

PASSAGE TO MILNE BAY

Another Tale of the South Pacific

by Bill Lee

~ Introduction ~

James Mitchner's classic *Tales of the South Pacific* is a collection of short stories about World War II. What follows could well have been included in his book, had he known **Richard Heard, James Good and James Ranck**. These three men came from very different backgrounds and geographically distant parts of the United States. The demands of World War II led them to become members of the United States Navy. In early 1944, they embarked in the USS WEST POINT, bound for assignments in the South Pacific.

What these men experienced during their *Passage to Milne Bay*, including crossing the equator follows, thanks in large part to information and illustrations recently provided to me by their relatives. In a remarkable coincidence, unsolicited contact by their family members took place within days of one another, albeit over 65 years after their loved ones' wartime sea voyage. Some things are just meant to be, I suppose.

The basic facts of the trip belie their experiences. On February 22, 1944, after loading 7,960 military passengers, the WEST POINT left San Pedro, California bound for an unspecified destination. Two weeks and 5,887 nautical miles later, she steamed into the harbor of Noumea, New Caledonia, where 230 passengers disembarked. The next day, she continued on to Milne Bay, New Guinea, steaming an additional 1,411 nautical miles. Arriving on March 10, 1944, she anchored and discharged her remaining passengers.



Now, for the rest of their story.

In February of 2009, my good friend Ralph Sirico, whose wife is a niece of the late James Good, was given a book that once belonged to her “Uncle Jim”. Entitled *Time Out*, this bound volume of over 200 pages is a well-illustrated history of the 119th Construction Battalion of the United States Navy’s famed Seabees. The title was derived from the concept that during World War II Americans everywhere took ‘time out’ from their families and the American way of life to fight for freedom.



As Ralph Sirico started to look through the book, some familiar words literally jumped off one of the pages: USS WEST POINT. Ralph is no stranger to that famous vessel’s history. After all, few of my friends have escaped being ‘educated’ about my favorite ship. In Ralph’s case, a professional career involving ships plus a lifelong love of sea naturally led him to enthusiastically share this ‘find’ with me.

Within days, and during the process of learning more about the 119th Seabees, I received an email from Shelley Heard, son of Richard Heard. He wanted to know more about the WEST POINT, since he possesses some interesting artifacts that include the ship’s name.

We quickly determined that his late father was on the transport at the same time as James Good. Both of them crossed the equator, each for the first time, and were transformed from lowly Pollywogs to heavenly Shellbacks. However, they were in entirely different naval organizations and probably never met. After all, during that voyage over 8,700 passengers and crew were crowded onboard the WEST POINT.

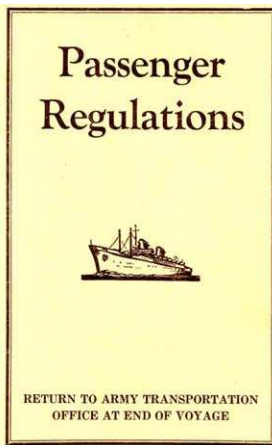


Shelley Heard also put me on the trail of Laura Nelle Helliwell, daughter of James Ranck. Less than a year ago, she fell heir to some of her Father’s treasures, and proudly displayed them on the Internet. One of the items is an elaborate certificate her Father received, when crossing the equator. Same ship, same voyage and the same date as James Good and Richard Heard. If that wasn’t treasure enough, it had been mailed by her Father (to himself) in 1945. The mailing tube, fashioned in the Philippines, is all bamboo!



As is so often the case these days, none of these three men is still around to spin for us their sea stories. But the Seabee book, and other tangible memories of their time spent onboard the WEST POINT provide us with a rare view of what it must have been like.

“On a cold rain-soaked pre-dawn February morning, the 119th, staggering under tons of personal gear, entrained from Camp Rousseau, California for San Pedro where late in the afternoon they boarded the transport, USS WEST POINT. Without fanfare, the huge vessel slipped her hawser and moved quietly out of the harbor on the next afternoon’s tide. The date was February 22, 1944. Somber mates lined the ship’s rails to get their last glimpse of the homeland for many months.



“The men easily adjusted themselves to the troopship routine. There was the usual bitching and griping. Sleeping quarters were cramped; the air stifling as the ship neared the equator. Tempers grew shorter. Long, long chow lines had to be sweated out for the two meals a day. The Turkish bath heat of the mess hall down in the bowels of the ship made eating a form of torture.

“The transport carried 8,000 troops. Aboard were three other Seabee battalions, various detachments of specialists, Army Medical groups, and 400 Army nurses who were quartered topside in officers’ country.

“Deck space on the fantail was a premium – standing room only. Passageways jammed. Ship’s crew having to bellow their way through – ‘Ship’s Company! Make way for Ship’s Company!’ Bets were laid on as to the units’ ultimate destination – New Caledonia? Australia? New Guinea?

“On clear days, the ship’s band gave concerts on the open deck. Impromptu shows were given with talent discovered in the ranks of the enlisted men. Lew ‘Dr. Kildaire’ Ayres, a medical detachment’s claim to fame, was aboard. Ship’s Store privileges extended by compartments – ice cream twice a week – cokes purchased in gallon jugs – long lines and hours of waiting to make the simplest purchase.

“The ship never faltered from a zigzag course across the equator. A day was lost crossing the International Date Line. At Noumea Harbor, some debarked. After an overnight refueling job by tankers, the transport eased out of harbor and set her course for the Coral Sea.



“Eighteen days out and 10,000 miles from San Pedro, the headlands of New Guinea appeared on the horizon. The great ship pushed into Milne Bay and dropped anchor. By nightfall, the last 119th Seabee was ashore at Milne Bay.”



As best I can determine, **Lieutenant (jg) Richard W. Heard, USNR** disembarked at Noumea. At that time, he was a member of a fairly small and secretive group; code-named Project Argus. Sometimes referred to as Project Affirm, his organization was involved with providing innovative air defense measures that they proudly and rightfully gave the nickname: *Ownership of the Night*.

Project Argus was created in 1942 to develop a night fighter capability for the Navy. This effort was needed to respond to the Japanese tactic of flying at night to harass the Marines on Guadalcanal. The subsequent success of the Navy's night-time air defense capability was greatly enhanced by the development and excellent tactical use of airborne radar that resulted in a large loss of Japanese aircraft engaged in night-time activities.

The Navy's airborne radar equipment was limited in range, and they had to be vectored to their targets by ground controllers at advanced bases. Since Richard Heard was 'old' by military standards when he volunteered for service, he presumably was a part of that ground control operation. By September of 1944, his unit had been moved forward, to Peleliu, and at the age of 38 he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant, USNR.

In April of 1945, he returned to the United States, perhaps to share his front-line experience with a group engaged in development of air defenses against another Japanese tactic: kamikaze attacks. In any case, after the war he resumed a career in the paper-making and distribution business that had been interrupted by the war. At the time of his death in 1992, he was 85, but still president of his own company in Savannah, Georgia.



When the 902 officers and men of the 119th Seabee Battalion disembarked in Milne Bay, **Shipfitter First Class James G. Good** and his comrades of Company C immediately went to work; living up to their unit's "On the Ball" and "Build for Victory" slogans.

From New Caledonia they moved on to do construction work at Hollandia while living on Liberty ships that they had to convert into floating dormitories for themselves. After a year there, they boarded five LST's bound for the Philippines. Unlike the WEST POINT, the flat-bottomed and shallow draft LST's pitched and rolled in rough seas, making many a Seabee seasick for the first time.

The 119th was the first Seabee unit to land in the Manila area. When they arrived there, the city was a mass of smoking ruins. Fighting was still underway just north of the city and frequent air raid alerts keep the Seabees awake during their first few nights in Manila. Once that danger passed, the Seabees turned to rebuilding the Navy's former base at Cavite. Many other tasks soon followed, including the construction of dozens of Quonset Huts.

While building sixteen of these structures in Quezon City, a disorganized band of Japanese soldiers approached. Putting down their tools and picking up their ever-present weapons, the Seabees killed most of them, and ran off the rest. The Seabees suffered no casualties in this firefight. When the fighting was over, a Seabee bulldozer was used to dig a mass grave for the dead Japanese.



After the V-J Day celebrations subsided, so did most of the battalion's construction work. The men of the 119th turned their attention to calculating 'points' so that they could go home. By the end of 1945, the 119th Construction Battalion was disbanded; its accomplishments became a part of World War II history. As summarized in *Time Out*:

"There is no doubt but what the 119th Seabees had done an important job well. They'd worked hard...lived hard...played hard. Born of adversity and necessity, mothered by total war, they were a different breed of men."



James Good was a typical example of that 'different breed of men' amongst the enlisted ranks of the 119th Battalion. Prior to the war he had been employed as a machinist and as a pipefitter in his hometown of New York City. He was employed at the New York Naval Shipyard when the war started, and he later took a leave of absence in July of 1943 to join the Seabees.

Shipfitter First Class Good was discharged on November 24th and returned to his wife, Jessie and their home in the Bronx. Between late 1945 and early 1951 he continued his pre-war occupation at the navy yard. He passed numerous civil service exams for the City of New York and his last position was that of a building inspector for the New York Fire Department. James Good passed away on the day after Christmas, 1992 at the age of 79.

This certificate was issued to **Lieutenant (jg) James G. Ranck – Ch. C., USNR** on February 28, 1944; the day the WEST POINT crossed the equator on a southwest heading. Typically, when there were thousands of troops embarked in WEST POINT, the Shellbacks in the ship's company concentrated their efforts on initiating new members of the crew, and only dispensed a few token discomforts to any known Pollywogs amongst the passengers.



Since he was both an officer and a man of the cloth, it is presumed that James Ranck suffered little of the indignities bestowed on his fellow Pollywogs. At some point, perhaps after the war, a photo of the ship as she appeared in pre-war service as the luxury liner SS AMERICA was added to his certificate; making it decidedly different from the many others issued that day.

Chaplain Ranck, more often called “Chaplain Jim” by the men of the 119th Naval Construction Battalion, was 33 years old when he became the unit’s padre. A United Methodist minister, he was born in China, the son of missionaries. James Ranck earned multiple degrees between 1933 and 1942, when he received his Ph.D. from Drew University.

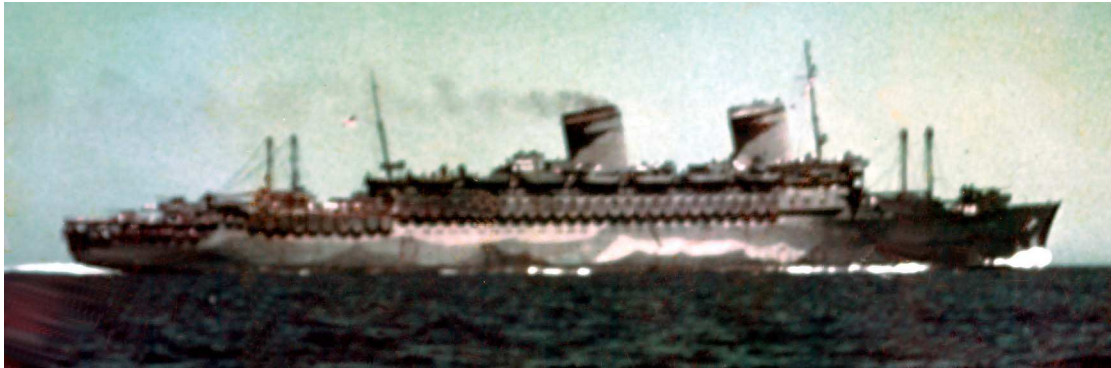


In 1943, he joined the Navy’s Chaplain Corps, and was assigned to the staff of the 119th Battalion until that unit was disbanded in late 1945. After returning to the United States in 1946, he studied further at Oxford, in England, and the University of Zurich in Switzerland. He then received a second Ph.D. from Columbia University in 1955. In later years, he served as a professor, clinical psychologist, and United Methodist minister with a specialization in the relationship between mental health and religious attitudes and beliefs

He also wrote portions of two books; *The Minister’s Own Mental Health* (1961) and *The Church’s Educational Ministry* (1965). At the time of his death in 1979, at age 67, Reverend Ranck was engaged in preliminary research for a book of his own.

As a part of the support efforts associated with the Allied invasion of Europe, the WEST POINT's theatre of operations changed from the Pacific to the Atlantic in June of 1944. After V-E Day, she brought home thousands of war-weary GI's from Europe. In late 1945, she was dispatched once again to the Pacific. After celebrating Christmas in Pearl Harbor, she moved westward for one last time in her war paint, arriving in Manila harbor on January 6, 1946.

WEST POINT left the Philippines a few days later, bound for New York. No one really knows, today, if any of her 7,737 passengers on that final mission were members of the 119th Seabees or not. I like to think so...



~ Postscript ~

While the USS WEST POINT played but a small role in the lives of these three men and their comrades, memories of their days at sea and crossing the equator apparently remained with them for the rest of their lives. How else can we explain the safe keeping of their certificates and other tangible memories of their great South Pacific adventure?

I am indebted to the families of Richard Heard, James Good and James Ranck for providing much of the information and most of the illustrations contained in this essay and also for their kind permission to allow me to share treasured memories of these men.

There are undoubtedly more untold Tales of the South Pacific waiting to be discovered and recorded about The Greatest Generation. Surely, some involve the WEST POINT. I hope to find and retell more of those stories.

Bill Lee
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