

Episode 1

THE CAPTAIN RAN A TIGHT SHIP

TRADITION in the U.S. Navy and Merchant Marine has always held the captain of a ship totally and solely responsible for the safety of his ship at all times. Even when a captain has turned over the bridge to the officer-of-the-deck and has gone below or sacked out he is still the one fully responsible, not the officer-of-the-deck.

The captain must establish standing orders for all officers and crew as to what must be done under every conceivable emergency, and he will always take the deck himself under any emergency or in any unusual circumstance. He must insist that these standing orders are followed to the letter and without exception, and he will conduct periodic exercises to ensure rapid and exact compliance with these orders. This is what is called "running a tight ship." The lax captain who runs a "loose" ship is asking for trouble, especially in time of war.

Captain E.E. Grant, USN, ran a tight ship during World War II in the Pacific theatre of action. He was captain of the Cumberland Sound AV-17. AVs were large seaplane tenders that could hoist a big FBM seaplane by crane onto the ship for repairs inside a hanger! AVPs were smaller fast seaplane tenders that had quarters to house the seaplane pilots and crew, and had facilities to hoist and repair seaplane engines and make other on-the-water repairs to the planes.

AV seaplane tenders were armed with 3" cannon and ack-acks but seldom saw any action during WWII unless they were attacked at sea or while at anchor at a seaplane base. Seaplanes were unarmed and vulnerable, and their primary function was to gather weather information for broadcast to ships at sea.

For several months in 1944 the Cumberland Sound was stationed at Ulithi,* a small coral atoll in the West Central Pacific near the area where typhoons were spawned. It was dull duty swinging around the anchor, servicing the planes and the "zoomies" (pilots) and spending a couple of days a week ashore on the little atoll island, drinking beer and pitching horse shoes.

The atoll lagoon was also used as a "rest stop" for the big carriers after they had spent 30 days of round-the-clock action and horror, fighting off the Japanese fleet. They would drop the hook and everyone aboard was beat with fear and fatigue.

One night we were swinging around the hook and a big carrier had just put in a couple of days before. I had the night watch in the radio shack and it was the same old routine. The radiomen copying the Fox schedule, and I decoding a few messages to and from other ships (snooping) just to keep busy. The carrier was all lit up aft where they were showing a movie on deck.

* The island itself is named Mogmog.

The radio shack was divided in two, one room with the radio equipment and a row of typewriters where the radiomen were copying the Fox schedule and other frequencies, and the other room separated by a door and waist-high counter, for work desks and the electric coding machine.

I looked up and saw a guy monitoring the shore voice radio look up to another guy and said "Should I?" and the other guy said "Hell yes you should."

So the voice radio fellow came to the counter, looked at me and said, "The shore base radio just reported they picked up on radar two unidentified bogies coming in at 30,000 feet."

So what did I do? I automatically followed the standing orders. I walked to the wall phone and dialed the captain who was in the shack. He answered immediately. I said, this is Phillips in the radio shack, then repeated the message word-for-word. He said, "Sound General Quarters." I said, "Aye aye captain", hung up, and reached over and pulled the lever right next to the phone. Gong! Bong! The place goes wild when you sound General Quarters. Ship outside lights went out immediately. The captain got to the bridge and relieved the officer-of-the-deck. I sat tight and didn't find out what happened until later.

The carrier kept its lights on. One Kamakaze swooped down and crashed and exploded right on deck where they were watching the movie. The other Kamakaze saw some lights, thought it was a ship, and crashed into the radio tower ashore. Nobody ashore was hurt.

Did the captain of the carrier have an excuse because his crew was all beat to hell and worn out from fatigue? In other words, do you run a tight ship while at sea but loosen up a bit when at anchor in a "safe" harbor? Those Kamakazies came from Truk Islands Japanese base, a long long one way flight to their doom with extra fuel tanks.*

James K. Phillips
For Karl Wigdal
February 22, 1990

APPENDIX A: The Captain's Flight Pay.

APPENDIX B: U.S. Navy Cryptographic Devices Used During WWII.

APPENDIX C: The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill.

APPENDIX D: Map of West Central Pacific Ocean.

* 900 miles from Ulithi.

APPENDIX A: The Captain's Flight Pay.

U.S. Naval officers who had their flight wings received extra flight pay if they flew at least once during a given month.

Captain Grant not only had his flight wings, he had "his own" small two-seater seaplane and "his own" Chief Petty Officer mechanic to take care of it. So every month somewhere in the Pacific (the ship would stop at sea if she couldn't make port before the end of the month), the crane would hoist the little plane overboard, the Chief would warm it up, then the Captain would take off for an hour or so. Usually he was able to pick a day when the weather was right and the sea was calm.

One month the sea was kicking up every day and finally calmed a bit but was still plenty choppy. Gotta get'r up. So he tried and she flipped and broke up a bit. As I remember, they got the pieces aboard before she could sink.

No flight pay that month.

APPENDIX B: U.S. Navy Cryptographic Devices Used During WWII.

FROM: James K. Phillips, Lt.(j.g.) USNR (Resigned)

TO: Karl Orlin Wigdal

SUBJECT: USN Cryptographic Devices used during World War II.

CLASSIFICATION: Unrestricted.

1. This report is submitted in the jargon and with the bureaucratic form used by the U.S. Navy in its reports.
2. This report does not violate any secrets of encryption since the methods described are long outdated and well known and no longer used by the U.S. Navy.
3. Three basic cryptographic devices were used during WWII:
 - a. Restricted messages: paper coding tables changed weekly.
 - b. Confidential messages: more complex paper coding tables changed daily.
 - c. Secret and Top Secret messages: On electric coding machines with 5 coding wheels, wheels changed monthly. Top Secret wheels were issued only to flagships with an Admiral or Commodore aboard.
4. This report describes only the electric coding machines.
5. The machine had 5 coding wheels (approx 5" diameter and 3/8" thick) each with a randomized alphabet of 26 letters.
6. The wheels were lined up vertically left to right inside the machine, according to instructions for that month.
7. To send a message, the coding officer dreamed up 5 random letters. Example: FSQPN
8. The coding officer moved each wheel by hand so that his random letters were lined up left to right:

F S Q P N

9. The machine had a standard typewriter keyboard. He was now ready to type out the message.
10. First he typed out FSQPN and a space. Then he typed the plain English message. The paper tape appeared with the encoded message in groups of five randomized letters, starting with FSQPN.
11. Each key depressed moved one wheel to the next letter, then the next wheel in sequence from left to right, then back to left to right.

12. For each new message, the coding officer dreamed up a different 5 random letters, so the wheels were reset differently for each message. Special Note: Beware the repetition of the same "dreamed up" 5 letters. Lucky Strike in the middle of the war dreamed up the slogan "Lucky Strike Means Fine Tobacco--LSMFT"! Hundreds of coding officers used this, making it possible for the Japanese to analyse the LSMFT messages for letter patterns so they could break the code for that month. Wow!
13. Decoding a message simply meant lining up the wheels according to the first 5 letters of the coded message. You then typed out the coded letters and the paper tape came out in plane English, even with spaces between words.
14. You then pasted the tape on the message pad and took the message to the Captain but quick.

COMMENTS: (a) Since we had lots of time on our hands during our watch, we would decode messages that were sent to other ships or from other ships that had nothing to do with our ship, just to see what was happening. Then we would paste up the most important ones for the Captain to see. He liked that. Kept him in the "know" (and us too).

(b) Each large Navy ship had a careful plan for destroying coding devices and codes in case the ship is damaged, about to sink or be boarded or abandoned: All coding devices and coding tables and instructions not in current use were stored in canvas bags in a locked steel shed on deck with easy access to the rails. The bags were weighted with 50 lbs. of lead and numerous holes cut in the bag so it would fill with water and sink rapidly. One officer was assigned during General Quarters to stand by the steel shed to be able to unlock the shed and drag out the bags and push them overboard if need be. The encoding machines would be thrown overboard too.

APPENDIX C: The Exxon Valdez Oil Spill.

What is still not clear to me yet from the media reports is whether the ship was in the channel marked on the chart, or was out of the channel. If the ship was outside the marked channel, then the captain was clearly at fault. If, however, the ship was in the channel and hit a sunken obstruction not marked on the chart, and with no lighted warning buoy, and the Coast Guard had not notified all ships of this new obstruction, then the captain was not at fault even though he was in the sack and stoned at the time, in my opinion.