

VWOA NEWSLETTER

Email Issue #8

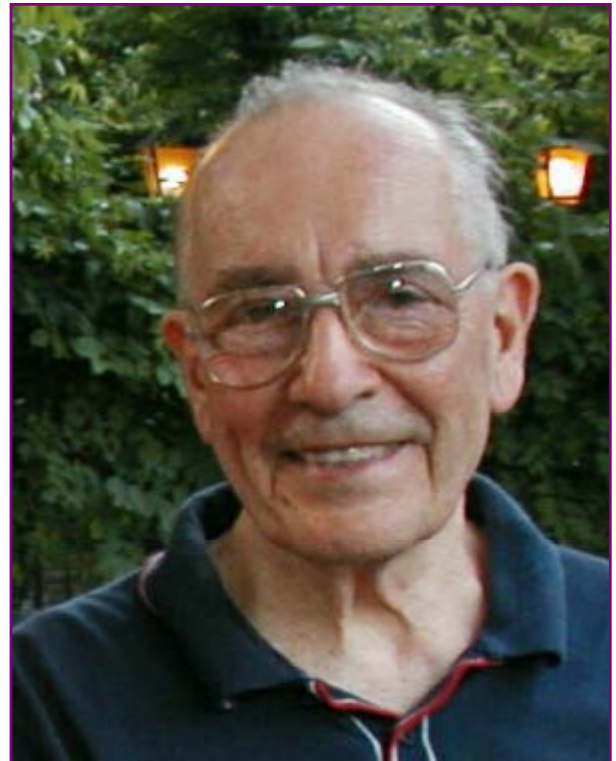
2005



Continuing Voyage #4 aboard
Liberty Ship SS Joyce Kilmer



VWOA Director Bernard Flatow



William B. Devoe AA3YR

Bernard Flatow to be the Keynote Speaker at the VWOA Fall Luncheon. The 80th Annual Business Luncheon will take place on Saturday, November 19, 2005 at the Top Deck of the Seamen's Church Institute, 241 Water Street, New York City. Please make your Reservation on the Forms recently supplied to you.

VWOA Member William B. Devoe AA3YR continues to tell us about Diaries kept by him while on World War II Voyages in Liberty Ships and now has them told as stories to entertain his Grand Children and obviously the many VWOA Members asking for MORE.

*Bill Devoe's War Time Voyage
Number Four – New York to
Archangel to Baltimore. February
28 1944 to June 6, 1944.*

On Sunday (the 9th), the third and I walked back into town and had a glass of vodka at the Intourist club. This was a very dreary place. We took a jeep ride back to the ship. My diary says I had a Scotch whiskey with the Captain and Purser in the Captain's cabin later that night.

The next morning we moved away from the dock and a floating crane came alongside and off loaded our deck cargo of steam locomotives. We then moved further into the stream, a pilot came aboard and the Kilmer with 3 other ships departed for a port very close to Archangel called Bakaritza. I didn't have to stand watch for this short run but it did take about 24 hours. We sailed all night through the ice pack with an icebreaker ahead of us. We passed Archangel at 3 PM and arrived at Bakaritza at 3:30 PM. By 6 PM we were unloading the explosives.

For the next 12 days we unloaded our cargo and I made several trips into Archangel 6 miles away. Sometimes I hitched a ride on a locomotive (wood burner) both ways. Archangel was on the other side of the frozen river where we were unloading so to get to town we had to walk across. At the center of the river there were several heavy planks bridging a wide crack in the ice. By balance walking on these planks we were able to gain the other side. It snowed on and off and otherwise was miserable.

Archangel was a very dreary city. The buildings were mostly two or three story, wood construction and unpainted. The roads were paved but covered with dirty ice.

The Kilmer's propeller had been bent. This happened when; on several occasions we were stuck in the ice and reversed the engines to get unstuck. Great chunks of ice were sucked into the wheel. It was finally damaged to the extent that it hit the rudderpost with each revolution. On the 18th we pumped water into the forward hold, which raised the stern so that we could work on straightening the propeller blade and rudder post. It was a big effort and only partially successful but if it hadn't been done we would have been stuck for many months.

On the 19th a group of Russian sailors came on board and started to build quarters in No. 4 hold. We were going to have passengers. These Russians made up a ship's crew and were on their way to England to man a British warship given to them.

We left Archangel on April 21st, 1944 with seawater ballast. There were a total of 90 Russians on board including two pilots. The Russian sailors numbered 82 plus 6 officers. They seemed to be getting along pretty well. Our Armed Guard stayed in contact with them. None of the Russian passengers visited us.

On Sunday, April 23rd, we sailed across the "Bar" and out into the Gulf of Archangel and into the ice packed White Sea. Progress was slow - we made 35 miles in two days and two nights since leaving Bakaritza. The Liberty Wm. Pepper had left a day before us and would be waiting in Murmansk when we got there. The Liberty Barbara Fritchie broke down near us and a Russian Ice Breaker towed her

back to Archangel. She'll be there at least until November.

The voyage back through the White Sea was similar to our trip from Murmansk. The Icebreakers would go ahead and the column of ships would follow. Then a ship would get stuck and the icebreaker would circle back and free her up. The weather consisted of snow showers and lots of wind. On the ice we saw many hair seals. They would swim in the channels made by the icebreakers.

When we got to the mouth of the White Sea we could see the water again and the two Russian pilots got off. They will be piloting new arrivals to Archangel. The convoy formed up on leaving the ice pack. We had a Russian escort for the trip along the Kola Peninsula arriving at the inlet to Murmansk April 27th when we took on a pilot. We were anchored by 3:30PM and a PT Boat came along side at 4:15 PM to ferry the Captain and me to a convoy conference. The PT Boat went to each ship in the anchorage to pick up the Captain and the Radio Officer. It turned out that there would be no convoy conference at all. Instead, we went alongside a British aircraft carrier where a British Naval Officer then came down the companionway and handed each of us sealed orders. I was on the deck of that PT Boat for four hours and it was cold, wet and very windy. It was a miserable trip indeed.

We left Murmansk on the 28th at 6:30 AM. The convoy formed up and was proceeding when at 3 PM the first depth charges were dropped. It then became quiet with a calm sea. We had daylight 24 hours a day now with no need for blackout curtains. There were no enemy contacts or depth charges dropped until 8:00 PM on Sunday the 30th.

At that time there were two sharp explosions and the Liberty ship William S. Thayer three columns away and on our port beam broke in two. The stern floated away but the bow sank in 6 minutes. There were depth charges dropped on all sides of the convoy and then the Kilmer's guns opened up. We were shooting at a periscope with our 3" gun forward.

My diary says that the William S. Thayer had 178 men on board and that she was empty and in ballast like the rest of us. The two torpedoes were fired at her from her port side and hit at the # 4 hold and under the # 4 lifeboat. The ship broke in half 2 minutes after the torpedoes hit in a calm sea. The engine room and bridge went under and the bow rose up out of the sea before slipping under. This was only 6 minutes after I heard the torpedoes hit.

The temperature of water was 33 deg. F. The sea was alive with men from the bow of the ship. Another Liberty stood by the settling stern. In an hour the stern and the rescue ship were out of sight over the horizon. Two escorts were standing by also.

Meanwhile periscopes were sighted off the convoy's port. It was 8:00 PM and I was taking my daily time-tick from G B R (1800 GMT) when depth charges were dropped near us. At 8:02 a Swordfish from one of our carrier escorts took off and flew ahead of the convoy. At 8:20 three Liberty Ships in columns 1 & 2 were firing into the sea. We were in column 3. Depth charges were being dropped all around us and the concussions were terrific. A few minutes later one of the escort carriers started firing at the sea 2 cables from us. Then our guns started firing ahead and over our starboard bow. We swung out of our column on a ramming course

for a periscope not more than 3 cable from us. Five of our 20 mm guns were blazing away and then the 3" gun forward started banging. The first shot carried the u-boat's periscope away and she submerged. No escort was on hand to depth charge that one because they were all outside the convoy contacting other u-boats. When we swung out of line on that ramming course and all our guns were firing I couldn't hear myself think but I said a prayer and I called out to my Mother.

At 9:00 PM a destroyer came tearing into the convoy off our port and dropped 8 charges in a row shaking up the Kilmer plenty. By this time I was in the radio room listening to the distress frequency, the escort's phone frequency and the aircraft carrier's phone frequency. I gave reports to the bridge on periscopes sighted by the escort ahead of the convoy. These reports and our own narrow escape made the third mate nervous. He was standing by the voice tube from the radio room to the wheelhouse and calling out my information to the skipper.

During the battle Tommy Vachon and Jim Gunn, my assistants, were in the radio room, trying to stay out of the way. Tommy was at one time shaking violently but Jim stayed cool and calm although he did manage to break the catch on the file drawer where we kept the codebooks and I had to pry it open during the siege.

The next day, at 11 AM the designated rescue Liberty came into sight with an escort on either side. One of the escorts was listing 20 degrees to port. We blinked to the Liberty and learned that she had rescued 36 from the Thayer but only 5 survived due to the cold water. Of the 178 men including 110 Russians onboard only 5 were saved. The merchant crew lost 27.

The entry in the Kilmer's log for Sunday 4/30/1944 reads:

7:58 Attack by enemy submarine pack. General Alarm sounded, guns manned, extra look outs posted. One vessel sunk.

9:00 Headed ship for and opened fire on periscope distance 600 yards.

All of the above action took place about 100 miles east of Bear Island.

The next morning, May 1st, was quiet but in the evening more depth charges were dropped. I was looking out the radio room porthole at the convoy when suddenly a tanker two columns on our port and behind us was torpedoed. A heavy black column of smoke suddenly formed. This was the only time that I was actually watching a ship when it was hit. There was a great deal of depth charging from then on and into the next day. The tanker was an oil supply ship for the escorts.

We passed Bear Island just before the tanker was hit and my diary says we were abeam of the Lofton Islands (Norway). All day long there were depth charges being dropped and our two aircraft carriers were busy keeping their planes aloft.

On May 2nd, we had a minor medical emergency on board. Our 6' 6" tall AB cut his forefinger, left hand while whittling. He was one big guy. I put two stitches in his finger with the first mates help.

We had 10 minutes of darkness that night for the first time in weeks. The anticipated warmer weather came the next day.

On the 3rd we received a message that enemy aircraft were in the vicinity. A few depth charges were dropped and I noticed that the escort was doing a lot of special high speed maneuvering in front to the convoy. The seas were getting choppy and we started to roll quite a lot. Then, on the 4th of May, the two aircraft carrier escorts took their departure along with the cruisers. A BAMS message after I decoded it, told us that our destination was the Clyde. Floating mines were spotted at 9:30 PM but no other enemy activity.

On the 5th the convoy entered the Minch and formed up into two columns. The sea was calm and we had our first Spring day. Land was sighted at 10:00 AM. It was the New Hebrides and we felt that we were now safe from U-boats. It was a great feeling.

I took many bearings using the Polaris on the repeater compass on the starboard bridge wing. This was great fun and I plotted our progress past Lock Ewe through the Little Minch all the way to the Firth of Clyde where we picked up our pilot for the run up to Glasgow. We passed Ailsa Craig at 4 PM on the 6th and arrived at the submarine nets at 11 PM. After testing the transmitters, I closed up the radio room and then slept for 11 hours.

When I awoke I was very pleased to be alive. I took a little trip in #3 lifeboat across Holy Lock to Greenock where I had a few beers at the Argyle Inn and when I got back on board there was a pile of mail waiting for me. I stayed up until 3AM reading it.

On the 8th, the Russians disembarked and I learned that we would be taking on our anti-torpedo nets the following day. That's the day that the purser and I went ashore and spent some time in Greenock. My diary states that we spent the night in

a private home for "7 and 6" which was reasonable but there was a drawback. I had to share a double bed with the purser. The stonewalls of our bedroom sucked the heat right out of us so I shivered all night.

On the 11th we left our anchorage and sailed up the Clyde to Glasgow where we took on 1,500 tons of sand for ballast and filled our fresh water tanks. I spent the next several days site seeing and enjoying shore leave. I cabled a box of candy to my Mother for Mother's Day and generally enjoyed my short visit.

I used the Aldis lamp quite often for the Captain and spruced up the radio room and reviewed operations with Jim Gunn. We learned that the convoy conference would be on May 19th in Gourock.

The conference was at 10:30 AM and afterwards I went to the Bay Hotel with Captain Wilson and, along with several English Radio Officers, consumed quite a few beers before heading back. Set watch at 3 PM and sailed at 5:44 PM May 19th -destination New York!

The trip home started out with a pleasant sunny day and moderate seas. We had gun practice, and I copied a BAMS, which gave us our rendezvous in case we needed it. This tranquil time lasted until 3 PM on the 23rd when the Commodore hoisted "enemy subs in area".

The wind increased during the night and by morning it was blowing at 40 mph. The Kilmer was pitching badly and each time the bent propeller came out of the water the ship vibrated and shuddered in a disconcerting way. One of the black gang was stationed at the high-pressure steam inlet butterfly valve and when the stern rose he shut off the steam

trying to reduce the shaking but he wasn't always successful.

That evening our escort had a firm u-boat contact and we sounded the general alarm. The gun crews went to their stations and depth charges were dropped. There was much escort activity and many depth charges. This continued until early the next morning when we received a signal that the alert was over. Later that morning we learned from the Commodore that two u-boats had been damaged and may have been sunk but also that one of our escort had been damaged but without casualties.

The heavy seas continued and I rigged the chair and typewriter with lines to keep them in place. The spares cabinet burst during one roll and the shack was a mess with Carbon-Tet, glue and spare parts rolling about. This occurred when Tommy Vachon was on watch but he didn't fall out of the chair and was so was unhurt. Nothing would stay in place and the rolling and shuddering did not stop.

This weather system stayed with us for several days and each evening we received the same blinker message from the Commodore that u-boats were in the vicinity. Within minutes depth charges would be dropped but no ships were torpedoed.

Finally, on May 28th at 4:20 AM, fog set in and continued all that day. It was very thick and the fog whistle was relentless. There were no u-boat contacts now and the Kilmer was sailing on an even keel. The fog stayed with us all that night. The next morning our position was in the center of the Grand Banks off Newfoundland.

Six ships left the convoy for Canadian ports and when the fog lifted in mid afternoon we changed our position from #121 to #36 in the reformed convoy.

That afternoon the sun came out and that night all the stars could be seen.

The next several days were happy ones, no depth charges, the air was becoming warmer and the fog was not serious. I took RDF bearings from the southern tip of Nova Scotia and that evening (June 1st) the temperature went from 45 deg to 70 deg F. as we entered the Gulf Stream.

On June 2nd, as we neared NYC, the Commodore blinked to us to sail independently for Baltimore. I took RDF bearings on the Cape Cod and Block Island radio beacons but the QRN was too heavy to get proper nulls. The fog came back and the whistle prevented me from catching any sleep before my 4 to 8 watch rolled around.

On June 3rd, at 2:00 PM, we and three other ships broke away from the convoy and headed for Cape Henry. The Kilmer became the commodore for this mini convoy. The trip was uneventful except that one ship had to drop out due to engine trouble.

In the morning we picked up our pilot and at noon we arrived at Lynhaven Roads and anchored. A second pilot came aboard and we sailed up the Chesapeake for Baltimore. I sent 3 messages to W M H (Baltimore) - one for the Master and two for the pilots.

The next morning, June 5th, we anchored at Baltimore harbor and Health came aboard. We were along side at 10:00 AM and I gave my requisitions to the Port Engineer.

The next day I started home and took a taxi to the Pennsylvania RR Station. The taxi driver asked if it was OK to pick up another fare that had been waiting some time. Of course I said yes. The "other

fare" turned out to be two girls who jumped into the cab, one on each side of me. When I got to the station, the girls said they would take care of the fare. When I got to the ticket window I found my money clip had been stolen and so could not buy my train ticket to New York.

The Travelers Aid in the station paid for a phone call to Tenafly and after several hours my Mother telegraphed enough money so I could get home.

That happy evening I was with my parents and told them about the voyage. My Mother told me she remembered being awakened from sleep in the middle of the night with a very strong feeling that something had happened to me. She went and got her diary and read that on Sunday, April 30th at about 2:30AM, she had written that she heard me call her. I looked in my little diary and sure enough, after correcting for the time difference, that was when we were firing at the periscope of a u-boat with our 3" gun. I was sure of the time because I had taken a time-tick from G B R just before the action started. I do believe it was mental telepathy. This has never happened to me since.

End Of Voyage Number Four

VWOA MEMBER NEWS

Wendell Benson suggest you visit the following URL of VWOA Member James J. Friel K3SXA Wendell reports the Web Site is well constructed and interesting in content.

<http://www.qsl.net/k3sxa/>

We contacted K3SXA and received this response:

Thanks for the kind words about my webpage. I have not done a thing with it in 3 years and I need to update it. I have lots of things going on here. I got my private pilot license in December 04 and am now very very busy trying to complete the Instrument rating. It is a real bear to multitask 7 different things at age 60.....

I will dig into my stories and see if I can find one for your publication. BTW I really enjoy it.

We at VWOA want to thank you for your favorable responses to your VWOA Email Newsletter.

We can only continue this form of **Celebrating the Past** if all of our VWOA Members make known some of their personal special events that contributed to their career in Wireless.

We want to hear from YOU. Dig into your memories and share them with the rest of your VWOA Members.

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:

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