

Letter From a Merchant Mariner On the Maiden Voyage of Great Republic *During* WWII  
Cal Reed to Don Myers

Note: I posted a message to the Merchant Marine web site a few years back, asking for any MM veteran who served on Great Republic, and having a special interest in her operations prior to this ship seeing service in the Atlantic. One other reply was from a woman who said her father also was a Merchant Mariner on GR. Her initial intent is to search through her father's mementos to look for documents noting his service; this for obtaining benefits for her mother. I suggested some contact references. She said if he found anything re GR, she would forward same.

April 10, 2004

Dear Don-Sorry to take so long to reply to your e-mail. I had to get our home back in order after an absence of two and one half weeks. Here goes my first try. Hopefully we can stay in touch to exchange memories and facts.

In June, 1943, I sat for my Third Mates License at the US Coast Guard Headquarters in San Francisco, CA. After about 4 days of work, I completed the test and subsequently graduated from the California Maritime Academy. After a short stay at home in Covina, CA, I was told to report to the War Shipping Administration Office in San Pedro, CA "ready to go". I packed my bags of clothing and, on the appointed day, was driven to San Pedro by my brother Jim and my mother. I was 19 years old. I reported in to the War Shipping Administration office and was told that I had been assigned to the S.S. Great Republic. I said goodbye to my Mom and Brother, got on an airport van for a ride to LAX and flew to San Francisco. I stayed in the YMCA at the Embarcadero that night and next morning, reported aboard the SS Great Republic. The ship was docked about two blocks north of the Ferry Building and was busy loading cargo when I arrived I climbed up the steep gangway and introduced myself to a seaman at the top. He escorted me to the Chief Mates quarters and introduced me to the Chief Mate, Mr. Boyle. Boyle was a very friendly man, from New Orleans, and he asked the seaman to take my bags to my quarters and took me to meet the Captain, Eivind Bornholdt. Both men made me feel at home and, after Mr. Boyle had shown me to my quarters, I took a quick look around. The ship was brand new, and I would be on her maiden voyage. The quarters to which I was assigned were on the boat deck and designed to carry passengers. I thought they were luxurious, especially after 16 months on the School-ship. I had two bunks, a private head and shower, lots of closet and dresser space, and a great view out of the two portholes. I was only a few steps across the boat deck and up a short ladder to the Bridge, where I would spend most of my time. I went ashore at dinner time and called home to tell everyone how pleased I was. The C-2 class of ship was a well-designed and built cargo ship. It was fast, about 17 knots cruise, and equipped with auto-pilot. The Great Republic was a refrigerator ship, so we could carry frozen or refrigerated cargo.

Later that first day, I met Second Mate Brown, who seemed very pleasant. Cargo loading was almost half completed. I stood the 8 to 12 watch and, while loading, was responsible for keeping a log of cargo put aboard and ships draft. Commercial stevedore crews manned the winches and stowed the cargo, so we mostly had to make sure that we knew what was where and that the ship's equipment operated satisfactorily.

The final phase of cargo loading was the deck cargo. We loaded several Army Trucks, jeeps, etc. around and on each of our 5 hatches and on the decks. Then we were preparing to sail. Up to this time, no one except the Captain knew our destination, and it was not until we had pulled away from the dock and were underway, that only the Officers were told.

The ship was fitted with 8 20mm gun tubs, (as I remember), one 3-inch -50 cannon on the bow and one 5-inch 38 on the stern. The 5-38 was able to fire at aircraft or surface targets, while the 3-50 was only good for surface targets. A Navy Gun Crew came aboard shortly before sailing and were responsible for all the armament. A Navy Lt. (jg) was in charge.

Docking stations were: All forward lines and the bow, the First Mate. After section of the ship and the stern, the Second Mate. Third Mate was on the Bridge assisting the Captain and Pilot. At the scheduled time, a Harbor Pilot came aboard to guide the ship out of San Francisco Bay and to the Farallon Islands, where he debarked via a rope ladder to a pilot boat which stood by off the coast. While crews fore and aft secured and stowed lines and mooring equipment, I stood by the Engine Room Telegraph on the Bridge and followed the Pilots, then the Captain's orders.

Finally, we knew, but just a select few. We were headed for Suva, in the Fiji Islands. We were traveling alone. So, we set up a zig-zag course around our true course line. The Helmsman followed a timer next to the Helm, which would buzz when it was time for a course change and steer to the course shown. This, of course, was designed to confuse a U-boat Captain so that he could not determine our true course and, therefore, could not lie in wait to torpedo us.

We sailed South and then, at the latitude of Los Angeles, changed to more of a South-Westerly course for the Fiji Islands. My watch was the 8-to-12, morning and evening. My duties included taking a morning "Sun-Line" that would be moved forward to cross with the Noon Latitude sighting to give us a "Noon Position". I stood deck watch, checking on the work of the helmsmen and lookouts, and keeping an eye out for other ships. We had two Able Seamen who traded as Helmsmen and Lookouts, and one Ordinary Seaman who was a part-time Lookout on the Bridge wing, and also went for coffee for all hands. We sighted several ships, all friendly, but all very evasive towards each other. After 10 or 12 days, a Lockheed Patrol Aircraft with British markings flew low around us, letting us know that we were nearing Suva. The Islands grew in size, then we passed through a blue water-passage across an incredibly large reef and into the Harbor of Suva, where we tied up to the main Dock. The Fiji men who came aboard to handle cargo were incredibly big and muscular, but very child-like. I remember, for instance, one big guy who climbed into the drivers seat of a Jeep that was on deck. He grabbed the steering wheel and punched the center as if to honk the horn. He punched and punched with no results. Then, with a resigned smile, he just said: "Beep Beep!"

We were in Suva for some 3 days, then passed the word to prepare for sea. The hatches were battened down, since only deck cargo was unloaded in Suva. Sea Details were set and mooring lines were singled up. The ship began to move away from the dock, and then a straggler, an Ordinary Seaman, who had lingered too long in the local bar, ran to the end of the dock. Someone pushed over a rope ladder, and the seaman jumped and caught the very end of the ladder and struggled up to the deck as the ship continued to move out of the Harbor and across the reef. We were underway for Auckland, New Zealand. We had been underway for only a short time and the Seamen were securing the cargo booms, when the ship encountered the swells and began to roll slightly. One of the five-ton booms at Number 3 Hatch started to swing, and one of the seaman unthinkingly reached up to stop this big piece of steel. He put his gloved hand on the end of the boom and it smashed his hand against the boom cradle. The Third Mate is the "Medical Officer" so it was my duty to cut the hand out of the glove and render first aid. The hand was crushed and mangled. Fortunately, Sulfa had been discovered and we had some aboard. I dusted the hand liberally with this wonder drug and bandaged it. We were several days away from Auckland and so the treatment had to be repeated several times.

Finally, we pulled into the beautiful harbor at Auckland New Zealand and pulled up to a dock for unloading. The main street of town was straight ahead. On our time off, it was wonderful to go into Auckland for a meal. Less than two blocks away was a nice restaurant. Steak, with two poached eggs, vegetables, bread and about a pound of butter was Two shillings sixpence, which amounted to about Forty-five cents, American. We discharged our remaining cargo in Auckland, then, after four or five days, sailed for Timaru, New Zealand on the South Island. It was a beautiful days trip, through the Bay of Islands, then down the East Coast and into a dock in the little town of Timaru, between Christchurch and Dunedin. We had a great view of the mountains, including Mt. Cook, and the town itself was sparkling clean. When I went ashore to take the draft after we came along side. I was besieged by kids wanting my autograph. Evidently, we were the first American ship in Timaru for quite some time. The

people there were wonderful, and our two-week stay enjoyable. We loaded a cargo of 200,000 frozen sheep, destined for the people of Great Britain, who had been under siege and were very short on food.

A few occurrences marred the otherwise peaceful visit. One of the Firemen, in the engine-room, had been trying to concoct some "home brew", with fruit juice and who knows what, in a galvanized bucket. Unfortunately, the concoction ate the galvanizing off the bucket and the man became very ill, requiring transfer to a hospital. Our Bos'n and another man, decided to take a ride and hijacked a locomotive and freight car from the dock area. They broke down some miles from town, with no significant damage. Another seaman got a motorcycle from somewhere and did a flying leap from the end of the dock into the bay. Luckily, we recruited a young New Zealander who served well as Able Seaman, Helmsman, etc. for the remainder of the voyage.

From Timaru, we headed East by North, passing just south of Pitcairn Island, and headed for a great circle to the Panama Canal. We were still zig-zagging to avoid enemy n-boats but it was a beautiful and relaxing trip overall. We were trailed by Albatross, the fork-tailed birds appeared as we neared the South American Coast, and we put in to Panama City for food and fuel.

From Panama, we proceeded up through the Windward Passage and on North, on the Great Circle route to England. We were still traveling alone, on a zig-zag course, but we were a little more tense as we made our way through the stomping grounds of the Nazi U-boats. We heard news of attacks in our general area by Pocket Battleships and U-boats as we passed through the North Atlantic, but we saw no ships of any kind. Finally, we entered the River into Liverpool and anchored to await passage through the locks into the main Harbor. We lay at anchor, awaiting space, for some two days, then went through the locks into Princess East Outer, a cargo dock area. The British longshoremen came aboard and began to unload our huge cargo of mutton. I never before had seen a stevedore in Derby hat and white shirt. Not all of them, of course, but it was striking. Liverpool had undergone its share of bombing, so the town was blacked out, but life continued at a pretty good pace. I swapped watches with the Second Mate and took a days trip to London on a train. Lunch at a fancy hotel told me why those 200,000 frozen sheep were so important. My fare consisted of "potato, tomato and sausage". One tiny potato, a small stewed tomato, and one pork sausage.

Our sister ship, the Trade Winds, sailed just before we left for home. She carried, for ballast, 1500 tons of good Scotch Whiskey. Our ballast, for the ride back to New York, was 1500 tons of sand. We arrived back in New York and pulled into a United Fruit Company Dock. The company offered me a job on another ship as Second Mate but I thought I wasn't quite ready. The Great Republic was going to South America and one of the Sons of a Company Official was going to be Third Mate. I stayed in New York for two weeks, then signed onto a Liberty Ship as Third Mate.

This is as much as I can remember of our trip on the Great Republic. Much of it is of no interest to you, I'm sure, but I wanted to include it for my family's information.

Thanks so much for the pictures and the information about the Great Republic. Maybe you have some anecdotes about your time on the Pictor that you might send me. At any rate, we'll keep in touch.

Yours truly,

CalReed

Addendum: I called Cal to inquire on a few items not addressed in his letter. One was the relationship between Armed Guard and Merchant crew members. He stated there was little conflict outside of a rebellious sailor or two. Second, he hadn't mentioned hold contents but did say it was food and offloaded. Third was on the sailor with the hand trapped between boom and cradle; no amputation. Also in our conversation he related later receiving a Navy commission and was assigned to USS TYRELL AKA-80 in the Pacific, surviving a kamikaze attack by 15 feet.