THE MERCHANT MARINE AND THE BATTLE OF THE ATLANTIC: 1942

“Damn the Torpedoes!”

by Helen Lawrenson

A group of sailors are drinking beer at a bar called George’s in Greenwich Village. The juke box is playing “Deep in the Heart of Texas,” and every time it stops someone puts another nickel in and it starts up again. A little man with curly hair and bushy eyebrows turns and glares fiercely at it.

“Can’t that machine play nothing else?” he roars. He looks tough enough and mad enough to eat it, record, needle, and all.

“Stop beating your gums, brother,” drawls the tall sailor with the black jersey. “I like it. It’s catchy.”

“I just come back from Texas,” adds a third whose face is a complete pink circle, illumined by twinkling blue eyes and a cherubic grin.

“How was it?”

“Oh, dandy!” says Cherub, sarcastically. “Just dandy. Fine trip for your health. A Nazi tin fish chased us for three days. We never seen a patrol boat nor a plane the whole time. Saw one destroyer going hell-bent for election into Charleston one afternoon about dusk, but we all figured she was trying to get safe home before dark when the subs come out.

“We was carrying fifty thousand barrels of Oklahoma crude and fifty thousand of high-test gasoline. It sure gives you a funny feeling. I thought we’d get it any minute. Man, those nights are killers! You sleep with your clothes on. Well, I don’t exactly mean sleep. You lie in bed with your clothes on. All of a sudden the old engines slow down and your heart speeds up. Someone knocks on the door, and you rise right up in your bed and seem to lie there in the air. So it turns out it’s only the watch. You settle down again and try to light a cigarette if your hand don’t shake too much. Not that you’re scared of course. Oh, noooh!”

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The others laugh. "Who ain't scared?" growls the little man with the bushy brows. "A torpedo connects with one of them tankers and it's just like lighting a match to cellophane. You ain't got a chance. Boom! and you're in the hero department. Just like that. And the next thing, all the guys you used to know are going around saying, 'Well, he wasn't such a bad guy after all. Poor old Joe Bananas! He lowered the boom on me for ten bucks the last time he was in port and he never did get a chance to pay it back. Let's have a beer to his memory.'"

"Well, let's have a beer anyway," says Slim, in the black jersey. "Here, Cherub, it's on you. You just got paid off. How about springing for another round?"

"Okay," says Cherub. "Might as well spend it now. It don't do you no good when you're floating around in a lifeboat. No kidding, a guy's a sucker to go through nights like that. You can't believe it. The next morning you come out on deck, and the sea's blue and beautiful and the sun's shining. The night before—with the zigzagging and the sub alarms and the lying there in your bunk, scared stiff and waiting—it can't be true. That night can't have happened to me. Impossible. This is the same sea I've always sailed, the same kind of a wagon, the same watch. Last night just didn't happen." He takes a drink of beer. "But then the darkness comes again. Yeah—night must fall."

What worried him most, he adds, was a remark made during lifeboat drill just before sailing. "We was practicing and everything goes off pretty good. Then the Inspector, he says, 'Now just in case any of you fellows have to jump—remember when you go over the side to pull down on your lifebelt as hard as you can. Cause if you don't when you hit the water it's liable to break your neck.' . . . My God, I thought. Now I got to worry about holding on to my papers and my chocolate bar and my cigarettes and at the same time I got to hold on to my lifebelt so my neck don't get broke!"

"So you have your choice," says Slim, "burn to death, drown, be blown to bits when the torpedo hits the engine room, starve to death in a lifeboat, or get your neck broke when you first jump over the side. Any way you look at it, you're a gone sucker. Only a lame-brained sailor would go for
that. You gotta be muscle-bound between the ears to do that for a living. And what for?"

"I'll tell you what for," says Bushy-Brows. "If the rising sun and the swastika and that bundle of wheat ain't gonna be flying over the White House we gotta keep 'em sailing. They gotta have oil and ore and stuff to fight this war, ain't they? And how we gonna get it to 'em if guys like us don't keep on sailing the ships? So that's what for!"

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This scene is typical of those being enacted every night in the waterfront bars of ports all over the land. Every few days you pick up the papers and there is the same gruesome picture painted over and over again of sudden death that strikes in the night, of seas brilliant with burning oil, of men screaming in agony, dying in the flaming water under the dark, implacable skies. And every night, in some bar in every port, there will be a group of seamen talking it over, naming the names of those who were once their shipmates, cursing the Axis—what some of them refer to as "Hitler, and his saddle-lights Mussolini and Hirohito"—and drinking toasts to one another's good luck.

"I was asleep when the torpedoes hit us—" said John Walsh, wiper, survivor of the Cities Service tanker, Empire, torpedoed off Fort Pierce, Florida "—three of them. I rushed up on deck and helped get one of the lifeboats over the side. I saw our captain on a life raft. He and some of the other men were on it. The current was sucking them into the burning oil around the tanker. I last saw the captain going into a sheet of orange flame. Some of the fellows said he screamed. . . . Monroe Reynolds was with me for a while. His eyes were burned. He was screaming that he was going blind. The last time I saw him he jumped into the fiery water. That was his finish, I guess. . . ."

In the first four months of this year over a hundred American merchant ships were attacked by enemy U-boats off our own coasts. About 950 seamen were killed. Despite improvements in the patrol system, the ships are still being sunk. The average during April was five or six a week.
It is a hideous way to die. I knew two men who were lost when the *Pan-Massachusetts* was sunk. One was a little thin man with spectacles, who had been a newspaperman. His name was Fred Fitzgerald. The other was Paddy Flynn, an oiler, whose two sons had already lost their lives in the war. I don’t know how Fitz and Paddy died. The *Pan-Mass* carried 100,000 barrels of gasoline, oil, and kerosene. (A barrel is 53 gallons.) Many of the men burned to death as they stood on the deck of the ship; others died struggling in the blazing sea which was on fire for a mile around the tanker.

“The bo’sun was in charge,” said George Lamb, survivor of the *Pan-Mass*. “He did everything possible to save the lives of all the men. He cut a raft loose after the men said they were ready. It burst into flames as soon as it hit the water. . . . Although I couldn’t swim I decided to go overboard. I figured it was better to drown than to be burned alive. I said, ‘Let’s go, Ingraham.’ He was the steward. He was standing there beside me in his shorts, the skin peeling off his back from the flames. We shook hands. He said, ‘Remember me, Red!’ I said, ‘OK. If I make it, I’ll remember you. . . .’ He was burned to death. . . .”

On his final trip Fitz wrote a letter to a man I know. In it he said: “No fooling though, it’s a queasy feeling to be shadowed by those bastards. One of them tried to decoy us off St. Augustine by flashing ‘P,’ which means show your lights. The Old Man zigzagged to hell-and-gone, and most of us were kidding each other about the false alarm when the *Pan Amoco* reported sighting a sub at 6 A.M. off Jupiter. (Our incident had occurred at 11:30 the previous night, 60 miles away.) We quit kidding then.”

He went on to report an incident on his previous trip: “Just as the moon was going down the second mate happened to make the big circle with his binoculars and spotted a sub in perfect silhouette. The first thing I knew about it was the Ordinary on watch giving me the shake. ‘There’s a Jerry on our tail,’ he said. ‘All hands get dressed with lifebelts and stand by.’ I got up all right but nothing happened. Later that day the same sub got the *India Arrow* and the *China Arrow*, just a few miles from where we were. What burns you up is no
guns. You can’t fight the bastards back. Luckily this crate is fast, so we can get going; but on some of them there isn’t a damn thing you can do except call the U-boat commander an old meanie—or something! Later it comes as something of a jolt to discover that fellows you once knew and were shipmates with are gone for good. Worse yet, without a fighting chance.”

Hundreds of other American seamen have had to stand by and watch enemy subs sink their ships from under them without guns to fight back. “You can’t fight submarines with potatoes,” as Bo’sun Walter Bruce said when rescued from the tanker Malay, torpedoed off the North Carolina coast.

The law to arm the merchant marine was signed by President Roosevelt on November 18, 1941, but most of the ships which have been sunk have been unarmed. A few which were armed have fought off submarines and either damaged them or frightened them away.

Guns are being put on the ships now as fast as possible, but some of the ships are so old and broken down that a gun is almost more of a liability than an asset. As one sailor says, “That rust-pot I just come off, they must of got her out of the Smithsonian Institute! Sure, we had a gun on her. But Holy Mackerel! if we’d ever of had to fire it the whole ship would have fallen apart.”

At the insistence of the National Maritime Union, special fireproof life-saving suits have been approved by the Maritime Commission and are being purchased by all tanker companies. On many of the ships new types of life rafts are being installed, and lifeboats are now being stocked with medical kits, food concentrates, and blankets.

When the Lahaina was sunk, 34 survivors spent ten days in a lifeboat with a capacity of 17. Two of them became half-crazed with hunger and thirst, jumped overboard, and were drowned. A third lost his mind completely, had to be lashed to the bottom of the boat, and died the next day. A fourth died from exposure. Dan James, nineteen-year-old wiper, describes the death of the last man: “It was cold the last night out. I was sleeping under a blanket with Herman. He’d been feeling low for some time. I kept saying to him, ‘Give me
some of that blanket.' But he wouldn't let loose. Finally I grabbed it from him. He just lay still. I touched his hand... it was cold... he was dead the whole time."

The patrol system is still not adequate, although vastly improved. In a letter to Secretary of the Navy Knox last March, President Joseph Curran of the National Maritime Union suggested that the large fleets of fishing boats, most of which are now laid up, be fitted out as patrol boats for the Atlantic coast, as was done during the last war. The sooner this is done the better.

There is no doubt about it, the merchant seamen took it on the chin during the first half of this year—with no guns, no patrols, antiquated lifebelts, and practically no safety precautions. They were sent out as helpless targets for the subs; but their morale was as magnificent as it was unheralded. That precautions are now being taken to protect them doesn't detract from their courage.

All the seamen know what they are facing when they ship out. Yet they keep on sailing. Remember, they don't have to. They are in the private merchant marine, and they can quit any time they want to. Most of them could get good shore jobs, working in shipyards as riggers and welders and mechanics and what-not, where the chief worry would be the danger of someone dropping a wrench on their feet. It isn't the money that keeps them sailing. On the coastwise run, from New York to Texas, they get a war bonus which works out to around $2.33 a day, hardly worth risking your life for. Also the bonus doesn't apply to the Gulf.

As a matter of fact, former seamen who have been working in shorside jobs are going back to sea. A few months ago the National Maritime Union issued a call to former seamen. Since then over 2,000 ex-sailors have turned up to ship out again, hundreds of them at the union hall in the port of New York alone, among them men who have been working as furriers, truck drivers, electricians, office workers, actors, construction workers, miners, painters, and bakers.

Those who have been torpedoed and rescued ship right out again as soon as they can get out of the hospital. That takes plenty of nerve, but the merchant seamen have it. They don't get much publicity, and you seldom hear anyone making
speeches about them. They don’t get free passes to the theater or the movies, and no one gives dances for them, with pretty young actresses and debutantes to entertain them. No one ever thinks much about their “morale” or how to keep it up. It was only recently that a bill was passed to give them medals. And because they wear no uniforms they don’t even have the satisfaction of having people in the streets and subways look at them with respect when they go by.

It is not that the seamen, themselves, are asking for any special credit or honors. When you mention words like heroism or patriotism to them they look embarrassed. “Listen, brother, there’s a war on!” they say. Ashore, they frequently pretend that they are not brave at all. Not long ago I was talking to a man called Windy, who had just come off the Texas run and had been chased by a submarine for three days. “No more of that for me!” he said. “I tell you, any guy who keeps on shipping these days has got bubbles in his thinktank. The only safe run is from St. Louis to Cincinnati. I’m going to get me a shore job. Why commit suicide at my age?” We believed him; and not one of us could blame him. . . . The next day we heard he had shipped out again. He is now on the high seas, en route to India.

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