

THE UNITED STATES MERCHANT MARINE

In peace and war we deliver

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Since the beginning of recorded history men have gone down to the sea in ships. They went to fish. They went to trade. They went to satisfy their curiosity of what lay beyond their lands. They were mariners; who confronted the unknown and were willing to face the dangers of a life at sea. They were a fundamental instrument of civilization spreading commerce across their known world. They were in all respects: Merchant Seaman.

Let us here describe exactly as possible just what we understand regarding the term "Merchant Marine." Basically, privately owned-vessels engaged in the following activities; local and international commerce, fishing including whaling, exploration, civil travel, tourism, piracy and yes, the slave trade. In times of war the transportation of military personnel and supplies. They plied the seas, rivers and lakes of the world. Perfecting better systems for navigation, discovering safer and shorter travel routes and producing charts of new discoveries, sea currents, temperature and depths. Indeed the entire world greatly benefited from these gifts.

Who were these men who were willing to abandon the land to spend their lives at sea? Mostly they came from the ranks of the poor, driven by poverty to face years of separation from loved ones, danger, hunger and the brutality visited upon them by their superiors and ship mates.

They came from every place and of every race. Sharing equally in the degradation that the world at large subjected them to.

They were, for the most part, illiterate, overly superstitious, fearing mysterious Gods, sea creatures able to devour entire ships and their crews, but most of all, the very sea upon which they entrusted their lives. They were shunned by genteel society. The land folks described them as; the flotsam and Jetsam of the earth. They were to be avoided. They did not belong. Even in my time as a Merchant Seaman I was regarded, (if jokingly by some in my family) as a "Merchant Marine bum." Today's Merchant Marine still faces some of the undeserved reputation as did our ancient brothers. So why did they ship out?

Who were these men and why were they there? For each one there was a reason.

For the most part they were loners, mal-contented, unwilling or unable to compete with the demands of life ashore, jilted lovers, hiding from a wife, hiding from the law, seeking adventure, Political and religious persecution or just wanting to be free.

In colonial times ships from the Americas flew the British Ensign. It was not until the successful end of the revolutionary war did the New United States of America proudly display our flag on all our Merchant Ships. This did not sit well with the British government who would not accept their defeat and still believed that American ships had no authority or deserved the respect as a legitimate nation. King George III ordered his Navy to stop and board any ship flying the American flag to search for deserters from the Royal Navy. Regardless of the claims of American citizenship many young American seamen were forcefully removed from their ships and impressed in the British navy. (Herman Melville's "Billy Budd", although fictional, described accurately those vindictive acts of the insane English king.)

The war of 1812, provoked by these hostile acts, forced the fledgling American government to take defensive to defend our Merchant shipping. It was paramount that ships flying the American flag must be respected by all nations in accord with our treaty with the British and to protect our hard won sovereignty.

With the coming of peace, and with our unlimited access to our national resources, our merchant ships were able to sail, unimpeded, throughout the world creating lucrative markets for our vast array of home grown products. This commercial expansion created the need for more and more seagoing vessels and more seamen to man them. The ship owners were forced to recruit hundreds of these men from around in the world creating such diversity of languages and customs that it was said on some ships there were as many as ten languages spoken. This need to be able to man our growing merchant fleet created a major problem for both our maritime industry and our coastal cities. Where to house and feed when they were "on the beach" and how to assure that they would be readily available when ships need crews. The ship owners, although fierce competitors, banded together to solve the problem. Each ship owner, or in cooperation with others, purchased sea front properties in the most depressed areas of the city and either remodeled or built human warehouses to retain their non-working seamen. These men were provided a bed roll and a meal ticket that would be honored by some greasy-spoon dive close to the dwellings. There they were housed until they were needed to man some vessel requiring a crew. During their stay in these facilities they were able to receive small cash advances, to be repaid, with interest, when they had the luck to be chosen to ship out.

It, as would be expected, tossing together these diverse groups of lonely, culturally different, poorly educated men would have unintended results. The situation quickly deteriorated into a situation that even the local police refused to enter these areas.

Murders and robbery were not uncommon. As should have been expected, bars and brothels sprung up in astounding numbers. There was a common belief that some of that same

enterprising Ship owners involved the housing systems were also involved with the bars and brothels. In extreme cases some of those areas were fenced off from the rest of the city thus making those men more like prisoners and furthering public fear and prejudice of the inhabitants. No wonder that the most derogatory terms were unfairly used to describe these men. Some of this branding survives today.

Those fortunate enough to find births aboard ships were little better off than their imprisoned brothers. The pay was low and living conditions were crowded and dirty. Rats outnumbered the crew and infections from their bites went untreated leading to many burials at sea. Rarely were these deaths entered into the ships logs. No thought of a notice to their families. How could there be? After all they were only one step above savages. (See Hollywood's depiction of a steam ship stoker played by Bill Bendix in the movie "The Hairy Ape.")

Feeding the crew was yet another example of overt discrimination. The term used to describe this discrimination was the "Two pot mess." Where the officers and passengers, if any were onboard, were fed the best the ship's chef could serve while the crews were fed foods of much less quality and at times the left over-s from the officer's mess.

Crew sleeping quarters were also a problem with the men confined in quarters below the deck in the forecabin. One can only imagine the conditions that prevailed in these areas.

Personal sanitation such as bathing was a serious problem. The crew was restricted to bathing with sea water while the fresh water was reserved for the Captain and the Chief Mate and the galley. Long hair and shaggy beards were common place adding to the spread of lice and other afflictions. Shipboard tattooing, common among seaman, resulted in many cases of untreatable infections resulting in amputation or even death. Safety of the crew was not a major concern. Injuries were commonplace and the injured man was still required to perform his duties or be denied his pay until able to return to work. In extreme cases, if the injury was so serious, the sailor was put ashore at the next port of call to fend for himself.

The Captain was the complete Master. He was the law. All his decisions were undebatable. He adjudicated conflicts that arose between crew members and his deck officers. It was rare that his rulings favored the crew and usually ended up with the seaman being flogged as an example to shipmates.

Differences between shipmates were handled quietly; usually at night, below decks.

With the growth of the American merchant fleets and the growing number of seaman manning these vessels the public was slowly becoming aware of the appalling conditions these men served under. Something had to be done, but by whom? Surely, not the ship owners or the Government. Not a chance I Hell of that ever happening.

The major growth of the American Merchant Marine that took place after the War of 1812 was not limited to America's east coast. This was also happening in the on the west coast.

The port of San Francisco was the hub of this expansion. The California gold rush of 1849 brought ships from many nations carrying with them thousands of fortune hunters hungry for the gold they believed was just for the taking. This was good business for the owners of these vessels except for those who were lost attempting to navigate around the infamous Cape Horn. Taking down with them hundreds if not thousands of seaman. These ships fortunate to arrive in San Francisco were in such bad shape after such a harrowing voyage that they no longer sea worthy and were scuttled. Their crews, both, officers and men were stranded ashore hoping to find another berth on any ship returning to their homelands. Many of them found employment, as laborers with the prospectors and headed to the gold fields. Even the ships that were still sea worthy and planning to return home were unable to do so. Their crews also abandoned their ships and headed out to make their fortunes in the gold fields. Who could blame them? The prospect of again facing the Cape and the bad conditions awaiting them on board ship was enough to discourage any one.

With Portugal leading the way sea routes were created into the far away orient. China was, at first, one of our Asian trading partners until in 1853 when Commodore Perry brazenly sailed into Tokyo Bay in the frigate U.S. Susquehanna demanding that our merchants be able to trade directly with Japan. After extensive negotiations permission was granted and the Japanese government established exclusive trading ports for American ships.

This agreement was a bonanza for American ship owners. Not only did they enjoy a shorter distance to travel than did their European competition but a far larger variety of products to trade with. The vast populations of the Orient were now all their potential customers.

But their jubilation was soon dampened by the fact that with so many shipping companies entering into the business there would not be not enough experienced mariners to man their ships.

This was especially true in San Francisco. The lure of gold not only syphoned off the simple sailors but many of the officers. San Francisco was fast becoming a very prosperous city. Gold and lumber drew investors and builders willing to roll the dice on her future. Not all the seaman fled toward the gold fields. Many choose to remain in the city and found better paying jobs, with less danger and better conditions, in this booming town.

This left the ship owners with the problem of how to man their ships. Many of fully loaded but riding their anchor in an over-crowded bay. They tried everything to attract experienced seaman to sail with them. Some owners took out ads in the local newspapers. Others offered a signing bonus if the sailor would sign two year articles. Others hired men to search the many bars and brothels that had established themselves on the water front. As the shortage persisted

more and more aggressive became the search. San Francisco's Barbary Coast area became virtually a human hunting ground.

The ship owners in an agreement with San Francisco city officials were able to pass a law that would place a bounty of fifty dollars for every runaway seaman captured and returned to his ship, most of the times in chains and severely beaten. When a protest arose and felt that this law affirmed that these poor men were virtually slaves of their ship owner masters.

The counter argument was that the runaways were in violation of their signed contracts and therefore were common criminals and should be denied any rights of trial.

Bars and brothels along the waterfront were the favorite target of the hunters but any abled body man daring to walk those dark streets was begging to be kidnapped. The victims were rendered unconscious and imprisoned in some safe-house until his captors were able to find a Ship's Captain willing to pay the going rate. Cab drivers were also part of this criminal enterprise. Should some inebriated man enter their conveyance he would be quickly delivered into the hands of the criminals. The local police were unable or unwilling to curtail this growing practice. Because most of the ships choking the docks and anchorages were heading to the Orient and were desperate to get underway they made, sometime a fatal decision, to sail short-handed.

Richard Henry Dana's "Two Years before the Mast", published in 1840, is a true story of a wealthy young student who gave up his studies and signed on as an ordinary seaman on the the merchant ship "Pilgrim" and sailed from Boston to San Francisco and later on to the Orient and returned on another merchant ship back to Boston. The two voyages lasted about two years. His book was the first that truly depicted the life of merchant seaman of that era. His story of life at sea and the brutal conditions endured by the seaman drew the attention of some important people in San Francisco who expressed their concern and made an attempt to correct the situation. Meetings were held with the ship owners and city officials. Although promises were made and regulations were instituted no major improvements were ever enforced.

It was now for the seaman to take matters into their own hands. Conditions were obviously in their favor. Middle of summer, a severe labor shortage and thousands of dollars being lost daily by shippers give the the sailors that now or never again to inforce their demands. The year was 1885 when the first organizing effort began. The Coast Seaman's Union was formed and presented their proposal to the ship owners who immediately refused even to read them. The local newspapers, always siding with business interests, began a campaign against the concept of the unionization of the shipping industry and dragged out every demining description of the class of people daring do attempt it. With no other recourse the CSU decided to strike. They mustered about 50 sailors and marched down Market Street where they encountered company strike busters. The men were beaten and some were arrested by the police and charged with

Civil Disturbance and jailed for ten days or longer.

Although, the strike was soundly defeated and the union was bankrupt the few remaining members continued to organize.

About that same time another group of seaman was considering joining the Coast Seaman's group. Led by a fiery Norwegian seaman, Andrew Furuseh then the CSU and quickly moved into the leadership of the organization. The CSU now had become the Sailors' Union of the Pacific.

Through his efforts CSU began to rebuild and soon were becoming strong enough to again challenge the ship owners, thirty five members Association.

The union membership voted to change its name to the Sailors' Union of the Pacific and elected Andrew Furuseh as their president.

On April 17, 1901 maritime history was made with ratification of the first labor agreement between the Sailors' Union and the San Francisco Ship Owners Association. The local newspapers condemned the contract as the first step for the hated Communists to take control of this vital industry. Genteel society was shocked that the ship owners would allow "that class of people" to dictate to them terms of employment as a loss of dignity and power.

Yes, there was a contract but not peace. The unions continued to press their demands and to strike and the ship owners continued to lock them out but very slowly the seaman won some gains in wages and working condition. These successes encouraged other maritime workers to organize. Surprisingly even the ships officers felt the need of union representation under the banner of the Masters, Mates and Pilots Union. Close behind came the Longshoreman and Dock Workers Union.

After years of fruitless efforts by the SUP to have the federal government intervene in the cause for the seaman the Congress, finally, passed the very controversial Seaman's Act of 1915.

The act was designed for the protection of American Merchant Seaman and eliminated many of the more odious conditions suffered by the sailors at the hands of their officers. This was an encouraging beginning but there was still long way to and many battles yet to come with the Owner's Association.

The Sinking of the American Passenger ship Lusitania on April 17, 1915 brought the United States into the war with Germany. This vessel was maned by American seaman and was sailing in international waters when torpedoed by a German submarine. These, seaman, as testified to by survivors, reportedly performed their duties both professionally and bravely, with many of them going down with the ship. Although the newspapers published the list of passengers not surviving very little was reported regarding the crew. They were still just "Those people". Yet about four thousands of "Those people" were killed in WW1 and over 9,000 in WW2.

Any progress made by the maritime unions during WW1 was quickly erased by the ship owners continuing activity to return conditions back to pre-war days. San Francisco was always ground zero for these confrontations with strikes and lockouts being the weapons of choice for both parties. In 1935, with negotiations stalemated the Sailors' Union of the Pacific decided that they would, to advertise their cause for striking, call all their locked out members for a march. Admittedly, there were acts of vandalism by a small percentage of the strikers. Some railroad box cars were burned and store front windows were smashed but the union leadership tried to curtail these illegal activities. There was a rumor that some of the pickets carried guns but this was never proven.

The Mayor, fearing more of this trouble called out almost all of his police force and ordered them to bring law and order to the waterfront.

The SUP decided it was time to take an action of its own and with 1,500, white capped, seaman began its march down the embarcadero. They were not armed but only carried picket signs hoping to inform the public that their cause was just. Large crowds of onlookers filled both sides of the street. Everything went peacefully until the marchers reached pier 38. Then a large truck emerged from the warehouse. The police charged, swinging their night sticks hoping to drive the strikers off the street and break up the march.

The strikers fought back but many were injured by the police as they began running away. Some remained to do battle when the police let go with grenades of tear gas. The fighting continued for hours when the police drew their weapons and began to shoot at the fleeing men. Some spectators were shouting for the police to stop shooting these unarmed men. Soon the attitude of the crowd turned in favor of the striking seamen. As night fell the battle ended and the spectators drifted away. The next day the Longshoreman joined with the seamen and agreed not to handle any cargo for ships belonging to the Association. The newspapers printed one-sided accounts of the incident blaming the union for the trouble and that more and greater violence was inevitable. Frightened city officials asked California Governor, Frank Merriman to send in the National Guard to protect the city from danger from not the unions but the growing support of them from large groups of citizens.

The Governor agreed and the National Guard arrived in force to set up road blocks, check points and in certain places machine gun nests. San Francisco became an armed camp but an uneasy calm settled in. The Ship Owners Association members, who were suffering immense losses, decided to negotiate with the unions and within five days had come to terms with the SUP.

The cost to the ship owners and all associated businesses was in the many millions of dollars but the cost to the union was: 9 dead, 1000 injured and 500 arrested, tried and sentenced to long prison terms. The dead brothers were memorialized with another march by along the waterfront. Along with the Sailors' Union of the Pacific were hundreds of members of other

unions and as many as 25,000 concerned San Francisco citizens.

These good San Franciscans were appalled by the violence witnessed by both sides and to see their great city portrayed so negatively across the country injured their collective pride. The unions had gained the public's sympathy which validated their cause and gave notice to the ship owners that the battle for the rights of working people had just begun.

Although some semblance of peace existed between the Ship Owner's Association and the seaman's union's deep resentments forever tainted the relationship. The maritime industry was always in turmoil beset with labor problems. Each new negotiation was as contentious as before. Strikes and lockouts made headline news with each side blaming the other.

1939 found Europe again at war. Although the United States declared its neutrality in 1940 American merchant ships were, openly, supplying the allies with war materials. German submarines infiltrated the waters close to American's east and gulf coasts sinking many outbound ships. The crews manning these vessels were not combatants but just regular sailor. Many died, many were wounded but yet they returned again to face the danger, The German submarines had all the advantages. These old ships sailed unescorted and unarmed.

Years later it was reported that Spain's, Francisco Franco's government, although, claiming to be neutral, were supplying the submarines just beyond the shores of the United States. German supply ships rendezvoused, far out to sea, with the Spanish freighters, who then returned to provision the subs.

In 1941 when America entered the war against Japan in the Pacific and the Axis Powers it quickly became inevitable the the Merchant Marine would be needed to deliver the goods of war.

Old ships were quickly made sea worthy while new freighters and oil tankers were being built in numbers never before experienced. Who then would man these vessels other than those men who had always there ready to serve their country?

Now the maritime unions, who were still struggling for better wages and working conditions, saw an opportunity to take control of the situation. They, quickly, increased their demands on the Ship Owners Association. This time the SOA was not in a position to argue. After all didn't they have an agreement with the government that they would receive a bonus of 10% over costs and a new ship as a replacement for any ship lost through enemy action?

The Sailors' Union of the Pacific now led by its new President, the very capable, Harry Lundberg took the leadership of the negotiations and with his success set the pattern for other unions.

On January 10th 1941 President Franklyn Delano Roosevelt signed the lend/lease bill allowing the U.S. to supply both Brittan and Russia with the materials they needed to carry on the war. Much of this aid was shipped in merchant vessels, manned by civilian crews.

But this time our ships they would be defended by the U.S. Navy's Armed Guard Service and where possible, by sub chasers and aircraft.

This action did save many ships and the men who sailed in them. Unfortunately this was not always the case. The subs, still being active in the Atlantic, took a heavy toll on Allied shipping especially on the convoys that sailed north to the Russian ports of Murmansk and Archangel.

On June 17 1942 Convoy PQ 17, composed of 35 merchant ships, left Hvalfjord, Nova Scotia headed to Archangel Russia. This was the largest convoy ever to be assembled and included both American as well as British cargo vessels. This convoy, because of its importance, was to be escorted by the America navy until American intelligence became aware the Germany knew of the convoy's sailing date and destination. The German navy was ordered to destroy the convoy and put to sea with a battle group consisting of capital ships, submarines and deadly raiders.

They also increased their number of attack aircraft stationed in Norway. At some point in the North Atlantic the escort was forced to abandon the convoy and sailed to confront the German task force. The merchant ships were ordered to scatter and were left, unarmed, to face the German Wolf Packs and aircraft. For the most part the German task force eluded the allied escorts and was able to attack the merchant ships with-out any resistance

Many of the ships, being so heavily loaded, could only make 6 to 8 knots and were easy targets for subs and dive bombers. Of the 35 ships that made up Convoy PQ 17 only 11 arrived at their destination. The losses were devastating both in ships and their cargos but more so the lives of 153 civilian seamen who were willing to face the enemy for love of country.

There is information that the Russians impounded the surviving ships and cargos and interned the crews until the end of the war.

As the war continued and more and more merchant ships were being deployed on both oceans many more were being lost to the German and Japanese submarines. Newer and faster ships were sliding down the ways. The maritime unions were gaining more members and more influence with governmental lawmakers. The post war future looked good for the maritime industry.

DEMISE AND DISILLUSION

At the end of hostilities the American Merchant Marine was at the height of its glory. A fleet of more than 4000 thousand ships and carrying more tonnage than the rest of the world combined. The industry, now, had the most modern ships and highly trained officers and crew men.

The ship owner had become wealthy due to the 10% war bonuses and shoddy government accounting. Old ships had been replaced with new oil tankers and freighters all paid for the American tax payers. But many in Congress questioned the need for so many vessels and began a systematic campaign that led to the selling off or leasing out a major part of the fleet. Many ships were purchased by the government only to wind in mothballed and left to rot in the swamps. Thousands of seamen were put out of work and union membership dwindled to pre-war numbers. The ship owners, quickly, set about reversing the gains made by the unions during the war. Negotiations again became a battlefield with the unions calling for work stoppages and the owners locking out. Without any government interference the ship owners quietly began registering their vessels under foreign flags mostly in Panama and Liberia. The advantage being that there were neither unions nor strict and costly safety regulations. Slowly the great American Passenger liners were taken out of service with foreign flag ships taking up the slack. The real killer of the American merchant came with the growth of the cruise ship industry. These ships, many owned by American companies, sail under foreign flags with all foreign crews. There are still some American ships on the seas. They still fly "Old Glory" and by federal law are used to supply our military in all parts of the world. For all intents and purposes the American Merchant Marine was dead in the water.

As of June 2011 the number of American ships still active was 393, ranking 27th in the world. As a comparison, the Russians rank 11th with 1,143 ships and our other adversary, China 2nd with 4,053. Greece is number one with 5,226. This loss of our once great fleets so decimated the maritime unions that its national membership dropped to about 1000 active members.

The men of the American Merchant Marine served our nation with with honor and bravery. Estimates place the numbers of casualties suffered by American seaman during the war at 9,330 dead and over 12,000 wounded.

Yet, in the end what really killed the American Merchant Marine has only one obvious answer, GREED..

Those brave seamen, who made the ultimate sacrifice, have not yet been properly recognized by the country they served. One wonders, are they are still being stigmatized by the ignorant elitist attitudes of the past? If so? There's still time to make it right.

The American Merchant Marine was created by Congress in 1939 and was regulated by the United Department of Commerce until 1948 when it was transferred to United States Coast