

April 22, 2000

Dear Don:

I'm sorry to be so slow in replying to your letter, but I was wintering in Hawaii to escape the snow and cold of the winter season in Reno. Having relatives living on most of the islands makes it possible for these old bones to have to worry only about sunburn instead of frostbite. I'm enclosing some clippings about the commissioning ceremony, a picture of the Pictor that was probably taken between 1953 and 1955, and a picture of a mine we exploded enroute to Japan in late 1951 or early 1952. After 50 years I'm not that sure of exact dates, and sometimes I'm not too sure of the year.

I don't remember much about the commissioning ceremony. I reported to Mare Island about 9 p.m. on the 17th of October after a three week trip from Lisbon, Portugal. When I got aboard Pictor I was informed we were being commissioned at 10:00 a.m. the next morning. There wasn't time to compose any fancy speech, my blues needed pressing, and I had to borrow a pair of gloves from my exec. The brass made their fancy speeches while I made my part of the process as short as possible so we could get back to work.

The Navy Yard had 30 days to rejuvenate the ship from the Reserve Fleet and turn it into a Navy ship. Most of the effort had to be concentrated on the engineering plant, the cargo handling gear, and the electronics. To make us Navy they painted the ship gray, put a number on the bow and the boats, and put 20 mm guns on each wing above the bridge. A few days after commissioning we got underway on sea trials with a large contingent of yard people along with our crew. We made it out through the Golden Gate and then back to Mare island in a real long day. As expected, there were all kinds of minor problems that showed up all over the place, so we were given a few more days in the yard. A second run the next week was better but we still had a lot of discrepancies to worry about. ComServPac said we were needed and to move us out.

We went to San Diego for a month of shakedown training, most of which we needed very much. Most of the crew had been picked by name from their Reserve units to fill each assigned billet. About 85% of the crew were called up from the Reserves and the rest of us were regular Navy. We had lots of talent but most had been away from the sea-going Navy since 1945 or '46. We just needed some practice time to get back in the groove. Our last week of training was primarily shiphandling maneuvers with some AP's, AK's, and AO's. We had to learn to keep station in column, in line abreast, and every variation in between. With our variations in power and maneuverability we never got to look like a destroyer squadron. As this was the only time we ever steamed in company with another ship during my 18 months aboard it did seem like mostly a waste of our time.

We returned to the S.F. Bay area in early December and instead of going back to Mare Island as we were expecting, we were sent to a commercial shipyard for minor voyage repairs. Each trip we made, the bosses promised that when we got back we would go into Mare Island or the San Francisco Naval Shipyard, but it never happened, and we always got a short voyage repair availability at Bethlehem Steel or Moore Shipyard and no major work was done. We loaded cargo during the week before Christmas and were due to sail late in the afternoon of the 24th. I tried to get WestSeaFron to let us sail 24 hours later and the answer wasn't no, but "Hell No, don't you know there's a war on". The exact same thing happened the next Christmas with the same result.

Because there was a war on, all ships westbound across the Pacific were routed on zig-zag courses by ComWesSeaFron although I never heard of any submarine attacks during the Korean War. All ships carrying troops had to go on southerly routes to cut down on sea-sickness, the carriers were sent on the southerly routing because their Operational

Readiness Inspections were held at Pearl and it also allowed them to carry out air training operations enroute. Destroyers had to refuel at Pearl and Midway, so that left cruisers and the auxiliaries to travel via the northern routes. With full loads and heading into the wind and seas, we took quite a beating topside and very rarely were able to do any work on the weather decks. On the trip back we were on our own for routes and always picked a track that would get us back in the shortest time and in decent weather. We were usually nearly empty coming back with just a few household affects and private cars as cargo. Riding high and with favorable winds we could work topside quite a bit. We always offered to take up to 25 or 30 passengers enroute to S.F. and used them for chipping and painting during the trip. When unloading cargo on the western destination we always tried to empty #3 hold as fast as possible. That gave it more time to dry out and be available for basketball games on the return trip. Each division had a team, the CPO's had one, and the officers. We had a regular game schedule set up and played a game at 1600 on weekdays and double headers on Saturday and Sunday afternoons. We didn't discover any NBA stars but had a lot of fun and some good exercise.

Mare Island had only rehabilitated the commercial cargo handling gear so we were not able to handle underway replenishment. We were strictly a point to point operation and tied up to fleet reefers in Sasebo, usually the Aldebaran, and transferred our cargo into her holds, while servicing ships in port and the shore establishment by unloading into small boats on our other side. Leaving Sasebo for S.F. we always made arrangements to have a tow plane and towed target for some AA practice with our 20 mm. It was the only opportunity we could get some firing practice and even more important, the firing area was close enough to the Korean mainland that we were in the war zone which meant the entire crew qualified for no income taxes for that month. Our normal cycle while on the run to Japan was a little over two months. It was usually 18 days westbound, 6 days unloading, 15 days back, 15 to 20 days of voyage repair availability in a commercial facility then 6 or 7 days loading.

After our first Japan run, our next three trips were all on the milk run from S.F. to Kwajalein, Eniwetok, Guam, and Wake Island. These were almost cruise line runs with lots of sunshine, a chance for softball games at Kwajalein and Guam, and even some golf on Guam. On our second island trip we were between Kwajalein and Eniwetok when the fire alarm in #1 hold activated. On checking, the hold was full of smoke, and when opened up a big cloud of smoke came out. Hundreds of cases of avocados headed for Guam had ignited from spontaneous combustion and were smoldering with even some flames, and they all had to be thrown over the side. We had strongly argued against their being loaded as they were nearly ripe in Oakland and our supply officer had warned they would not survive a three week run to Guam. It was nice to be right, but it was a scary day, and a lot of money went over the side.

On the island trips nobody paid much attention to our course, speed, or location. During our last run we suddenly got orders from CincPac to report our position every six hours until we reached Eniwetok. When we got to Eniwetok we were boarded by all kinds of brass and security personnel who wanted one special box in our cargo as fast as we could dig it out. We learned later that the Air Force commander on Eniwetok had ordered several small trees to put in front of his quarters. He had insisted to Travis AFB that his trees be shipped priority air and the bumped cargo had been diverted to us for surface transport. Unfortunately one of the displaced cargo boxes held some of the timing devices needed for the H-bomb they were about to test. Everything had to be put on hold while they waited for Pictor to arrive. I don't think the general ever made Chief of Staff.

The change from Commanders to Captains as CO's came about following the rapid decrease in the size of the surface Navy after Korea. From the 1920's until the 1970's one of the requirements for promotion to Admiral was to have had a deep draft command. With most of the battleships, cruisers, and carriers laid up and more top officers needed on staffs for NATO, SEATO, and other international commitments, large auxiliaries were now included as meeting the requirement. The four strippers served tours of 12 to 14 months instead of the 20 to 24 months that was considered normal so more captains could qualify. Good for the individuals career but probably not so good for the ships to have command changes so often.

I know that getting a roster of officers out of the Navy, even a fifty year old one, is about as easy as getting them to tell you where all the A-bombs are located. It seems silly but I guess they have a reason. I've been trying to find something listing the officers on board for commissioning or very shortly after. I think I have most of them now but can't recall the name of our original First Lt. or the Supply Officer. I remember their looks very well, but no name goes with the picture. Some of the names came to me in my sleep, and I'd wake up and write them down. First names are not guaranteed, as many were better known by nicknames.

CO	CDR John V. Cameron
XO	LCDR John Dubrule
Deck	Lt ? Lt Edward Olsen Chief Warrant BM Frank Vulk Chief Warrant CARP George Giddings
Eng	Lt Robert Henderson Lt (jg) Melvin Bruns Lt Mervant MM Richard Peterson
Ops	Lt James Caraway Lt (jg) William Connelley ENS John Hostetler
Gun	Lt Harold Oldfield
Sup	Lt ? Lt (jg) Patrick Henry Chief Warrant CS Joseph DeAmore

The warrant officers were all part of the wardroom mess.

I'm sorry you won't be at the reunion, but hopefully some of the old timers will make it and perhaps I can get some better answers to your questions or to confirm what I thought I remembered. I'm going to have a couple of busy next month starting with a reunion in Baton rouge of the A.J. Luke, a DE that I had command of in the Atlantic in 1944, then on to New Iberia, LA to visit a friend who was with me at the Purdue NROTC in '55-'57. From there to Biloxi for another DE reunion, the LaPrade, that I had in Okinawa and Japan and brought back to San Diego in 1945. That reunion ends the day the Pictor's starts, so by the time I get home I may not remember one from the other.

Feel free to use any information from me in any way you think is desirable, but you should caution folks that it is fifty year old recollections from an old sailor that might not have been very sharp in the first place.

Best regards,

John

almost left out George Giddings