

# VWOA NEWSLETTER

Email Issue #9

2005



## *NEW VWOA OFFICERS AND DIRECTORS TERM OF OFFICE 2006-2007*

### OFFICERS

#### *PRESIDENT*

Alan M. Ehrlich

#### *1st VICE PRESIDENT*

Richard T. Kenney

#### *2nd VICE PRESIDENT*

Douglas S. Stivison

#### *SECRETARY*

Francis T. Cassidy

#### *ASSISTANT SECRETARY*

Wendell R. Benson

#### *TREASURER*

J. Michael Shaw

### DIRECTORS

John Chooljian

John Dziekan

Bernard C. Flatow

John H. McGonigle

Norman Mills

Edward F. Pleuler, Jr



*T.K. Phelps W8TP*

## *Battery Sparks -- A Memoir by Theodore K. (Ted) Phelps*

*This story was previously printed  
(March, 1980) in The Inland Seas  
Beacon, a former publication of The  
Society of Wireless Pioneers (SOWP)  
of which the author was editor.*

---

## *Battery Sparks*

Along toward evening on a gray February day in 1941, a taxi pulled up and deposited me, bag and baggage at a shipyard pier in Brooklyn, NY. I was looking for the ship that was to be my first salt water assignment as a merchant marine Radio Officer, S/S Alcoa Cadet, a 1918-vintage, Square-bow Hog Island freighter. She was to be my home for the next few months on a voyage with general cargo to Bermuda, the Caribbean, northern South America and home again, with all holds overflowing with bauxite.

I asked directions from a longshoreman and after a long walk, I reached the Cadet's starboard gangway. I struggled aboard and got further directions from a deckhand to the Captain's cabin.

I introduced myself to the Master, Thomas M. Lewis, a tall but portly man with white hair and a ruddy complexion. Like me, he was new to the Alcoa Steamship Company. He had sailed for many years on coastwise runs for Eastern Steamship Lines.

He welcomed me aboard by saying it was about time for the evening meal in the officers' mess. There I was introduced to the Mates, the Engineers and the Steward.

Of this assemblage with whom I was to meet three times each day, I remember one

individual in particular. He was Bill Porter, our First Assistant engineer, who also doubled as ship's electrician.

Bill was a tall string bean of a man, with graying hair and wire-rimmed glasses.. He hailed from somewhere in New England and had a pleasant voice to match. Wherever he went aboard ship, he wore a peaked blue cloth cap and oily dungarees.

Our first port out of New York was Hamilton, Bermuda. I can still remember that trip, for most of it took place on the outer fringes of a decaying Atlantic Nor'easter storm.

During our first night out, we rolled and tossed, or at least I, a confirmed landlubber did. The high sides of my bunk in the radio cabin kept me from making abrupt contact with the deck.

The Alcoa Cadet's radio shack was located in a deck house just aft of the vessel's single stack. The operator's stateroom was on the starboard side.

The port side of the cabin housed the radio gear with the call sign WNEO. We had a 200-watt medium wave set for watch-standing on 500 kHz and working nearby medium frequencies and a high frequency transmitter for long-distance contacts beyond medium frequency range.

---

Midships (between the radio room and my bunk), was the battery room. Located here were two strings of six-volt storage batteries to power the auto-alarm and the motor-generator to supply transmitter power in case the ship's main power (110v DC) failed. One battery string was on-line while the other was on charge. The smell of sulphuric acid was everywhere.

The storm was gone. Bermuda came into view at dawn. We unloaded cargo consigned here and sailed southward toward the Caribbean.

During the next few sunny, perfect days, I made friends with my shipmates. The rotund chief engineer and his ever-present fox terrier still are clear pictures in my mind. I was the ship's rookie, a college kid making his first deep-sea voyage to replenish his depleted bank account to go back to school come next September.

During those days. I remember that the second mate complained that his stateroom lights flickered when he lay in his bunk and tried to read, Bill Porter said he'd look into it.

Saint Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands, was our first Caribbean port. Again we unloaded cargo and continued our voyage through the Leeward and Windward Islands. We touched them all: St. Martin, Barbuda, St. Kitts, Antigua, Guadeloupe, Dominica, Fort de

France, Martinique (where Marshal Petain's, Vichy French, bullyboys trailed us on shore liberty). St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Barbados, Grenada and at last, Port-of-Spain, Trinidad.

That's quite a town, Port-of-Spain, of at least it was. A major find for us on shore liberty was the ice-cold Canadian beer at the Hotel de Paris, for we were now in summer weather.

I made my first acquaintance with the "bumboats", those very small craft that would take you ashore from your ship anchored out in the stream for a fare of two shillings (two bob) and would take you back aboard for four and sometimes more.

At Port-of-Spain we took aboard some additional people. We had been carrying southward a forward deck load of heavy machinery and large caissons, which were destined for a mining area in British Guiana (Guyana), some 110 miles upriver from the seaport capital of Georgetown.

These people, about 20, as I remember, were East Indian immigrants to Trinidad. They were to be deck passengers aboard our vessel. At the bauxite mine, they would become stevedores, unload the deck cargo and then remain to assemble it into bauxite-producing machinery. They slung hammocks among that heavy gear and somehow built their own cooking fires on deck. Have you

---

ever smelled curry every evening for a week?

A second group was a Uniformed contingent of British colonial Army troops, about 10 or 12 men commanded by a Sergeant. They were our security force and patrolled the decks on regular tours. They carried British Army Enfield rifles and wore heavy khakis and wrap-around puttees in those tropical temperatures. I suppose they had a daily ration of warm beer, too!

At Georgetown, we took on a river pilot and began our slow, winding course inland. One afternoon. I had my camera film confiscated by the polite, but firm Sergeant after I had taken some snapshots of Indian village life along the riverside.

Eventually, we reached the bauxite mine and tied up with our port side next to the river bank. Just ahead of where we were moored was a small, dirty British tanker from Liverpool. There was some fraternization between the crews. The Englishmen were glad to be away from their home war zone for a while.

Late in the evening of our arrival at the mine, there was a commotion aboard the *Alcoa Cadet*. The second mate came running out on deck.

"FIRE!" he shouted, "My cabin's on fire! "

Smoke was pouring out of portholes and companionways of the deckhouse. Several

crewmembers turned to with extinguishers and snuffed out the small but smoky blaze.

Bill Porter's check of the Second's blinking bunk light had not been in time.

As it turned out, the electrical wiring of the officers' cabins was long past due for replacement. What Bill Porter found was a pair of conductors with badly decayed insulation lying against the wooden bulkheads and covered by lead sheath. He had enough conduit and new wire aboard to replace the old wiring, which he promptly did. What else he had done with his repairs I was soon to find out.

We sailed down river again, dropped our pilot at Georgetown and turned southeast for Surinam, where, near Paramaribo, we were to take on a bulk cargo of bauxite, that grainy, pink sand that later got into everything, including our food.

During our southbound voyage from New York, Captain Lewis had let it be known that he was new to Caribbean and South American coastal waters. So he consulted his charts and light lists with extra care.

He had used the direction finder (DF) a few times too, but sometimes there were problems.

In early 1941, American lights and radio beacons were still operational. British and Dutch navigation aids were shut down. Lightships had been taken off station.

Aboard *Alcoa Cadet*, Captain Lewis repeatedly shut off the red pilot light on the DF battery box. It annoyed him. He didn't realize that switching off the bulb took the battery off its charging circuit.

---

I had found out about that before we were very far along on our voyage. Bill Porter and I scrounged another lamp socket and relocated the offending bulb so it wouldn't shine into the Captain's eyes. He knew that the Paramaribo lightship was no longer there. He wanted a "fix" to help find the port entry.

We cooked up a scheme where I would call the Dutch coast station on 500 kHz, ask some pointless question and while he transmitted I'd quickly ground the ship's main antenna so a DF bearing could be taken.

Now, a couple of days after we had left the Guyana bauxite mine, I called the Paramaribo coast station, asked his hours of operation or some such simple question, grounded my antenna and let him reply.

His answer was, of course, short and I had to re-switch my antenna and acknowledge.

The whole process took less than a minute. The whistle-tube in the radio shack made a noisy wheeze.

"Yes", I answered.

"What's the matter with the damn' DF, Sparks, shouted the Captain?"

"Didn't you get your bearing, sir?" I asked.

"Hell no!" he hollered, "Damn thing's stone dead!"

"I'll check on it right away," I said, a little puzzled, because the direction finder had been working normally on our approach to Georgetown a few days ago.

There was no need to stay on radio watch. Our ship had found the

Paramaribo harbor anyway, in sunny weather.

I picked up my volt-ohmmeter and went forward to the bridge

I turned on the DF. Dead! I checked the battery. Not only was the voltage off normal, but my meter indicated reversed polarity! Disconnecting the battery leads, I checked again. Sure enough, the battery showed a "back-charge" of a couple of volts and the charging circuit leads were reversed!

Puzzled, and being hazed by the people on the bridge, I removed the sick battery, took it to the radio room and substituted it for one of the auto-alarm batteries. I took the replacement batter to the wheelhouse and very carefully connected it, taking care that the charging leads were correctly attached. But I had to learn what had caused the DF Battery to die!

Our rewiring of the pilot bulb was clean. Then I remembered the fire in the second mate's cabin and Bill Porter's rewiring job. Could that have caused the problem?

I sought out Bill Porter and found him in the engine room. We went to the bridge and checked the new wiring he had installed. Sure enough, there could be no other cause. Bill's new conduit run had rewired much of the officers' cabin area. But it also had spliced into a circuit serving the wheelhouse directly above.

His re-wiring had killed the DF battery by reversing its charging polarity!

My efforts to restore the damaged battery were only partly successful. It did revive enough to be left in the auto alarm supply circuit in the radio room. Up in the wheelhouse, the substitute worked well. Our



\*\*\*\*\*

A new VWOA Director John H. McGonigle was appointed by VWOA President Alan M. Ehrlich to serve a term of office in 2006 and 2007.



*John H. McGonigle NX2F*

John supplied us with the following bio:

As a youngster growing up in the forties and fifties I found myself being caught up in all of the excitement of the Annual VWOA Affair held at the Hotel Astor in Manhattan. For the totality of my life up to that point my dad had always been the President of the VWOA. Each year prior to that event our dad was sort of off limits while he dealt with all the phone calls, preparation and paperwork for the yearbook, which became a centerpiece of those, being honored at the annual gathering. As a teenager I was honored and thrilled to have attended several of these gatherings which provided me the

opportunity to meet many of the distinguished members and leaders of the time.

Soon I found myself building kits from EICO and Heathkit all the while struggling to learn the code. Getting my amateur license would have to wait until after my tour of duty as a Radioman in the Navy. I attended Naval Radio School at Newport, R. I. and the Navy Teletype Repair School at the Boston Naval Ship Yard.

While on duty I served on the destroyer D.S.S. John Paul Jones, DD932 and the destroyer tender D.S.S. Grand Canyon AD28

After being discharged from the Navy I obtained my amateur license and immediately set up my first station. For me ham radio became a life long hobby with interests in several areas. At present my call sign is NX2F; I am a member of the ARRL, Long Island DX Association, VWOA and Long Island Wireless Institute

I spent several years at Vacuum Electronics on Long Island and then accepted a position with the New York Telephone Co., after the death of my dad. I pursued my degree at New York City Technical College

My career consisted of various technical assignments in telephone switching, telephone carrier systems, traffic and systems engineering and as Senior Staff Engineer and Staff Director of Quality Improvement.

---

After twenty nine plus years of service I left New York Telephone to pursue other interests including quality improvement consulting and a second career in Horticulture, specializing in Tropical Plants

Most recently after five years of study I was ordained a Deacon this past May at the Cathedral of St. Agnes in Rockville Center, Long Island

We wish John an interesting and productive Term of Service for the benefit of all the VWOA Members.

John's father is William J. McGonigle who served as President of VWOA from 1937 to 1960

\*\*\*\*\*

One of our new members contacted us after a clerical mix up and supplied additional contact information. We visited the Link he supplied and were amazed at the content, quantity and quality of the Web Site. Take a visit to this URL

<http://www.home.earthlink.net/~k0hb>

and enjoy a visit with H. Hans Brakob KOHB, a US Navy Veteran of 21 years and his proud family in Minnesota

\*\*\*\*\*

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:

**VWOA**

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