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THE LUCKY "R"

Chapter I - Commissioning

I have never decided whether I was lucky or not the morning I reported to the Destroyer office at Norfolk and was assigned to the USS ROBINSON (DD-562). My orders were given to me in a rather grab bag manner in that two complete sets of orders were on the Commander's desk ^{when} and one of my fellow sufferers at Norfolk Training Station and I were instructed to ^{choose} pick up the orders we wanted. The choice to me was immaterial since neither of us knew anything about either ship we were being assigned to, but not so with Sam. He read both sets of orders and decided the USS WEDDERBURN was his ship. That, of course, left the ROBINSON for me. The only hitch in our orders was that we were to "Proceed Immediately" to San Francisco. As many of my readers will recall with nostalgia, getting out of Norfolk by any means of transportation is about as easy as stacking BB's on the beach, but we were finally able to get aboard a Norfolk & Western train heading west that night, January 1, 1944.

Traveling across our great country by slow train is an experience anytime but during our peak war effort months it was something that could not be undertaken and completed except by those with courage, stamina, and a cache of food and drink stowed away among their effects. I must say though that there is something about the confinement of a Pullman car which breeds comradeship because by the time we got to Ogden, Utah we were all on a first-name calling basis and by the time we reached San Francisco we had all vowed to remain lifelong friends.

The crew for the Robinson was being assembled at Treasure Island. This little pile of mud in San Francisco Bay had all the conveniences of a wigwam and was about as appropriate for a Naval Receiving Station as Pike's Peak. I was informed upon reporting for duty here that I had

taken one more day in travel time from coast to coast than the Navy allows so that I was being docked one day from my salary. This puzzled Sam and me since we had made perfect connections in Cincinnati and Chicago, to say nothing of the feeling that we had been on the move constantly for five days. Had I known that this hostility had existed in Naval Regulations toward our railroad timetables I would have been moved to climb into the cab with the engineer and let out a loud "Mush" every few miles, for by the time I got to San Francisco I needed every cent I could lay my hands on as evidenced by my relations with my landlord, the Sir Francis Drake Hotel. I was lucky to have been billeted in this fine hotel but the management had an odd little ruling that if military personnel wished to remain registered they had best pay their bill each morning before the sun broke over Knob Hill, or wherever the sun breaks in San Francisco if it is one of these days when it breaks at all.

After the crew had been assembled and undergone a certain short period of training we were ordered to Seattle for commissioning of the ROBINSON. We left Treasure Island by Navy tug at dusk for the Southern Pacific Station at Oakland in what was supposed to have been a "hush-hush" move. It was apparent when we docked at Oakland that we were the only people who did not know what our next move would be as the dock was loaded down with mothers, wives, and sweethearts. This taxed the ingenuity of all the officers to keep the men from jumping ship before they had ever set foot on it. Each officer was assigned a car on the special train we were to board and I drew the car with the most gamblers per square inch. We had not pulled out of the station when the dice and cards appeared, but being a very green Ensign myself and knowing that my word would not be heeded, I wound up in a game of poker myself. The train was made up of converted cattle cars which gave the effect of being ridden out of town on a rail, and I regained my equilibrium about two days after we got to Seattle.

The ROBINSON was being fitted out at the Seattle-Tacoma Shipyards preparatory to being commissioned and three of the officers were already there. They were our commanding officer Commander E. B. of Rocky Mount, N. C. Grantham, Jr./, our Gunnery Officer Lt. Edward Winslow of Dallas, Texas and our First Lieutenant John R. Coakley of Pawtucket, Rhode Island. The rest of the officers and men had been assembled at San Francisco and we were now to become one happy family on 376½ feet of steel.

Robbie was commissioned on January 31, 1944 in a very impressive ceremony and we were informed by the captain in his acceptance speech that our blood would be "running in the scuppers," which did not exactly set well with all of us because we all firmly believed we would get back alive, and we did, thus the ~~REASON~~ reason for the nickname "Lucky R." This particular day was a very dreary one in Seattle and the sun did not once break through the overcast and as the day wore on it became drearier because I was informed with a blinding smile by Winslow that I was to take the entire gunnery division to Pacific Beach, Washington for some last minute gunnery practice prior to ^{Shakedown} commissioning. About 75 men, Lt (jg) Mike Sheehan of Seattle, and I were stoked into two busses and sped southeast to the end of the earth, or so it seemed for 7 days. My bus seemed to keep miles ahead of Mike's and we were arrived in Olympia, where we were to change busses, well ahead of his. I was told here that we would have an hour's layover and this was probably the worst news I had ever received in my life since I had about 40 sailors in tow and they were about as easy to keep together as iron filings in a hurricane. I finally gave up in despair and told them to be back at the bus station in one hour. Looking back on this now I realize I should have been given the DSC for bravery but fortunately they all got back on time and we loaded everyone on a double deck bus and took out on a ride that would have given pause to Lucky Teter. The monsoons set in at Pacific Beach as soon as we arrived and we left after seven days

not having fired one round of ammunition. We got back to the ship in Seattle in time to move to Bremerton and begin loading torpedoes, ammunition, depth charges, etc. These operations were carried out in different locations, each in a separate part of Puget Sound. The scenery on each of these trips was breathtaking and each time we turned into another cove off the Sound I fully expected Jeannette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy to paddle by in a canoe singing the "Indian Love Call."

After we had been completely equipped, fitted out, and supplied we were ready for our run to San Diego for our shakedown cruise. On February 18, 1944 we left Seattle for San Diego. We got underway about 1300 and were able to have our evening meal in the comparative smoothness of Puget Sound. As luck would have it our meal consisted chiefly of pork chops and as we approached the Straits of San Juan de Fuca opposite Victoria, British Columbia about dusk these pork chops began stirring within the men. It was at this point that the Pacific and the Straits of San Juan de Fuca began to play havoc with Robbie. We pitched, we tossed, and we rolled and half of the crew was at the rails (the leeward one that is) to return the pork chops from whence they came. I stood my first watch that evening in the big main battery director atop the bridge and the five of us in this hollow piece of steel were shaken up like dice in a cup for four hours. A boy with a sling shot could have captured us that night because I for one had already surrendered to the elements and from the word we received over our telephones so had almost all the rest of the officers and men. Point Loma is not a particularly attractive piece of land but to us it was the most beautiful sight on earth at this time and became so once more 23 months later when we arrived back in the country from our war activities. Our shakedown began almost immediately.