We've struck an iceberg. I'm having an inspection made to see how much we are damaged. Be ready to send a call for assistance." Then he disappeared, leaving the two operators astonished. In ten minutes he returned, stuck his head into the operating-room, and merely said: "Send out the call for assistance."

Phillips began to send the C. Q. D. Bride jokingly told him to send the new call, S. O. S., as it might be the last chance he would get to use it. Phillips laughed and changed the call. He got the *Frankford*, and told them the *Titanic* was sinking by the head. By this time the list forward was perceptible. Then Phillips got the *Carpathia*, who said she was putting about and making for them.

Phillips sent Bride to tell the Captain the *Carpathia* was coming. When Bride came back, he heard Phillips giving the *Carpathia* directions as to where to find the *Titanic*. He told Bride to get his clothes on, and Bride realized for the first time that he was in his nightclothes. He dressed, put on an overcoat, and brought another overcoat and put it around Phillips' shoulders as he worked. Captain Smith came to the door again, and told Phillips to send the *Carpathia* word that the engine-room was taking water and the dynamos couldn't last.

The life-boats had been going off for some time now. The deck was in a turmoil, and for the last fifteen minutes Phillips sent under a terrible strain, amid the general scramble. Bride got a life-belt for himself, and strapped one around Phillips, who was still standing at his instrument, urging on and directing the *Carpathia*. He told Bride to see if there were any life-boats left. Bride went out and helped some men launch the last collapsible, then came back and told Phillips that the last boat was gone. The Captain came and told them to abandon the operating-room, and take care of themselves if they could. Phillips kept sending for ten minutes after the Captain had released him, answering questions from the *Carpathia*. Bride saw a stoker steal up behind Phillips and try to get his life-belt off him. He rushed out of the inner cabin and knocked the fellow senseless. The water began pouring into the operating-room, and the two operators went on deck just as the *Titanic* made her final plunge, and Bride never saw Phillips again.

CLIFTON J. FLEMING and Harry Fred Otto were lost in the three-masted lumber schooner *Francis J. Leggett* last September, sixty miles out at sea from the mouth of the Columbia River. In this wreck eighty persons were drowned, and there were only two survivors. One of the two survivors caught a piece of lumber, and hung to it for ten hours in the icy water before he was rescued. He said one of the wireless men swam up and caught the same tie to which he was clinging, and hung there for several hours, but was so exhausted and so benumbed by the cold that he finally let go and sank.

STEPHEN SCZEPANEK, a Pole from Worcester, Massachusetts, went down when the *Pere Marquette*, flagship of the fleet of five car ferries owned by the Pere Marquette Railroad, sank in four hundred feet of water in Lake Michigan, twenty miles from land. He sat at his desk flashing, "Car ferry 18 sinking—help," until the boat sank under him.

His message was caught by the station at Ludington, and another car ferry was sent out and saved thirty-three passengers.

ADOLPH J. SVENDSON, a Scandinavian, went out under more terrible circumstances when the schooner *Hanalei*, last November, struck Duxbury Reef, off the coast of California. Life-savers came from Fort Point life station, brought a mortar and lines, and tried to reach her. They sent out line after line; but each one fell short, and the boat was breaking to pieces. The life-savers were so wrought up by their failures that they put in a double charge—and burst the mortar. They sent out a life-boat, but it was smashed in the breakers and the volunteer crew drowned. A brave sailor from the *Hanalei* tried to swim ashore with a line. He made a wonderful swim of it, but when he reached the breakers he disappeared. Fifty-eight passengers and all of the crew were lost.

WALTER REKER was lost in Puget Sound last August, on the *Admiral Sampson*. The steamship was rammed in a fog by a Canadian vessel, the *Princess Victoria*. The bow of the *Victoria* entered the hull of the *Sampson* just at the point where a large amount of fuel oil was stored, crushed several of the containers, and set them on fire. In a few moments both vessels were wrapped in flames. The *Victoria* drew off, put out the fire, and lay by to pick up the boats from the *Admiral Sampson*. All the passengers and most of the crew were saved. Reker, the wireless operator, the Captain, and the chief engineer were the last to leave the ship; and they went down while they were trying to launch the last life-boat.

DONALD C. PERKINS perished in the wreck of the steamship *State of California*, two years ago. The steamer, running at full speed, struck an uncharted rock in Gambier Bay, ninety miles south of Juneau, Alaska. The entire bottom of the vessel was torn off, and she filled and sank in three minutes. Within that three minutes Perkins got out his call for help several times, otherwise there would not have been a single survivor. As it was, twenty-five passengers were drowned, and seven of the crew. Of these seven, the wireless operator was one.

LAWRENCE PRUDHUNT, wireless operator on the oil-tank steamer *Rosecrans*, was drowned when the steamer was sunk on Peacock Split, in the mouth of the Columbia River, in January, 1913. The tank-boat was caught in a sixty-mile gale with 18,000 gallons of oil on board. The Weather Bureau station at Northead picked up Prudhunt's C. Q. D. He said the steamer was being driven toward the shore by currents and a terrific gale. His second message was interrupted. Nothing more was ever heard or seen of the vessel, except two men, lashed to the upper rigging, who were lost in the end.

GEORGE C. ECCLES was lost on the steamship *Ohio*, sunk off Steep Point, near Ketchikan, Alaska, August 26, 1909. Wireless Operator Booth was sitting in his operating-room at the wireless station at Ketchikan, with his receiver on his ears, and had just finished talking with Eccles of the *Ohio*. He was amazed when he suddenly got a C. Q. D. call from Eccles. He answered it, and got from Eccles the following:

Ohio struck rock. Steamer sinking fast. Send aid immediately or everybody will be lost.
CAPTAIN.

Booth was dazed for a moment. Just then the steamships *Humboldt* and *Rupert* called the *Ohio*, and asked for her latitude. Booth heard the call, and he heard Eccles flash back the answer. In a few moments Booth heard Eccles again, and this time he said:

Ohio sinking fast. Can not hold out. Passengers are being taken off in small boats. Captain and crew will stick till last.

Humboldt and *Rupert* both replied they were making for the *Ohio* at their utmost speed. Eccles flashed back:

Passengers off and adrift in small boats. Captain and crew going off in last boat, waiting for me now. My God! I'm——

The message was never finished. Operator Booth sent call after call to the *Ohio*, but got no answer. The *Ohio* had suddenly broken loose from the rock on which she had been hanging. She sank instantly, and Eccles was trapped in his wireless house.

FREDERICK J. KUEHN, a New York boy, only twenty years old, one of the youngest men in the wireless service, gave his life to save a woman, when the Old Dominion coast liner *Monroe* was rammed and sunk by the *Nantucket* off the Virginia Capes.

The accident happened at two in the morning. Kuehn stayed at his instrument until he was told to go; then he snapped off his call and adjusted his life-preserver. He left the wireless house and went to boat 3, which was just being launched. A woman came running along the slanting deck, crying. Kuehn asked her where her life-belt was, and then said: "Here, take this. I'll get another." He took off his life-preserver. Just as he finished buckling it around her body, the *Monroe* took its long downward plunge, and those who were still on deck were swept into the sea. Thirty-nine were drowned; the *Nantucket* saved 101. Kuehn was never seen again.

The pleasant fountain, the seats, and the monolith in Battery Park are a reminder of all these stories, and bring together the names of these men who never saw one another, but who possessed one common quality. Probably not one of them ever intended to be a hero. They were all young men, and went into wireless because it was a new and exciting business and appealed to the imagination. In a new form of service they found an old opportunity. They met it in such a way that, though this profession is less than a dozen years old, it has already a fine tradition.

© 2004-2009, Willa Cather Archive, Andrew Jewell, editor. Updated June 2009.

The *Willa Cather Archive* is freely distributed by the [Center for Digital Research in the Humanities](#) at the [University of Nebraska–Lincoln](#).