

NED SPROW  
ADMIRAL, USCG

S: It's Friday, the 20th of May, 1988 and I'm visiting Ned Sprow at his home in Seal Beach, California. Ned, why don't you just take over from here and tell about your events in the Coast Guard.

N: Well, as most people around here know, I retired from the Coast Guard nearly 22 years ago, after serving 38 years in the service. So I have lots of experiences and memories and with my good friend Sammy Guill here, we've been sitting around recalling a lot of experiences and meetings we've had with the fine people in the Coast Guard.

As far as I'm concerned, I graduated from the Coast Guard Academy the 15th of May, about 57 years ago. After I graduated, my first assignment was on the destroyer SHAW in New London- I never even moved out of town after I got out of the Academy. We were spending our time in the North Atlantic every other ten days hunting rum runners. I can remember very well that in the wintertime that wasn't much fun out there but, fortunately, that was one of the activities.

It finally disappeared around 1934. By that time I had been stationed on the SHAW of New York and placed her out of commission in Philadelphia in 1933, at which time I was assigned to the Coast Guard Cutter CALYPSO, a 165 footer. She was based in New York and we did the same work with her as we did on the destroyer, but in a more uncomfortable manner at sea because they really bounced around and in the wintertime iced up and it wasn't very pleasant.

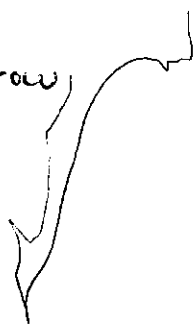
S: Back to the rum patrol... in many of the stories about those days, there's the expression rum **road**, are you familiar with that?

N: Yes.

S: Just exactly what were rum **roads**?

N: The liquor was coming basically from Canada and various islands up in the North Atlantic in that area. French islands. And the boats who were causing the trouble were the ones who came out a certain distance off land. You'd see them every few miles you'd see another boat waiting out there for a shore boat from the US to come out, make his contact, and take off his liquor and run it in.

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S: How large were these vessels?

N: Smaller than we were. Most of them were wooden built. They were very low in the water, the object was to not be easily spotted by the Coast Guard. I never saw one over 65 feet long.

S: Carried about a thousand cases?

N: I would think so, yes. The cases were all wrapped up in burlap and we'd chase a few of them out of there and would catch one once in a while and bring one in because he was inside the rum road, which was an hour's distance to shore. Twelve miles was supposed to be the limit. Once you'd find one inside of that, of course, he'd start running. He could maneuver a little quicker than we could. Especially at night, he'd frequently get away. They used to put out smoke screens. It was quite a battle.

Going back to the load they have in there, I don't know how many cases they had, but they were all fastened together on a line so that when it appeared that they were going to be caught, they'd throw them over the stern and the first would drag all the rest of them into the water. They were slickers.

We took one in. We caught him nine miles off the coast of Long Island. We brought him alongside and the commanding officer had me on board to take him in to Customs at the Battery in New York. So I took it in and turned it over to Customs and went back to the ship. The customs arrested the boat and he was brought to trail before one of the federal judges in New York. They used to handle it pretty fast.

About a week later, I was called in to testify before this judge as to where he was on the chart. He questioned my position and asked how I

stood base duty in turn at Governor's Island, now Coast Guard Island. It happened that when the Japs dropped the bombs on Pearl Harbor, I had the duty at the base there so I don't need to tell you there was a lot of confusion. The first thing we did was black out everything. It went on for quite a while and we eventually went to war. But we did put out a lot of mates and engineers for the merchant vessels, two or three hundred in a couple years.

Then I was transferred to the Merchant Marine, the maritime commission. After another year and a half, I was training officer for a Coast Guard training station on Governor's Island, where all recruits were brought in, outfitted, inoculated, and assigned to ships.

S: Were you on that duty in 1943?

N: Yes, early in '43. I left when they turned the maritime training over to the maritime service and they transferred me to the training station around 1943. Sometime in there I was given orders to San Pedro to the navy patrol frigate that was being built and outfitted by a lumber company down there. That was a naval vessel manned by Coast Guard personnel, the PS 38 CORONADO, and we were one of the first groups to go to the South Pacific.

We left in February of 1944 and I think I went out with the SAN PEDRO Sister ship and we joined the Seventh Fleet and spent two years out there searching for submarines. We had sonar and escort conveyes and patrolling, that sort of thing. We were crossing the equator going north one day and south the next. The only thing that was disgruntling was the heat and it had a great effect on the morale on the people on the ship. The ships were not insulated. We finally got relieved in December, 1945. We went into Lady Gulf on the night that the battle of Seroguil strait was being executed which cut the Japs back.

S: That destroyed a whole Japanese task force.

N: Yes. We saw all the gunfire and we didn't know which way to go. Our division commander was Captain Alexander Ford.

Then they released us and we were dispatched to the Panama Canal and our destination was Boston and this happened to be the middle of the winter. We went from 120 degrees to 25 degree weather when we hit Boston and within 24 hours, about half of the crew were in the hospital with colds. It was rugged.

I wasn't there very long. I had a set of orders received in the mail when I got to Boston, effective the 10th of September 1944, but we got in there 20th of January 1945, so I was a little behind time. I got on a train and got back to good old West Coast and I was then assigned to a ship being built by an ironworks down there, one of the 255 foot cutters, the CHATAQUA. We put her in commission.

About that time the war was over; we were commissioned August 4, 1945 and the war was over the 14th. Then I got a set of orders from headquarters to proceed to San Diego and assume command of three old turtle back light house tenders and escort them to Manila Bay and turn them over to the Philippines when they gained their independence. I had the ANEMONE, the ORCHID and the TULIP. They had like a turtle shell bow and they were slow, twin screw, triple expansion engines, steam, and they burned oil. They weren't very long legged, so you topped off all their tanks and, much to the chagrin of the commanding officer of each one, we figured out how much oil we were going to need to get to Honolulu and we put ten or twelve drums of fuel oil lashed on their decks. They didn't like that. They didn't want to go through the trouble of pouring the stuff into the tanks. We got about halfway to Honolulu and one of them broke down. We towed him in and put him in Pearl Harbor. I was escorting them in the CHATAQUA. It was subsequently found that the engineer deliberately caused too much pressure in the middle cylinder in the engine that broke the piston rod. I think he was court marshaled.

The ORCHID was left in Pearl Harbor and I went on with the other two. We stopped at Midway and Wake and we stayed in Guam for about a week for repairs and recreation. We finally got into Manila Bay on the 28th of June, 1946. I reported to the senior Coast Guard officer there in Manila who was a member of the class of '28. He said we'd turn the vessels over to the Philippines on July 1. We were there a while when

MacArthur came with his entourage. We saluted the new independent nation with our five inch guns. It was quite a ceremony.

Then we went into voyage repairs over at Soowick Naval Base for about ten days and I was ready to leave when I got another set of orders, this one to escort three diesel buoy tenders that had been out there all during the war and they were barely able to crawl. So here we go again back. We pulled out of there on the 10th of July, left Manila Bay and stopped in Guam for a couple days and then one of the engines broke down and had a maximum speed of seven knots. The other ones were cruising at eleven. I said we'd tow them at eleven knots and they'd keep engines running at seven knots. We towed them all the way from Wake to San Francisco. We went right on to Honolulu and stayed there for about a week. We left there, towing them again, dropped him off just before we got to the light ship in San Francisco and he went in and I reported to the 12th Coast Guard District. It was quite a trip.

S: The round trip must have taken you several months.

N: I left in May and I got back in around the fifth of August. It wasn't too fast, but there weren't any telephones or radio messages to answer to. You were on your own. You were given orders and could do them and that was a delightful feeling. That was the end of the war days, after that I was transferred to headquarters. I was in the military morale division back there with Captain Merine, we called him Peanuts.

S: How'd he get that nickname?

N: I don't know. I was with him on the rifle team too.

S: He was one of the expert rifleman

N: Yes. He was captain of the Coast Guard rifle team for several years. I reported into headquarters and stayed there five years in military morale.

S: In the meantime, your morale was going down...

N: No, not really, but I was getting a little tired of it, although I liked Washington.

S: Where was headquarters located there?

N: It was between the downtown post office and the district building, the old Southern Railway building. It was a crummy old place, but handy. I was there from October 1946 to January 1951 and I was transferred after that to one of the 255s in Miami. I was only down there one year, but that was great. We made a couple trips to Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. You could do almost anything you wanted. George McCabe was the district commander down there. The only thing that galled him was that there were too many captains. I could tell a story about him.

They had a selection board in Washington when I was there, selecting new admirals and George McCabe's group was in that area. He knew when it would be announced who the new admirals would be, so while the board was meeting, he ordered stars and bars and all this stuff. When the board was completed, he knew when it would be announced who the new admirals were going to be, so he was going to have a pin on the stars party. Eddie said to him: George, I wouldn't do that. He said: Why? I'll be selected. She warned him not to do it, but he did have the party and when the word came in he didn't make it, the party got kind of quiet. I felt sorry for him and ashamed for him too

S: I was with him in Korea, '46-'47

N: After that I was ordered to Boston, aids in navigation. I enjoyed that. I had not had anything to do with aids in navigation except to plot for them, but I spent three years up there and learned a great deal. Then I went back to headquarters as a chief of aids in navigation.

S: Did you ever order any putty chain for your buoys?

N: No, I don't know what that is.

might be a good idea for the Coast Guard to get them and use them for quarters for district commander and chief of staff. He got right on it.

I was just over there, in fact, because it just changed command. There were about five hundred people there, a Marine Corps band, a chaplain from the navy, all kinds of senior officers. So I joined them, and that's the latest news I have from the Coast Guard.

S: Ned, you've related a very interesting history. You've been active in lots of things. I'll tell you about the putty chains when I shut this thing off.