



My Friend! My Brother! My Shipmate!

By Jim Mooney

This is a true story. It involves race, but it is not a story about race. It is a story of brotherhood and shipmates. It is a story never before told.

Before the story can begin, it is necessary that the reader have some feel, some knowledge, of the status of black citizens at the time of the incident to be related. Following the Civil War, blacks were welcomed into the armed services of the United States, but were relegated to serve in specific rates and segregated units. Segregation was an accepted social condition for almost 100 years after the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation. It was the norm. In January of 1948, President Truman publicly stated that the Armed Services of the United States needed to be integrated and the segregation of Negroes stopped. However, it was not to be the case. Following great pressure from united political groups within the black community and the NAACP (National Association of the Advancement of Colored People) and the prospects of the upcoming national election, President Truman issued Executive Order Number 9961 ending segregation in the Armed Forces of the United States on 26 July 1948.

The signing of the executive order did not bring about immediate integration of the races within the Armed Forces, however. There was much foot dragging and even outspoken resistance to the order, such as none other than General Omar Bradley stating that the Army would desegregate when American society did so. This is not the place to become mired in all the whipsawing and foot dragging that went on, suffice it to say that the desegregation of the services did eventually take place, but segregation of American society and the bias and prejudice against the Nation's Negroes dragged on long after the signing of Executive Order 9961.

When I joined the United States Coast Guard on 3 May 1950, it was fully desegregated. Sailors were sleeping "nose to toes" without regard to the color of the noses and toes. To be sure, there were black stewards and cooks, but there were also black seaman, fireman, boatswain mates and quartermasters. We all worked, slept and ate together. Any socializing, however, was limited as the sailors tended to form into segregated groups during "free" times. I'm sure that then, as now, such grouping was the result of looking for a comfort zone and took place when there were other "minorities" with which to "group". Once ashore and on liberty, the white and black sailors faded into their segregated way of life, i.e. black clubs, white clubs and bars, churches, neighborhoods: two different societies.

When in port, and at the end of the workday, it was not practicable to consider going ashore and having a drink with a black shipmate. The reasons were simple. If the black sailor was a friend, no white sailor would want to subject him to the silence, stares, and the possible breaking of the glass he drank from. There was even the possibility of physical violence. In 1950, there were black neighborhoods and white neighborhoods

...not integrated neighborhoods. This was true in LA, Brooklyn, Chicago and Philadelphia: cites that were considered enlightened. For example, in Chicago at that time, there was a bus that ran from the Loop to south 63rd Street, the southern boundary of the “black section”, and a bus that ran from the Loop to the far Southside with the first stop being 64th Street. Get the picture?

The integration of the Armed Services was but an initial step in the ongoing process of bringing the races together

Now that you have an understanding of the social norms and pressures of the times, I will begin my story.

I arrived at the Third Coast Guard District Headquarters in New York City in August of 1950 as instructed. I had just finished a ten-day leave following my graduation from recruit indoctrination and training or “boot” for the previous twelve weeks at the U.S. Coast Guard Training Center, Cape May, N. J. During boot training, I saw what are currently called “high endurance” cutters and patrol boats and one or two of the WWII vintage sea going buoy tenders when they tied up there. Those were the kind of ships I thought I’d be assigned. It was not to happen. The Yeoman at the District Office smiled as he handed me my orders to report to the Cutter Lilac¹, a buoy tender that was at the CG Depot in St. George, Staten Island for maintenance. He then told me how to get to the depot at St. George and wished me well.

The “Lilac”! I will tell you that I was really disappointed. What kind of a ship could this one be with a name like “Lilac”? How does a guy who expected to be aboard a class “A” cutter patrolling the Atlantic tell his Mom and his friends he is on the Lilac? On the subway ride to South Ferry at the lower end of Manhattan and the ferry ride out across the harbor of New York City, past the Statue of Liberty and to the slip at St. George, I weighed the pros and cons of my new assignment. And, of course, my stomach was in knots over the prospects of my new assignment. What if I didn’t like the crew? My new superiors? Worse, what if they didn’t like me? What was shipboard life really like? What was to be expected of me? What did I get myself into? And what was the Lilac like?

Leaving the ferry at St. George, I walked out of the terminal and could see the CG Depot. My first impression of the depot was that it was quite old. The buildings looked to me as though they were late 19th Century or early 20th. There was an administration building, barracks and maintenance shops. There was a “cee” shaped enclosed area in which a number of ships were moored and three docks or piers running out toward the harbor to which I could see several cutters moored. The cutters were splendid. The white 327-foot Spencer or Campbell, the white 311-foot AVP’s that were probably the Mackinac and the Rockaway. There were the black hulled “working ships”: the 204 foot Tamaroa, a sea going tug, and at least two 180 foot buoy tenders, the Gentian and the Mariposa of the type that I mentioned previously that were built in 1942 and had served in the Pacific. After being cleared through the main gate of the depot, my heart was racing as I looked

¹ Buoy tenders were named after plants and trees, hence the Lilac, Hickory, Mariposa, etc.

for the Lilac. One of the ships tied up in that area of the all but enclosed “cee” dock was the Oak, another was the Hickory and then....Lilac. My heart sank in disappointment.

The United States Coast Guard Cutter Lilac was stationed out of the Coast Guard Depot at Gloucester, New Jersey. Her job was to service and maintain buoys from the Delaware Bay and up the river to Philadelphia and the manned lighthouses in the Bay and all aids to navigation such as range lights. In servicing the lighthouses, of which there were seven if memory serves, the Lilac supplied water, fuel, food and other necessities. The lighthouses were in the middle of the Delaware Bay.



CGC *Lilac* in New York Harbor
(Photo courtesy of Restoration Team)

To the 18-year-old sailor looking at his first ship, the *Lilac* looked like a US Navy gunboat on the Yantze River from the 1930s. A riverboat! Oh, gosh! She looked so old. In fact she was about the same age as me. She was launched on 23 May 1933. She was built for the United States Lighthouse Service and became a Coast Guard buoy tender when the Lighthouse Service was merged into the Coast Guard. She was 180 feet long and had two propellers each powered by a three cylinder saturated steam engine. She got her power from two Babcock and Wilcox boilers.



Elbow of the Cross Light, Delaware Bay, 1950 (Mooney Collection)

I can't remember how I was received but had the reception been lacking in some way I would have remembered. Another seaman apprentice by the name of Shuey joined me. As I had taken a ten-day leave after boot camp Shuey, who graduated after me, had not which resulted in our both arriving at the same time. Since it was the weekend, we were both given liberty cards and told not to attempt drinking the city dry (drinking age in New York at that time was 18). We had a great time learning how to get around and looking at the sights. Before joining the Coast Guard, I had seen the movie, "*On the Town*" with Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra², and attacked New York City with the imagination of a teen. We were, Shuey and I, Gene Kelly and Frank Sinatra for one glorious weekend.

As it turned out, the men of the Lilac were welcoming and friendly. It was a working ship with a working crew. In some ways it reminded me of the ship in the play, *Mr. Roberts*. As I said, I had a working imagination and loved fantasies.

I was not aboard the Lilac for very long before I was asked if I'd like to be a fireman. It was time now for me to expand by number of friends beyond Shuey. Although we had not yet left the dock in Staten Island, I had enough chipping paint and painting, and just knew that with fall and winter on the way, doing anything with those enormous buoys was not going to be my thing. I therefore accepted the proffered position. As I remember it, the fireman on the Lilac stood six-hour watches with twelve hours off. Liberty was one out of three days. There were four firemen: me, Harrison, Walsh and Basile and one Boiler Tender 2/c. We tended the boilers and did the oiling. Each boiler had two burners. After a few weeks, we got underway for Delaware Bay and the river and eventually home to Gloucester. I was beginning to learn how to be a fireman.



A buoy on the well deck of the Lilac
1950 (Mooney collection)

One cold night in November of 1950 we were alongside the pier at the Gloucester depot. We had water and phone lines hooked up to shore service, but heat, hot water, electricity and the ancillary machinery such as pumps were all dependent on the ship's steam. This meant that the steam pressure had to be observed so that the burners were "lit off" as needed to maintain the required amount of steam to operate the machinery and provide

² *On The Town* is an MGM movie musical adapted from a Broadway show. The movie starred Gene Kelly, Frank Sinatra, Jules Munshin, Vera Ellen, Ann Miller and Betty Garrett. Made in 1949

heat. For fuel, the Lilac used bunker oil. This oil is very viscous and when cold, it is thick and hard to move. It is difficult to light when cold as well. Therefore, the bunker oil is pulled from the oil tanks to and through a “donkey” boiler where it is heated so that



Fireman John Basile in the Boiler room of the Lilac
1950 (Mooney collection)

it moves through the fuel line at a good flow and ignites readily. Steam operated pumps provide pressure for all fuel and water lines, and of course the steam comes from the boilers. I had gotten off the 1200 to 1800 hours watch and at about 2100 or 2200 hours I thought I'd get a little shuteye before having to report for my watch at 0000 hours (midnight).

I was awakened for my watch. The man on watch who was to be relieved, shook me, asked if I was awake, and getting an answer went to bed. The problem was, I was not awake even though I had said I was. ZZZzzzzz! Through the night I slept as the steam in the ship's boilers slowly dissipated until there was nothing. At about 0400 hours I was jolted awake by a voice saying, “Get Up!! Don't you have the watch?” and heavy shaking. As I was coming out of a deep sleep I heard the fearful words, “There's no steam. The ship is dark and it's cold.” Oh, boy! Oh, Boy! I could clearly see the muzzles of the firing squad's rifles as they took aim on my racing heart. The voice belonged to a fireman named Harrison. Harrison was a tall, lanky fellow who said little unless there was something to say. He was in his dress blues having just returned from liberty to get ready to take the watch at 0600. Harrison was married and lived in Philadelphia. He always went home when on liberty.

Harrison waited for me to slip into my dungarees and shoes which I did as quietly as I could so as not to wake my sleeping shipmates. Without hesitation or being asked, Harrison came with me. Feeling our way we ascended the ladder as we left the forecandle's berthing compartment, and, once on deck headed aft to the fire (boiler) room.

Along the way we managed to grab a couple of battle lanterns so we could find our way down the long



L to R: Mitch Mitchell,
Machinist Mate 1/c,
Fireman James Walsh
and the author
(Mooney Collection)

ladder into the eerily silent blackness of the boiler room.

The deck watch must have been sound asleep on the bridge. Along the aft bulkhead of the bridge was a very comfortable leather bench that was perfect for stretching out and hunkering down into the warmth of a pea coat or foul weather jacket. Had this sailor on the bridge been awake he would have seen the ship's lights slowly dim and go out as the last vintages of steam made their way to the generator.

Harrison did not abandon me. We took a few minutes to ponder the situation and figure out what we should and could do to get things up and running once more and as soon as possible. Working in the light of the two battle lanterns, we thought first to light off the donkey boiler. It burned diesel fuel that flowed by gravity from a tank on the 01 deck. That was the easy task. Next we had to get the bunker fuel to the donkey boiler. How to do that since the pumps were dependent on the steam that we didn't have. We figured out that the thing to do would be to somehow move the pistons of the pump, but how? Aha! We got large pipe wrenches and by opening the jaws of the wrenches and putting them around the connecting rods for the valves of the pump we were able to pull the piston out and back into the cylinder. It was unbelievably difficult to move the thick cold fuel oil through the pump a job that was made even more difficult because the piston moved so slowly that it was almost a wasted effort. Think! Think! It dawned on us to loosen the packing that kept the steam from leaking around the piston rods. We loosened the retaining nuts until the packing all but fell out. This allowed us to move the pistons fast enough to get the bunker oil to and out the donkey boiler. It was a slow and seemingly endless process, but eventually, the oil started to drip out of the burner tubes at the boilers. One of us continued to work the pump while the other attached the burner nozzles that we had removed to reduce backpressure and ease our pumping task. Once the nozzles were attached the light-off torch was held under the nozzle until the oil

ignited. When the oil burst into flame, the feeling of relief and triumph overcame us both. Oh, thank God! We got flame! We got fire! We pumped harder and faster as our eyes became glued on the steam gauges. It seemed like years, but in a short time, the needle began to rise as the steam came up we were able to reconnect the steam lines to the pumps and turn the valves on. The fuel pumps, water pumps and the other steam driven machinery that had been on line began working. The lights came back on. Water could once again flow from spigots and heat would slowly return to the ship's spaces. However, in the boiler room we continued to work. With the packing loose in the fuel pumps oil was spurting out and onto Harrison's dress blue uniform and the uniform's white piping. He ignored the damage being done to his uniform and continued working. The two of us were able to bring the boilers back on line, light and heat the ship all without anyone, not a soul on that ship, being aware that while the boiler room watch stander was fast asleep the ship lost its power and two sailors bonded that night.

We got the packing back into the pumps, cleaned up the mess and shook hands. I couldn't find the words to express my deep gratitude to my friend, my brother and shipmate who worked so hard to save my butt, ruining his uniform in the process. No surgical team could have worked with such precision, determination and togetherness as we did during those early morning hours. Neither of us ever spoke of the event to anyone. Life went on aboard the Lilac as it always did as the ship came alive with the rising sun. Harrison changed his clothes and relieved the watch. What a great guy!

I would have bought him a drink, but you see, Harrison is black and it was 1950.



Fireman 1/c Harrison crossing well deck on the Lilac 1950

Semper Paratus!

Jim Mooney
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