

Houtsma 1 :

DUTCH HOUTSMA

S: This is the 24th day of September, 1988, and I'm visiting Dutch Houtsma in his home in Tomaston Maine. Dutch, take over.

D: You were talking about anecdotes and one of the funniest things that I ever saw happened up in Halifax, Nova Scotia. That was the days of the ice patrol. For those of you who don't know what the ice patrol was, it was a question of going out and drifting with an iceberg and staying there as long as it was foggy. This came about because of the Titanic sinking.

I was on a ship, the Champlain, with a very fine officer and one of my favorites, Raymond McGilliget, who also was the commandant of cadets when I was a cadet. When he got transferred, he went to the Champlain and I decided I'd like to go with him. We were up in Halifax and things were very formal in those days. We were to receive the council and we had received certain Canadian dignitaries and we were all lined up on the Champlain's quarter deck.

I was the junior member and standing at the end. Joe Howe was next to me. We were all dressed up in blues, that is frock coat and ironbound railroad trousers, as we called them, with a wide gold stripe, and our fore and aft hats. I'll tell you we were a fine looking group.

Pop Short, who was a mustang, and who used to grit his teeth when he put on that rig, was standing at the head of the line and Captain McGilliget was standing at the gangway. We were awaiting the arrival of the US Council.

A car pulled up and a man got out in whites and the sideboys were ready, the boson had his pipe out, and as this man came across the gangway, he was piped aboard. He stepped aboard and gave a snappy salute. He was in a uniform, and the captain introduced himself and welcomed him to the Coast Guard cutter Champlain. This man said he was very glad to be there, he was the laundry man.

Everybody burst out into laughter, but the old man was no man to be toyed with- he raised hell. The sideboys got a detention and we all got a lecture on behavior. Pop Short was gleeful.

The Champlain had a bathtub. We had no fresh water to speak of, except that which we carried in our tanks, but we did have an evaporator to make water for the boilers and when we drifted next to a berg, we used a steam whistle. Joe Howe used to bitch because he said the whistle was using up all his water.

We would ride alongside that berg for days at a time. If it cleared up at all, we'd run north, look for more bergs and hope that we could get back to the southernmost berg before the fog set in. We had no radar and would drift next to that berg.

Zeke Brunner was the navigator and Zeke instructed Nesker and myself, we were the JOs, that at night you could hear the echo off the berg, the echo of the whistle The bergs used to roll, not necessarily during the day either, and you'd be drifting next to this thing and have to stay there, cause the old man would raise Cain if he didn't see that berg in the morning.

And yet you were always in danger of having the thing roll over close to you. I remember listening for the echo and the berg had rolled and there was no echo. I wasn't exactly happy with the circumstances. It was as if the berg were alive. There was no radar. To find out where we were we had to get soundings. How good they were, I don't know.

There was a broadcasting station in Cape Cod and we tried to get a radio direction point or bearing on that. That with the sounding told us where we were. We used to broadcast that information to any transatlantic vessels to warn them clear of the bergs. I often wonder whether we really knew where we were, but at any rate no one hit a berg.

We had Gary Graves aboard and he was the ice observer. He used to transfer from one vessel to the other, he never got ashore. He used to get samples of the iceberg and keep them in a bucket. Joe Howe took some ice cubes out of the refrigerator and put them in Grave's bucket, that caused quite a stir. He had to tell him eventually, but it screwed up Gary's measurements for quite a while. He thought he'd really made a discovery.

Life in those days was so much different. Knowing where you were and being able to contact people with radio communications, all by code. We could get through, but not always as well as we should have.

S: What year was this?

D: This was 1938. I joined Champlain in the fall. We were in New York at the time, Staten Island, and the ice patrol season used to begin in the summertime. It was the next summer that I went out on ice patrol. I really enjoyed being with later Admiral McGilliget, and kept up a correspondence with him over the years. To me, he was the epitome of a Coast Guard officer. He was stern, a blue-eyed Irishman. I guess that's the best kind, because he could look right through you. He seemed to see what was on the other side. Hank Nesker and I both really enjoyed him, with Joe Howe and Montrello was on that vessel also. I remember the girls, that is Mrs. Montrello, he brought his wife. Joe Howe was a confirmed bachelor. Nesker and I were both bachelors. I think Pop Short was married, but his wife wasn't there. Capt. McGilliget's wife came up.

S: And she made the best doughnuts ever dished out to cadets.

D: Is that right? I had a great deal of respect and I guess you could say love for that man. He was a model for me. I never could live up to what he did.

We've all had wartime experiences, and I had my share. A lot of good luck. A lot of vessels sunk around me and I was very lucky. Living in the engine room wasn't too pleasant. I recently read a book, The Boat, which was the story of the experiences of a newspaperman aboard a German submarine. He mentions the terror that must go on with the people in the engine rooms in merchant vessels. He speaks of the high pressure steam and how, if a torpedo hits the engine room, the boilers explode and the water, which is 900 pounds pressure, turns into steam immediately when it's released. He speaks of that terror and in that book, I could live that.

I'd been to a reunion of the Chase, it was the second transport I was on, and I was a lieutenant at the time. They had some of the ship's

papers and in one they said the engineers had had damage control drill and Lieutenant Houseman said there were two steps that we should take if we got hit with a torpedo, and they were the lower two on the ladder. Take the rest of them one at a time, but rapidly. When I read that book, I could relive the whole thing. The terror of hearing bombs. You hear them on the port side and they're pretty far away and then they get closer and then you wonder whether the next one is going to go to starboard or be there.

Still, they were the best years of our life, for those who got through it, because they were rough times, but good also. I often wonder now whether that's the reason we have wars. It bothers me a bit when I think of my own boy and going to war, it just shatters me. But yet when I look back on my own experiences, I wouldn't swap them for anything.

I feel very fortunate that I was able to go out to Bikini to see the atom bomb tests. You remember that we only had two go off on two Japanese cities and I don't know whether they had some surplus ones or not, but they decided to test them out at Bikini and I was chosen to go out there. I think Chris Columbus was supposed to, but something came up and they were looking for someone who was loose at the moment and that happened to be me, so on very short notice, I was sent out.

S: How much notice?

D: No notice at all. I was told to call the district and they told me to call headquarters, Admiral Johnson who was the head of engineering. He said : How would you like to go to Bikini? I told him that I'd just got back from the South Pacific and Admiral Johnson had the devastating habit of not listening, because he said: I think you'll enjoy it.

So with my new wife, never having lived together in a home for any length of time and having told her about the glories of going ashore while still being in the Coast Guard, I left her at Grand Central Station, New York City, at two in the morning. We left Boston and traveled together by train to Grand Central, with all my clothes and such gear as we had and she went to my parents home in New Jersey and I was off to Bikini. Straight off. I had no warning, except the night before when --

Childress came over and wagged his finger at me and said he knew something I didn't know. That gave me a sleepless night.

I got out to Bikini and saw the two bombs go off. I think I was probably the only member of the Coast Guard with the exception of the crew of the White Sage or the Lupine or another buoy tender was out there, putting out the anchors. Whether they stayed for the explosion, I don't know. I enjoyed it, although there were many tales back in the states about the horrible things that were going to happen because we were blowing this thing first in an air strike and then underneath the water.

I took quite a ribbing because I was a lieutenant commander and all the rest of the non-participating observers were brigadier generals and lieutenant generals and here was this little lieutenant commander who was called major most of the time. What was I doing there?

S: What did you do for a uniform?

D: Most of my clothes were in steamer trunks being shipped. All I had was traveling clothes- a suit of blues, some khaki, and whites. I decided I'd take the khaki.

I arrived in Washington on Sunday, got my shots and on Monday, we took off on a train. I spent most of my time washing and drying my socks. I had no clothing, hoping to buy some when I got to Oakland. When I got there, a young sailor came aboard the train and asked where my bags were. I pointed out my bag, and he said follow me and went aboard the Blueridge. They had no small stores. They had skivvies that was about it.

I went aboard her and all the rest of the people had fancy uniforms and I had to make do. I cut off my khakis and made shorts, went out on deck to play quoits, which was a little strange for me. Usually you're working when you're on a ship, but these army officers lapped it up and the marines did just as well.

I was always "tail end Charlie," sleeping on the upper bunk and last in the chow line. Not only that, but: What service were you in- merchant marine? That sort of thing. What do you do? just play along with it.

After the first blast we went on a tour to Truck Island and some others that had been bypassed during the war. Truck had been quite a Japanese base. Then we came back and saw the underwater blast and then the navy dept. sent two DC3's out to Bikini to take back the senior officers. They were choosing them from each service, so there was a colonel of marines and a lot of navy people and army and air force and who do you think the senior Coast Guard officer was? I got on the plane and you should have seen the rest of these people- for a couple of months they'd been really shafting me and now here I was on the plane. They flew us back first to Honolulu, then on to Frisco, then I was flown across country to New York. The Coast Guard really came through that time.

S: You mentioned the ignorance displayed by all about the hazards of the contamination...

D: Yes, when I look back at it now, after reading popular magazines and newspapers, I realize how little knowledge we had. We were playing with something that was a hell of a lot more dangerous than we thought.

For instance, after the air blast, which incidentally, the army air force missed the target. They painted the track right down through the center of these anchored ships, they were anchored like spokes on a wheel, and they missed. By yards. And there was nobody shooting at them, so to have missed was really something. The bomb was dropped automatically and they didn't have the correct information.

Anyway, we had no knowledge about this, the contamination. We were on those ships the day after the blast. We went swimming in Bikini Lagoon after the blast. Laughing about it.

With the underwater blast, we were six miles away. It was a coral atoll and the rim is not very high, so at six miles you don't see it. When the blast went off, we weren't wearing glasses and we were all at the rail. We were broadside, so that we could get a view of it. When it went off, we automatically withdrew from the rail up to the deckhouse. because the wave looked like we would be inundated. One of the pictures they had was a battle ship standing on end.

S: That was one of the German ships.

D: Yes. It was really a frightening thing to see this tremendous wave come. We didn't realize at that time that there was a coral atoll between us. You couldn't see it.

The next day we were aboard those ships, and they were all washed with radioactive water. In fact, I was sitting on a set of mooring bits on a tug and a young man came by with a Geiger counter and said: Sir, I don't think I would sit on that, that's pretty hot. We were infantile in our wisdom. They went along the decks with chalk, marking where it was hot and where it wasn't. I since have a couple of letters from a nuclear regulatory thing asking whether I have any difficulty, but I'm fortunate.

I'm going to close this by saying something that I've said before to some of my friends. I'm going to be 74. I've got all my faculties. I just finished remodeling a home. I hew my own firewood, burn twelve cords a year. If tomorrow you see that I've passed over, I would do it without regret.

The Coast Guard took an apprentice machinist who was earning 25 cents an hour and whose father had to borrow a hundred dollars to get him in, and it's given me a total life. MIT gave me experience you wouldn't believe and I'll be eternally grateful.

S: Dutch you were telling a story off the record about the Samuel Chase and the skipper Roger Himer, I want you to repeat that.

D; Well, to begin, Roger and I were the class of 1918 and that class graduated in 1917 so that they could participate in WW1, so he'd been in the Coast Guard a good length of time. Roger was a rough customer.; he brooked no negligence. He had been an engineer, that meant he had a purple stripe between his gold stripes because at the time, the Coast Guard had engineers and line officers and that was the distinction. But then they amalgamated, he became a line officer, but he always felt he was an engineer.

He got to be skipper of the Chase and I was a lieutenant and I was the engineer. I had been the engineer on another transport before that, so I was not unacquainted with large ships, but this was a new one. She

had an automated firing board which controlled the fuel flow and also the air flow and we had a lot of trouble with that vessel because the steam pressure would rise, the oil flow would be cut down, as it should be, but the blowers would not respond. They were alternating current and they couldn't get down slow enough and they would blow the fire out and once they did you had a heck of a time getting back, cause the steam pressure plummeted, you couldn't hold it, had to go to an auxiliary generator- it was quite a nuisance. We got over that finally because they made some changes to the blowers.

We were in Algiers, the invasion was over we were going back to England. In England they had had a severe shortage of citrus fruit., that being a luxury item during the war. Captain Himer, along with the supply officer, decided that they would take a cargo of oranges back to Britain.

I got back to the ship one day, having been ashore, and there was a long line of little burros and atop each one was an Arab boy and he kicked the animal in the ribs with his heels and it would move forward. Strapped across each burro were oranges in a sling. They were dropping the oranges in a cargo net and putting them aboard the Chase.

Oranges have to be maintained cool, and so I had to make some changes in the refrigerators right away. Normally, that hold had been used for ammunition. I got aboard and we got the refrigerators lined up and everything was fine. We were going to go to England and we were going to be greeted like saviors. And there were many tales in the ward room about how the young ladies would love us.

We spent New Year's in Gibraltar and were told by cowboy commander if we showed as many lights after we left ship as we did before we got there, that not all of us would be getting to Britain. We lost a couple of ships outside of Gibraltar.

Going up past the coast of Spain, my water tender had orders to drain the settling tanks. We pumped oil from our main tanks into the settlers, let the water settle out, then drained it and, I have to admit, pumped it overboard and then you would use that oil. He shipped the tanks without draining the water and we lost our power. The cowboy disappeared over the horizon. We were left with one limy destroyer who ran circles and dropped depth charges at intervals, which was a bit

disturbing and we were trying to get underway. I was down in the engine room and tried to get the auxiliary generator going.

A friend of mine was on the bridge and he said the Captain Himer decided to go to the engine room to see what in hell we were doing down there. He came down, 28 feet below the water, and he wanted to know what was going on. I'm busy trying to get things organized and we were progressing, but it takes time to raise steam from zero. For the first time, I blew my stack to a senior officer. I said: if you'll just let me do what I have to do and get the hell out of my engine room, I'll get this son of a bitch on line again faster. Whereupon the old man took off, back onto the bridge, and when the lieutenant asked him how things were going he said: I think Mr. Houtsma has everything under control. And he never mentioned it to me.

After we got her underway, we were approaching the shoreline of France and we got word that we were not to go to England, instead we were to go to Norfolk. Everybody was happy as they could be. Holtzman was the navigator and he had the word first and it didn't take him any time to set the course. Then someone remembered that we had a cargo of oranges and they couldn't be imported into the United States because of the Mediterranean fruit fly. What are we going to do with all these oranges?

Fortunately we had our milk in ten gallon containers, old type milk cans, and we had a lot of those aboard, all empty. Now the engineers had to devise devices for squeezing oranges. We had all kinds including the kind you step on and the kind you squeeze by hand. All methods. We filled all the containers we could. Approaching Norfolk we still didn't have all the oranges squeezed and the word comes to rig for unloading cargo at sea. So we dumped all the oranges overboard and as far as you could see in our wake, there were oranges bobbing up and down. I talked to Nordling years later and asked how he explained it- he said actually we made out all right. I don't know what happened to all that orange juice and we never did get to Britain again.

S: That's one for the record.