

## Naval Crossings of the Equator, 1812 and 1956

While nosing around Bob Seymour's Book Barn a while back, I chanced upon a small book consisting of journals kept by the quartermaster of a U.S. privateer in the War of 1812. The accounts cover two cruises made in the Atlantic in 1812 and early 1813. On the second, the privateer *Yankee* crossed the equator, and the author, who kept the log of the ship, recorded a rare example of life aboard a naval ship in those days when crossing the equator. This is an ancient ceremony, and is still observed to this day, although no doubt greatly modified on today's huge warships. As luck would have it, there is in Colebrook an account of such a ceremony that took place on board a destroyer escort (a small ship carrying some 140 men) remarkably similar to the one described in the book written in 1812 that carried a crew of 120. Not only are the ceremonies similar, but the diary was also kept by a sailor with the rate of quartermaster who maintained that ship's log. To the landlubbers out there who might not know what the term "log" implies, all naval ships at sea maintain a running account of every single event that takes place on board that ship on a minute-to-minute basis, if necessary. Every course change, every boat or ship observed, the detailed account of all aspects of "general quarters", or actual battle situations are entered into the logbook. This journal becomes the official "diary" of that particular ship. A sailor whose rate is known as quartermaster performs this duty; other of his responsibilities are the upkeep and maintenance of all charts, or maps and any navigational equipment that may be aboard. This person is in a unique position to know everything that has happened, and to a certain degree some of what is scheduled to happen in the future. In the present military, it is not strictly legal to keep a personal detailed diary concerning military operations; never the less, the responsibilities of the job dictate that anything of a sensitive nature is omitted. With this in mind, we will compare these two journals and see how similar they are. The ceremony itself has been researched back to 1529. It is a mock baptism of any member of the crew who has not previously crossed from the northern to southern hemisphere. Members of the crew who have been initiated are known as "Shellbacks", and the uninitiated are "Pollywogs". The shellbacks form themselves into a cast of characters consisting of King Neptune, the ancient ruler of the seas, his wife, Queen Amphitrite, and a court that includes a villainous surgeon and barber, several guards and other hangers-on. A mock court is set up and all uninitiated are subpoenaed before it with no chance of a fair trial. Hair is cut with no regard to convention; a stripe from ear to ear, one half shaved, the other untouched, etc. Putrefied food is saved for several days, through which all pollywogs must swim. After all indignities have been perpetrated upon those unworthies, each is issued a certificate welcoming him into the realm of the deep and guaranteeing that he will never again be on the receiving end of these initiations, but rather will be a member of the royal court and mete out punishment upon other lowly Pollywogs.

On October 27 1812, the privateer *Yankee*, being close to the western African coast, and headed south, "crossed the line" and passed from the northern Hemisphere into the Southern.

"The ceremonies began at dinnertime when King Neptune, in a barge attended by his lady, his barbers and constables, dressed in the most fantastic manner, with black sheepskins round their bodies, their faces painted in diverse colors and large swabs upon their heads, serving both as hair and beards, with trumpets, pitchforks, shaving

instruments etc. in their hands, hailed the *Yankee* and came on board. They were received with the discharge of cannon and three cheers by the whole crew. Neptune came aft and inquired of Captain Wilson whether he had any of his sons on board, and welcomed the famous privateer *Yankee* into his dominions. Receiving an affirmative reply, Neptune and his comrades went forward and initiated the crew into all the curious forms requisite to make them true sons of the ocean. The candidates were then blindfolded by the constables, then brought before the old sea-god and seated upon the side of the barge which was previously filled with dirty water, tar, slush, rotten onions and potatoes, stinking codfish, bilge-water, etc. Then Neptune, with a loud blast on his trumpet asked of each of the candidates his name, age, occupation, why he had gone to sea, did he have a wife and children, or did he expect to have any? While these questions were being asked, Neptune's lady frequently embraced her son, covering his face with red and black paint. After this the new seaman was sworn to these oaths, thus: "never to leave the pump till it sucks, never to go up the lee-rigging in good weather, never to desert the ship till she sinks, never to eat brown bread when he could get white, unless he liked it better, never to kiss the maid when he could kiss the mistress, etc., etc. At the conclusion of each oath, the barber lathered him with a combination of different colored paint, slush, grease, dirt, bilge-water, gun-powder and other delicious essences; the candidate was next shaved with an old iron hoop, not quite so sharp as a razor, yet sharp enough to take off the beard, paint and sometimes a little of the skin. This being done, he was required to blow a blast on the trumpet to hail King Neptune. No sooner was the instrument fixed to his lips than a charge of bilge-water was poured down the trumpet, nearly suffocating the poor culprit. No sooner was this done when the trembling wretch was seized and plunged into the barge filled with the before mentioned sweet ingredients, after which he was brought out and welcomed by Neptune and the whole crew as a true son of the old ocean. The performance of these ceremonies occasioned infinite laughter and merriment. After the whole ceremony had concluded, the commander, officers and whole ship's company joined in a ducking match, which excited great good humor and pleasantry. The remainder of the day and evening were devoted to fencing, boxing, wrestling, singing, dancing, drinking and every species of mirth and fun."

This was the ceremony as conducted nearly two centuries ago aboard a privateer during our struggle with Great Britain in the conflict known as the War of 1812. Now we will compare that ceremony with one that took place in the mid twentieth century on a small U.S. naval warship in the western Pacific in 1956, also written by the sailor who kept the ship's log and we are able to see the stability of naval traditions. Generations apart, one performed on a wooden sailing vessel, the other on a steel, fuel-burning warship; the event is played out as though each was following a script older than either of them.

"Tuesday, May 29 1956. Noon position 02 degrees, 37 minutes north latitude, 154 degrees, 54 minutes east longitude. Day's high temperature: 93, low 81. Sighted Nukero Island at 0400 (4:00 AM) I was supposed to have gone on the landing party, but after getting us up at 0430, and messing around until 0600, they decided not to go ashore. I had had the 20-24 watch (8 PM – Midnight) last night, too."

"Held pre-ceremony rites this PM. Set all sorts of watches in crazy get-up to look for Davy Jones. At the bow of the ship was stationed a sailor dressed in the same winter garb that we used in North Korea. He was designated as the iceberg watch and had a

grappling hook on a chain that he had to keep throwing out into the ocean in attempts to latch onto any icebergs that might be lurking on the equator. Someone was positioned atop a gun mount with two rolled-up Reader's Digests that served as binoculars. He had to constantly scan the horizon looking for the equator, all the while dressed in woolen winter garb. The Shellbacks have been saving all garbage for the past several days, and while we Pollywogs have tried to discover where, so as to jettison it over the side, so far we haven't been successful. There is a loose confederation of pollywogs that are planning a 'mutiny' tonight as we cross the line. In anticipation of that event, I have constructed a standard sized flag depicting a giant green pollywog on a white background that will be hoisted up when we 'revolt'. We will cross the equator around 0200. Don't believe there will be much sleep for anyone tonight."

"Wednesday, May 30 1956. Day's high temperature 97, low 84. Just about everything a person could think of happened today. There was a big revolt last night. The Pollywogs locked up all Shellbacks about midnight, and not without some monumental struggles – there were quite a few black eyes and bruised knuckles this morning! All Shellback chiefs were locked in the forward chain locker and others were incarcerated wherever a space could be found with a place for a padlock. The communications officer was chained inside a tiny electronic space barely large enough to hold an average sized man (which he isn't). The metal door was then locked and various sailors took turns throughout the night keeping up a constant pounding with a soup spoon on the door right next to his ear. Because his wrists were chained behind his ankles, he could barely move a muscle. He was not a happy man! We had knocked on the Captain's cabin door around midnight and informed him that the pollywogs had mutinied and were holding all Shellbacks hostage. (He was a Shellback, but even when crazy things such as we were doing are taking place, you never touch or hinder in any way the Captain, even in fun.) When he was informed that he was our 'prisoner', he merely said 'Very well, carry on!'"

With dawn, all the prisoners had to be released, and don't think that didn't present problems – would you want to be standing there with a key in your hand when those angry hornets swarmed out all over you? With the Shellbacks firmly in control, one of the first things they did was to hoist the Jolly Roger (skull and crossbones) on the masthead. In so doing they saw the pollywog flag, and of course took it down. Predictably, the chief quartermaster (Shellback), who had the only other key to the bunting locker where all materials used for making flags were kept, sought me out and had a few more entries made on my subpoena, which already charged me with claiming to be a petty officer (I am one), claiming to be a better signalman than any first class petty officer and claiming that Connecticut was the best state in the Union!

The Royal Barber practiced his art on everyone, leaving stripes, gouges and odd tufts of hair scattered about our scalps. Everyone had to pay a visit to the Royal Doctor, who prescribed the same 'cure' for all – a long squirt of pure quinine down the throat. To the uninitiated, quinine is the bitterest natural-occurring substance known to man! Many were beaten with four-foot sections of fire hose, others were put in stocks seated stark naked in the equatorial sun for one or two hours. The executive officer (a Pollywog) was positioned on top of a gun mount with a rifle, and every ten minutes had to shoot at the sun and report our position as being in the Pacific Ocean, all at the top of his lungs!. When the gunshot was heard, all Pollywogs that were designated to perform a special

function had to do so, at the same time announcing it to the world at the top of his lungs. One of our officers was placed in a gig (motorized boat) that had been rigged outboard. He had a paddle and had to go through the motions of paddling the gig, all the while bellowing at the top of his lungs 'Wait for me!' (By the end of the ceremonies, he had lost his voice and his hands were covered with huge blisters.)

One of the Pollywogs from Texas, who always made a point of letting anyone know who would listen, that no matter how hot it was 'it gets a lot hotter in Texas', had to stand in the engine room where the temperature was about 115°, dressed from head to toe in heavy winter clothing. He had to shout 'It's not hot down here!'

The Royal Queen went around embracing Pollywogs and smearing a combination of Limburger cheese and ketchup all over their faces. As if that wasn't bad enough, there had been constructed a long canvas tube about ten or twelve feet long and two and a half feet in diameter. This was placed between two large pieces of wooden beams and filled with all the putrefied garbage that had been saved, as well as liberal amounts of yeast and mayonnaise with corn and peas (for color!). As each man was positioned to go through this tunnel, he automatically took in a deep breath, closed his eyes and plunged in, keeping his head high to avoid as much of the sludge as possible. It was all to no avail, however – about midpoint a 200 lb. plus Shellback jumped on top of the poor soul, totally submerging him. Then you would see him move with unbelievable speed! As he emerged, he was hit with water from a fire hose having a 'suicide nozzle' on it (to obtain very high pressure). This removed the liquid coating as well as some skin!

That was about it – we were Shellbacks now with no one else to initiate. My only regret is that we are headed back to The States after this cruise and I am getting out and will never have the opportunity to initiate some poor unsuspecting Pollywog!