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COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

POPULAR PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN MERCHANT  
MARINE DURING WORLD WAR II

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A Thesis submitted to the  
Department of History  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts

Degree Awarded:  
Spring Semester, 2008

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## **DEDICATION**

To my family for their undying love and support over all these years

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AFL .....	American Federation of Labor
AMMV .....	American Merchant Marine Veterans
CIO .....	Congress of Industrial Organizations
EFC .....	Emergency Fleet Corporation
ILA .....	International Longshoremen’s Union
ISU .....	International Seaman’s Union
IWW .....	Industrial Workers of the World
MWEB.....	Maritime War Emergency Board
MWIU .....	Marine Workers Industrial Union
NMU .....	National Maritime Union
RMO .....	Recruitment and Manning Organization
SDC .....	Seaman’s Defense Committee
SUP .....	Sailors Union of the Pacific
USMS .....	United States Maritime Service
USSB .....	United States Shipping Board
WSA .....	War Shipping Administration

## **ABSTRACT**

The United States Merchant Marine played a pivotal role in the successful conclusion of the World War II and suffered the highest casualty rate of any branch of the Armed Forces. Often labeled as draft dodgers, profiteers, Communists, slackers, and anti-authority, the Merchant Marine's connections with the maritime unions attracted much criticism. The unions rather than the Merchant Marine were the intended targets of most negative press. Yet there was also a great deal of positive images of seamen. Primary sources such as government documents, newspapers, popular magazines, movies, and literature contain a wide variety of perceptions on the Merchant Marine. The purpose of this study is to explore both the accuracy and the origins of these perceptions.

## INTRODUCTION

During World War II, the general public viewed the American Merchant Marine in positive and negative ways. This was nothing new. Since the Colonial period, popular opinion held seamen as marginal characters in society often associated with the vices of the waterfront. The growth of labor unions in the nineteenth century added to people's misconceptions. These misunderstandings converged during the war into claims that seamen were draft dodgers, profiteers, slackers, and Communist sympathizers. In spite of these assertions, most media portrayals of the Merchant Marine during the war were positive. Neither portrait, however, presented an entirely accurate picture of the civilian seamen who fought as part of the armed forces. Despite the importance of their role in the Allies' victory, little has been written on the centrality of their presence in military operations. Their absence from the literature on World War II is an artifact of the fact that regardless of the media broadcasting positive and negative representations during the war, in the public's imagination, seamen remained just as much on the fringes of society as they were before the war.

The history of the American Merchant Marine from its inception in 1775 to the present day has received very little notice. Other events often overshadowed the accomplishments and travails of merchant shipping during wartime. In every major war fought by the United States from the Revolution to the present conflict in Iraq, the Merchant Marine has had a presence. In wars fought overseas, its roles were much greater. Yet, historical memory can be selective. During the Revolutionary War, the Continental Navy was nothing more than refurbished small merchant vessels. The most effective naval force operating during this period was privateers, who were mostly seamen without jobs due to the British blockade. Yet John Paul Jones and his famous battle with the *HMS Serapis* in 1779, a minor setback for the British, is the most well known naval accomplishment of the war.<sup>1</sup>

Merchant shipping was of considerable importance to the new nation, owing to the issues of sovereignty and the protection of economic interests. The notion of a flag

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur Donovan and Andrew Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean: A History of United States Maritime Policy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 17-20; and Bruce L. Felknor, editor, *The U.S. Merchant Marine at War, 1775-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1998), 13-29.

vessel literally being a piece of that country's soil relies heavily on international recognition. The first wars involving the United States following its independence, the standoff with France in the 1790s, the Barbary Wars in 1801 and the War of 1812, started over infringements on American merchant shipping. Before the wars, Britain and other more established countries only gave token acknowledgement to American autonomy. Being able to safeguard its citizens overseas gave the U.S. government important diplomatic and economic victories with the opening of oceanic trade relatively free of harassment. The quasi-war with France also led to the reestablishment of the United States Navy during the tenure of John Adams. Hence, the main reason for the Navy's founding was for defense of shipping rather than national defense, although national defense was a logical corollary once the Navy came into full operation. The significance of these events seems lost in history. The exploits of Andrew Jackson and Oliver Hazard Perry in the War of 1812, for instance, dominates accounts of the war more than its actual results.<sup>2</sup>

During the Civil War, the majority of naval engagements occurred when Confederate raiders attacked shipping rather than any outright battles between the two navies. The South realized early in the war that it could not match the naval supremacy of the Union Navy. They diverted much of their focus instead to the construction of commerce raiders that ran off both sail and steam power. Built by the British and manned by a large portion of British nationals, these ships wrecked havoc on Union merchant shipping. The Union lost over 110,000 tons of cargo by the end of the war. The real damage occurred with cargo insurance, as the rates quadrupled from one to four percent. This created a ripple effect that drove foreign exporters away from American flag vessels and towards the British. With the loss of business, ship owners turned to changing the registry of the ship or simply selling the ship to a foreign country. Over 800,000 tons worth of shipping capacity changed registry, which led to a reduction of over 50 percent in total cargo handling of American flag vessels. Hence, Union losses in shipping were one of the great setbacks of the war, with Confederate actions directly or indirectly resulting in over a million tons of cargo or cargo capacity lost. After the war, the British

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<sup>2</sup> Donovan and Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 22-42; and Felknor, *The U.S. Merchant Marine at War*, 33-48.

had to pay the United States an indemnity of fifteen million dollars for their role in building the raiders and assisting the Confederates. The losses inflicted upon the American merchant fleet were so great that it was not until World War One that American flag vessels would once again play a prominent role in international trade. Government reluctance to subsidize shipping and American monopoly on coastal trade caused American shipping lines to turn instead to domestic trade.<sup>3</sup>

World War One (1914-1918) offered a great opportunity for the United States to expand the Merchant Marine. For the majority of the war, the involvement of the United States was limited to hauling supplies to the British and French. At first, the sudden drop in foreign ships created an economic crisis in the United States, as northern industries and southern cotton producers had trouble exporting their products overseas. The government subsidization of war risk bonuses helped free up intracoastal shipping for international trade. President Woodrow Wilson also passed regulations allowing foreign built ships to change registry. These actions sparked a rapid increase of available ships, as both American operators under flags of convenience and foreign operators quickly saw the advantages of switching to a neutral country. From the start of the war until 1917, the Germans, wary of drawing the United States into the war, refrained from attacking American flag vessels. The United States officially declared war in April 1917 after the Germans, willing to take their chances at this point, conducted unrestricted warfare against all shipping supplying the British and French.<sup>4</sup>

For the Merchant Marine, the most important development during WWI was the creation of a centralized governmental agency to oversee every aspect of America's shipping needs. The primary responsibility for the Emergency Fleet Corporation (EFC), which fell under the United States Shipping Board (USSB), was to provide the ships by whatever means necessary. Initially, this duty entailed the purchase of vessels already built. Upon U.S. entrance into the conflict, the EFC also refitted captured enemy ships. The shipbuilding program (which will be discussed in chapter one) however, never had a major effect on the war. The United States entered in the war in April 1917, but it would

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<sup>3</sup> Donovan and Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 64-78; and Felknor, *The U.S. Merchant Marine at War*, 61-75.

<sup>4</sup> Donovan and Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 103-08; and Felknor, *The U.S. Merchant Marine at War*, 105-120.

not be until August 1917 when the necessary infrastructure was in place for the program to begin. By the time production reached its height, the war had ended. The Shipping Board had a small training program put into place that was nowhere near the size of the program instituted by the Maritime Commission during WWII.<sup>5</sup>

The United States Shipping Board had some unique methods of recruitment. Recruits actually could enlist for the Merchant Marine at Rexall drug stores across the country. Local pharmacists, paid one dollar a year by the government, acted as the recruitment officers. This arrangement came about in 1917 after the USSB opened its training school in Boston, MA, which was the home base of the Rexall Drug Store chain. Louis Liggett, the founder, offered use of the stores as a favor to his friend Henry Howard, and with a presence in over six thousand cities across the country, it was an offer hard to refuse. Howard was in charge of the USSB's Maritime Recruiting Service and was the one who came up with the idea. Although the Merchant Marine relied heavily on recruiting men who entered the industry outside of the academies, it also developed a highly successful training program that turned out over 50,000 graduates in the short time it operated.<sup>6</sup>

In the period after WWI, the initial optimism that came with the construction of the new ships and the expansion of American influence in foreign shipping gave way to disillusionment. Two major pieces of legislation passed during this period were the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 and the Merchant Marine Act of 1928. In an effort to protect the American shipping industry, the 1920 act provided stricter laws ensuring that American vessels plied coastal routes. It also established a U.S.-based maritime insurance cooperative for setting rates, and promoting the sale of surplus vessels to American companies. Its goal was to keep the American presence in the maritime industry at the same prominent position it had during the war. Yet, the surplus of ships combined with the drop in wartime demands and tough economic conditions in Central and Eastern Europe quickly forced shipping companies to cut back. Between 1922 and 1928, not a single large ship was built in the major shipyards. By now, most Americans opposed any

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<sup>5</sup> Donovan and Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 112-24.

<sup>6</sup> Donovan and Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 112-24; and Signe Hassof, "Heave Ho, Lads, Heave Ho!: Training the Merchant Marine of World War One," *Sea Classics* 40, no. 2 (Feb 2006): 56-60.

form of mobilization. As a result, Congress ended direct subsidies to the Merchant Marine.<sup>7</sup>

At the same time, Congress passed the Merchant marine Act of 1928 to offer some help. This act increased the funding for system of mail subsidies that had been in place off and on since the 1830s. It was a system full of loopholes and easy to exploit. The government maintained this method of indirect subsidization until the passage of the Merchant Marine Act of 1936.<sup>8</sup>

The Black Commission's exposure of the mail frauds committed by the shipping industry gave President Franklin Roosevelt an excuse to implement a policy of direct funding for the Merchant Marine and a shipbuilding program. Led by Senator Hugo Black from Alabama, the Black Commission investigated the corruption in shipping companies and airlines who received large subsidies for the delivery of mail. Given the option of voiding the contracts and starting anew, Roosevelt backed the Merchant Marine Act of 1936. This act created the Maritime Commission and bestowed far-reaching powers ranging from ship construction to training and staffing the ships. The leaders of the Maritime Commission, and later the War Shipping Administration, faced the challenge of building new ships while the Merchant Marines had to run the gauntlet and haul supplies across the Atlantic and Pacific, often in technologically inferior ships. Several important ship designs emerged before the start of America's direct involvement with the war: the C-2 tanker in 1939 and the EC-2 "Liberty" freighter ships in 1941.<sup>9</sup>

At the beginning of the WWII, German U-boats inflicted heavy casualties on merchant shipping. Outdated WWI Hog Island ships made up a large percentage of the American fleet. In addition to their inferiority in speed, many of these ships were not fully armed and actually had wooden decoy guns installed. Merchant seamen had no training in the beginning of the war on using guns and the Navy Armed Guard only started their training in 1942. The Navy was slow in adopting the convoy system for merchant shipping owing in large part to a lack of medium-sized escort ships. When the war started there were no blackout regulations even for coastal cities. As a result, slower tankers that made their runs port hopping from city to city under the cover of darkness

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<sup>7</sup> Donovan and Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 125-33.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Donovan and Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 158-164.

were often illuminated, making them easy targets. What resulted was a complete disaster for the Merchant Marines as U-boats sunk 263 ships in 1942 alone. Overall, 9.8 men out of an average crew of 50 seamen, or roughly 20 percent, in ship sinkings died, 2.3 percent of all Merchant seamen in the war died, and the ratio of casualties to fatalities was 3.96 to 1. Despite all of this, the Merchant seamen never achieved full veteran's status, receiving only partial government recognition in 1988.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, relatively few academic books exist on the Merchant Marine and seamen themselves wrote the most extensive works written on the subject. A major exception to this is Arthur R. Moore's book *A Careless Word: A Needless Sinking*. Moore provides a listing of all American flagships sunk during WWII along with a ship photograph, information on the ship such as when its date of construction and its capabilities, and a one to two page description on how the ship sank. He provides the names of all American Merchant seamen killed during the War, their age, job on the ship, when they enlisted and the ship they were on when they died. The sheer size of Moore's project often gives the book more of an encyclopedic appearance. Moore's aim, however, was to inform the public about the vast scope of damage done to merchant shipping during the War. In other words, he wanted the public to gain an appreciation of the sacrifices made by the Merchant Marines.<sup>11</sup>

Moore's book came out in 1983, when the American Merchant Marine Veterans, an organization of Merchant Marine veterans from foreign wars, were deeply involved in the fight over veteran's status. With an active wartime force of between 200,000 to 250,000 men, the Merchant Marine was by far the smallest of the Armed Forces. After the War, they returned to their regular lives. Almost no one wrote the history of the Merchant Marine from the postwar period up into the 1970s. A major work that appeared during the 1950s was the personal memoirs of Admiral Emory Land, who ran the Wartime Shipping Administration and commanded the United States Merchant Marine. Admiral Land labeled the Merchant Marine "America's Cross-Eyed Stepchild." Land expressed concern over the neglect shown towards merchant seamen:

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<sup>10</sup> Robert Carse, *The Long Haul: The United States Merchant Service During World War II*. (New York: WW Norton & Company, Inc., 1965): 108-110; and James E. Valle, "United States Merchant Marine Casualties in World War I," *American Neptune* vol. 53, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 20-29.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Moore, *A Careless Word—A Needless Sinking* (Kings Point, NY: American Merchant Marine Museum, 1984).

There is little or no romance in the Merchant Marine; no glamour, no sex appeal, no uniform for the sailor; and very little attention given to his welfare on the beach; in fact, little overall interest of any kind comparable to that for the military services. The only time the merchant marine is appreciated is in time of a national emergency as an auxiliary to the armed services. In peacetime it is quickly forgotten.<sup>12</sup>

Land's book holds a wealth of valuable information, including what Roosevelt and the Navy said about the Merchant Marine as well as the struggles Land himself faced as head of the War Shipping Administration in his interaction with the president and the Navy.

As the American Merchant Marine Veterans (AMMV), the Merchant Marine equivalent to the Veterans of Foreign Wars, stepped up efforts in the 1980s to raise public awareness for the veteran's status, its members quickly realized the dearth of information in print about the Merchant Marine. Veterans of the war took it upon themselves to write this history. While some chose to write a history of the Merchant Marine, by far the most common form was the written memoirs. The memoirs range in length and presentation from short newspaper articles to autobiographical books. The AMMV national and chapter newsletters themselves also hold much information. Despite the availability of all the new source material, serious attempts to write a Merchant Marine history by people outside the Merchant Marine from the 1980s to the present came mostly in the form of journal articles rather than books.

In 1993, James E. Valle wrote an article in *American Neptune* titled "United States Merchant Marine Casualties in World War II," in which he grappled with the numbers of casualties suffered by the Merchant Marine. Valle gives a scientific elaboration to Moore's earlier work. The most useful aspects of this article are the tables listing the geographic and chronological spread of sinkings and the number of ship types that sank during the War. Valle also confronts many of the controversies of the War, including the questionable conduct of the British Navy in the *PQ-17* disaster and the welding quality of Liberty ships. However, a major problem with his article lies in the fact that he frequently depends on the statistics compiled by Moore and other authors. The accuracy of these authors is not official. A thorough search of the National Archives and Maritime Commission reports could have helped this article greatly.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Emory Land, *Winning the War with Ships: Land, Sea, and Air—Mostly Land* (New York: R.M. McBride, 1958), 192.

<sup>13</sup> Valle, "United States Merchant Marine Casualties in World War I": 20-29.

Military contractors have always been a visible part of war campaigns. In the present day, with the conflict in Iraq, the numbers of private contractors in the employ of the U.S. government compose a large percentage of the fighting forces. While the government has not released an official total of all contractors, the estimated number is about 180,000 and is nearly equal to the number of military personnel in Iraq. With fewer recruits enlisting into the ranks, the military has taken in a record number of contractors, many of them nationals of other countries. The current crisis over veteran's status faced by the Merchant Marine, themselves civilian military contractors during WWII, most likely will have an impact on how the U.S. will handle the question over what to do with civilian military personnel in the future. Much like the Merchant Marine during WWII, many contractors perform military duties and often put themselves in the same dangerous situations as enlisted personnel.<sup>14</sup>

The purpose of this study is not to provide a general history of the Merchant Marine but to examine the portrayal of seamen in the media and in popular culture during WWII. Many of the histories on the Merchant Marine mention the media battles and some of the negative perceptions about the service but do not focus on its roots. Histories written on the maritime labor unions, namely Donald Edward Willet's dissertation "Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union, 1936-1945" and *This is the N.M.U.* published by the National Maritime Union, go into further details on the misconceptions but confines the discussion mainly to how the conservative media and other conservative organizations portrayed the unions. The subject bears importance to the larger question of whether seamen received proper recognition and compensation for their services. Whenever doubts arise as to the motivations, behavior, or even loyalty for a large group of individuals engaged in the war effort, it tends to trivialize to a certain extent their accomplishments.<sup>15</sup>

The global nature of the conflict made WWII a war of logistics as well as production. Most historians today agree that a crucial advantage the Allies enjoyed during WWII was the industrial might of the United States. Yet just as important was the

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<sup>14</sup> Timothy K. Hsia, "Iraq Needs Contractors," *Los Angeles Times*, September 21, 2007.

<sup>15</sup> William P. Gottlieb, *This is the N.M.U.* (New York, William P. Gottlieb Co., undated); and Donald Edward Willet, "Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union, 1936-1945" (PhD. diss., Texas A & M University, 1985), 157-73.

infrastructure created to transport supplies and troops across the globe. Understanding the Merchant Marine and its contributions to the war effort helps in visualizing the vastness of the scope of the war.

Chapter one discusses the history of the Merchant Marine during the Depression and leading up to WWII, including the rise of radical unionism, government subsidization and the creation and duties of the Maritime Commission and the War Shipping Administration. Understanding the situation leading up to the war and the governmental framework in place is important learn about the preconceived notions shared by many people across the country. A major criticism of the Roosevelt administration was its perceived labor coddling policies. The training of seamen gets discussed, since several misconceptions relate to their attitudes and behavior during the war.

In the second chapter, the central focus is the depiction of the Merchant Marine and the maritime labor unions within the news media. The portrayal of the Merchant Marine in the media was both positive and negative. The majority of commentators praised the seamen, but drew the line between “average” seamen and unionists. Hearst Publications was a conservative bastion with a long-running feud with the Congress of Industrial Organizations. Hearst carried syndicated columnists like Westbrook Pegler and Walter Winchell. There has been debate as to exactly how much influence they exerted over popular opinion, but their national circulation gave them a degree of influence that one cannot overlook. Pegler’s and Winchell’s comments in the papers and over the radio brought slander lawsuits by the National Maritime Union. Hearst’s willingness to publish anti-union stories led to the release of stories such as the Guadalcanal Strike. The target of their attacks however was the unions, specifically the Communists within the unions, and not seamen in general. Articles referring to the ineptness of merchant crews blamed these problems on the supposed morally corrupting manipulation of Communist-dominated unions.

The third and final chapter dwells upon the portrayal of the Merchant Marine within popular culture during the war. The wartime propaganda machine extended into every major form of media. In Hollywood, few movies related specifically to the Merchant Marine. *Action in the North Atlantic* was the most prominent feature film of the era, serving as a straight propaganda film. In books and other forms of literature, their

messages and quality varied greatly. Books and pamphlets, especially nonfiction, tended to take greater liberties in confronting abstract social issues. Pamphlets provided an alternative outlet both cost effective and free from the influence of reluctant editors and publishers. A primary goal of the WSA during the war was to educate the public on the importance of the Merchant Marine. Hence, much of the propaganda was informational. Advertisements from the era for example reflected this approach through descriptions of the role of the Merchant Marine, the extensive maritime networks in place, and the accomplishments and sacrifices of the Merchant Marine.

## CHAPTER I: SETTING THE STAGE

In the period leading up to WWII, the most important development on the waterfront was the emergence of more aggressive unions. The economic conditions created by the Great Depression and President Roosevelt's labor policies were catalysts for this change. This was not a situation unique to the maritime industry, as clamor for more active unions fueled the creation of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) to challenge the American Federation of Labor (AFL).

The Great Depression forced even the most successful companies to either go out of business or significantly reduce their payroll. Cost cutting measures used by employers during this period made matters worse for workers. Unions had no real advantage until the passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act in 1933, which allowed for collective bargaining and gave workers a right to select their own labor representative. This emboldened the unions into taking further action. Militant confrontations between the radicalized unions and company owners took place through much of 1933 and 1934. The great San Francisco waterfront strike was merely one of several massive strikes that occurred during the Depression. While some strikes achieved success, many did not accomplish what the workers hoped, and it led to a growing sense of impatience within the labor movement.<sup>1</sup>

The key difference between the CIO and the AFL was their attitudes towards industrial trade unions. John L. Lewis, the head of the United Mine Workers, led the CIO and wielded a great deal of influence throughout the labor movement. Lewis argued that labor unions could never reach their full potential and take advantage of the provisions of the NIRA while still structured the way they were. The AFL still held to its craft unions, a system that segregated skilled laborers from semi-skilled and unskilled skilled laborers who worked in the same industry. Modern technology made this arrangement outdated, creating a large number of unskilled and semiskilled positions in occupations once dominated by skilled laborers. In the wake of failed strikes among autoworkers and rubber workers, Lewis pleaded with the AFL leadership to allow for industrial unions but to no avail. In 1935, Lewis and several key members of AFL unions met to establish the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO 1935-1955* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 13-15.

CIO. It was in this atmosphere of economic hardships, militant unionism and schisms within labor leadership that the more active maritime unions of the 1930s arose.<sup>2</sup>

### **Unionism on the West Coast**

Prior to the war, the more aggressive unions on the waterfront took the place of the older, more conservative established unions. Before 1934, the major labor union in the maritime industry among mariners was the International Seaman's Union (ISU), which was a decentralized union comprised of virtually autonomous regional entities. Up until this time, the ISU managed to remain the sole bargaining agent with shipping companies for unlicensed personnel. The International Longshoremen's Union (ILA), led by Joe Ryan, had a similar preeminence in relation to dockworkers. After a failed strike in 1921, many seamen joined the left-wing Industrial Workers of the World on the belief that the ISU was too conservative. From its inception in 1908, the IWW, or "Wobblies" as the members were called, was always one of the most radical organizations in the union movement. Open to all workers, the Wobblies followed a policy of syndicalism, which favored direct economic action at all times and refused to take part in political action or sign any labor agreements. Lured by this call to action, thousands of disillusioned seamen joined the movement. Most of them left shortly afterwards, however, as they faced uncertainty over the effectiveness of Wobbly methods and work-related pressures forced them to abandon their union affiliation.<sup>3</sup>

Another union that materialized out of the discontentment with the International Seamen's Union was the Marine Workers Industrial Union (MWIU). The founders created the organization with the single goal of wresting control of collective bargaining. Many were Communists and Socialists. They tried to change ISU policies from within and, for a short period, they were successful. They gained control of the port of Baltimore, with an ambitious plan for turning this into a staging ground for usurping the ISU nationally. However, the MWIU abruptly folded after it lost a national labor vote to

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<sup>2</sup> John L. Lewis, "Adapting Union Methods to Current Changes-Industrial Unionism," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 184 (March 1936): 176-83; and Robert H. Zieger, *The CIO*, 22-29.

<sup>3</sup> Harald Beyer-Arnesen, "Direct Action: Toward an Understanding of a Concept," *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, no. 29 (Summer 2000), [http://www.syndicalist.org/theory/direct\\_action.shtml](http://www.syndicalist.org/theory/direct_action.shtml);

the ISU in 1934. Hence, although the Wobblies and MWIU posed serious risks to the ISU, they never managed to gain control of the waterfront.<sup>4</sup>

In 1934, a strike that started among dockworkers led by Harry Renton Bridges in San Francisco spread to the seamen. A native-born Australian seaman who immigrated to the United States, Bridges took an active role in unionism from the start, participating in the 1921 strike and joining the Wobblies before splitting on ideological grounds. He came ashore in San Francisco afterwards, finding a job as a longshoreman in 1922 and emerging later as a local labor leader in the Bay Area. He was one of the original Committee of 500, a small longshoreman group set up under the direction of the MWIU. The group soon joined the conservative International Longshoremen's Association, however, creating the ILA Pacific Coast District. The basis for the strike was for a six-hour workday, 30 hour a pay increase, and union hiring hall privileges. While the heart of the strike was in San Francisco, ILA members in all the major ports along the west coast struck as a group and the seamen followed suit. In what was a strike that lasted 83 days, various local unions from different industries all voted on a general strike in the city of San Francisco. The strike was eventually settled, though, with the longshoremen receiving their demands. However, the stipulations for the seamen hinged upon the certified elections of the International Seaman's Union and Sailors Union of the Pacific (SUP) within the ships. Harry Lundeberg emerged as an important force within the older SUP during the 1934 strike. The strike achieved little initially for the seamen other than establishing networks with other unions and causing ship owners to proceed with caution.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Donald Edward Willet, "Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union, 1936-1945" (PhD. diss., Texas A & M University, 1985), 15-26.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Bridges, interview by Noriko Sawada Bridges, 1978, *Oral History of Harry Bridges*, edited by Harvey Schwartz, ILWU Oral History Archives, <http://www.ilwu.org/history/oral-histories/harry-bridges.cfm>; Harry Bridges testimony, in James M. Landis, *In the Matter of Harry R. Bridges: Findings and Conclusions of the Trial Examiner* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1939), 122-24; Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Champaign, IL: The University of Illinois Press, 1988), ; Jane Cassels Record, "Ideologies and Trade Union Leadership: The Case of Harry Bridges and Harry Lundeberg," (PhD. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1954), 17-21; Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific 1885-1985* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1986), 81-114; Philip Taft, "Strife in the Maritime Industry," *Political Science Quarterly* 54, no. 2 (June 1939): 216-236; and Paul S. Taylor, "The San Francisco General Strike," *Pacific Affairs* 7, no. 3 (Sep 1934): 271-78.

The most successful tactic employed by the west coast seamen was to initiate small strikes targeting individual ships. Lundeberg, who adhered to the syndicalist beliefs of the Wobblies, favored this type of action aboard the ships. Gradually, the ship owners granted concessions towards seamen, including pay raises, and this in turn gave Lundeberg more support within the SUP. Lundeberg's policies did not sit well with Andrew Furuseth, who had been the secretary of the SUP since 1887 and a founding member of the ISU. With nearly 50 years of control over the union, uprooting Furuseth was not an easy task.<sup>6</sup>

The election of Lundeberg as the secretary of the SUP in 1936 created some unusual problems. Furuseth, ousted from his position within the SUP, was still the head of the ISU. On paper, the SUP was a member of the ISU and remained a subordinate. Furuseth tried using this position to maintain his control over the SUP by demanding a revocation of what he saw as a Wobbly takeover of the union. When the SUP members refused to reverse their decision to place Lundeberg in power, Furuseth made a major tactical mistake by revoking their charter. Rather than drawing a recalcitrant SUP back into line, the measure only emboldened the membership. It gave official recognition of a situation that had existed for a handful of years, namely that the SUP largely operated outside the control of the ISU. By the time the ISU attempted to rectify the situation and reinstate the SUP, the SUP exerted so much influence that it virtually controlled the ISU.<sup>7</sup>

The west coast seamen held significant advantages over the east coast by virtue of laws passed protecting domestic trade. Federal statutes allowed only American flagged vessels to conduct trade between American ports. As a stipulation for American registry classification, there were employment requirements for hiring American citizens. On the west coast, the vast majority of shipping involved the lumber and fishing industries. Aside from Japan, most of Asia was still predominantly agricultural and did not have the factories comparable to the United States and Western Europe. This situation contrasted greatly with the east coast, where there were no prohibitions against using foreign vessels

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<sup>6</sup> Jane Cassels Record, "Ideologies and Trade Union Leadership," 43-46.

<sup>7</sup> Archie Green, "Harry Lundeberg Stetson," *West Coast Sailors* 30 March 2001, 3-4; Duane Hewitt, "A Harry Lundeberg Retrospective," *West Coast Sailors* 30 March 2001, 5-6; Jane Cassels Record, "Ideologies and Trade Union Leadership," 39-52; Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, 115-121; Philip Taft, "Strife in the Maritime Industry," 216-236; and *West Coast Sailors*, "Harry Lundeberg Centennial Tribute, 1901-2001," 30 March 2001, 1-2.

and cheaper foreign labor in the conduct of international trade. Therefore, the mariners from the east coast did not have the advantage enjoyed by their west coast counterparts. There was considerable overlapping, however. Often, east coast seamen and ships based on the east coast ran regular shipping routes from the east coast to the west coast. They tried unsuccessfully to lobby for equal pay and benefits from companies who carried out trade on both coasts. In fact, the ISU agreed to the renewal of their contract without any changes in 1934. This agreement left many within the union very much dissatisfied with the policies of the leadership. One of the results from this episode would lead to the creation of the Rank and File Committee, a group of former Marine Workers Industrial Union members who returned to the International Seaman's Union. They called for a change in leadership and making the union more democratic, "returning the union to the rank-and-file."<sup>8</sup>

### **Unionism on the East Coast**

The events leading to the establishment of the National Maritime Union (NMU) arose out of the frustration caused by the ISU. Out of sympathy for the crew of the *SS Pennsylvania*, a crew stranded in San Francisco after staging a walkout, the crew of the *SS California* docked at San Pedro, CA but refused to set sail. As a way of averting mutiny charges, the crew still handled all their daily tasks, except they refused to let the ship leave the harbor. Leading this small strike was a former member of the MWIU named Joseph Curran. Up until this point, Curran was never a major figure in the labor unions. He spent a little time as a local organizer for the MWIU, and like most members of the fledgling union rejoined the ISU after the MWIU folded. The strike garnished national attention, especially after the crew continued its strike despite orders from the ISU to end it. Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins managed to negotiate an end to the strike. Just like the SUP situation, the ISU made a tactical error by negotiating the extra

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald Horne, *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 35-56; House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, *Hearings Before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities House of Representatives: Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, 76<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., October 28, 1939, 6519-6696; Albert Vetere Lannon, *Second String Red: The Life of Al Lannon, American Communist* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999), 35-64; and Daniel Edward Willet, "Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union," 1-30.

five-dollar a month raise as the *California* headed back without any additional benefits and then recommending a blacklisting of the crew from the ship.<sup>9</sup>

The key to Curran's rise to power was his coalition with Communists and the old members of the MWIU. When the *California* made its way back to New York City, the company fired the crewmembers involved with the strike. This move triggered a strike among the crews of twenty-one ships. With the aid of the Rank and File Committee, others soon joined and they formed a picket line. The ISU, however, never recognized the strike and worked actively with the shipping companies to break it. In addition to seeking the same benefits as west coast seamen, they also sought improved safety on board ships. The strike never got off the ground. With no money left and little prospect for negotiations, the Curran group managed to secure a way back into the ISU. They brought the labor deals to a vote, and despite initial promises of security, the leadership formally expelled Curran and the strike leaders. Curran made a personal appeal to the head office for reinstatement but to no avail. While he remained officially out of the union, he negotiated an end to the ill-fated strike in return for equitable treatment for most of the members who participated in the strike. The men reentered the ISU, and preached a militant form of unionism within the ranks. Soon Curran had so many followers within the New York City area that he was the de facto union head of the city. His Seamen's Defense Committee (SDC) had over 20,000 ISU members, and as a show of strength, Curran publicly scheduled a strike in September of 1936, the "Fall Strike," and the ISU was powerless to stop it.<sup>10</sup>

The Fall Strike was much more successful, since experience gained from the Spring Strike resulted in a well-organized leadership. The SDC strike spread up and down the east coast and the Gulf coast. It was more violent, however, than the 1934 west coast strike. Twenty-five strikers lost their lives in the strike, with the biggest clash between the police coming in December 24, 1936 in Houston, Texas. Dubbed the "Christmas Eve Massacre" by the National Maritime Union, Houston police cracked

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<sup>9</sup> William P. Gottlieb, *This is the N.M.U.* (New York, William P. Gottlieb Co., undated), 46-63; House Special Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation of Un-American Propaganda Activities*, 6457-6696; *Newsweek*, "Tie-Up: Secretary of Labor Perkins Settles a Strike Between Soup and Nuts," March 14, 1936; Bernard Raskin, *On a True Course: The Story of the National Maritime Union of America, AFL-CIO* (Washington: Merkel Press, Inc., 1967), 17-37; and Willet, "Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union," 41-49.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

down on the picketers. According to the police, the strikers attempted to storm the police station and they forced them back and took it a step further by clearing all seamen out of the area, including those not involved with the strike. There was one death, and several people injured. Newspaper accounts initially placed the number of injured seamen at over 100, but a later account from the NMU stated the number at around 75. One month later, the east coast and gulf coast seamen won their strike. They received a ten dollar a month raise, overtime and the union hiring hall.<sup>11</sup>

Oddly enough, through all of this, the vast majority of the SDC was still officially within the ISU, which did not support the strike at all. Despite the success of the strike, the ISU officials managed to stay in power. After realizing they had the backing, the SDC officially broke away and formed the National Maritime Union, with Joseph Curran as its president.<sup>12</sup>

The NMU became almost overnight the largest maritime union in the United States. After an effective grass roots campaign promoting their cause, they forced National Labor Relations Board elections within the shipping companies in 1937. The NMU won 56 of the 67 elections. This result was the death knell for the ISU, as the NMU chose to align itself with the CIO as opposed to the AFL affiliation of the ISU. The ISU ceased to exist by the end of 1938, after which the SUP took it over and recreated it into the Sailors International Union.<sup>13</sup>

While some differences in opinion existed as to whether it was acceptable for unions to participate in political action, almost all unions exist mainly to address the problems of economics. With the SUP and NMU, it was no different. As the situation in Europe grew worse and Germany started aggressively expanding, the unions maneuvered to leverage their way into better contracts for their members. The rise of the maritime unions also came at the same time the government started to recognize the military necessity of merchant shipping and started its mobilization of the shipping industry.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> *New York Times*, "Houston Policemen Accused," December 27, 1936; *New York Times*, "Texas Strikers Storm Police," December 25, 1936; *Port Arthur [TX] News*, "Rioting Marks Seaman Strike," December 25, 1936; *Port Arthur News*, "Houston Seamen May Take Legal Action Against Policemen," December 26, 1936; Raskin, *On a True Course*, 34-41; and Willet, "Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union," 53-73.

<sup>12</sup> Gottlieb, *This is the N.M.U.*, 56-63.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Gottlieb, *This is the N.M.U.*, 56-63; Raskin, *On a True Course*, 34-41; and Taft, "Strife in the Maritime Industry": 226-36.

## Shipbuilding and the Creation of the Maritime Committee

The military reasoning for the early start of the shipbuilding program came from a lesson learned in World War I. Waiting for an official declaration of war would be too late to produce ships in sufficient numbers to affect the outcome of the war. In WWI, the production of emergency fleet models dubbed “Hog Islanders” did not begin until the United States entered the war in 1917. As a result, the merchant shipbuilding program never played a major role and in fact failed to reach the height of its production until 1919, when WWI was over. Congress passed the Merchant Marine Act of 1920 hoping that government-operated shipping lines would show an operating profit and sales would be negotiated on a favorable basis. With such a massive buildup of ships and a loss of wartime demand, by the mid-to late 1920s thousands of deadweight tonnage remained laid up in ports throughout the country. This created a ripple effect throughout the industry as the profit margins dwindled.<sup>15</sup>

By 1928, the government cut back considerably as money invested in the industry became harder and harder to explain. The largest subsidies went into mail delivery, with the loosely worded nature of the subsidy purposely done in order to provide liberally for shipping lines. As the Great Depression hit, the federal mail subsidy literally kept many of the lines alive. By 1935, this last method of subsidization faced a serious chance of eradication when a congressional committee headed by Senator Hugo Black from Alabama investigated abuse of government money by the shipping industry.<sup>16</sup>

Senator Black led the investigation into the subsidy scandal that would lead to important changes in the management of the Merchant Marine. In only his second term in the Senate, Senator Black gained a reputation as a tireless crusader against government corruption. The majority of media attention during the investigations focused on the airline industry, resulting in the famous split of the Boeing Company and William Boeing’s resignation from the industry in 1934. A significant amount of time went into shipping companies as well, however. The Commission’s final report, “Investigation of

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<sup>15</sup> William Joseph Kelley, “The American Merchant Marine During the Administrations of Truman and Eisenhower,” (PhD. diss., Florida State University, 1982), 1-7.

<sup>16</sup> Virginia Van der Veer Hamilton, *Hugo Black: The Alabama Years* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), 221-26; *Newsweek*, “Senator Black Uncovers Shipping Board Extravagance,” October 7, 1933; and 898. Senate Special Committee to Investigate Air Mail Contracts, *Investigation of Air Mail and Ocean Mail Contracts*, report prepared by Sen. Hugo Black, 74<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., May 18, 1935, 3-6.

Air Mail and Ocean Mail Contracts,” identified a list of sixteen shipping companies who had taken advantage of its provisions. Companies collected subsidy money for imaginary cargo, overcharged for the cargo they received, and paid enormous sums of money to their executives. Black recommended repealing the 1928 law establishing the mail subsidies. President Franklin Roosevelt rejected this idea. He did not want to take measures that would adversely affect the ocean liners with the situation in Europe growing gradually worse. He countered by proposing that Congress should directly fund the Merchant Marine. His reasoning was both economic and strategic. With the rest of world headed for an apparent war, it would be in the best interests of the United States to maintain its own merchant fleet since wars inevitably draws the world’s merchant ships elsewhere. This move would create a shortage of dead weight tonnage needed to supply the US economy. A renewed government sponsorship of shipbuilding would also bring in jobs, which was always a prime goal of Roosevelt’s New Deal program. Roosevelt’s political influence secured the necessary support from Congress.<sup>17</sup>

What resulted from this was Public Act No. 385, the Merchant Marine Act of 1936. This law established the Maritime Commission, entrusted it with the construction of a merchant fleet, and gave it powers to oversee the employment conditions within the Merchant Marine. Its first head was Joseph Kennedy, patriarch of the Kennedy political family, but he stepped down in 1937 due to his lack of understanding about the shipping industry and his anti-union sentiments. Admiral Emory S. Land, a cousin of Charles Lindbergh and a leading naval engineer, took Kennedy’s place and remained as the chairman for the duration of the war. The program got along quite well, with a large transport carrier *America* and the development of the T-2 tankers and EC-3 “Liberty” ships. Just prior to United States’ entrance into the war, however, the Merchant Marine had to turn over the *America* and 24 other ships to the Navy and Army. As a result, they remained heavily dependent on the old Hog Islanders to bring vitally needed supplies to Britain. The War Shipping Administration (WSA) took over most of the Maritime

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<sup>17</sup> Hamilton, *Hugo Black*, 222-34; Kelley, “American Merchant Marine,” 1-7; *Newsweek*, “Black: A Man of Parts: Senator Investigator and Individual,” March 14, 1936; *Newsweek*, “Senator Black Uncovers Shipping Board Extravagance”; 898. Senate Special Committee, *Air Mail and Ocean Mail Contracts*, 12-47; and William L. Standard, *The Coming Ship Subsidy Scandal: Why an Investigation of the United States Maritime Commission is Necessary* (New York: National Maritime Union, 1939), 20-28.

Commission's powers in 1942, retaining Admiral Land who became the head of both agencies.<sup>18</sup>

A major issue that arose during the war focused on the quality of construction of the Liberty ships. The EC-2s, patterned after a British merchant ship design, employed an all welding approach to ship building since it took only a few weeks to train a welder, welding was cost effective and, most importantly, faster to build. Hence welding was more conducive to mass production than riveting. The problem of quality began when six all welded ships, including two T-2 tankers, simply split in half. This prompted the establishment of an investigative board comprising of representatives from the Merchant Marine, Navy, Coast Guard, and the American Bureau of Shipping. The board found that 432 ships reported fractures, with 95 of them serious; but only the six that split in half led to the complete loss of a ship. They found that low temperature welding caused by a rushed job caused the fractures.<sup>19</sup> Admiral Land was quick to point out that riveted ships had a 90 percent higher casualty rate due to structural failure than welded ships. Owing to their style of construction, when a riveted ship fell apart due to faulty construction, lives were usually lost while only one of the six welded ships resulted in the loss of life. The success rate of the Liberty ships' construction speaks for itself. "The Ugly Ducklings," as F.D.R. called them, lost only four ships to structural failure out of over 1,000 built for the war effort.<sup>20</sup>

For the Merchant Marine, finding a way to haul supplies overseas in a sufficient number to maintain the war effort proved difficult. It was no small undertaking and in many ways proved to be a microcosm of the entire U.S. war effort. By centralizing employment, training and war production under one government agency, it synchronized a wide and varying array of traditionally separate fields. There was a realization that

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<sup>18</sup> 55A. *Laws, Proclamations, and Executive Orders Relating to the United States Maritime Commission War Shipping Administration* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1945), 1-54; United States Maritime Commission, *Report to Congress for the Period Ended October 25, 1938* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1939), 5-9; and United States Maritime Commission, *Report to Congress for the Period Ended October 25, 1939* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1940),

<sup>19</sup> United States Maritime Commission, *Report to Congress for the Period Ended October 25, 1941* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1942), 9-17; and United States Coast Guard. "Investigation of Failures in Welded Merchant Ships." *Proceedings of the Merchant Marine Council*, 1 no. 7 (Jul 1944): 142-154.

<sup>20</sup> Admiral Emory Land. *Winning the War with Ships: Land, Sea, and Air—Mostly Land*. (New York: RM McBride Co., 1958), 168-229.

coordination was essential to efficiency. A sudden increase in shipbuilding meant nothing if there was a lack of crews to man it. Keeping the ships afloat meant better technology fused with better crews. Although Roosevelt's ambition was for the Merchant Marine to remain a civilian service, the War Shipping Administration independently took on many duties and responsibilities similar to that of the Armed Services. In addition to regulating shipbuilding and recruitment, the WSA set up the Division of Public Relations, headed by Robert Horton, with responsibilities similar to that of the Office of War Information. The agency within the WSA responsible for maintaining the maritime academies and recruiting the ships was the Recruitment and Manning Organization. Like most WSA programs, it was officially an independent agency but worked closely in collaboration with the Selective Service.<sup>21</sup>

### **Maritime Academies and the RMO**

Prior to the war, there were state maritime academies operating in New York, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and California. During the war, Maine followed suit and established its own maritime academy. The goals of these schools were to provide competent deck officers for the commercial shipping interests. They provided cadets with a combination of classroom and shipboard education, with the most of the operational expenses going into acquiring and maintaining the training ships. Operating under a military style of discipline, the schools placed the most emphasis on working aboard the ship.

An example of this would be the Pennsylvania Maritime Academy. The 1932 regulations set aside three hours for study from 8:30 to 11:30 and 55 minutes from 6:45 to 7:40 p.m. On Wednesdays, cadets attended Naval Reserve lectures from 1 to 4 p.m. The state academies faced problems in justifying expenditure of state funds, since ship experience, military style education and coursework could be obtained elsewhere. The criticisms were more vocal after the creation of the United States Maritime Service in 1938. In 1939, for example, the California Maritime Academy, then called the California

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<sup>21</sup> Division of Public Inquiries, Office of War Information, *United States Government Manual: 1945* (Washington: Office of War Information, 1945), 115-19, <http://ftp.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USGM/EWA.html>; and War Shipping Administration, *United States Merchant Marine at War: Report to the President of the United States*, report prepared by Admiral Emory Land, January 15, 1946.

Nautical School, faced possible closure and had to petition the state legislature to keep its charter.<sup>22</sup>

The relationship between the Recruitment and Manning Organization and the state maritime academies initially was one of reluctant cooperation. The state maritime academies preferred control under the Navy as opposed to the Maritime Commission and later WSA since there was some uncertainty as to the permanence of the two agencies. Likewise, most of the attention and resources of the RMO went towards the U.S. Maritime Service. The state academies also thought that the regulations passed by the federal government in standardizing maritime education were in effect giving the states no say in the institutions and in effect driving them out of business. Ralph Leavitt, the Chairman of the Board of the Maine Maritime Academy, was an outspoken critic of federal government policies relating to the state academies.<sup>23</sup>

Despite initial promises of support to the states, the Maritime Commission went ahead, established the federal academy at Hoffman Island, NY and later Sheepshead Bay, NY, and offered to pay \$65 to any cadets willing to enter the program. This was a huge disadvantage to the state schools, because they still charged students for instruction and had stricter standards for admission than the federal school. As they tried to petition the Maritime Commission for the same benefits for their students, the Coast Guard gained temporary control of the state academies. Shortly after the creation of the WSA, a presidential order placed control of the state maritime academies under the RMO. The RMO had to convince the state schools that they were in support of their missions, even as federal schools opened in states where these academies already operated. Eventually, the government corrected these discrepancies by offering state school cadets the same

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<sup>22</sup> Board of Commissioners of Navigation, *Regulations for the Pennsylvania State Nautical School*, California State Maritime Academy Archives (Philadelphia, PA: Board of Commissioners of Navigation, 1932); California State Maritime Academy, *Regulations and Information Governing the Cadet Corps of the California Maritime Academy* (Sacramento, CA: California State Department of Education, 1941), 1, 6-7; California State Senate, *Assembly Bill No. 253: An Act to Repeal the California Nautical School Act, and to Abolish the California Nautical School*, January 9, 1939; Jennifer L. Speelman, "Nautical Schools and the Development of United States Maritime Professionals, 1874-1941," (PhD. diss., Temple University, 2001), 129-141; and Vallejo [CA] *Times-Herald*, "San Pedro Legislator Claims School Costs to be Unnecessary," January 10, 1939.

<sup>23</sup> Ralph A. Leavitt, "Panel Discussion on State Maritime Academies," *American Merchant Marine Conference* (1942): 98-117.

benefits and incentives as the federal schools in exchange for registering state graduates in the USMS.<sup>24</sup>

Like all other aspects of the Maritime Commission and WSA, the training and recruitment program increased and improved exponentially as the war lingered on. The United States Maritime Service (USMS) started as an independent agency in 1938. The USMS and state academies fell under the Maritime Commission management in 1941, and after a period in 1942 under the control of the Coast Guard, the War Shipping Administration took over. At the beginning of the USMS program, there were 389 cadets enrolled in its first year. As the number and size of the facilities and the number of courses offered increased, so did the number of enrollees. By the end of the war, there were over 262,000 graduates of the various schools. Originally, the instructors for the USMS were experienced merchant seamen and members of the Coast Guard. The United States Navy taught in the state academies. When the WSA took over the management of the schools, officials decided upon Navy instructors since the cadets received commissions in the Naval Reserve.<sup>25</sup>

Another function of the War Shipping Administration and Maritime Commission related to labor affairs. In the coordination of manning and shipbuilding, maintaining peaceful cooperation and preventing stoppages was vital. One of the first tasks given to the Maritime Commission in 1937 was investigation of working conditions in the maritime industry. Their findings led to the creation of minimum manning scales, a standardized minimum wage and improved living conditions aboard ships for both coasts. With the advent of World War II, the SUP and NMU dominated the maritime industry. The two unions were both essentially new labor unions who overthrew the old order amidst a rejuvenated unionism. While the SUP officially had been around since the 1880s, the turnover in leadership resulting from the 1934 strike was so drastic that the

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<sup>24</sup> Ralph A. Leavitt, "Panel Discussion on State Maritime Academies," *American Merchant Marine Conference* (1942): 98-117; and Robert B. McPherson letter to Chief of Bureau of Navigation, subject "Requests ensign's commission for Merchant Marine Reserve cadets upon graduation from State Nautical School," 5 Dec 1938, Neil E. Nichols Presidential Papers, California State Maritime Academy Archives.

<sup>25</sup> United States Maritime Commission, "Regulations for Appointments as Cadet Officers in the American Merchant," undated circular, Claude B. Mayo Presidential Papers, California State Maritime Academy; United States Maritime Commission, *Report to Congress, 1938*, 2.

union was the same in name only. Both unions saw the advantage that worsening conditions in Europe brought for merchant shipping.<sup>26</sup>

As the increased demand on shipping brought the unions and ship owners into conflicts again, there was a fear that bickering between the factions might hold up the delivery of troops and goods. The WSA called a conference of maritime labor unions and shipping operators for the sake of establishing a blanket agreement for the duration of the war. In exchange for a no strike pledge from the labor unions, the WSA granted some major concessions in hiring hall privileges to the National Maritime Union and the Sailors Union of the Pacific.<sup>27</sup>

The situation in the maritime industry caused by a combination of a post-WWI shipping collapse, the Great Depression, the emergence of militant unions and stronger governmental control reinvented the Merchant Marine. For the first time ever, the maritime industry received government appropriations during peacetime for the primary purpose of national defense. The Maritime Commission and later the War Shipping Administration, created to regulate various aspects of the Merchant Marine, served as a multi-functional agency with the necessary elasticity needed to run a branch of the Armed Forces where the line between military and civilian is blurred. This flexibility was crucial in the success of the Merchant Marine. With the hostile situation between the unions and ship owners, the government stepped in to regulate labor relations. As part of negotiations, maritime unions received compromises that made them major factors in the war effort. The establishment of federal maritime academies and expansion of state academies brought in a new and different type of personnel, one who made his way into the Merchant Marine without signing on as an Ordinary Seaman as was the traditional means. No longer funded through indirect subsidization or some emergency spending, the intent was to make direct subsidization permanent.

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<sup>26</sup> House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, *Merchant Seamen*, 77<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., February 26-28, 1941; and United States Maritime Commission, *Report to Congress, 1937*, 6-8.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

## CHAPTER II: “COWARDLY AND INSOLENT,” HE DECLARES

During the Second World War, the United States Merchant Marine fell victim to several misconceptions that would haunt them for many years afterwards. Most of the negative press focused on the labor unions that hired personnel for the ships. The distrust towards labor unions and the amount of power granted to them in turn led to distrust in the membership placed on the ships. Many people perceived the Merchant seamen as draft dodgers, profiteers, Communist sympathizers and anti-authority almost to the point of treason.

### The Guadalcanal Story

A widely circulated fabrication relating to the Merchant Marine during the war was the Guadalcanal story. This rumor started in a front-page article titled “Ship ‘Strike’ Ires Guadalcanal Fighters,” written by Helen Waterhouse in the January 20, 1943, edition of the *Akron [Ohio] Beacon Journal*. The article claimed that seamen aboard an unnamed merchant ship refused to unload cargo off the coast of Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands and instead forced “hungry, malaria-weakened, and in some cases slightly wounded Marines,” to come aboard the ship and unload it themselves. The article contains no specific date for this incident. The reason given for this refusal was that the seamen did not work on Sundays. One of the sources for the article went so far as to declare it was a strike and the National Maritime Union was to blame. While Waterhouse did say the Navy was still investigating the matter, she stated that confirmation of this story came from an unnamed “high military source in Washington” who was in Guadalcanal when it allegedly happened. Waterhouse concluded her article with a warning that a “blow off is eminent” in Congress. Following the release of the article, Waterhouse appeared on a local radio station in Akron, Ohio, WAKR. When asked whether she received verification of the facts, she replied, “I certainly did.”<sup>1</sup> The Associated Press picked up this article and carried it in several newspapers across the country, setting off a firestorm that led to a Congressional hearing on the matter. The

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Waterhouse, interview by Carl Kent, WAKR Akron [Ohio], January 24, 1943, in 29. House Committee on Naval Affairs, Special Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal, *Hearing of Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal*, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 8 February, 1943, 169-70.

*Chicago Daily Tribune* was especially harsh, running an article on Republican congressman Clare Hoffman:

That members of a Communist dominated labor union should not only refuse to unload supplies for marines in Guadalcanal but would stand around and jeer at the wounded and hungry boys attempting to obtain a little something to eat besides rice, will be brought to the attention of Congress this week as the inevitable result of administration's labor coddling policies.<sup>2</sup>

What the hearing revealed was that not only did Navy, Marine Corps and the War Shipping Administration confirm the story as false, but also that it had many holes, from the sources to the fact checking.<sup>3</sup>

Waterhouse's specialty was local gossip. Most of her articles centered on social happenings in the Akron community. She received the majority of her information from interviews conducted in the homes of people in the area, many of whom she knew quite well and considered her friends. One of her features during the war was writing about local servicemen who were on leave and she went to their homes to interview them for her stories. She had very little, if any, experience in investigative journalism and had earned a reputation that her editor Charles C. Miller described as a "sob sister." The term denotes a writer, often a woman, who writes emotionally charged material with the intention of eliciting sympathy from the reader. In her January 24 radio interview, she stated one of her inspirations for writing this article came after she attended a play in New York. One scene featured Marines fighting in the Solomons who were suffering from hunger and malaria because of the lack of supplies on the island. A couple weeks after witnessing the play, on Christmas Day 1942, she interviewed two local Marines who recently came back home. Waterhouse herself had a son in the Marines, and when this particular Marine told her of the trouble they had in getting supplies off the merchant ships, she asked Miller to print the story without further verification. Miller insisted that she hold off until she could get additional information from other Guadalcanal veterans. On December 29<sup>th</sup>, Waterhouse found a naval pilot from Guadalcanal who told her "the biggest scandal of the war today is the C.I.O. strike at Guadalcanal."<sup>4</sup> Later, on January

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<sup>2</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, "Labor Coddling Blamed for CIO Ship Scandal," January 25, 1943.

<sup>3</sup> Helen Waterhouse, "Ship 'Strike' Ires Guadalcanal Fighters," *Akron [OH] Beacon Journal*, January 21, 1943.

<sup>4</sup> 29. House Committee on Naval Affairs, Special Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal, *Hearing of Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal*, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 5-8 February, 1943, 125.

13, 1943, Waterhouse found a Marine corporal who added that a merchant ship came ashore and unloaded for two hours before pulling back and not returning. He went on to affirm that Major General Alexander Vandegrift had a confrontation with the captain of the merchant ship to force crewmembers to unload the ship but was unsuccessful. It was because of these four interviews that she wrote the initial article.<sup>5</sup>

In the Congressional hearing, Miller stated that the intention of the newspaper was to print a follow up relying on additional evidence that came into its possession after the article's publication. The day after the article's release, two staffers from the *Beacon Journal* reported to Miller that a Marine corporal who claimed he was part of the unloading party told them the Marines were angry about the whole situation. According to the Marine, "... we hadn't had cigarettes for weeks and had lived on coconuts and rice; and we knew there would be cigarettes and food aboard so we went on anyway."<sup>6</sup> When Miller tried to corroborate it with this Marine, he shied away out of fear of punishment. A fifth source came from a mother of a Navy sailor who died at sea. When a shipmate of his came to visit the mother, he told her the merchant crews were partially responsible for the sinking of the ship her son died on, the *USS Quincy*. By refusing to work in a timely manner in the unloading of supplies, they caused a delay of several days in the convoys sent out from the Solomons. A crewmember from the *Quincy* confirmed this story, saying he saw members of a merchant crew horsing around and shooting coconuts off the trees on the island when the *Quincy* sank. On January 26<sup>th</sup>, a woman came up to Miller claiming a Marine major told her that merchant seamen stayed two miles off shore because they were too afraid to come ashore. Miller wisely decided to withhold publishing these items until after the hearing.<sup>7</sup>

Several problems with this story quickly emerged, starting with the sources themselves. The one glaring issue was that none of the people interviewed actually took part in the unloading of the ships. Many of them provided nothing more than hearsay evidence, simply reciting what they heard from someone else. The one piece of evidence

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<sup>5</sup> Helen Waterhouse, interview by Carl Kent; *Hearing of Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal*, 124-126, 152; and 30. House Committee on Naval Affairs, Special Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal, *Report of Subcommittee of House Naval Affairs Committee Appointed to Investigate the Alleged Misconduct of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands*, 78<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> Sess., 1943, 198-99.

<sup>6</sup> *Hearing of Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal*, p. 127

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-29, 132-34.

that could have been their strongest, which was the testimony of the Marine who was in the loading party, came second-hand from someone else. The story of the *Quincy* is at worst a story of negligence rather than outright treasonous insubordination. Only one source, the Navy pilot, directly stated the events as a strike. He was on an aircraft carrier, however, and was not on shore when the alleged events happened. All the Marines interviewed did not actually see any of this happen, but only reported a rumor that circulated around the island. Not one of the sources interviewed was from the Merchant Marine. It was, in essence, a one-sided article written by a Marine mother.

The loading procedure put in place at Guadalcanal called for merchant ships to stay off shore about two miles. This procedure was for two major reasons: a lack of deep-water harbors and for safety against Japanese attack. The Marines used their own barges to haul cargo from the ships to shore. Marines handled the unloading duties since the size of the merchant crew was insufficient to handle both the operation of the ship and loading the ship at the same time. Merchant ships did not drop anchor, but instead had to keep the ship ready at all times to move away in case of danger. Usually when a ship arrived in port, it was the duty of the stevedores and longshoremen to deal with freight.

During WWII, the Allies used native stevedores whenever possible to free up men for the front, especially before the creation of special Army, Navy and Marine stevedoring units. In Guadalcanal, however conditions were such that it was too hazardous for native workers. One intangible in this modus operandi was that Marines would have a better idea of what they needed most on the battlefield. They could prioritize and get these supplies in first. When questioned, Miller confessed that did not even know that longshoremen and stevedores, not seamen, unloaded ships. Bonner from the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries later questioned Radford Mobley, the *Beacon Journal's* Washington Bureau correspondent on these procedures. Mobley confessed complete ignorance despite the fact he sat in on numerous Merchant Marine and Fisheries hearings relating to the pay and jobs of longshoremen and stevedores.<sup>8</sup>

The National Maritime Union quickly pointed out that in none of its labor agreements was there a stipulation prohibiting Sunday work. If they refused to unload

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 143-47.

their ship, they faced mutiny charges and court martial like any other insubordinate serviceman. Miller noted that the article never made any specific charge of a Sunday rule in the article and that was something only twisted around when other newspapers re-wrote the story. The *Beacon Journal* also checked into the backgrounds of the Marines and other witnesses and found that several of them had fathers in unions or were themselves involved with a union. One of the mothers interviewed had a husband in a union. Thus, it appears that anti-union bias was not the motivation for their testimony.<sup>9</sup>

Radford Mobley had the job of confirming everything with governmental authorities. He consulted with the press agencies for the Navy, Marine Corps and the War Shipping Administration but all affirmed that as far as they knew, the Guadalcanal story was untrue. The Navy then launched into an investigation into the matter and withheld further word until its conclusion. Mobley declared in a *Beacon Journal* article written the day after the Guadalcanal story that a member of Congress confirmed to him “similar incidents took place.” When he consulted the Bureau of Censorship, the censor turned to the Navy, which stated that they believed the *Beacon Journal* should not publish the story. Since the Navy did not make a direct request prohibiting it and the censor passed it as not violating any wartime restrictions, the editors decided to give permission to proceed and printed the story.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly afterwards, however, the Navy refuted the story after completing its investigation into the matter. Sworn statements by Major General Alexander Vandegrift, in command of the Marines at Guadalcanal, Admiral William “Bull” Halsey, in command of the South Pacific, and Secretary of Navy Frank Knox not only denied the accusations but offered praise for the Merchant Marine. The Committee concluded that the charges brought against the Merchant Marine were false. It also stated that the *Beacon Journal* failed to follow proper journalistic protocol in every aspect of the article’s publication from finding sources and fact checking to gaining proper verification from authorities.

This, however, does not explain the wide coverage of this story. With most stories, even ones featuring such a malicious allegation, the reputation of the reporter and

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 126-27; and National Maritime Union, *The Enemy at Home* [available online] accessed online at <http://www.usmm.org/nmu>.

<sup>10</sup> *Hearing of Subcommittee on Misbehavior of Merchant Seamen at Guadalcanal*, 137-40, 146-47, 155-56, 159-61; and *Report of Subcommittee of House Naval Affairs Committee*, 201.

the lack of prestige associated with the *Beacon Journal* seemingly would have kept it out of circulation until further confirmation. The underlying issue starts with anti-union and anti-Roosevelt forces within the conservative media. The keyword in the article was the mentioning by name of the CIO and the NMU and the word “strike.”

The Guadalcanal story attracted vehement words against unions from conservative bastions like the *Chicago Daily Tribune* and the *Los Angeles Times*. The *Chicago Daily Tribune* published several articles condemning the NMU and praising the efforts of Congressman Hoffman, who called the whole affair “a story of treasonable activities unsurpassed in the history of the world.”<sup>11</sup> The *Los Angeles Times* ran an editorial in the January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1943 edition titled “How Long Should Traitors Last?” This article proclaimed that the actions of the unions, particularly CIO unions, amounted to treason. The *Times* argued that the government needed to step in and impose military style discipline, instead of words, in dealing with these traitors. It also accused the union leaders of lacking control over their members, as evidenced by the apparent multitude of small-scale strikes they claimed interfered with war production and the troops in the field. The overriding fear among the anti-unionists and the anti-Communists was the tremendous power wielded by labor unions under the Roosevelt administration. Nowhere was this power embodied more than in the special privileges granted to maritime unions by the War Shipping Administration.<sup>12</sup>

The NMU, in response to these allegations, immediately held a press conference followed by the release of a pamphlet titled “The Enemy at Home.” In it, they labeled the media as the “6<sup>th</sup> Column Axis in America” and “friends of Hitler” whose sole purpose for propagating this article was to generate anti-union sentiment within the public and to discredit the accomplishments of merchant seamen. In the months following the release of the Congressional investigation, the NMU filed a one million dollar libel suit against Hearst Publications, the Associated Press, and the *Beacon Journal* for the damage done to the union’s reputation. In addition to the Guadalcanal story, there were other stories linking the NMU to Communism. In the midst of the Guadalcanal controversy,

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<sup>11</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Bill to Induct War Strikers at Once is Offered,” January 26, 1943.

<sup>12</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Sick Marines Forced to Bring Cargo to Island,” January 22, 1943; “Labor Coddling Blamed for CIO Ship Scandal”; and *Los Angeles Times*, “Editorial: How Long Should Traitors Last?,” January 23, 1943.

Westbrook Pegler, in his nationally syndicated column "Fair Enough," even went so far as to say that giving gunnery training to seamen brings the risk of the seamen taking control of the ship and putting it under control of the NMU and the CIO. According to Pegler, these seamen owed their loyalties to the Communist union, not the United States. This lawsuit settled out of court for the sum of ten thousand dollars.<sup>13</sup>

### **Seamen's Wages**

One of the universal misconceptions of the war related to the wartime pay, overtime and bonuses, of merchant seamen. While the gross pay received by merchant seamen exceeded that of a service member, there were some important variables to consider. Since the Merchant Marine officially held civilian status, they paid income taxes, which servicemen who earned less than \$1500 a year did not have to do. The fringe benefits associated with the Armed Forces also added up. An article from *Barron's* dated 24 April 1944 made a comparison in the earning potential between servicemen and civilians. According to Malvern Tillitt, the earning potential of a buck private in the Army making \$600 a year was the equivalent to a civilian making \$3600. For a private, the government provided food, housing, clothing and medical care for free, which Tillitt worked out to a value of \$1831 per person. As Tillitt points out, a general rule with wage earners is the more you make the higher your cost of living will be. The average cost of living for someone who made \$3600 at the time was a little over \$2500. When federal income taxes figure in the total net earnings amounted to \$343, less than the \$420 net made by privates. For privates, with the government paying for their living expenses, their largest expenses were miscellaneous items, mainly relating to hygiene and uniform upkeep add up to a total of about \$180 a year. The additional fringe benefits relating to the military had to do with income tax credits for family members. For \$22 dollars a month given to a private's parents, the government reduced \$46 from the parents' income taxes. The combined value of both equals \$972 a year. With the \$1831 in living expenses covered, this came out to \$2803 in salaries and benefits for a private.<sup>14</sup>

The exact salary of a Merchant seaman varied depending on the types of bonuses he received. Like wages, the government taxed all bonuses received by seamen. As the

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<sup>13</sup> *The Enemy at Home*; and Westbrook Pegler, "Fair Enough," *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1943.

<sup>14</sup> Malvern Tillitt, "Army-Navy Pay Tops Most Civilians'," *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly*, 3-4.

war progressed, the danger zones either changed completely or faced adjustment depending on the risk. For example, a seaman making a run in the Caribbean in 1942 stood more at risk than did a seaman making the exact same run in 1945. In order to set a war risk bonus, there was a need for a third party to set the appropriate rates, weighing the various factors involved that often changed daily. The Maritime War Emergency Board (MWEB) was set up to establish war bonus rates. In the beginning, there was a difference in how the government paid out these bonuses. For licensed officers, it comprised a percentage of their income while there was a set payment for unlicensed personnel. Prior to US entry into the Second World War, a voyage to Europe, Africa or in the Pacific past the 180<sup>th</sup> meridian brought an \$80 a month bonus for unlicensed seamen and a bonus of 2/3 their monthly salary for licensed seamen. This changed dramatically after December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941, as the risks rose dramatically by virtue of open warfare waged between the United States, Germany and Japan.<sup>15</sup>

War risk bonuses rose to 100 percent on all voyages to European ports and all voyages across the Pacific regardless of latitude. For trips to Africa and the Indian Ocean, there was a bonus of 80 percent, with a 70 percent bonus for cruises to Greenland. The MWEB added the Gulf of Mexico as a 100 percent bonus zone in September 1942 following a dramatic increase in U-boat attacks in the region. This agreement stood at the height of wartime hostilities, from September 1942 until April 1944. During this time, the MWEB inserted an important stipulation providing five dollars a day for entering combat zones and a single payment of \$125 for attacks on ports where the merchant ship was present. After April 1944, the risk of attack out in the open sea declined considerably as improved techniques in convoying, anti-submarine patrols, and coastal security made the ocean immeasurably safer. By then, only ships operating in combat zones, heading into combat zones or under direct attack themselves received bonuses.<sup>16</sup>

In terms of the actual base pay received by the Merchant Marine, it ranged from \$406 a month for masters to \$82.50 a month for ordinary seamen and firemen. The discrepancy is even greater when one takes into account the fact that many seamen had

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<sup>15</sup> 70. Maritime War Emergency Board, *Memorandum of the History of the Maritime War Emergency Board from Inception to the Present Time*, report prepared for the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, 865-69.

<sup>16</sup> MWEB, *Memorandum of the History of the Maritime War Emergency Board*, 869-74.

ten, fifteen, twenty years or more experience and thus their pay would be higher. Many of the fringe benefits offered to the military servicemen, such as protection under the Soldiers' and Sailors' Relief Act, did not apply to the Merchant Marine. Merchant mariners did not have vacation/leave or sick pay and had to pay for their uniforms or work suits. When they came ashore, they had to pay all the normal expenses associated with the cost of living. The United States Seaman's Service provided for lodging at a reduced rate, but they did not receive free room and board at the Seaman's Service facilities. Upon boarding a ship, a seaman signed the ship's articles. He received pay only while he was actually on the ship. Whenever a ship pulled into a port, if a seaman wished to have liberty, he signed off and went on liberty on his own time without pay. If the ship sank, the moment it went under was the moment pay stopped. After a ship's voyage, the time spent between ships was also without pay. Transportation back home following a sinking was free of charge but items provided by the Red Cross for survivors, such as clothing and beds and food, came out of a seaman's pay. A report filed by the War Shipping Administration in 1943 compared the average wages of a seaman to that of Navy sailors of similar rank, factoring in taxes. Admiral Telfair Knight concluded that the overall net income after taxes was virtually the same between the two. A Seaman First Class in the Navy and an Ordinary Seaman in the Merchant Marine made almost identical. The report is a little deceiving, however.<sup>17</sup>

The whole issue of war bonuses was problematic in many regards. The War Shipping Administration, in establishing wage scales, did not include war bonuses as part of the equation. When factoring war risk bonuses, seamen made from \$244-250 a month for Ordinary Seamen to \$775 for masters, which averaged out to nearly \$3000 a year for Ordinary Seamen to \$9300 for masters. According to the National Maritime Union, the average seaman made \$57 a week, which averaged \$2964 a year. This was very good pay for the time. One of the pitfalls of the war bonus program was the fact that it was not permanent. After the surrender of Germany in 1945, there were virtually no risks associated with the Atlantic. Seamen who came to count on this as a part of their income

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<sup>17</sup> 41. Capt. Edward J. Macauley, *Memorandum of Questions and Answers Relating to Rights, Privileges, and Benefits of Merchant Seamen*, report prepared for House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, 625-31; and Letter from Admiral Telfair Knight to Warren H. Atherton, dated 1943, [available online] accessed online at <http://www.usmm.org/salary>.

faced the very real prospect of losing it. The advocacy of labor unions for bonuses was a short-term victory but a long-term defeat.<sup>18</sup>

Whenever the Maritime War Emergency Board established war bonus rates, it was final. The National Maritime Union staged a futile protest of the War Shipping Administration's office in Washington that did not help in correcting public opinion of the seamen as profiteers. This was all to no avail and ended up making the maritime unions appear rather shortsighted. As the war ended, the temporary raises in base pay also ended, bringing the wages of seamen back to where it was prior to US entrance into WWII.<sup>19</sup>

This protest, although merely a picketing, gave additional fodder to those who criticized the loyalty of the NMU. The United States remained at war with Japan and many people questioned the wisdom and the timing of the NMU actions. The NMU was able to save face by drawing a basic wage increase but this was a mere pittance compared to wages earned by seamen earlier in the war. Later, after a Communist purge of the union in the late 1940s, the NMU blamed the Communists for the temporary wage increases, calling seamen "victims of Communist tactics."<sup>20</sup>

### **Seamen as Profiteers**

The idea of Merchant seamen as profiteers seems rather far-fetched. While it is true the Merchant Marine received better overall pay, the fringe benefits of servicemen both during and after the war surely was in the servicemen's favor. One would have to be naïve to think that the better pay was not an inducement for some of the seamen to join. Personal motives in a war of this magnitude were just as varied in the Merchant Marine as in any other branch of the service. The National Maritime Union made the statement that the wages of the average seaman was equivalent to that of a second-class rigger at a shipyard. In other words, work on shore could bring in just as much, if not more, money

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<sup>18</sup> MWEB, *Memorandum of the History of the Maritime War Emergency Board*, 869-874; and *New York Times*, "Seamen to Picket WSA on Bonus Cut," July 9, 1945.

<sup>19</sup> MWEB, *Memorandum of the History of the Maritime War Emergency Board*, 866-68; and *New York Times*, "Seaman Ruling to Stand," July 13, 1945.

<sup>20</sup> MWEB, *Memorandum of the History of the Maritime War Emergency Board*, 869-874; *The Enemy at Home*; Louis Stark, "Says Pay Demands Peril Our Shipping," *New York Times*, July 21, 1945; *New York Times*, "Seamen to Picket WSA on Bonus Cut," July 9, 1945; *New York Times*, "Seaman Ruling to Stand," July 13, 1945; *New York Times*, "WLB May Raise Basic Pay of Seamen to Offset Reduction in War Risk Bonus," August 24, 1945; and National Maritime Union, *This is the NMU* (New York: William P. Gottleib Co., undated), 76-79.

than working on merchant ships only the shore worker did not have the additional hazards associated with hauling cargo into a war zone. In the press, there arose other criticisms of the seamen.<sup>21</sup>

A 21 December, 1942 *Time Magazine* article titled “Slackers and Suckers” described the graduation ceremonies from the Merchant Marine Training Academy in Sheepshead Bay, NY:

Ten thousand men between the ages of 17 and 35, who customarily greet each other as "Slacker," "Draft dodger" and "Profiteer," stood for one and a half hours in the icy offshore wind at the United States Maritime Training Station at Sheepshead Bay, N.Y. last week and heard themselves lauded by President Roosevelt (by letter) and a No. 2 company of lauders as potentially gallant merchant seamen. To the undisguised relief of the station's 1,800 instructors, they uttered no boo, no Bronx cheer, and only a few rude mutterings...

Rough and rambunctious, uniformed as sailors but fully aware that their civilian status permits nose-thumbing at M.P.s, the 13-week volunteer trainees sneer at their \$50-a-month pay, wait for the day they sign on for double pay of \$200 a month, or \$250 for those qualifying for higher ratings. Extra bonuses for a voyage to dangerous ports come to about \$150.

Exempted by draft boards when they enroll in the Merchant Marine Naval Reserve "for inactive duty," they spend five weeks in preliminary training. Then they are given eight weeks' specialized training as seamen, firemen, water tenders, oilers, messmen, cooks, bakers, clerks and pharmacist's mates. Trainees are taught to handle themselves in a lifeboat, spend a total of 90 hours on lifeboat drill alone.<sup>22</sup>

A *Chicago Daily Tribune* article, unsigned like the above mentioned piece from *Time*, titled “Naval Officer Bares Red Rule of Sailor Union,” featured an interview of a Naval gunnery officer who made the assertion that Communist elements within merchant crews encouraged insubordination towards officers. The Navy officer alleged that after his ship sank, the unionists in the crew refused to help anybody but themselves. They were draft dodgers who “come aboard ship not to work but to get paid.”<sup>23</sup> The *Daily Tribune* article made the unions and Communists as its intended target but the *Time* article made no such distinction. It applied to all seamen.

### **The Average Seaman**

Both articles question not only the motives for joining the Merchant Marine, but also the character of the men themselves. Evaluating these issues fairly requires an examination of the makeup of the Merchant Marine. Who was the average seaman? A

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<sup>21</sup> *The Enemy at Home*.

<sup>22</sup> *Time Magazine*, “Slackers and Suckers,” 21 Dec, 1942, [available online] <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,886050,00.html>.

<sup>23</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, “Naval Officer Bares Red Rule of Sailor Union,” 25 Dec 1942.

useful source for this information comes from statistics compiled by the war Shipping Administration's Psychobiological Program. As part of routine physicals, members of the Psychobiological Unit interviewed seamen as a way of testing their mental fitness for shipping out. In an article titled "Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen," Nathan Kline used at random 500 seamen and from this group classified Merchant seamen under three categories: Old Timers, Trained Men, and New Untrained. Within these three groups were two subgroups classified under Literates and Illiterates. Illiterates were men who could not read and write in English, mainly because they were foreign-born and spoke a different language. Old Timers were the men whom shipping experience before 1940, with a subset Kline had described as Recalls who had shipping experience prior to 1940 but had quit to find jobs ashore. New Trained Men were those who graduated from the Merchant Marine academies after 1940. New Untrained were men who had no experience in shipping prior to 1940 and who did not attend the Merchant Marine academies.<sup>24</sup>

The average age of seamen comes closer to the average age of the service member mainly because the vast age differences between the groups skewed the numbers. The preferred age for enlistment, between 18 and 26, the Army, Navy and Marine Corps monopolized. To boost enrollment, the War Shipping Administration lowered the acceptance age for the Merchant Marine academies to 16 years old. Of the 500 men studied, the average age of Old Timers was 37.69, for New Untrained Men it was 25.99 years and for New Trained it was 22.64. The background of the men varied just as widely: in terms of schooling Old Timers had on average an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education, New Untrained Men had a 10<sup>th</sup> grade education, and New Trained Men had an 11<sup>th</sup> grade education. Over 10 percent of Old Timers had a criminal record (as compared to 8 percent with New Untrained and 5 percent with New Trained) and 15 percent of them faced trouble with the Coast Guard (as compared to 10 percent with New Untrained and 8 percent with New Trained). In terms of draft eligibility, 31 percent of Old Timers, 34 percent of New Untrained Men and 47 percent of New Trained Men were eligible for the draft. Most of the eligible 47 percent of New Trained Men actually entered the Merchant

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<sup>24</sup> Nathan S. Kline and Lawrence Rogers, "Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen," in *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, edited by George G. Killinger (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 177.

Marine academies before they turned 18. As this number points out, the majority of the men in all three major categories were disqualified from the draft. Of the Old Timers, 21 percent received discharge from the Armed Forces, 8 percent were 4-F, or physically unfit for service, and 40 percent were overage. 20 percent of New Untrained Men were under age, 19 percent discharged, 21 percent 4-F, and 6 percent overage. For the New Trained Men, 40 percent of all, including the draft eligible, either were underage or entered the academies underage, 7 percent discharged and 6 percent 4-F.<sup>25</sup>

Therefore, the term “draft dodger,” given the information obtained from the War Shipping Administration, does not really apply to the Merchant Marine. The majority of them had no draft to elude. There was a working agreement between the WSA and the Selective Service in which the WSA did not accept men between the ages of 18 to 26, except for those already exempted for various reasons. Merchant seamen who fell within the 18 to 35 age range still had to answer to the draft boards like every other able-bodied male. The Merchant Marine’s status as a civilian force worked to the advantage of those who could not get in to service but it was a curse for those who could. Any seaman who went more than 30 days without sailing out received a draft notice. A draft deferment plan set up by the WSA in November 1945 attempted to rectify this problem by establishing a method identical to that of the other services. If a seaman served “32 months of substantially continuous service in the Merchant Marine,” he could get a deferment from further induction into the Selective Service. The goal of this program was to keep men in the Merchant Marine by offering them an inducement for staying on to finish out their 32 months. There was a loophole in this act, however:

Final determination of whether or not such a registrant has already made a sufficient contribution to the war effort to relieve him from any further consideration for classification in a class available for service will be made by the local board.<sup>26</sup>

### **Discipline Within the Merchant Marine**

The disciplinary structure put in place regulating the Merchant Marine relied heavily on military authority. Whenever a merchant ship entered convoy or into operated in a theater of war, it fell under the command of the Navy, Army or Marine Corps depending on the situation. Where an action threatened the safety or effectiveness of a

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<sup>25</sup> Kline and Rogers, “Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen,” 181-89.

<sup>26</sup> War Shipping Administration, *Deferment from Draft of Merchant Seamen* (Press Release for Sunday Papers, Washington DC, 11 Nov 1945), 1.

military operation, the military stepped in with court-martials when needed. In ordinary disciplinary matters, the master of the ship held power over all seamen aboard ship. The punishment often took the form of entering the seaman into the logbook and fining the seaman a certain number of days' pay depending on the infraction. The entry only becomes official after a hearing onshore with the Coast Guard and here the seaman can either protest the charge or explain the circumstances. A problem with the regulations, however, was that it gave the master of the ship leeway in determining what constituted an offense punishable by logging and what constituted an offense punishable by court martial. The masters often took liberty to bring members of the crew before an Army military court martial, preferring the convenience and swiftness of these proceedings to having to wait for the ship to come to port.<sup>27</sup>

The Coast Guard took the most responsibility for handling punitive matters with the Merchant Marine, since they controlled the issuance of seaman's papers. Just as the law granted them the powers to issue licenses, it also gave them the power to take them away. There was a local Coast Guard investigator at every American port. As each ship entered port and paid off its crew, the officer boarded the ship and conducted a preliminary investigation into any possible problems. The three of the most common infractions that the Coast Guard examined related to disciplinary trouble, unrest between the crew and officers, and infractions incurred relating the operation of the ship. From there, this officer determined whether to take the matter before a Coast Guard hearing committee. The committee decided upon the proper punitive action taken. The ruling took six different forms: revocation, suspension, suspension plus probation, suspension on probation, admonition, and dismissal. The first three effectively withheld the seaman from shipping out. Revocation was the complete loss of the license, suspension related to the temporary disqualification of the license, and suspension with probation carried the penalty of both a temporary prohibition of the license plus a probationary period. Suspension on probation was simply probation without temporary forfeiture of license. An admonition was a writing warning that went on the seaman's record in case of further

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<sup>27</sup> 50. War Shipping Administration Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters, *Report of the Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters of the War Shipping Administration* (Washington: Government Printing Office, June 27, 1945), 10-12.

trouble but resulted in no further punishment. With a dismissal, the committee granted complete exoneration from all charges.<sup>28</sup>

War Shipping Administration records reveals that the total number of disciplinary reports increased as the war lingered, but this was a reflection in the improved methods of reporting, not on actual increase of insubordination. The larger number of seamen enlisted in the Merchant Marine also share part of the blame. For the duration of the war, only 3.9 percent of all seamen faced punishment for offenses committed. Nearly 40 percent of infractions incurred were attendance related, with 27 percent for job performance, 14 percent for general misconduct, roughly seven percent for war regulations violations, five percent for property theft and six percent for various other violations. While this may sound serious, most of the offenses committed were minor in nature. Of attendance related offenses, about four percent was for desertion, the rest coming from seamen taking liberties either too long or without permission. General misconduct mostly took the form of drunkenness, almost 75 percent, with assaults counting roughly 25 percent of the general misconduct charges. Given the numbers, the fact that the percentages only relate to 3.9 percent of all seamen, the overall percentage of serious offenders in relation to the whole was very small.<sup>29</sup>

Wartime service of seamen, like every other branch of the service, had their questionable characters. In the beginning, when the Battle of the Atlantic started in 1942, the Allies were unable to keep up with the losses inflicted by U-boats. With the losses in shipping came the losses in personnel. This created a desperate shortage in experienced seamen, and the government, in a rush to put out the ships, remained rather flexible in the men they chose to operate them. Traditionally, people viewed mariners as loners lacking in morality and beholden to vices like alcohol, criminal mischief and illicit sex. The sea may have offered a chance for financial and/or social advancement for someone from a poverty-stricken background, but it was also a way to evade the law and run away from trouble. Many of the men on the waterfront either committed crimes, or had back alimony or child support payments. The teenagers often went into seafaring to run away from home. They either came from broken and destitute homes or perhaps simply were

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>29</sup> 50. War Shipping Administration Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters, *Report of the Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters*, 12-15, 29.

troubled youths who were difficult to handle and had a history of running away. Some merchant seamen had their prison sentences shortened in return for service in the Merchant Marine. It is hardly surprising that when crews of fiercely independent men with questionable backgrounds came together, fights and mutual animosity arose. Oftentimes, seamen from different sections of the ship tended to form their own cliques. On some ships, these groups became so entrenched and opposed to the others that they essentially formed two, three, even four separate crews on a single ship. This problem occurred throughout the war, but it improved towards the end.<sup>30</sup>

Negative perceptions of the Merchant Marine during WWII arose from both new and old ideas about who the seamen were. These ideas were either completely false or only half-truths. Seamen as slackers, drunks and womanizers were traditional views of seafarers that to a certain extent had some foundation in fact. Their connections to the unions however, attracted most of the criticisms. Conservatives within the media ran with stories detailing their profiteering, draft dodging and anti-authoritarianism mainly as a way of undermining the maritime unions and Communists within those unions. The propagation of the Guadalcanal story stands out as the most glaring example of this tactic. It is not surprising therefore, that much of their claims were untrue.

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<sup>30</sup> Arthur Donovan and Andrew Gibson, *The Abandoned Ocean: A History of United States Maritime Policy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 164-68; John Simms, interview by Andrew J. Waber, January 27, 2007, transcript, Reichelt Oral History Collection, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, 11; and 50. War Shipping Administration Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters, *Report of the Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters*, 14-15.

### CHAPTER III: THE MERCHANT MARINE IN POPULAR CULTURE

During World War II, much like today, popular opinion and popular culture mutually fed off each other, as moviemakers and publishers catered to a consumer market and adjusted their product according to consumer tastes. The government also saw tremendous propaganda value in movies, literature and advertising and utilized these forces to further their cause on the home front. Images of the Merchant Marine during the war generally fell in line with that of the other branches of the service, with some impetus given to educating the public out of fear that the post-war merchant fleet may face a repeat of the post-WWI fleet.

The defining feature of Hollywood during World War II was the war film. Dorothy B. Jones, in her postwar assessment of Hollywood movies, classified war movie themes under six categories: why America fought, the enemy, the allies, war production, the home front, and the American forces. An important principle in these movies was in advocating Franklin Roosevelt's Four Freedoms, which were "freedom of speech... freedom of worship... freedom from want... freedom from fear."<sup>1</sup> These freedoms, seen as essentially American values, served as an ideological framework for the American cause. War films stressed superiority of those values. During the period, with so much competition and demand over war stories, film companies started employing wartime issues into romances, comedies, musicals and even westerns. Film portrayals in these movies often showed evil enemies, spies sabotaging the Allies, or featured the heroic deeds of Allied forces. In the process, moviemakers often took artistic license in dramatizing the actions of the Allies or demonizing the Axis on the belief that the movie screen was another front in the war against fascism. In this attempt to boost morale, however, they also brought fear and misunderstanding as to the exact nature of the war.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of total movie production, precious few movies came out directly involving the Merchant Marine. Of the 374 war films released by Hollywood between 1942 and 1944, only eight of them dealt exclusively with the Merchant Marine. Just

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<sup>1</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Our Documents: Franklin Roosevelt's Annual Address to Congress- The 'Four Freedoms,'" [accessed online] available at <http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/od4frees.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Lewis Jacobs, "World War II and the American Film," *Cinema Journal* 7 (Winter 1967-68): 1-21; and Dorothy B. Jones, "The Hollywood War Film: 1942-1944," *Hollywood Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (Oct. 1945): 1-19.

before the war and during the war three major movies emerged relating to the Merchant Marine: *The Long Voyage Home* (1940), *Action in the North Atlantic* (1943), and *Lifeboat* (1944). Each of these movies featured big names. John Ford directed *The Long Voyage Home*, which starred John Wayne. Humphrey Bogart played the lead role in *Action in the North Atlantic*. Alfred Hitchcock directed *Lifeboat*, with the movie script written by John Steinbeck. Therefore, while the number was small, the names associated with the movies were capable of drawing a lot of interest from the movie-going public.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Long Voyage Home*, the characterizations of seamen are not very flattering. A movie poster advertisement carried the caption: "The Love of Women in Their Eyes...The Salt of the Sea in Their Blood."<sup>4</sup> The beginning of the movie features seamen getting drunk off smuggled liquor while sneaking in loose women without the captain's knowledge. The whole affair eventually devolves into a brawl, similar to that of a saloon fight in the old westerns that Wayne and Ford were accustomed to filming. The setting for this movie takes place on a British merchant ship called the *SS Glencairn*. John Wayne plays a Swedish seaman named Ole Olson who is a wayward young man with dreams of returning to his native Sweden. His unassuming nature contrasts greatly with the raucous characters aboard the ship, as Olson is the only one aboard who does not womanize or drink alcohol excessively. The Germans appear as a faceless enemy in this movie, with the only implied evidence of the presence being the scenes in the movie where the merchant ship comes under attack from a Luftwaffe plane. In the air raid scene, the Nazi plane attacks the ship with bombs and a machine gun, killing a crewmember named Smitty. The death scene for Smitty offered a chance for overt war propaganda, with the waving British flag superimposed over his body after he valiantly tried to rally the ship. Wayne's character comes to save the day by seizing the fire hose and putting out the fire in the hold before the explosives set off. At the end of the movie, Olson's friend Driscoll dies on a torpedoed ship after being shanghaied aboard the *Amindra*.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Humphrey Bogart, *Action in the North Atlantic*, DVD (1943; Warner Brothers Home Video, 2006); Alfred Hitchcock, director, *Lifeboat*, DVD (1944; Beverly Hills, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005); Jones, "The Hollywood War Film," 95; and John Wayne, *The Long Voyage Home*, John Ford, director, DVD (1940; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Home Video, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> John Wayne, *Long Voyage Home*, DVD protector cover.

<sup>5</sup> John Wayne, *Long Voyage Home*.

Of the three movies mentioned, the one with the most overt propagandistic storyline is *Action in the North Atlantic*. The War Shipping Administration used this film in recruiting and in the training academies. The basis for the movie came from a book written by Guy Gilpatric with the same name, although the finished product of the movie strayed so far from the book that it was essentially a completely different story. A radio play narrated by Cecil B. DeMille featuring a condensed script of the movie aired on 15 May 1944. In the movie, Humphrey Bogart plays First Mate Joe Rossi, a loner but a competent officer capable of being a captain of his own ship. Bogart, who recently finished *Casablanca*, was at the height of his career when he starred in this movie. Nazi brutality, praise for Roosevelt and the American way of life, as well as praise for the National Maritime Union, the United States Merchant Marine Training Academy, the Navy gunners, and the Merchant Marine all find their way into the movie. Bogart even knocks out a man in a bar who loudly discussed details of ships leaving the harbor. Chips Adams, played by Sam Levene, is a veteran of World War I, and a counterbalance to Johnnie Pulaski, played by Dane Clark. In the NMU hiring hall scene, Pulaski decides he had enough of the war and figures he would rather find a safer job on shore or operating a ferry service. He feels that dying would be for nothing. Adams replies:

So you want a safe job, huh? Go ask the Czechs and the Poles and the Greeks. They were figuring on safe jobs. They're lined up in front of guns digging each other's graves. The trouble with you, Pulaski, is you think America is just a place to eat and sleep. You don't know what side your future's buttered on.<sup>6</sup>

Pulaski, sobered by these remarks, decides to join on the next ship.<sup>7</sup>

Pulaski's attitudes and desires are at opposite ends from Cadet Ezra Parker, played by Dick Hogan. Parker graduated from the Merchant Marine Academy. Parker is a firm believer in the importance of the Merchant Marine and has his sights set on making this his career after the war. Furthermore, he is polite, respectful and obedient to authority. He is the embodiment of everything desired in an officer. On the contrary, Pulaski has six years of seagoing experience but remains an unlicensed able-bodied seaman. He scorns the Navy and views their job as easy, never taking gunnery practice very seriously. As Pulaski openly complains about remaining separated from his wife and unborn child, Parker never says a word about his own personal life and not being able to marry his

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<sup>6</sup> 11. "Signing up Again," *Action in the North Atlantic*, monologue by Sam Levene.

<sup>7</sup> Humphrey Bogart, *Action in the North Atlantic*.

girlfriend until he comes back home. Pulaski's big epiphany comes after an air raid on the ship kills Parker and much of the gun crew. After personally witnessing the sacrifices of the gun crew and reading Parker's letters, Pulaski realizes that their struggle was his struggle as well. Through Pulaski, the film expressed an important message that just about every American at the time understood. In war, separation is inevitable but necessary for the sake of a greater cause.<sup>8</sup>

Unlike *Long Voyage Home*, the Nazis are very much present throughout the movie. The Nazi enlisted men were nothing more than machines, showing no discernable emotion. The Nazi officers on the submarines were the personification of evil. U-boat captains in this picture rammed and torpedoed lifeboats and fired unnecessarily at disabled ships. The U-boat commander in the opening scenes even bore a striking resemblance to Adolph Hitler, sporting Hitler's trademark toothbrush mustache. Before ramming the lifeboat, this commander calls out for the captain, with the assumption from the viewer that something horrible was to happen to him. In the convoy attack scene, a smiling U-boat commander says "gut" after launching a torpedo into a lifeboat loaded with survivors. A constant theme in the movie was the appearance of a periscope from the subs with dark music in the background. This image clearly played off fear, with a striking similarity to the shark fin and gloomy music used in the movie *Jaws*.<sup>9</sup>

Germans also appear easily duped, especially in the U-boat chase scene and in the scene where the U-boat catches up to the *Sea Witch*. Rossi suggests turning off the ship's engine and going into complete silence to avoid sonar and confuse the U-boat chasing them. Under the aid of complete darkness and fog, the ruse works as the commander calls off the pursuit and asks for Luftwaffe planes to conduct reconnaissance. After two seaplanes attack the ship, causing damage, the same U-boat locates it and launches a torpedo into the side, causing it to lift to one side but not sinking it. Rossi, who by now assumed command after the captain suffered an injury from the air attack, decides to trick the sub into surfacing by setting fire to the deck and shutting off the engine to make it

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

appear as if the ship was about to sink. The U-boat commander, after a devious laugh, brought the ship to surface and just as he did, the *Sea Witch* rammed the sub.<sup>10</sup>

In contrast to the unemotional, evil and duped Nazis are the defiant, passionate and heroic actions of the Allies. Captain Stephen Jarvis and Rossi, through several key theatrical monologues, epitomize the movie's portrayal of the Merchant Marine as valiantly fighting against all odds to defeat the enemy. In the opening stages of *North Atlantic*, a U-boat sinks a merchant ship named the *Northern Star*, and as the survivors manage to gather together into a lifeboat the submarine surfaces with a camera to film their plight. The seamen give a defiant "thumbs up" for the camera, infuriating the U-boat commander. One of the most dramatic scenes of the movie was when Captain Jarvis, played by Raymond Massey, after the lifeboat sank and he found his way onto a raft, proclaims "Go on! Laugh you apes! You've had your blood and fire to make you laugh. But I swear to God, our time is coming! We'll pay you back. We'll hunt you down and slice you like a piece of cheese!"<sup>11</sup> After the Luftwaffe attack, there was a burial at sea for the men who died and Rossi delivered the sermon. Expressing his regret for the loss of lives, Rossi proclaims, "A lot more people are going to die before this [war] is over. And it's up to the ones that come through to make sure that they didn't die for nothing."<sup>12</sup> As W. Russel Gray pointed out in his assessment of the movie, the deaths of Americans from both the Merchant Marine and the Navy were gallant while the deaths of the Germans were not. The reason for this lies in the propaganda value of glorifying the Allies while at the same time arousing resentment towards the Nazis. By belittling the deaths of the Nazis and vilifying them, you disparage their cause and promote the moral superiority of the American cause.<sup>13</sup>

*Action in the North Atlantic* was perhaps the most important war film to come out relating to the Merchant Marine. There were several inaccuracies, however. One of the great myths of the war was the brutality of U-boats. There were some reports that came out during the war regarding machine gunning of crews but nothing was ever

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> 7. "Skipper's Vow," *Action in the North Atlantic*, monologue by Raymond Massey.

<sup>12</sup> 30. "A Good Sendoff," *Action in the North Atlantic*, monologue by Humphrey Bogart.

<sup>13</sup> Humphrey Bogart, *Action in the North Atlantic*; and W. Russel Gray, "Navigating Propaganda's Sea Lanes: A Fresh Look at *Action in the North Atlantic*," *The Journal of American Culture* 27, no. 1 (March 2004): 81-85.

substantiated. In actuality, U-boats sometimes went out of their way to help survivors. John Simms, a survivor of the *SS Cranford*, recalled that after his ship sank, the German sub surfaced, brought aboard a wounded seaman, treated his injuries, and gave him food and a compass course to Barbados. Later, the U-boat signaled to a Spanish tanker to come pick them up.

The differences between the movie version and the book version of *Action in the North Atlantic* are great. In the book, the story centers around Captain David Elder, changed to Ezra Jarvis by the moviemakers, while in the movie Humphrey Bogart's character Joe Rossi plays the lead role. In the book, First Mate Joe Rossi was a raging, foul-mouthed alcoholic. Both ships in the book were oil tankers while in the movie the second ship was a Liberty ship. A major plot line in the book not present in the movie was the deep-seated resentment Captain Elder had for the Navy. Elder's goal in fighting the war was to get the navies off the sea as quickly as possible. The fact his son in law, whom he did not like, was an officer in the Navy intensified this animosity. In the opening scenes of the book, the U-boat sank Elder's ship because the destroyer was late in arriving. To add insult to injury, when it actually caught up with the U-boat, it failed to sink the ship. A whole chapter of the book was devoted to the destroyer picking up the survivors and escorting them back to the United States. While on the ship, Captain Elder voices his discontent of navies in general:

I don't like the Navy because I love the sea! I love the sea because in normal times, it's the cleanest, decentest, finest place in the world for a man to work and live... but then, there's war, and out come the navies!... and as soon as the navies get to work, the sea becomes a filthy, oily, bloody, hell!<sup>14</sup>

A sobering scene in the book comes when Captain Elder finally arrives home. After a brief press conference, he walks into the crowd and almost instantly falls into complete anonymity. On his first night home after surviving the sinking, he invites his daughter and son in law over for dinner. His son in law, surprised to see him back so soon, jokingly asks him if they caught him drunk and fired him. The son in law and daughter express some concern when they find out what happened to him but decide to leave early so his daughter Adelaide could sing in a Navy Relief Benefit. Upon hearing

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<sup>14</sup> Guy Gilpatric, *Action in the North Atlantic*, rev. ed. (1943; repr. Palo Alto, CA: The Glencannon Press, 2000), 31.

this, Elder quips “Navy Benefit? Oh, *Navy Benefit* hunh [sic]? Well, it’s too damn bad she can’t sing for her Merchant Marine father’s benefit, once in a while!”<sup>15</sup> This would be the last time his daughter and son in law show up in the book, until the very end when they reconcile. Given the potentially volatile nature of the issue, it is easy to see why the movie writers left this plot line out of the film.<sup>16</sup>

The book, much like the movie, has some weaknesses. Namely, aside from Elder, nearly every other major character in the book is nothing more than a stereotypical caricature. There is Smitty the old salt, who starts his sentences with “yair.” Holger Larson, a Scandinavian who hates the “Yermans.” T. Jefferson Caldwell is the black steward who is “out dere on de ocean... comin’ to grips wif de forces of evil and helpin’ us win de war.”<sup>17</sup> There is Round Kid Ahearn who is a fat man who cannot stop eating. Texas Fitch is a Texan who speaks in a long drawl. Clearly, this takes away from the narrative of the story. Each one of these characters does not appear in the movie. Overall, the writing for the movie was better than that for the book.<sup>18</sup>

In *Lifeboat*, Hitchcock uses the sinking of a merchant ship as a backdrop to taking on broader socioeconomic problems and the extent to which people internalize these differences. The entire movie takes place on a small lifeboat. The importance of this film in terms of propaganda value was the fact that a black man, a steward named Joe Spencer played by Canada Lee, played a major role in the movie, which was highly unusual for the time. A former criminal, Joe actually saves the lives of Tallulah Bankhead’s character Connie Porter and Mrs. Higgins and attempts to save the life of Mrs. Higgins’ baby by bringing them into the boat. Many commentators after the war criticized *Lifeboat* for the stereotypical job role and past criminality of the black character as well as his musical ability. He was a reformed individual with a strong faith in God and a fond attachment to his own family. His past is something he wants to put behind him, and he uses his skill to check the German for hidden items only after coercion from Kovacs. While blacks made advancements during this period and held many positions within the Merchant Marine, it still remained a fact that, for most of them, their best opportunity of employment aboard

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 71-74.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 14, 51-54, 145-149.

ships remained as stewards and cooks. Representing Joe as a steward was not stereotypical but rather a depiction of who the average black seaman was at this time. The two people who give him the least respect, Porter and C.J. Rittenhouse, the millionaire, are actually the two least desirable characters on the boat. Porter, who calls Joe Charcoal, is a newspaper columnist who callously photographed wreckage and people floating out to sea while sitting perfectly content and dry in the only remaining lifeboat. Rittenhouse is a factory and shipyard owner who has supreme overconfidence in his ability when in actuality he knew absolutely nothing about ocean navigation.<sup>19</sup>

The symbolism of Porter and the media and Rittenhouse and industrial America cannot be lost. Porter converses freely in German with Willi and manages to talk the group out of executing him. She firmly believes everything he tells her and gives him the benefit of the doubt. Even as the group votes Kovacs as the leader, Porter insists they listen to the directions given to them by Willi. Rittenhouse backs Porter on everything she says. One of the most surreal scenes in the movie comes after the storm, when the group realizes Willi misled them all along and resigned themselves into serving as captives aboard a German ship. As Willi rows them towards the ship, he sings German songs and Rittenhouse, borrowing Joe's recorder, not only learns the songs but also willingly plays along. After Rittenhouse asks him how he did, Willi smiles and says "Fine Ritt, fine. You're a born accompanist!"<sup>20</sup>

In contrast to Rittenhouse and Porter is the crew from the merchant ship. They are far more down to earth and are for the most part agreeable people. Kovacs, a ship engineer of Czechoslovakian descent, sees almost immediately the danger of letting Willi aboard and remains highly suspicious of his intentions. While elected leader of the ship, Kovacs never really has full control over operations, as Willi's deviousness and the complicity of Porter and Rittenhouse prevents that from ever happening. Gus Smith, the able-bodied seaman, sides with Kovacs but the injury to his leg incapacitates him. The rest of the survivors, including Joe, have some sneaking suspicions but are unwilling to

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<sup>19</sup> Gregory D. Black and Clayton R. Koppes, "Blacks, Loyalty, and Motion-Picture Propaganda in World War II," *The Journal of American History* 73, no. 2 (Sep 1986): 383-406; and Alfred Hitchcock, director, *Lifeboat*.

<sup>20</sup> 12. "The Master Race," *Lifeboat*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock.

assert themselves in the decision making process, being more concerned with handling themselves primarily.<sup>21</sup>

The most controversial aspect of this film however was the portrayal of the Nazi. What stands out most about this depiction is that Hitchcock makes him look human. He laughs, jokes, carries on small talk like anyone else. Capable of speaking German, English and French, Willi has a type of intellectual sophistication not seen from Nazis in other World War II films. Willi is also a likable person, although full of contradictions. He hides his compass and food pills and steers the boat to a Nazi ship yet saves the boat from capsizing. Willi saves a member of the crew by successfully amputating his leg yet later kills him. Hitchcock received criticism from people who felt Willi, the U-boat captain, was a stronger character than the rest of the cast. The United States government refused to allow the distribution of this film into Allied countries. There was fear that Germans could make some simple edits to it and make it into a pro-Nazi film. John Steinbeck, who wrote the script, was so disappointed in the final product that he requested his name removed from the screen credits.<sup>22</sup>

Much like the movies, books often took on the form of straight propaganda. Publishers often kept a close eye on the media, where public reaction to stories was easier to measure. Most books either were expanded forms of short stories from popular magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post* or based off items from news accounts. In the Merchant Marine, which had the disadvantage of lack of general public knowledge regarding their role in the war and its importance in peacetime, there was an emphasis placed on stories with informational value. A general fear within the shipping industry was a return of public apathy, which was part of the reason the impressive WWI fleet fell into disrepair. Early in the war, recruitment was a serious problem. The high losses suffered from U-boat attacks had a marked effect on morale both on the home front and in the merchant ships. A great way of drawing public attention to the Merchant Marine,

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<sup>21</sup> Alfred Hitchcock, director, *Lifeboat*.

<sup>22</sup> Bosley Crowther, review of *Lifeboat*, directed by Alfred Hitchcock, *New York Times*, Jan 13, 1944; W. Russel Gray, "Navigating Propaganda's Sea Lanes.," Alfred Hitchcock, *Lifeboat*; and Donald R. Noble, review of *John Steinbeck: The War Years, 1939-1945*, by Roy Simmonds, *South Atlantic Review* 62, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 127-29.

improve morale, and help in recruitment was through stories displaying heroism of individual seamen.<sup>23</sup>

The story of Archie Gibbs represents a great example of the wartime propaganda machine at work. Newspapers across the country carried his story of surviving two ship sinkings and spending time in a U-boat as a prisoner of war. A condensed version in diary form made it into the newspapers later. This opened up other opportunities and Gibbs took advantage of it. He wrote a column in *Life*, he went on a national speaking tour, made radio appearances and became an unofficial spokesperson for the Merchant Marine. Houghton Mifflin picked up the story and published a book titled *U-Boat Prisoner*, which later turned into a B-movie of the same name from Columbia Pictures. The movie, which never really gained much attention, fell in line with the wartime spy thrillers. Unlike *Action in the North Atlantic*, which merely twisted around another fictional story, *U-Boat Prisoner* took a nonfiction story and made it into a more unbelievable tale than that told by *Action in the North Atlantic*. With the public regaled with stories of U-boat brutality, hearing of a seaman who cheated death twice and actually was inside one of the U-boats as it was operating and conversing with German submariners was a story that stood out. Receiving news that they were not only sick of their living conditions, but were not enthusiastically supporting Hitler offered encouragement for an eventual successful conclusion to the war.<sup>24</sup>

The book version of *U-Boat Prisoner* reveals nothing overly spectacular in regards to personal action taken in combat. When the two ships sank, Archie Gibbs was merely doing what he did prior to the war. It required no special training. In fact, he was representative of many of the men who made up the Merchant Marine, especially the Old Timers group. Gibbs came from a lower class background with very little education. Abandoned as a child and raised in a reform school, Gibbs spent much of the Depression as a drifter. He signed on board his first ship as a messboy and from there worked his way up to an able-bodied seaman. Gibbs was actively involved in the short-lived Marine Workers Industrial Union in the mid-1930s, which was a radical left wing breakaway

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<sup>23</sup> Mark O'Dea, "Educating the American Public on the American Merchant Marine," *American Merchant Marine Council Proceedings-1941* (New York: Propeller Club, 1941): 54-59.

<sup>24</sup> Archie Gibbs, "Four Days on a German Sub," *Life* (24 Aug 1942); Archie Gibbs, *U-Boat Prisoner: The Life Story of a Texas Sailor* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1943); and Captain James E. Wise, Jr., "Unsinkable Archie Gibbs," *Naval History* 12, no. 2 (April 1998):43-46.

union that folded and merged back into the old International Sailors Union after failing to secure labor contracts with the shipping companies. This radical element later formed the nucleus of the National Maritime Union. Therefore, this book has a pro-Union outlook, being particularly critical of the ISU and praising the MWIU and the NMU, a common theme in many NMU publications. The ship, recognized as the *SS Scottsburg* by Captain James Wise but unidentified in the book due to wartime restrictions, sank in convoy on June 14, 1942. Gibbs managed to jump onto a lifeboat, after which a second ship, the *SS Kahuku*, picked him up. As luck would have it, Gibbs sank a second time but could not find a lifeboat or a raft. Instead, a U-boat lifted right out of the water and a German submariner emerged, demanding he come aboard. Their purpose for taking him in was for questioning regarding the name of the ship he was on and the nature of its cargo. The book portrays Gibbs as a defiant seaman who stood firm under questioning. The men aboard the sub, far from being the emotionless machines in *Action in the North Atlantic*, were just as informal and independent as seamen were. In fact, many of them were former merchant seamen themselves who visited the United States many times and had a certain degree of fondness for places like New York and San Francisco.<sup>25</sup>

Another potential source utilized by book publishers was that of the memoir, especially if this memoir reached a particular target audience. One of the most recognizable symbols of black advancement in the United States during WWII was the *SS Booker T. Washington*. During the war, John Beecher, a descendent of the famous abolitionist family and the ship's purser, wrote a book about the ship titled *All Brave Sailors*. Beecher was optimistic about the message of racial unity shown by the crew, calling Jim Crow a "straw man" and believing that the ship was a microcosm of what America could be. This book, much like *U-Boat Prisoner*, takes a very sympathetic tone towards the NMU. The NMU, of all the maritime unions, was most accepting of blacks. This was not due so much to liberal mindedness as much as it was to practicality. Traditionally, one of the most effective means of control in negotiations on the waterfront

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<sup>25</sup> Archie Gibbs, "Four Days on a Nazi U-Boat," *San Antonio Express*, 10 Oct 1943; Archie Gibbs, *U-Boat Prisoner*; and Captain James E. Wise, Jr., "Unsinkable Archie Gibbs."

was checkerboarding. By playing blacks and whites off each other, knowing their unity rarely extends past racial lines, companies could use group as scab labor over another.<sup>26</sup>

The commander of this vessel, Captain Hugh Mulzac, was one of the most highly qualified officers in the entire Merchant Marine. The first black ever to acquire a master's license in Baltimore, Maryland, he was one of the ship officers associated with Marcus Garvey's ill-fated Black Star Line. Despite this experience, Mulzac never managed to secure a job as ship captain until WWII started. Initially offered an all black crew, Mulzac refused to take charge of a Jim Crow vessel. He insisted on having an integrated crew. To everyone's surprise including his own, the War Shipping Administration granted him his wish. They also gave him a dream team of black officers. The officer crew on the *Booker T. Washington* included Cliff Lastic, who later commanded the *SS Bert Williams* and Joseph B. Williams, first black graduate of the United States Maritime Academy. Mulzac's postwar memoirs, written in the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement, essentially reuse many sections of the Beecher book. With the advent of the McCarthy era, Mulzac's involvement with labor unions and Communism eventually caught up with him. Anti-Communist forces blacklisted him and he would not find another job in the maritime industry until 1960.<sup>27</sup>

The Merchant Marine during WWII struggled to maintain its share of the public attention. While plenty of coverage went into the sinking of merchant ships, as the Battle of the North Atlantic turned, so did the popular attention. There was no popular face for the Merchant Marine that rivaled that of MacArthur for the Navy or Eisenhower or Patton for the Army. This has mainly to do with the fact that merchant ships fell under the command of the Navy, Army or Marine Corps while Merchant Marine leadership held desk jobs in the capitol. The Merchant Marine's grand experiment in racial integration, although a precursor to later military desegregation, offered promise but would have to wait awhile before the rest of America caught up.

The government was fully aware however of the double-edged sword of integration. For example, at the launching of the *SS Booker T. Washington*, the US government prohibited British reporters from releasing information that they placed a

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<sup>26</sup> John Beecher, *All Brave Sailors* (New York: L. B. Fischer, 1945)

<sup>27</sup> Hugh Mulzac, *A Star to Steer By* (New York: International Publishers, 1963).

black man in command of the vessel. There was fear that the Germans and Japanese could use this information regarding racial tensions within the United States to fulfill their own propagandistic purposes. Racial unrest was public knowledge however, as the Germans were using this back in WWI to drop leaflets over black troops urging them not to fight for a country in which they did not have full acceptance. This drew many criticisms from both at home and abroad. The “Amazonian pundit” Dorothy Thompson voiced her discontent:

To say [that such censorship is necessary] is tantamount to claiming that the most profound issues of this war may not be publicly discussed, or if publicly discussed, must be confined within the United States.<sup>28</sup>

The real advocate for African-American integration was the unions. This advocacy had its imperfections as well, since it met a lot of opposition within the membership. A major catalyst for the rise of the National Maritime Union and the reformed Sailors Union of the Pacific, however, was their black support base. They recognized this, and welcomed blacks with more openness than their predecessors. The economic reasoning behind integration of the unions was to combat a practice known as “checkerboarding,” where the ship owners play the races against each other, using scab black labor when the white unions went on strike and scab white labor when black unions went on strike. Two of the leading black figures in the labor movement, Joe Grange from the Marine Cooks and Stewards and Ferdinand Smith of the National Maritime Union, associated themselves with maritime unions. While these men had actual influence and administrative duties, perhaps their biggest contributions to the unions were their public relations value. The unions, especially the National Maritime Union, actively sought black membership through its own advertising campaign.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most effective tools used by the NMU in promotion of racial integration was through pamphlets. The booklets, however, often took on a condescending tone. One of these, titled *The NMU Fights Jim Crow*, comes with cartoon drawings. In the last frame, the black cartoon character jumps out of his shoes in elation after the boss hands him a mop and bucket. The message from the cartoon panels seems to tell a different story than the actual text. It includes a quote from Franklin Roosevelt

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<sup>28</sup> *Time Magazine*, “Let Us Tell the Truth,” December 7, 1942.

<sup>29</sup> Donald Edward Willet, “Joe Curran and the National Maritime Union,” (PhD. diss., Texas A & M University, 1985), 167.

promising no racial discrimination among military contractors, after the NMU telegraphed him about the plight of 25 black seamen who were the only ones denied work about a ship named the *Kungsholm*. There was the positive message that the rest of crew voted not to sail out without them. It exclaimed the heroic feats of black seamen in the Age of Sail. Yet the panels above the literature give the reader the stark realization of what the average job was for a black seaman. The idea of happiness from such a job seems degrading.<sup>30</sup>

The advertisements in the newspapers and magazines for the most part portray the Merchant seamen in a positive way. Like the writings of the time, the ads run the spectrum from informational to romantic to misleading. A Standard Oil company advertisement, which appeared in the May 15, 1944 edition of *Barron's*, titled "Oil has not Been Lacking on Any Battlefront," in a series of six panels, summarized the war effort of the oil fleet. The ad covers the oil tankers given to the Navy, the U-boat troubles of the oil fleet at the beginning of the war, facts about the percentage of oil provided by Standard, the port facilities for loading the oil, the oil flying program and the refineries. Part of the propaganda program instituted by shipping companies were educational, since there was a generally held belief that part of the reason for the post-WWI collapse of the Merchant Marine was a lack of public understanding as to the importance of the Merchant Marine.<sup>31</sup>

A great example of a romantic portrayal of the Merchant Marine is an advertisement for the E.H. Scott Radio Laboratories from *Newsweek*. The advertisement was for low-radiation marine radios. The title of the ad was "Sailor... if we were passing out medals, we'd pin a handful on you!" The type of seaman presented is that of a loner who receives no glory for his sacrifices. The target audience clearly is the merchant seamen, and it illustrates a common complaint of the seamen that people forgot their services. The lack of GI Bill benefits after the war and the trouble many of them faced during the war reinforced this belief. For example, USO canteens were off limits to merchant seamen. Ship sinking survivors often had to go through a great deal of trouble

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<sup>30</sup> National Maritime Union, *The NMU Fights Jim Crow* (New York: National Maritime Union, 1943), 1-14; and Willet, "Joe Curran and the NMU," 167.

<sup>31</sup> Standard Oil Company of New Jersey, "Oil has not Been Lacking on Any Battlefront," *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly*, May 15, 1944.; and Mark O'Dea, "Educating the Public on the American Merchant Marine," *American Merchant Marine Conference Proceedings* (1941): 54-59.

to make sure they made it back home. The U.S. consul was legally obligated to ensure safe passage back to the United States and provide for the seaman's welfare. Both the WSA and the unions, however, received complaints from seamen of inadequate care given to them by the consulate. While the government provided food, lodging, clothing, burial expenses and transportation free of charge, seamen sometimes paid out of their own pocket for these items. For example, John Simms, a survivor of the ship *Cranford*, received clothing from the Red Cross, and ended up having the expenses for the clothing taken out of his pay.<sup>32</sup>

Advertisements from companies also boasted of the achievements of their factories. The Federal Telephone and Radio Corporation advertised the accomplishments of the company in improving the efficiency of installing radio equipment aboard ships. They proudly proclaim the fact they received the Maritime M pennant, the Victory Fleet Flag, and maritime merit badges. This ad serves the dual purpose of selling the product and improving the spirits of its workers. There is a bit of romanticism in the artwork associated with this ad, showing a convoy of Liberty ships sailing through rough waters. In an effort to improve morale in the factories, the Merchant Marine awarded honors as a way of recognizing their contributions. The Merchant Marine did not have the advantage of receiving and granting military honors reserved for the other branches of the Armed Services.

Popular media during WWII mostly presented a positive image of seamen but, motivated by other reasons, it also further propagated myths about who they were. At odds with the old negative stereotypes of seamen was the heroic portrayal as a rugged individualist. Using romanticism similar to that of western novels, the public, although sometimes enlightened about the importance of the Merchant Marine, still did not get an entirely accurate depiction of seamen. As with every other branch of the military during this period, one of their primary purposes in covering the Merchant Marine was for propaganda. The type of seaman presented in movies such as *Action in the North Atlantic*

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<sup>32</sup> Constance Kyle, "Individual Problems of Seamen," *American Merchant Marine Conference Proceedings* (1943-44): 210; Felix M. Cornel, *American Merchant Seaman's Manual* (New York: Cornell Maritime Press, 1942), 576-79; E.H. Scott Radio Laboratories, Inc., "Sailor... if we were passing out medals, we'd pin a handful on you!," *Newsweek*, January 25, 1943; and Capt. John Simms, interview by Andrew J. Waber, January 27, 2007, transcript, Reichelt Oral History Program, Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL, 5.

was one of impeccable characteristics. Many seamen, when compared to this ideal model, fell far short. In other forms of popular media, publications such as those by groups interested in Civil Rights expressed optimism in the possibilities within the Merchant Marine through the crew of the *SS Booker T. Washington*, but while doing so, gave the public a false sense of just how open it was to blacks. Ultimately, like the mainstream media, it was the general lack of attention given to seamen that turned WWII into a failed opportunity to correct long-held assumptions about the Merchant Marine.

## CONCLUSION

To many Merchant Marine veterans today, the biggest problem they have faced was not so much the negative press they received during the war but the general lack of attention they received after the war. One of the greatest obstacles they have had to overcome was the fact that they were officially civilian contractors. Many lawmakers were wary of granting veteran's status to them because they feared setting a precedent by which other future contractors could attain veteran's status. President Franklin Roosevelt fully entrusted Congress to pass measures granting seamen rights similar to those provided for in the GI Bill. After Roosevelt's death, however, the initiative lost its momentum and failed to pass through Congress. This left many of them feeling unappreciated for their sacrifices. By the time the government granted them partial veteran's benefits in 1988, it was too late for the seamen to take advantage of its provisions.<sup>1</sup>

The fact seamen often fell under the wide umbrella of production played a major role in the indifference of the public. The achievements of war production did not receive anywhere near the publicity of the armies and navies. Initially, when the Allies were losing the Battle of the North Atlantic, the attention paid to the Merchant Marine peaked. As the war lingered on and the ship sinkings dropped, the struggles of the Merchant Marine gradually faded from the front page. The bulk of casualties suffered by the Merchant Marine occurred during the first two years of the war. By 1944 and 1945, when most of the public attention shifted to D-Day and the fighting in the Pacific, losses suffered by the Merchant Marine in terms of ships sank accounted for less than one percent of the total fleet. Hence, by this point, it ceased to possess the same danger that became synonymous with the Merchant Marine during 1942 and 1943.<sup>2</sup>

Public perceptions of the Merchant Marine during the war were positive for the most part. With an awareness of the heavy losses in shipping, there was a need to improve morale. Newspaper articles often contained stories of survival and highlighted

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<sup>1</sup> *Belated Thank You to Merchant Mariners Act of 2007*, HR 23, 110<sup>th</sup> Cong., 1<sup>st</sup> sess., *Congressional Record* (January 4, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Carse, *The Long Haul: The United States Merchant Service During World War II*. (New York: WW Norton & Company, Inc., 1965): 108-110; and James E. Valle, "United States Merchant Marine Casualties in World War I," *American Neptune* vol. 53, no. 1 (Winter 1993): 20-29.

the accomplishments of seamen. Magazines featured romanticized accounts of the heroic actions of seamen. While improving morale, there was also a conscious effort to shake free of the traditional stereotypical views of seamen. Traditionally, there is the seaman who is a loner, a transient within the community who frequented bars and patronized prostitution. Like many legends and stereotypes, there was a factual basis for the propagation of this opinion. Sailors were fringe members of society, often prey to the most unscrupulous characters on the waterfront. Subjected to heavy penalties for desertion, they often found themselves working against their will. The reinvention of the seaman was a defining aspect of the union movement of the 1930s.

During WWII, several misconceptions about the Merchant Marine either arose or were already there. People viewed them as slackers, draft dodgers, profiteers, and radicals. Although job performance is often hard to measure, there are figures that can provide a rough barometer. Statistics from the period revealed that only 3.9 percent ever went before the Coast Guard for infractions, with a little over 27 percent of this related to job performance. This averages out to roughly one percent of the entire Merchant Marine fleet punished for “slacking.” The notion of seamen as draft dodgers does not measure up to the facts. Most seamen were ineligible for the draft when they entered, with huge fluctuations in the age gaps between different groups that comprised the Merchant Marine. Owing to the pressures of the Selective Service, which claimed a monopoly on the 18-26 age range, the Maritime Commission and War Shipping Administration admitted boys as young as 16 into their cadet program and accepted men over 60 to man the ships. Since licensing depended on time spent at sea, men classified as 4-F found a loophole by gaining necessary sea time working on neutral flag vessels, which had a much lower standard for acceptance.<sup>3</sup>

The gross pay and bonuses of seamen exceeded that of regular enlisted men, but several factors tip the balance in favor of servicemen. Many fringe benefits associated with the military did not apply to the Merchant Marine. In addition to not paying taxes,

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<sup>3</sup> Nathan S. Kline and Lawrence Rogers, “Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen,” in *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, edited by George G. Killinger (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 177-189; and 50. War Shipping Administration Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters, *Report of the Committee on Crew Disciplinary Matters of the War Shipping Administration* (Washington: Government Printing Office, June 27, 1945), 12-15, 29.

the cost of living for servicemen was much cheaper than that of seamen. Whereas servicemen received furlough and paid time off, seamen operated under a sign in, sign off basis that only gave them pay as long as they signed on. When a ship went under, the pay stopped. At port, time between ships varied but whatever time spent waiting on another ship was time without money. Further disproving the charge of profiteering, onshore work offered more money than that of the Merchant Marine without the dangers associated with operating in a war zone.<sup>4</sup>

Most of the negative notice given the Merchant Marine during WWII focused primarily on the unions. During the 1930s, newer, more liberal unions emerged to replace the older establishment. Playing major roles in the organizing of these unions were radicals such as the anarchists, socialists and communists. These connections brought with them the antagonism of conservatives who held positions of influence in government, business and the media. As the unions gained privileges within the Merchant Marine such as hiring halls and war bonuses, the conservative media launched attacks on the effectiveness of union members in the Merchant Marine. It is easy to construe events such as the Guadalcanal Story as a condemnation of all seamen since union labor contracts with the government and the shipping companies made membership a virtual prerequisite for shipping out. Their aims, however, were to instead illustrate the morally corrupting influence of unions upon the people. They made the distinctions between regular seamen and union men.<sup>5</sup>

The War Shipping Administration had the daunting task of promoting the Merchant Marine to both the public and to the seamen themselves. The battle between the media and the unions only complicated matters. With doubts about the permanency of the service, many seamen were reluctant to continue their careers within the Merchant Marine. A major part of the WSA's publicity campaign was educating people on the wisdom of maintaining a postwar fleet. This effort had the dual purpose of both trying to keep the Merchant Marine militarily relevant and giving seamen enough hope to stay.

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<sup>4</sup> Malvern Tillitt, "Army-Navy Pay Tops Most Civilians'," *Barron's National Business and Financial Weekly*, 3-4; and 70. Maritime War Emergency Board, *Memorandum of the History of the Maritime War Emergency Board from Inception to the Present Time*, report prepared for the House Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, 865-69.

<sup>5</sup> *Chicago Daily Tribune*, "Naval Officer Bares Red Rule of Sailor Union," 25 Dec 1942; and Westbrook Pegler, "Fair Enough," *Los Angeles Times*, January 30, 1943.

Much like after WWI, there was a hope that the large merchant fleet built by the United States could sustain itself and usher in a new era of American shipping predominance. Many of the maritime leaders blamed public apathy for the decline of the post-WWI fleet, and sought to prevent this from happening a second time. Despite their best efforts, the amount of coverage given the Army, Navy and Marine Corps still far outweighed that of the Merchant Marine.<sup>6</sup>

There were, however, some bright spots for the Merchant Marine. Movies, literature, radio and other forms of popular culture during the war portrayed seamen in a good light. With movies, the high profile celebrities associated with Merchant Marine movies compensated for the limited number devoted to this topic. Three movies made during the period, *The Long Voyage Home*, *Action in the North Atlantic*, and *Lifeboat*, varied in their depictions of seamen and the enemy. The drunken, womanizing sailors and faceless enemy in *The Long Voyage Home* counters the heroic, patriotic seamen and demonized enemy in *Action in the North Atlantic*. *Lifeboat* departs from both by showing seamen, including a black seaman, and a Nazi as realistically human. Literature took on many forms, varying in quality and in the message given by the author. A cheaper and easier medium, many organizations took to publishing books and pamphlets as a way of reaching a larger audience without having to deal with the stricter censorship imposed upon news media and movies.<sup>7</sup>

Popular perceptions of the Merchant Marine took on a variety of forms ranging from romanticism to treason. During the war, the unions attracted a great deal of criticism towards the Merchant Marine and the opposition within the media expressed itself through various stories and accusations, which caught the Merchant Marine in the crossfire. The limited attention the Merchant Marine received as the war lingered magnified the effects of the allegations. There were media outlets that either restrained themselves or offered assistance in the effort to improve morale. With the early problems in recruiting, it was important to try to garnish support. In the end, the Merchant Marine

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<sup>6</sup> Mark O'Dea, "Educating the American Public on the American Merchant Marine," *American Merchant Marine Council Proceedings-1941* (New York: Propeller Club, 1941): 54-59.

<sup>7</sup> Humphrey Bogart, *Action in the North Atlantic*, DVD (1943; Warner Brothers Home Video, 2006); Alfred Hitchcock, director, *Lifeboat*, DVD (1944; Beverly Hills, CA: 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2005); and John Wayne, *The Long Voyage Home*, John Ford, director, DVD (1940; Burbank, CA: Warner Brothers Home Video, 2006).

remained a rather overlooked aspect of the war. Far from being anything new, this was essentially a continuation of a trend dating back to the beginning of the country.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

The author, Andrew Waber, was born in the National Hospital in Bethesda, Maryland, in 1982. He spent much of his childhood following his father from port to port until settling in Jacksonville, Florida. He graduated from Sandalwood High School in 2001, and received his AA and BA in history from the University of North Florida in Jacksonville. Prior to entering Florida State, the author volunteered in several museums in the Jacksonville area, including the Jacksonville Museum of Science and History and the Jacksonville Maritime Museum, specializing mainly in collections work. After entering the Historic Administration and Public History program, he worked at the Florida Master Site File as a senior database analyst and currently works for the Institute on World War II and the Human Experience at FSU as a graduate assistant.

The author's research interests as an undergraduate focused mainly on World War I-related topics such as the Red Baron and the Armenian Genocide. After working with several Merchant Marine WWII veterans at the Jacksonville Maritime Museum and conducting oral history interviews, the focus of research shifted to WWII. The author remains heavily involved in genealogical research, a member of several regional, lineage, and heritage societies, serving as regional coordinator for the states of Florida and Ohio for the Seelye Genealogical Society and as webmaster for the Churches History website for the Huron County Chapter of the Ohio Genealogical Society.