



*J.E. GORMAN, another ancient castoff, converted to a Marine Repair Ship;
similar to the WILLIAM F. FITCH*

FITCH THE BITCH

Most crewmen develop an attachment for their ship that is hard to describe to a non-seafaring person. You could compare this affection to a man-woman affair. "You treat her right; she'll do anything you ask of her." Of course this does not mean that all women or all ships fit into this scenario.

I was only two days aboard the "Fitch" when she and I started developing a hate-hate relationship that was to fester and grow for the entire two and a half months it took us to travel from Manila to San Francisco.

Crews aboard ships calling at the port of Hollandia, on the North West coast of New Guinea, Netherlands East Indies, in late 1944 and early 1945 will surely remember a large turn-of-the-century ship lying at anchor in the main roadstead with a large work barge tied along side. The S.S. William F. Fitch was a marine repair ship. Her keel was laid in 1898; she was made of riveted iron plate, and was launched at Detroit, Michigan in 1902. At 354 feet she was rated at 4,000 Gross Tons. She had a single screw powered by a 1500 H.P. triple-expansion steam engine, with three old Scotch fire-tube boilers in a fire-room separate and forward from the engine room. Her 50 foot beam permitted her to work anywhere on the Great Lakes. Her engine room was aft, with a bridge and house forward, similar to a tanker profile. I found out years later that she was named after a man who rose from a clerk to the head the company and ordered her construction on the Great Lakes.

Every time I came into Hollandia, I would go aboard the "Fitch" to see the

latest movies, as did many of other ship's crews. Sometimes it was almost impossible to find a space to dock our shore boat if the movie was a first run. Most of all, I remember the spacious accommodations aboard and the beautiful machine shop deep in her holds. I was crewing on a high speed 112 foot coastal supply vessel called F.S.1A., operating to Wewak, Aitape and back to Hollandia.

At the time, the "Fitch" was manned by the U.S. Coast Guard. Never in my wildest imagination could I foresee the role that she was to play when we were to meet a year or so later.

It was 1946 and the war in the Pacific was over. After serving on several other ships I opted to go back to the states for leave, as I had completed another contract with the Army Transport Service.

After five months training I graduated at the Marine Engineering in New Orleans as an Engineer and was reassigned out to the Pacific again. Because of a girl I had met in New Orleans, I tried to get discharged. But, as I had seven months to go on my contract, the Army insisted (in its perverse way) that I return to the Pacific to fulfill that contract.

I was sent to the Philippines to await my new assignment. The war was long over and there was a glut of vessels still lying at anchor in Manila. I sat around for weeks watching ship after ship being turned over to other governments. As foreign crews took possession of the ships, the American crews were beached....to wait in boredom (as I did) for any assignment that would break the monotony until they could go home. The wasting time and the pretty girl in New Orleans had dulled my craving for any more adventures on the high seas and I was ready to come back home to pursue other interests....such as getting married. I offered to take any ship heading stateside, even as a work-away, just to get away from the environment I was then in, and negate the seven months remaining on my one year contract.

My appeals must have made an impression on the Transportation Officer, because one evening a jeep drove up, the driver handed me an envelope and told me to get my gear together and hop in. He was going to take me to a ship going home. My prayers were answered.

I secretly prided myself on being able to recognize ships by their profiles, and I spotted her tied dockside amongst several other ships. "Hey that's the old William F. Fitch. I remember her from New Guinea," I told the driver.

We drove right up to her gangway and the driver said, "This is your ship going stateside."

"Happy day," I thought.

After meeting the Chief Engineer and then signing the articles as an Oiler, I was escorted to the after-berthing area. The Coast Guard crews were gone but the pipe racks remained. I was told to select any one of the many empties available. Seeing a group of Filipinos conversing in Tagalog further aft, I thought it would be best if I selected a bunk isolated in a corner. Little did I know that I was to be the only non Filipino assigned as a rated or documented in the engine room crew. As I recollect, all the officers were American except the Captain, who was Filipino.

My duties as day Oiler were to maintain the pumps and generators.... and anything the Engineers on watch thought needed looking after. I guess they heard I had graduated from engineering school and wanted to take advantage of my training.

A large convoy of trucks lined up on the dock off-loading about 300 Army Air Corps enlisted men from the 5th Repel-Depot. Most military personnel were just sitting in camps waiting for any available way home, be it by plane, troopship, or whatever means of transportation available to get them moving in the only direction, "Home". Little did the troops that boarded the William F. Fitch know what the next two and a half months held in store for them. I only hope they now look at it as a memorable experience, and have overcome the frustrations of 60 years ago, as I have.

We left Manila and worked our way up the coast of Luzon, then around the northern Islands, finally pointing our bow toward the good ol' U S of A. They say the ocean's greatest depths are located off the northeast coast of the Philippines in the "Mariana Trench". You could tell from the way she took the huge rolling swells that this old gal was sailing light, but she was trying to make the most of her instabilities. I would liken her gyrations to that of a tanker without ballast. It wasn't pleasant for our fly-boys, nor the rest of us, for that matter.

The first engineer told me to pump the contents of three 55 gallon drums of lube oil that were stored top-side in a gun tub down to the engine room storage tank. I went below to make sure the drain-cock was closed. I checked the pet-cocks that were evenly spaced up the side of the tank to make sure it could hold the 150 plus gallons, all appeared OK. After stopping for coffee I went topside to pump the oil, and 150 gallons later I went below. I guess I heard it before I noticed the bilges slopping and surging back and forth. I rushed to the tank and the drain-cock had lifted (by itself no doubt). Every drop of the lube oil went into

the bilge. Recovering the oil wasn't too much of a problem. By pumping it through the strainers and separators, we saved a good majority of the oil. Hosing the bilges with hot water and steam took care of the rest. What was hard to take was the knowledge that it had been done deliberately, and I couldn't point a finger towards anyone.

About the third day out one of the Oiler's came down with a fever and chills very much like malaria. I knew the symptoms, for I still came down with it every once in awhile myself. The Chief ordered me to relieve the sick Oiler's watch. We were all aware of an eccentric strap heating up, so I kept mixing soluble oil, water, and soap on top of the lube-oil to make an emulsification to keep a lubricant and cooling agent circulating as the valve rod lifted and bearing rotated. I had relieved the previous watch knowing the eccentric strap was hot. The watches following refused to relieve me, as they did not want to take responsibility for the problem. We were down to 3-4 knots hoping to make Guam....but no such luck. After 16 straight hours on watch, I was dead tired and about ready to give up whether relieved or not. Steam rose from the fried bearing and I was hosing raw water, but to no avail. There was so much slop that the eccentric started hammering. The Chief called the bridge and told them we would have to shut her down.

I found out that someone had gone to the fly-boys and started a rumor that the "stupid American kid" was responsible. I couldn't even go to the mess without having an argument before finishing my meal.

When a ship stops and has no headway, as we had to do for a couple of days for what seemed like an eternity, she tends to lie broadside to, wallowing side to side in the trough of the swells. When a ship is without ballast she tends to roll more violently, dipping the rail on one side then dipping the rail on the opposite side. Several rolls were so fierce we didn't think she would right herself, and several of the crew left the engine room refusing to return. The Engineers worked out a solution to trim the ship by shifting bunker oil and flooding wing tanks with sea-water. I didn't notice any difference, but what the hell, I was feeling so bad because of the treatment I was getting from the Filipino engine room crew and a cold shoulder from the seasick fly-boys that I wasn't noticing much of anything. I was starting to believe this was my entire fault but I was determined to see it through even if it killed me.

Engaging the jacking engine worm and blocking the crank throws with wooden blocks to keep the engine from turning over and then using chain falls, we

were able to hoist the valve rod up, separate the strap and expose the damage to the eccentric sheave. The journal was too galled to use as it was. We used a flexible drive high-speed grinder to grind out all the galled areas. A spare strap was brought down from the generator flat and installed. I worked alongside the Engineers for about 12 hours (by this time I had been without sleep going on 40 hours) grinding the galls out of the eccentric sheaves and installing the new strap. Finally we were ready to give it a try. Slow RPM's at first, 15, 30, 50. Suddenly another problem developed; no steerage. It seems that when we were laying broad-side to in the swells, tremendous forces were exerted on the barn door rudder, damaging the quadrant's worm teeth. Two teeth were knocked out with just enough gap for the worm driving gear to miss. Pinch bars and chain falls were needed to assist the steering, a short period of time going in one direction and a like amount of time in the other; our zigzagging would have been admirable for dodging subs if we were still at war.

Thank God Guam was close by. We made it, after what seemed like, super-human effort. Days later, after welding the quadrant, refitting the eccentric, and trying to keep the fly-boys from jumping ship, we were on our way again. At the time, water on Guam was at a premium. It was rationed out by a small Navy YO tanker that distributed fresh water to all the ships. The Chief Engineer said his biggest problem in getting enough water for us to make it to Honolulu (since our evaporator wasn't working) was in rounding up enough liquor. The Chief said he had to explain to the Captain that the liquor was to bribe the men on the YO tanker for extra water rations.

A few days out from Guam, this time on one of the other watches, a burner box blew out spraying hot fuel oil all over one of the firemen. It burned him pretty badly, but not bad enough to return to Guam. After questioning him he admitted to dozing off, and the next thing he knew was the blast that woke him. That sort of accident seems to be a common hazard for the old time boilers. When the fires are left unattended they momentarily go out, but the pumps keep spraying raw fuel into the hot burner-box, and when enough vapor is trapped, the vapor ignites causing an explosion.

I don't think the firemen had too much experience. The Chief had me put red and blue tape strips on all the fire room gauges; red meant not to exceed, blue meant normal working pressure, temperature, vacuum or whatever.

During watch my duties which included water-tending, logging temperatures, pressures, and times when pumps and generators were put on line. I

was expected to check the fire-room, check on the burner box used, and the size of tips. On one check-tour (which required me to climb up three decks, cross the tops of the boilers, and then go down the three flights into the fire-room) when I looked down through the grating I could see the fireman asleep. I went down and woke him up, and he got so mad that he picked up a spud wrench and chased me out of the fire room and up over the bulkhead into the engine room. It scared the hell out of me....especially since I couldn't understand a word that he was screaming at me.

Later on in the watch the Engineer asked me to go to the fire-room to check on something. I told him I didn't want to go, and explained what had happened earlier. He went instead, and when he returned said that I'd better watch my back, and that the guy was out to get me. He suggested that I move my berth to an empty gun crew cabin 'till things smoothed over. For the rest of the long voyage as we inched our way across the Pacific, I slept lightly and was very careful not to stray into any dark corners or let myself get caught alone with the Filipino engine room crew.

I never did find out exactly why they didn't accept me. I can only surmise that they wanted one of their own countryman in my place and weren't about to take orders from a kid who, in their eyes, wasn't dry behind the ears yet. I knew the Filipino crew could speak and understand English, as I'd heard them. But this was a clannish group, they cooked their own meals and they always congregated on the fan-tail and hushed when anyone approached.

We got word that the Atomic detonation at Bikini was scheduled one morning. We knew we would be far enough away that it wouldn't affect us, but as men will exaggerate, we envisioned we would be swamped by a gigantic tidal wave if the heat and concussion didn't get us first. Come first light, all the troops and crew were manning the starboard forward rails, staring to the southeast some 300 miles away, looking for the flash that didn't appear. We then waited for the wave. What a disappointment. We had really worked ourselves up into believing the worst. As an afterthought, I now thank God we weren't close enough to be blinded by the blast or suffer the after-effects of the radiation fall-out.

We finally made it to Honolulu. Half the Army Air Corps men were removed ashore. The rest, who had now become accustomed to the sea, thought this was still the fastest way available to get home. They got word of a Transport plane going down half-way to San Franciscosome felt it could have been them.

Only one other catastrophe happened as we neared the end of our two-

month plus cruise from Manila, and of course it happened on my watch. A shaft bearing just aft of the Kingsbury was heating up and my watch Engineer told me to nurse it like we had for the eccentric strap; spray sea water on the outside of the bearing housing with a hose, like watering a garden. He said he would cover my other duties until the bearing cooled. It took a couple of hours to get it cool enough to hold my hand on the housing for a ten count. I went to inform the Engineer of my success, but he wasn't in the engine room. I glanced at the boiler water gauge glasses. No water or too much water, I couldn't tell which, as there was no water line in the glass. I blew them down....nothing. I panicked. I rushed to the fire-room thinking my watch engineer would be there. He wasn't. I rushed up to the mess and there he was, having coffee. I told him about the water glasses and he rushed past me and headed down the ladder to the engine room. Just then we heard the most horrendous explosion and crunching racket from the steam turbine generator flat. Then the lights went out.

Any man that has served in the Engine department of a steam ship is certainly familiar with the term "over the top".... well it does happen. I'll be glad to tell you all about it, from first hand experience, and about the excitement that follows. Also, don't rely too much on all the safety relief equipment to function properly all the time.

Getting the water down to a safe level was not a chore, but having the Chief ride my butt, asking how I could let it happen, screaming like a maniac....I'll never forget the scene. Sometimes I still shudder at the memory. We were able to get the diesel generator on line to supply enough power until we could drain the water from all the lines before bringing up the other turbine.

My saving grace was that my watch Engineer took a lot of abuse similar to what I went through. He explained the circumstances, but I was still logged. He felt I wasn't to blame and told the Chief so, which only made matters worse for him.

When we tied up at the Oakland Port of Embarkation almost all the crew was paid off at once, with the exception of a few of us in the engine-room. We thought maybe we were going to be charged with some account of the engineering problems, instead we were needed to break in the relief crews.

An inquiry was held concerning our many problems. I didn't hear of anything coming out of it, so I guess everything was washed over. I was one of the last of the crew to be discharged. As I left ship the Mate dumped in my sea bag (as a final parting gesture) the contents of a carton of condoms, nearly 200 of

them all wrapped in foil.

My Mother was glad to see me, and as I was calling my fiancé long distance, my Mother decided to wash the sea bag full of dirty clothes. But that's another story.....