

NEAR MUTINY

The introduction of the steam power plant in merchant ships has on occasion fomented a rivalry between the Engine and Deck departments. Having served with pride an equal amount of time in both departments my thought was that this tale might offer the reader some insight as to differing attitudes I found on one of the last vessels that I sailed on.

This yarn is about a near mutiny; a few years after WWII, aboard a Victory class cargo ship operating out of Seattle, which hauled military cargo to and from Western Pacific bases.

If you've read *Mutiny on the Bounty*, by Nordhoff and Hall, you will remember the incident concerning the ship's fasteners (nails) traded to the island natives for whatever favors there were to offer, creating a crisis over the near destruction of their vessel.

Our Victory ship was only a few years old, made of steel and (of course) no nails, but that didn't prevent a member of the crew from devising a scheme to literally make off with most of her stores....even those carried under lock and key.

The problem started innocently enough. On our last haul from Singapore to Manila, we discovered that most of the sheets, towels and blankets were missing from the Chief Steward's storage compartment one deck below the engine room mess. A thorough questioning of the crew resulted in nothing to which one could point a finger. We made port at Okinawa, replenished our linen supplies, and thought the dilemma was over. We off-loaded our cargo of trucks and earth moving equipment and we were on our way back to the states, with a scheduled stop at Honolulu.

A simple request of the mess man, during breakfast, for some jams or jellies to go along with our toast brought the Chief Cook. He announced that many of the canned goods, including the jams and jellies, supposedly in the Steward's locker were missing...Oh-Oh...Here we go again.

The Chief Mate, along with the First Assistant Engineer wanted to hold another inquisition but this time everyone, even those off watch, were awakened and told to appear. You talk about griping amongst the crew...they were fit to be tied. The Mates and Engineers were delegating members of the crew to begin inventorying everything from the bilges in the engine room, to the triatic, and from stem to stern.

I should explain that this was a civilian crewed military sea transport cargo ship; many of the crew belonged to various West Coast unions. The deck department had their own self-appointed "delegate" aboard, but instead of trying to root out the thieves, he seemed to be more interested in agitating a boycott of the extra duty unless the ship agreed to pay for any overtime during the inventory.

The engine room crew agreed to do the inventory of all its spaces, including the reefer-chiller boxes, which the engine department and electricians (for maintenance reasons) had the keys to. However, they felt they shouldn't have to go

topside and count hardware, paint and the likes unless the deck hands also participated in the inventory below decks as well.

Midway in the counting, the Chief Steward announced that we were also lacking a healthy portion of the frozen stores along with a great amount of the frozen meat, and cheese and butter from the dairy box. This news went through the ship like wildfire. Everyone on the deck force was insinuating that the black gang was stealing because we had the keys to the refrigerators.

When people live and work in a mundane environment, any bit of excitement to break the otherwise tranquil monotony comes to life like a lightning bolt. The thievery incident was charging the crew into a frenzy.

Nothing is secret for long aboard a ship. Both Mates and Engineers will discuss the day's topics and share experiences between their watch mates as conversation is about the only thing to do to pass time. So, a bit of information gathered here and there, put together with a bit of unfounded spice, and you have a plot forming, sides start agitating, accusations start flying.

Whenever four or five men congregated, such as at chow or when off watch, they would talk and exaggerate things out of proportion, allowing their opinions to fester into a sense of bravado, not considering what the end result would be of their dreamed up actions. Our "self-anointed delegate" (sea lawyer) was trying to whip the deck force into a lather. Those not part of the deck department clique, or not in agreement with the rabble-rousers would be verbally abused in the passageways and on deck if they were by themselves. Our unfriendly "delegate" had fanned the flames of his mob and had them ready to pull a work slowdown by refusing all extra duty work.

When the weather was too hot to stay in our cabins many of us, both deck and engine crew, would spend our leisure hours back aft in the shade under the ex-5" gun platform. It was usually a friendly get together; telling sea stories, daydreaming or just snoozing away on old army cots, but now we felt we had to watch every word that we said in fear of starting an argument.

I would like to offer at this point my characterization of the Captain and Chief Engineer. The skipper was an older gent, in his late 60's early 70's, very bald, big red nose and a big gut. Members of the deck crew told of his exploits that went back to the days of sail. Every conversation with him included the bygone days on the old steam schooners when he used to haul lumber along the coasts of Washington and Oregon and every story ended up with a storm and cargo breaking loose.

The Captain acted as if he had no duties aboard this ship, almost as if he were just sailing as supercargo. This is not to say our Captain did not perform valiant service during the war but now, it seemed to the crew, that he was eager to delegate his duties to the youthful appearing Chief Mate, and that person was most anxious to have that authority and to exert it to the limit.

Our Chief Engineer was just the opposite. This was his engine room, and nobody did anything without his knowledge or his permission. If he could have it his way, you would need his O.K. to take a leak. But on the other side of the coin,

he was knowledgeable and earned respect from the black gang by involving himself in many of the day-to-day duties such as cleaning brine from the evaporator or repacking a pump. It wasn't that he didn't trust us but he actually enjoyed doing those menial chores. He took our bantering in good spirits when we told him, "The only tools YOU ever need is a 20 pound sledge, pinch bar and a 36" Stillson."

The Captain and Chief Engineer had sailed together for several years and formed a close relationship, but recent events and the too-eager Chief Mate seemed to be straining that tie.

The Chief Engineer's favorite expression when referring to the Chief Mate was, "No damned school kid is going to give me or my men any orders. Not while I'm Chief!"

On one occasion, after a particularly bitter run-in with the Chief Engineer during the reefer inventory, the Chief Mate spun around and started up the ladder leading up from the reefer flat. He somehow missed the second step from the top and slid down to the bottom, tearing the hide from his shins. This final insult turned him into a raging, out-of-control bull. He took off for the bridge, and we all pitied the poor sucker that got in his way.

We made our scheduled stop at Honolulu to take on additional cargo routed for Seattle. During our stay, word came down that there was a change in our sailing orders. We were to off-load some of the cargo that was destined for Seattle and take the remainder and head for New Orleans.

The Captain and the Chief Engineer went ashore leaving the Chief Mate in charge and that's when the "you-know-what" hit the fan. The word came down that there would be no pay, no draw, no liberty, until after the Captain returned,

The Chief Mate caught the First Assistant Engineer on deck as several engineers were repairing a troublesome cargo winch and demanded of the Engineer, in front of everyone, that he turn over all keys to the reefers and steward's lockers.

The Engineer told the mate that the skipper had copies of all the keys in his office and hesitated for a moment before agreeing to turn them over, asking, "why?"

The Chief Mate replied that he had information that someone in the black gang was going to raid the stores and sell them ashore.

The First Engineer demanded, and not very politely, "Who in hell told you that crap?"

The Mate replied, "It's none of your damn business, I'm in charge so it's an order! Give me the keys, now!"

All of us standing in the vicinity were flabbergasted at the exchange and started circling up on the Mate in case punches started flying. The Mate took our moves as a threat and started warning us he would have us all brought up on charges of mutiny. At that point, the Engineer turned and walked away leaving the Mate screaming, "You can't do that to me! Come back... right now! You can't treat me like this!"

We all started laughing, and the Mate turned and went up the ladder mumbling something under his breath to the effect that he was going to call the port

police and have us all arrested. To our surprise, he did call the police.

Those of us who had witnessed the confrontation went to advise the rest of the engine crew of what happened, and to suggest that we all gather in the engine room for a conference.

A group gathered on the Engineer's flat just ahead of the Turbines. The First would not listen to any suggestions of shutting down the boilers, generators, or pumps, nor any thoughts of refusing to work or to strike. All the engine room people were willing to abide with any plan that we would all agree to, as long as it did not violate any laws.

The Harbor Police came aboard and down into the engine room. They instructed that any engineering people not on watch report to the crew's mess. The ladder up to the engineer's mess deck led directly in front of the deck crew's mess. The "self-appointed-delegate" made some remark that was like lighting a fuse to a powder keg. Fists started flying everywhere in the confined passageway around the pantry. Thankfully, the cops were there to break it up. They had to put out a call for back up and even called in the Coast Guard.

Who should now show up but the Chief Engineer, with news that would change everything. The crew was to be paid off in Honolulu, transportation would be provided to Seattle for those that qualified, and anyone interested in delivering the ship to New Orleans would be paid a bonus and transportation home from there, if they wished.

His news included the fact that the Military Transport Service was claiming their rights to the ship, planned to convert it to a grain hauler, and run to Europe and back under the new Marshall plan. He added that for those that might be interested, the Captain was in the hospital undergoing tests for a serious heart condition, and that the Government service had asked him (the Chief Engineer) to handle all arrangements to get the ship under way, including interviewing a new skipper. This news was like pouring water on a fire.

The police, sensing a change in the crew's attitude, asked the Chief Mate, in front of everyone, if he still wished to pursue the charges of mutiny against the engine-room crew. An uneasy quiet came over the group, as none had realized how serious the Mate's threat really was.

When the Chief Engineer heard that statement, he pointed his finger at the Mate and beckoned him to follow. Without saying a word, the Mate followed him up to the Chief Engineer's cabin. Whatever the discussion was in that cabin we never found out...but so ended the crises.

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After an investigation, the word was that the missing stores were truly missing. In fact, they had never made it aboard ship to begin with. Our Chief Steward ordered, and signed as receiving, the stores, no doubt getting a kickback from the ship suppliers ashore. Then to cover up his scheme pointed the claims of thievery at the crew. What happened to the sea lawyer delegate? He was put ashore along with the Chief Steward. As for the Mate, he stayed aboard and became a pussycat...at least while he served with that particular Chief Engineer!