

**THE USS EMMONS (DD457)**  
**My personal recollections**

I've wondered for more than 50 years why I have such incredibly strong feelings about a small warship and a crew with whom I spent only about 8 months of my life. Certainly I spent far more time at Dartmouth for example, but it will never have the emotional power over me which the Emmons has. Of all the experiences of my life, this is the one which I wanted most to share with children and grandchildren – not its history so much as the very personal emotions and experiences it held for me.

The depth of feeling clearly starts with the particular sequence of events and my own emotional state at the time. While I was assigned to the Emmons in the summer of 1941 while it was still under construction at the Bath Iron Works, I actually reported on board early in the morning of December 7, 1941 – just a few hours before the attack on Pearl Harbor that marked the beginning of our formal engagement in the war.

I was returning that morning from a 7 day emergency leave to attend my brother Jim's funeral at Arlington. And what a week that was! I was of course devastated by the loss of my mentor, my brother and my best friend (I had just turned 18 and he had just turned 22.) Within a 14 day period I was to lose the person who had been my "soul mate" for all my life to that point, enter into declared war and meet the girl who became my other "soul mate" for the next half century and more. No Shakespearean character ever had a more thoroughly dramatic set of experiences in so short a time. As a result, every emotional "nerve end" in my body was about as sensitized as they can get!

And then there's the ship itself as I first saw it. In those days, ships were delivered from the Naval shipyard without armament and since we were not yet at war, the ship was still painted in the traditional "Navy gray" which was in fact almost white (thus the popular name for our Navy of the "great white fleet.") The basic hull design, uncluttered with 5" gun mounts and other armament was breathtakingly beautiful when I first saw her in the morning light – she looked as though she were going at least 35 knots while still tied to the dock. For me, it was the first of two "love at first sights" that I was to experience in less than a week.

A little more background to help you understand this era in my life: I had joined the Navy shortly after my 17<sup>th</sup> birthday (11/11/40) and been called to report for induction on February 4, 1941. I was not being patriotic – I was seeking a way to get a college education and to escape the boredom of the only kinds of jobs a 16 or 17 year old could get in the waning days of the depression. Jim had learned of and told me about a Navy program to offer up to 100 appointments to the Naval Academy annually to enlisted personnel on the basis of competitive exams. The risk was fairly high – you had to enlist in the regular Navy in a standard enlistment (if you were under 18, that meant a "skivvie hitch" – enlisting until your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday instead of the normal six year minimum.) To be eligible for an appointment (and therefore eligible to take the competitive exam) you were required to complete 2 years of active duty including one year of "sea duty" and still be under 20 years of age before the date of your expected entry into the Academy. The good news was that the Navy had never succeeded in filling all these available appointments so in practical terms, simply passing the entrance exams would almost surely be enough to get the appointment and with the high school education I had, passing should certainly be possible.



## THE USS EMMONS

Page 2

The "system" then was enlistment as an "apprentice seaman" for four months (basically the "boot camp" period) at a monthly wage of \$21 followed by automatic promotion to seaman 2<sup>nd</sup> class and an increase in wages to \$36 per month. All meals, housing and uniform clothing (including underwear, socks, handkerchiefs, etc.) were provided.

Following "boot camp" at Norfolk, Virginia, I remained in Norfolk to attend "quartermaster/signalman" school. The training for these two specialties were combined because they were both assignments that put one on the bridge of the ship to work with either the navigator or the "officer of the deck" as assistants and/or communicators with other ships. Many, but not all, of the required skills overlapped.

After completing school, I was sent to the Boston "receiving station" sort of a long term "holding pen" to await commissioning of the Emmons. One of my most vivid memories is of the trip from Norfolk to Boston on a small coastal passenger ship

It was sometime between August 22 and September 10, 1941. During the voyage, President Roosevelt made one of his famous radio addresses in which he announced that the US Navy would now be authorized to patrol the North Atlantic to a point halfway to Europe with orders to attack any German submarine or warship in "our half of the Atlantic." I was on my way to Boston to join a destroyer and this meant we were effectively "at war." Even at that age I realized we had absolutely no right to take this action outside our recognized "territorial limits." With all of Europe under Axis domination and only the small islands of Great Britain still standing, it had become obvious that they could not be supplied without successful convoys and that the British simply did not have enough destroyers (even with our "lend lease program" of "surplus" World War I destroyers) to defend convoys all the way across the Atlantic from the large and growing numbers of Uboat "wolf packs." Roosevelt clearly made a decision that we had to be more actively engaged or Britain could not stand until we were ready to actually enter the war as a declared combatant.

And so I proceeded on to the South Boston "receiving station" to await commissioning. This kind of duty, even for a few months, is the "pits." There's absolutely nothing to do and on \$36 per month there isn't much opportunity for recreational activity. We spent hours playing blackjack for pennies for a few days after payday and for toothpicks thereafter. All I can claim from that is a real acquired skill in shuffling cards. After a month or so of that, we were offered the opportunity to volunteer to work as cook's helpers and thereby become part of the receiving station crew instead of temporaries. This meant a decent bunk, a locker, the right to wear civilian clothes on liberty and unlimited liberty when we were not on duty. I jumped at the chance and boy, did I get to be good at frying a couple of hundred eggs without breaking any yolks!

I was blessed by the companionship of a young friend from Baton Rouge, Louisiana named George M. "Dick" Flory. Dick had been in my platoon in boot camp and he had gone on to machinist (what we deck sailors called "snipes") school while I was in Quartermaster/Signal school and we had both been assigned to the Emmons. He and I were together in every location from February, 1941 until October, 1944 - a remarkable coincidence in those days of constant transfers!



Enough background – back to the ship. Remember the Emmons was commissioned in peacetime and under peacetime conditions. This meant that despite the fairly rapid growth in strength, we started with a full complement and with no bunks in the crew's quarters – just hooks in the overhead from which you could sling your hammock. Within a few days, however, we had to increase crew capacity to handle wartime manpower and that meant bunks had to be installed – and installed so closely on top of each other (four high in a compartment with about an 8 foot vertical space) that you could slide into your bunk but you couldn't roll over without *really* scrunching up your shoulders.

The "bridge gang" consisted of a Chief Petty Officer/Quartermaster(Stokes), a Signalman 2/c (Briggs), a Signalman 3/c (Takacs) and a Seaman 1/c who had been "busted" several times for conduct but had the professional qualifications of a Quartermaster 2/c. We were one short of the authorized rated "watch standers" but were quite capable of rotating watches on the normal "four hours on, eight hours off" schedule. In addition to these "ratings," there were also a number of Seamen 2/c like myself, many of whom had been to training school before reporting aboard and who hoped eventually to become either Quartermaster or Signalman petty officers. I remember, for example, Charron (son of Portugese fishermen with the greatest capacity for profanity I ever encountered anywhere), Hayes and Olender who both had Appalachian backgrounds and could make great music with a jug and washboard (I learned "Springtime's a'comin' Sweet Lonesome Fern" from them for which Erna never quite forgave me.) and several others.

Six days after I reported aboard the Emmons, I went to a dance for sailors at the Boylston Steet YMCU (not a typo, it was not the YMCA) and met Erna. My life would never be the same again but that's another whole story in itself.

I have a vivid memory of the day following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Germany and Italy declared war on the United States and a lot of people expected air raids on the East Coast. All the new destroyers which would make up our "division" were in Boston; all were new and were just beginning to have guns installed. Some ships already had 1.1" guns, some had 40mm and we all had some kind of ammunition but no ship had the ammunition to match the guns which they already had. I can still see gunnery officers from the various ships running up and down the dock trying to trade ammunition in the hope that they could fire *some* gun if we were attacked. Of course we weren't, but with Uboats operatin within sight of the East Coast, it isn't surprising that we were concerned.

The Emmons remained in Boston until January 22, 1942 in order to complete outfitting and initial training and organization. Before that happened, I had been selected to go to a secret school in Key West to learn sonar. At the time, the very existence of sonar was so secret that while we were paid an extra \$5 per month once qualified, we were not allowed to wear any kind of insignia or even tell people about the training we had.. I left the ship on January 9 for Key West.



Key West was a memorable (though short – 5 weeks) time. Not only was I learning a new and fascinating skill but it was during this time that I really began trying to come to grips with Jim's death. I had his copy of Will Durant's "Story of Philosophy" with me and I read it over and over. Each time I discovered a philosopher whose words held real meaning for me, I bought his book(s) and studied them. I wrote copiously. Erna certainly received the longest letters she would ever get from me – and they were more lectures in Philosophy 101 than they were love letters – but they were certainly that too. In those five weeks and the six weeks that followed waiting for the Emmons to return from its "shakedown" cruise, I created the basis for the metaphysical convictions which have guided me all the rest of my life. In simplest terms, I came to believe that Jim had achieved immortality because he had *loved and been loved*, that immortality came only from love – not just of family but of all human beings. The more you love, the more you live forever. Needlessly and deliberately harming another human being is self-destruction. We don't know *why* unselfishness is better than selfishness but if we listen to our feelings, we know that it is.

The sonar equipment itself was pretty primitive compared to the technology of even a couple of years later. Instead of a constant "sweeping" beam which would show a blip on a screen if a target were detected, this original sonar sent a single highly directional signal in the precise direction in which the operator pointed it. The "search" mode therefor meant sending a beam, waiting to hear an echo, then manually (by dial) moving the beam a couple of degrees and sending another signal. This "probing" process was constant and we "swept" an arc from about "10 o'clock to 2 o'clock" ahead of the ship. If an "echo" was received, we could look at a lighted dial which showed the distance to the contact and call out "Contact – bearing 025, range two five double O (I have a target located in the direction 25 degrees off the starboard bow at a distance of twenty-five hundred yards. Then the fun began. First the operator would narrow the search to a few degrees on either side of the original bearing, trying to locate by echo quality the bow and stern so that we could get some idea of the submarine's direction (the echo from the center of the hull would be a very strong "ping," the echo from the bow would be less loud but still pure and the echo from the stern would be "mushy" because of the wake from the propellers.

Once located, the submarine would know we had found him and would take one of several evasive or aggressive maneuvers: the aggressive one would be to turn and head directly for the destroyer, presenting the smallest possible target and putting itself in a position to fire torpedos at the destroyer (although in that position his target was minimal as well since we would be approaching bow to bow) and if he missed he would almost surely get within our depth charge range.

The more likely course would be to evade by maneuvering or by seeking a "hiding place" in the water. The earliest maneuvers during the war depended on seamanship rather than artificial devices. The submarine could speed up engines, make a very tight turn and then shut down or slow down engines again. This maneuver created what we called a "knuckle" in the water – a small area of heavily disturbed water which would itself return a sonar echo for a few minutes, hopefully keeping the sonarman tracking it while the real target changed course or depth again. Good sonarmen weren't fooled – the echo from a "knuckle" was there all right, but it simply didn't have quite the same sound quality as a true echo off a metal hull. Echos from whales or schools of fish could also fool one momentarily but again didn't keep an experienced operator confused for long.



Much more frustrating were temperature layers in the water. Ocean water tends to get colder as you go deeper but not at a constant rate. As a result, the water is frequently in "layers" or what we technically called "bathothermoclines." These sharp divisions between layers of water at different temperature could occur at any depth and we had no way of telling where they were at that stage of the war. (Later, we used a device which we could lower to various depths and tow behind the ship briefly to record water temperature and thereby the location of various "layers.") The advantage to the submarine is that a wise skipper was sailing at various depths and knew where these temperature changes occurred. Since water at different temperatures transmits sound frequency at slightly different speeds, these sharp gradients act on sound like in the same way a prism acts on light – it bends the rays or beams. If the angle is narrow, the beam simply reflects back up and the target "disappears" when it gets below the gradient. Even if some of the beam penetrates and produces an echo, the location and quality of the echo is confusing.

There were other evasive maneuvers, of course. If the submarine could escape contact for a short while, it could go to greater depth (the bottom if the water were shallow enough) and simply lie quietly, making detection very difficult.

At the school, we were operating in teams with our own submarines of course. Destroyers were so scarce that our "attack ships" were mostly yachts and fishing boats which the government had acquired quickly and on which they had installed sonar gear. We would proceed to a designated area, search for the sub, try to locate it and then attack. Measurement of attack was simple: At the time we would have been dropping the very center of our depth charge pattern, we dropped a wooden crate over the stern and the sonarman sent a signal to the submarine who released a bubble of air from a torpedo tube. If the bubble came to the surface around or near the floating crate, we knew we would have had a major hit – but only, of course, if we had also guessed right on the depth. The other problem with the attack was that the destroyer had to pass completely over the submarine to be in a position to drop depth charges from the stern and we always lost contact during the last part of the attack as we got too close. Smart submariners could often use that moment to quickly change course and direction and get out of the way of the attack, since we could only drop charges directly behind the ship.

As the war went on, much of this improved. First we installed "K guns" on the sides of the destroyer which fired smaller depth charges like mortar shells out to either side of the main pattern being dropped from the stern – net, the pattern was more a circle than a straight line and therefor harder to escape. Even later, we replaced the number one gun mount on the forecastle with a "hedgehog" – a platform holding a large number of smaller "mortar shell" type depth charges which could be fired out ahead of the ship while we still had contact with the target. I think these were used during World War II but I didn't encounter them until my time on the Collett (DD730) during the Korean war. They were much more effective!

One of the curiosities of war is that this entire destroyer vs. submarine activity would have been the greatest "game" ever invented if the object had not been to kill people. It was an absolutely fascinating evolution of "hide and seek" and the outcome depended almost entirely on the individual skill of the sonar operator, the destroyer skipper and the submarine skipper. Technology was a relatively small factor, skill was paramount. Of course, as the time wore on, each player developed better and better technology and the skill factor lost a lot of its relative importance. That was good for the war effort but it sure took a lot of the fun out of it.



By the time I rejoined the Emmons on March 24, 1942, we were truly at war. Existing crews were being "stripped to the bone" to provide a nucleus of trained personnel for the ships being rapidly commissioned - replacements of qualified personnel were almost impossible. On the Emmons, this meant that the Chief Quartermaster had been promoted to warrant officer and transferred, Takacs had gone AWOL, the other qualified watch stander was in the Norfolk brig and the only remaining rated signalman or quartermaster on the ship was Briggs. Since I was qualified to stand watches, I was added to the list (as a result I never stood a watch as a sonar operator although I was the only qualified sonarman we had.) We did get a Signalman 3/c from the reserves so we would have three capable watch standers. Unfortunately, he got seasick as soon as we cast off the last line from the dock and never was able to stand a watch. This situation (only two qualified signal watch standers) remained true as long as I was on the Emmons. In addition to regular watches, wartime rules required "general quarters" for one hour before sunrise and one hour after sunset because these were the most dangerous times for submarine attack. The schedule went something like this: on watch from midnight to 4am, back on the bridge at 5:30am for general quarters, leave the bridge at 6:30 am, breakfast, back on the bridge from 8am to noon, lunch, sleep (you hoped) until 3 pm, back on the bridge from 4pm to 6pm, eat supper(if general quarters didn't interfere), back on the bridge from 8pm until midnight and then a blessed nearly four hours in the bunk until you relieve the watch at 4am. You can see why my idea of recreation in port was not "pub crawls," it was sleep!

The job of signalman in wartime conditions was fascinating. We were virtually the only means of communication within the fleet when underway because radio transmissions were forbidden except in case of dire emergency (too much danger of interception which would give away fleet position.) In peacetime, twelve inch signaling searchlights in daytime and "yardarm blinkers" - yellow blinker lights mounted high on the mast - were the norm for morse code communication. Once the war started and total darkness was important, we used a flashlight mounted on a rifle stock with a long 2" diameter barrel blocked at the end with a wooden plug leaving only about a half inch opening. Needless to say, your aim had to be perfect if your target were going to be able to read your signal. Understand, however, that on a dark night with "darkened ships" the flare from a small match can be seen for several miles!

Briggs was a great coach. Even though we were both standing "watch on and watch off" whenever underway, he insisted that whenever we were in port, we spend a couple of hours practicing to see if either of us could send blinker code faster than the other could read it. We finally reached the point where neither of us could! The professionalism and pride of the "peacetime" sailor was phenomenal. Many men spent a full six year enlistment as a seaman 2/c and reenlisted for another six years on the promise of being promoted to seaman 1/c. Frequently there was little hope of achieving petty officer status until the end of 12 years and even then the competition was fearsome!



Technically, when you are receiving a blinker message you respond at the end of each word transmitted by sending a long dash which means "Yes, I've got that word, give me the next one." The height of arrogance is to answer a call with the signal to go ahead and transmit and then simply hold the key down so you are sending an unending dash which will only be released if you should fail to understand a word. What it really means is "Go ahead and transmit as fast as you can, you amateur. You can't possibly transmit faster than I can read!" Naturally, this challenge causes the sender to speed up in the hope he'll confound you. Nobody ever did. When Briggs and I were the watch standers, the Emmons *never* had to break the arrogant "steady dash!" And were we proud of it!

Semaphore was almost never used; the ships were too far apart and destroyers roll too much to hold a strong telescope on a sender. Flag hoists are different. When the commanding vessel raises a flag signal, each ship in the formation repeats the signal as quickly as possible and the command is "executed" when the commanding ship lowers the hoist (which he does only after making sure all other ships have repeated it.) Flags are kept in a "flag bag" - a sort of file cabinet with an open top in which the flags are arranged in order with the top snap hooks holding them in place. I can't remember how many flags are in the racks - each letter of the alphabet and 10 numeral pennants, of course, but there must have been at least two of each making a total of over 70. On a large ship, one signalman reads the hoist and another hooks the flags together. With a small crew, we did both simultaneously. The trick was to learn to hold a telescope steady enough with the left hand only on a rolling and pitching ship so you could use the right hand to pick each successive flag from the bag without looking. Our goal was to copy the signal as each flag came out of the commanding ship's flag bag rather than waiting until the hoist was all the way up. Perfection was when we could hit the yardarm with our hoist at the same time the originating ship did - and we usually made it! Talk about cocky!

I've probably never developed any skill quite as thoroughly as I did those. When I reported aboard the Collett in Korea in 1950 - eight years after I left the Emmons and therefor eith years after I had stood a signal watch, I could still read blinker better than any signalman on the ship.

Countless hours of standing on a destroyer bridge looking for signals and for periscopes - almost always "in harm's way" and almost always with no excitement. I can still remember thinking to myself that when my children someday ask me what war was like, my first response will be BORING! And yet we mattered - before we made the Hatteras patrol off our Carolina coast early in 1942, the Germans were sinking a number of tankers and freighters within sight of our coast every night. In fact, our merchant ships were not supposed to sail at night because we couldn't protect them. During the seven days we were there in April, I believe only one ship was sunk.

It was on this patrol that I watched the wake of torpedo pass directly beneath our ship. They're easy to see on dark but moonlit night. Either their torpedo malfunctioned or was set to run too deep for a destroyer. Since it missed, we all thought it was pretty "cool."



## USS EMMONS

Page 8

Later we escorted the aircraft carrier Ranger to a point within site of the African coast. The purpose was to ferry Army fighter aircraft which could then be flown into Africa from where they could be further "hedgehopped" to places where they were desperately needed. Interesting memories:

- The launch point was within fifty miles of zero latitude and zero longitude.
- Near the point of launch we had a number of sonar contacts (we had been warned that a "wolf pack" was in the area) and the destroyers had a hard time maintaining the discipline of staying with the carrier instead of running off to play "cowboys and indians" with the submarines.
- I never saw a greater courage than that demonstrated by the first pilot who took from the carrier. Those planes were not built for short takeoff runs; they were land based planes of the type used by the "Flying Tigers" in China. Since their wings couldn't "fold up" like a Navy plane, they could not be stored below the flight deck and about one third of the entire flight deck was used as a "garage" so the first planes to take off were trying to get up to flying speed for a land based fighter plane in about two thirds of carrier flight deck (and they were a lot shorter in those days.) *No one knew if it was possible or whether the plane would simply go off the end of the deck and drop into the ocean!* The first cadre of planes all dropped like a rock when they left the deck but somehow managed to accelerate to flying speed while they were dropping and began to climb slowly when their wheels were only a couple of feet from the waves! We didn't lose a one but talk about unsung heroes!
- Returning home from Africa we encountered a moonless night in glassy calm water with the greatest level of phosphorescence I've ever seen. The bow wave and the wake of our ship and the other ships were absolutely brilliant green.
- Still returning home, I remember watching in fascinated concern as a bow wave seemed to head directly for us from our starboard side. (Radar had not been installed yet and on a dark night with darkened ship you really couldn't tell where your other ships were.) I notified the officer of the deck and we watched in relief as the wake passed close behind us. About five minutes later, radio silence was broken by the the Ellyson (DD454) to report a collision on the starboard side. Quickly, the Hambleton (DD455) reported - in a very disgusted voice - a collision on the port side. One ship had simply gotten confused when we were "reorienting the screen" on a zigzag change of course, had crossed all the way across the formation and passed behind us, reversed course to get back in position and hit another of our destroyers. No casualties - just a very embarrassing event and a couple of destroyers with a few weeks of unscheduled Navy yard time!

It was also on this trip that I nearly decided that I didn't want to be a Naval officer. Enroute to Africa we stopped at Port of Spain, Trinidad for a couple of days for refueling and provisioning. As soon as we arrived, I was the signalman who received the message that the officers were all invited to a dinner party and dance at a local club but that enlisted personnel were not to be allowed ashore for security reasons. I was furious! I had no trouble with higher pay, better quarters and better food for officers but I was incensed that the Navy thought they could be trusted and we couldn't.



It was on this trip to Africa that I stood the first of so many "mid-watches" and learned to use them as priceless periods of reflection. The seas in the South Atlantic were calm, exchange of blinker messages among ships was almost unheard of, the stars were brighter and more numerous than I had ever seen them, I was usually alone on the bridge in comfortable South Atlantic breezes (There were a few others on watch - an officer of the deck, a couple of crew inside the pilot house and perhaps another signalman "striker") but conversation if any was usually hushed and I could be left to sit alone on the flag bag for hours and do nothing but watch the stars and the fluorescence stirred up by our wake and to ponder my philosophical meanderings and my new-found love in Boston.

Besides my thoughts of Erna and her *joie de vivre*, her quick little steps, her grace, her beautiful voice singing Victor Herbert and Sigmund Romberg tunes and our long walks in the drizzly winter weather of Boston, I spent hours reliving my times with Jim.

The incredible skies - semi tropical latitudes, calm seas, absolutely no air pollution and no lights for miles showed me millions of stars that I had never seen before despite the thousands of hours delivering morning newspapers between 2 and 5 am in Baltimore. They reminded me most of one of my last conversations with Jim before we each entered the service. Living as we did in a very small house, Jim and I as the two youngest frequently shared a bedroom which gave rise to very long discussions about religion, life and relationships into the wee hours of the morning. They began when I was a very young teenager and he an older one and we tried to come to grips with our questions about much of the very fundamental Christianity in which we had been raised and which was the firm faith of our parents - particularly my mother. The only things I can remember her singing around the house during my childhood were hymns; the words of the bible were infallible; life was a "vale of tears" which would be followed by true rebirth in heaven - and none of this could be questioned or discussed (except in the seclusion of that bedroom where he and I could question everything and seek our own conclusions. I can well remember days at that age when I wished I were a Catholic because I had the impression that a curious Catholic youngster could ask questions like this of his priest but we would have been considered sinners for even asking a Protestant minister in the kind of churches we attended and our mother would have been hurt and shocked if she knew we asked.

Back to that last conversation. After Jim became fascinated with philosophy, we talked more and more about the true meaning of life and particularly about life (if any) after death. One night he told me his dream of the perfect life after death would be to be completely freed of the bonds of a mortal body so that a surviving mind and soul could forever wander the universe, traveling from star to star and from galaxy to galaxy and learning to understand all the vast knowledge of that universe which as mortals we could not even comprehend - much less understand. Jim's dream of heaven was simply the opportunity to find the answers to questions that no one had ever been able to know. His thirst for learning was unquenchable. Is it any wonder that growing up with him made me a lover of learning and teaching or that one of the things that made Erna so immediately my "soul mate" and kept her that for so many years is her intellectual curiosity?



As I stood those many hours of "mid watch" on that first long cruise, still trying to deal emotionally with the loss of Jim, I think my sanity was largely saved because I could look at that canopy of brilliant stars and convince myself that I could see Jim's soul zipping from one to the other and giving him his ultimate fulfillment. During those hours I could continue some of the conversations we had had - filling in his part from the reading I had done of the philosophers he had most admired.

Jim's loss had also immediately changed two parts of my life plan. I had been an "airplane nut" since the age of about 8 or 9. My primary hobby was building model airplanes of all kinds - scale models, contest models, gliders, my own designs - and of riding my bicycle out to the local airport to watch real airplanes fly. I had changed my mind about two things since I joined the Navy - I wanted to apply for flight school as soon as I was old enough (18) and I wasn't so sure I wanted to go to the Naval Academy - preferring perhaps to seek a "warrant" commission by rising through the enlisted ranks. Jim's death in a completely unexpected crash of a Stearman trainer a week before we were even at war made it clear that I couldn't punish my parents any further by transferring to flight training so I dropped that idea.

I had also received a long letter from Jim when I reported aboard the Emmons *after attending his funeral*. Needless to say, his words in that letter carried an impact that no other letter ever has. His message was simple: I had written him about my admiration for the career enlisted men with whom I was working and my growing questions about Annapolis. It was not the first time I had talked or written to him about my enjoyment and excitement of a new job or a new group of people because I had felt much the same way about my brief months in a clothing factory and more brief months as a "gopher" in a life insurance office before I joined the Navy. His letter contained advice worthy of a Solomon - advice which I've never forgotten and which I've found applies to many more things than occupation: He said "I can understand the excitement and the satisfaction of learning to do new things and learning to work with and understand new people but the excitement will pass and you'll need deeper satisfaction and challenge. Remember that a man can starve to death gnawing on a bare bone just because he liked the ham that was on it at the beginning." I still hate to think what the world lost when that mind was snuffed out just after his 22<sup>nd</sup> birthday. What a teacher he would have been - and frankly, in the final analysis I think that's what he would have become.

I learned something else: even though I shared only 18 years of my life with Jim, he is still with me. Because we truly loved each other, he has never ceased to be an integral part of my being and in some way to affect everything I've done.

At any rate that letter put me back on the track of competing for the Naval Academy which meant preparing to take the first competitive exams in a few months to try for admission to the Naval Academy Prep School in Norfolk. In order to more nearly meet its annual allotment of 100 spaces, the Navy had begun taking 100 promising enlisted personnel for eight months of special preparation before subjecting them to the actual Academy entrance exams. I persuaded Dick Flory that he should try along with me and when he said his high school education was not adequate and he had no hope of qualifying for the prep school, I offered to tutor him for a few months. It is a mark of the quality of Baltimore Polytechnic's education that I was able to help him enough so that we both left the ship for prep school on October 8, 1942 - but that's getting ahead of my story.



## USS EMMONS

Page 11

By the time we had returned from the African trip, Briggs was getting increasingly restless. I don't think there was anything specific about the ship or its officers that he didn't like - he just had the wanderlust. I remember one day when we were both on the bridge and the exec came over and said "Briggs, why don't you just keep your nose clean (stay off report for disciplinary problems, etc.) for a while and you could easily be first class and then chief petty officer. Briggs reply was "Sir, I don't think you understand. Some of us just don't give a damn."

At any rate, for whatever reason, he deliberately failed to return to ship in time for our departure from Boston for Newport on June 26 - in fact, he appeared on the dock as soon as the last line was cast off to wave good-bye! He knew he'd get a little brig time and then another ship assignment (and probably reduced in rate to Signalmman 3/c instead of 2/c) but at least he'd get a change of scenery.

The problem was that I was now the *only* member of the Emmons crew who could stand a competent signal watch. So for the next four days, June 26-June 30, I was "on watch" twenty four hours a day. Most of that time we were anchored in Newport Harbor so the procedure was that I would stay awake as long as I could, then get a "striker" to look for flashing lights anywhere that seemed to be pointed in our direction. I would take a nap on a pile of life jackets and he'd wake me whenever he saw a light so I could tell whether we were being called or not.

This didn't make for much sleep but that wasn't the major problem. This was one of the few occasions when liberty was available to the crew; we were in a nice town and I simply could not be allowed to leave the ship in this brief interval between the fairly long African trip and what we knew would be a long absence on some kind of convy duty when we left the East Coast this time.

On the fifth day, Lt(jg) Joe Behan (my favorite officer because he had come originally from the enlisted ranks just as I hoped to do and he had a better understanding of the crew) came to me and said, "I think this is our last day in port, liberty will be up at 1800 tonight and you should get at least one chance to get ashore. I'll stand the signal watch today so you can have liberty." Needless to say, I've never forgotten and will never forget that consideration. But what to do with this great opportunity? I wasn't able to leave the ship until almost noon and had to be back at the dock by 6:00 pm. Having had no opportunity to spend any money for a long time, I did have a fair supply of cash even at \$54 per month (I had made Seaman 1/c on June 1 with the accompanying increase in pay.)

Inspiration! I had no idea how to get in touch with Erna who was only a couple of hours away in Boston so I hired a taxi for the day at an agreed fixed rate (using up almost all my money but I wasn't going to need any for a long while), had him drive me to Boston where miracle of miracles, I found Erna and we shared a few precious hours before I took the cab back to Newport. Oh what a couple of hours and the opportunity to be with the person you love can mean! We talked, we sang, we walked and I was complete again!

Fortunately, when I returned to the ship we had acquired another signalman and even though he outranked me, I was by virtue of experience (an old grizzled veteran by then) the mentor and the recognized boss of the "bridge gang."



## **USS EMMONS**

**Page 12**

The next major undertaking for the Emmons was escorting two troop ships across the North Atlantic to Scotland. Shipboard life was much the same as before. The pace was slower because of the maximum speed of the troop ships but the daily routine and watch standing were the same. It was after our arrival at Greenock that I developed a life-long love of the Scottish people.

Dick Flory and I went ashore as soon as liberty was declared in order to see the sights. Not having been on the shakedown cruise, this was my first time on shore in a foreign country. We had been anchored in Trinidad but not allowed ashore. We had been within sight of the coast of Africa but not actually anchored. We had been anchored in Halifax, Nova Scotia but not allowed ashore. However, we signalmen were blessed by the fact that a lot of the girls in Halifax had learned blinker and would call us with flashlights to "chat" (were these the first "chat rooms"? ) and that at least gave us some feeling of companionship.

Now we were finally in a foreign port and were allowed liberty! We wandered the town until noon and then began seeking a restaurant where we could get a break from the good but monotonous ship's mess. We found an attractive place but there were no unoccupied tables. Imagine our surprise when we were taken directly to a table for four where a couple about our parents ages were already eating. (I learned later that this is perfectly normal in Scotland - was then, is now and it's a wonderful idea.) This couple immediately adopted us - they didn't see many young people anymore - all their young had gone to the war years before.

They led us on a walking tour to "Heather Hill" and other beauty sights around the town and then took us to their home for tea. Remember that these people had been on severe rations for years and things like butter and sugar were more valuable than gold. But for these two young American sailors they spread the table with scones and all the butter they had as well as jars of marmalade and preserves which they had clearly been saving for years. Having no shortage of these things on the ship, we felt guilty eating them and yet they were offered with such warmth and love that we could not refuse. I ended that day believing (and I've never had a reason to change my mind) that the Scots are among the most truly civilized of people - accepting strangers as valued equals and treating everyone with respect, interest and care unless and until they prove they don't deserve it. They don't resent having strangers imposed upon them - on the contrary, they regard it as an opportunity to meet new people and learn new things.

We were only in Greenock for three days, but we did get the opportunity to take the train to Glasgow the following day. It was a larger city, of course, more industrial and not a place about which I remember much except on anecdote. My buddy and I, like any good sailors on liberty had met a couple of young Scot girls with whom we walked around the park and talked for a while. I thought I was having a very clear conversation (about what, I have no idea) with one of the girls when she said with great surprise in her voice: " My, I can understand almost everything you say - you Yanks speak a kind of English too!" It has reminded me ever since that we may not look or sound to others quite the same way we look and sound to ourselves!



## USS EMMONS

Page 13

We're off to join the British! When we left Greenock, we didn't return to the States as we expected but instead were detached to join Task Force 99 in Scapa Flow and to operate under the command of and as part of the British Home Fleet. There was still considerable concern in both Britain and the United States that the Germans would combine a naval attack on the British Isles with their continuing air blitz and that Britain might fall, depriving us of any chance to mount a European invasion when we had the men and machines we needed. We were to become part of their defense for a while.

For me this meant bringing aboard a British signalman and becoming familiar with the differences between some of their procedures and ours. Most fascinating to me was the difference in the "phonetic alphabets." Where we were using "Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog, Easy, Fox, How and Interrogatory" for example, they were using "Apples, Bananas, Charles, Duff, Edward, Freddie, Harry, and Issac."

The young British signalman we added to our crew was a classic example of the British will to resist in those dark days. He was small, with a quick wit and a bright smile. He would eventually be going to Murmansk with us but staying there rather than returning. He had only been back in Scotland for medical treatment because of the scurvy he acquired in a long tour of duty on a mine sweeper stationed in Murmansk (food for our allies on that side of the ocean were pretty scarce in 1941 and 1942.) During the days in Murmansk, his little ship was bombed three or four days every week. Their job was to keep the sea lanes near Murmansk open in case any supply ships could get through. Every day, the Luftwaffe stationed in Norway would patrol the seas near Murmansk looking for convoys or stragglers and when they found none (which was usually the case) they'd drop their bombs on the mine sweeper rather go back home without having fired a shot. Talk about sitting ducks! Fortunately, mine sweepers are small and maneuverable and they knew what was coming so they didn't actually get hit very often.

With this background - months of patrol and almost daily attack in the freezing area north of Murmansk, with so little decent food he contracted scurvy, a brief hospital stay near home and a return to those conditions, this youngster was nothing but humor. I still remember the night when I relieved him on watch and he said " Well, I'm going down and try to get a bit of nap; if we get torpedoed while I'm below, come down and give me a shake, will you?" Fifty five years later, I find the incredible courage of so many young people (not decorated heroes but the millions of "ordinary" soldiers, sailors and civilians) in the face of almost unbelievable and constant danger to be awesome. There is no doubt in my mind that it is this experience which has made me believe all my life that a free people can do *anything* if they want to do it badly enough and will work together! I still have trouble defining my religious beliefs as clearly as I'd like, but I can not look at so many human beings I have known and the qualities they have exhibited from time to time and accept the idea that they are not somehow different from the other animals who occupy the earth. If each of us would only "be all that we *can* be" what a world we could have!



Admiral Billingsley does a superb job of describing the entire Murmansk experience – not just the fascinating “why” and the story of what happened to convoy PQ17 (much of which we knew before we started out) but of the general personal experiences of officers and crew.

I'll add only a few details which have been indelible in my mind for these 55 years. I think the Admiral, though he certainly describes the food problem, underestimates it! When we were called away from Iceland to chase a submarine report, we left with none of the American provisions we were supposed to get. There was never another opportunity to return for that purpose before beginning the Murmansk trip and so our supplies came only from the depleted British Navy stocks. Basically, we got two things other than the poor quality flour he describes: we got a lot of mutton, some potatoes and some cabbage. Mutton had to be stored in the meat locker which was directly below my sleeping compartment. Believe me, this mutton must have come from sheep who died of old age several years earlier. The smell emanating from the meat locker permeated the sleeping compartment and since nobody could stomach the stuff even when it was cooked, we finally persuaded the exec that we should throw the mutton over the side after a few days and clean out the locker. The potatoes and cabbage would have been good except that as he reports, we had filled every normal space and a lot of abnormal spaces as well with supplies for the Russians and these fresh vegetables had to be stored in piles on the deck. Unfortunately, we hit enough rough weather shortly after leaving Iceland to soak them all with salt water so they quickly rotted and had to be jettisoned as well.

This reduced the variety in the mess hall considerably but the cooks did the best they could. We fortunately had plenty of rice, some sugar, some powdered milk, some raisins and some beans which had been in proper storage so the daily meals went something like this: breakfast was cooked rice cereal with raisins and sugar, lunch and dinner were most likely beans with rice pudding for dessert. With each meal there was plenty of something like lemon Koolaid to provide the anti-scurvy nutrition. There was also plenty of bread made from the poor quality flour he describes and there were some jellies and jams for the bread. All pretty boring but we survived and it was a lot better than smelling and eating that mutton. It was years before I could even face the idea of eating a piece of lamb!

Of course, we were not completely passive about all this! Remember, there was food stored all over the ship for delivery to the Russians and there are two mouth watering treats I can remember from that trip: occasionally, a case of dried fruit from our cargo would get broken somehow and one of my friends would bring me a handful of dried apricots – HEAVEN! And sometimes we could bum an onion from the cook and make a fresh onion sandwich.

Funny thing is I never got tired of rice pudding! We must have had a cook who was an expert in that dish!

The storm Admiral Billingsley describes was indeed memorable. And yet I cannot remember a single moment of fear or even concern. To me, the Emmons was absolutely unsinkable (I guess I would have made a good passenger on the Titanic) and the pitching, rolling and crashing was just plain exciting – a little bit like riding a great horse who has suddenly gotten a little wild for some reason. It was fun to stand on the bridge and guess whether the next wave breaking over the bow would actually come over the bridge as green water or only as spray. I suppose more experienced sailors recognized the danger but I certainly didn't. I loved it!



As the logbook shows, after returning from Murmansk we went back to Greenock to drop off the British survivors of PQ17 whom we had carried, were released from the British fleet command and returned to the States for some different training – particularly the growing need for effective antiaircraft fire and some anti-submarine exercises as well. On one of these exercises I got my first chance to actually man the sonar gear on the Emmons because in normal cruising situation, I simply could not be spared from the signal bridge. I was still the only fully trained sonar operator on the ship and the skipper didn't even know it. We made our run with me on the sonar and he got every report just the way he had learned it in his training. Accurate bearings; ranges; bow, beam or stern identification; probable course changes; in precisely the right order and vernacular – and the run was perfect! The air bubble came to the surface and our crate was directly in the center of it. The skipper came running into the sonar room, elated and saying "Who's on that sonar?" And when he saw me smiling, dropped his jaw and said Butler, who the hell sent *you* to sonar school – we need you on the bridge." And that's the way we manned ships in the early days of the war. We simply could not provide all the skills we needed on each ship so we did the best we could with extra duty, double duty and "filling in."

Shortly before beginning the Murmansk trip, I had received my Signalman 3/c rating and was I proud (althouth it helped get me my only brig time a little later – and that's the kind of comment that's supposed to make you want to read a later chapter about the Naval Academy prep school.) The rating, however, makes me want to share a minor correction to the text on page 131. The Admiral says that a shipmate (Bill Hayes) and I flipped a coin to see which would take the test for Signalman and which would take the test for quartermaster. That's not quite true as Bill reminded me in about 1976 when I gave a major speech to the Academy of TV Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles and he saw my name in the paper and contacted me. He remembered vividly that I intended to take the test for quartermaster (for which there was only one opening on the ship's authorized billet.) He came to me and said "You could easily pass the test for either quartermaster or signalman; I can't possibly pass the signalman test – what should we do?" He reminded me that I said "Easy, I'll take the signalman test – a minor change in my plans because I thought the quartermaster route – being basically navigation – would have been a little better preparation for the hoped for officer training.

At the same time, it seemed to me that cumulatively we would be better off if each of us could obtain almost all his desire instead of one of us getting exactly what we wanted and the other nothing. I really thought nothing much about it at the time, but it resulted in Bill making the Navy a career and caring enough almost thirty years later to track me down and say "thank you." What a reward for such a small sacrifice!

Over fifty years after the event, Dick Flory told me that without my encouragement and tutoring in 1942 he certainly would not have ended up at Dartmouth, then on to engineering training which he completed after the war. He would not, he thought, have had the successful career he enjoyed as engineer and he wanted me to know tthat he gave much of the credit (more than deserved, I suspect) for his career to my early help.

I believe these two examples illustrate so well what Christ meant when he said "Store up for yourself treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt nor thieves break through and steal." No stock market crash, no business failure, no obsolescence or erosion can ever reduce the value of those two treasures!



And so, in those few months on the Emmons, I learned to deal with the loss of Jim, to cement the undying love I would have for Erna, to face danger and endure hardship, to learn the real joy of working as part of a "crew" with a common purpose, to learn the joy of giving of oneself to help others, and to form the fundamental philosophical convictions by which I would lead the rest of my life.

What that year must have been like for my parents I cannot imagine and that question has haunted me throughout the years when our own children and grandchildren have been growing up. Starting out in their teens, one with a sixth grade and one an eighth grade education, they had devoted their lives to a family of three sons and what those sons could become. They began by spacing their boys four years apart (with no artificial forms of birth control available), had worked and saved and loved and nurtured with the hope that they could send each of these boys off to college one at a time over a period of years. Then, in just four months (September to December 1941) the oldest had married and settled in another city, the second was killed in a plane crash and the "baby" (me) was on a destroyer in the North Atlantic, isolated by censorship so there were no letters or calls for weeks on end and no way of knowing where I was or whether I was alive.

I've sometimes wondered since how they survived that period, but even then I had some sensitivity to their needs. That in itself was a powerful motive for me to try to get into and stay in officer training where they would at least know where I was.

Coming full circle, I started by wondering how such a short period of time could have affected me so deeply and still affect me so deeply. The strongest indication of that feeling is that I still have never read the last chapter of the Emmons Saga. I accidentally turn to one of those pages occasionally when I'm looking up something but I cannot read it. Just a sentence or two or a paragraph at most makes my throat choke up and my eyes fill with tears. Some people and some experiences in our lives become such a central part of our being that we simply cannot ever separate ourselves from them.

If time permits, I hope to add some reminiscences about the Naval Academy Prep School and the Dartmouth, Midshipman School and Japanese Language Schools to this but if not, I hope this will give you some increased understanding of a young sailor, the times in which he lived and the way those times shaped his life.

O. B. Butler  
January 5, 1998