

On the *Water*

Stories from Maritime America

Sam Casarez

Sam Casarez describes his experiences as a junior engineer aboard a Liberty ship during World War II.

Engine room training

I trained for the engine room.

You could train for the engine room
or for the deck,

and the engine room was where I trained.

And of course they'd teach you
about the machinery, and,

I was actually an oiler / water tender
on those ships,

and that meant we had to keep everything oiled,

every fifteen minutes, we'd have to make a round.

On a Liberty ship, had those big pistons,
and it was old-timey steam engine.

On those steam engines

you had a space in between the
big machinery that come and

they're not oiled by pressure,
they're oiled by in a tank.

They have water and oil mixture
in a tank and every time the engine,



the cylinder hits the bottom,
it comes back up,

and my job, or any job for that time,

was to put your hand in between there,
and see if it was hot.

Every few minutes, on all the cylinders,
you had to put your hand in between 'em.

And that wasn't no fun, either, burned,
or get your hand pulled off, or anything.

Dangerous cargo

When you're sailing, you sign articles
that you're going somewhere.

But when you sign articles on both, when
you're in wartime,

you only said "foreign port." They didn't say
the port you were going to,

just said "foreign port."

And they told us at the office that
when you sign on this ship,

although it's not gonna be at sea,
you might as well figure it's at sea,

because you will not get off, regardless.

You might as well think
and take everything with you,

'cause you're not gonna
get off that ship no more.

We didn't know why. We went,

they took us by bus,
to the Mississippi River,

and we got on the Liberty ship,
and then we found out why.

They were loading 128 car loads of
solid ammunition on that Liberty ship.

And they wanted no one to go and be able
to babble it, I guess, to someone else.

So it was for security reasons
that we could not get off that ship.

We had ammunition,
solid ammunition on the bottom.

We had trucks and trailers
for carrying tanks on deck,

tied down with cables.

And we left New Orleans
and went to New York.

We picked up a
convoy of sixty-eight ships.

And in sixty-eight ships,
when you leave together,

they make kind of like a square.

And we got what they call the “coffin corner,”

the last one on the corner in case they hit us,

we wouldn't take too many other ships with us.

We headed to the North Atlantic.

We did not know where we were going,

lot of people thought we
were going to Murmansk,

and we did hear that in Murmansk,
not too many ships made it.

Navigating in the dark

What we had, we had Navy ships
circling the convoy,

and they must have
spotted a U-boat somewhere,

because you could hear when
they dropped the depth charges.

You could hear on the side of the ship
like someone hitting with a sledge hammer,

and then you could feel the ship go up
when the depth charge went off.

And on a ship, you had to sit there,
and the Liberty ships weren't automatic,

so you had to sit there and pull the steam off
every time the screw came out of the water,

because it would shake
the ship to pieces otherwise.

Then it went back in, you'd put it back in.

At night-time, they'd have no lights,

and you wonder how you can
stay away from the boat in front.

They towed a huge boat behind—
a board behind each boat.

They had it tied behind each boat, and
then the water, it kind of sparkles

like a match, you know, when it sparkles,
you could see it,

you could see where the ship was.
That's how you could tell.

And it had, I wasn't on the deck,

I was in the engine room,

so I wasn't "sparks-man" that trip.

But on the deck, these
kids would have to put on

coats over coats, shoes over
overshoes, and masks on and head-gear.

And it got so cold they could
only stay up there fifteen minutes.

This was going up to the top, so
they could see the board in front.

And then we hit a bad storm,
a real bad storm.

And you could look down and
see the bottom of the wave,

next time, you'd look up
and see the top of it.

We also had Army personnel on that trip,
because of the ammunition.

And they had a lieutenant in there trying
to tell the captain of the ship to turn back.

But the captain is the master of the ship,
he's over everybody.

And later on, we found out that if he'd turned
like the lieutenant wanted him to,

that wave would have sank us.

It would have taken
that ship completely over.

So he stayed hidden away all the time.

And during that storm is
when we heard that two

on Liberty ships, that one guy was going up

in the engine room, up the ladder,

and the wave was so hard it
knocked him off, and he died.

And I don't know how the other one.
Two people died on that storm.

Drills and adrenaline rushes

We had ash cans, or smoke-screen cans,

fifty-five gallon drums on the back,

in case like, let's say those U-boats would
come, we would turn those ash cans loose,

and cause a smoke screen.

But we had an emergency drill ring,
you know the ring,

and we always slept with the life jackets.
You couldn't go to sleep without a life jacket.

You wore your life jacket continuously,
to eat, sleep—everywhere.

And we had this abandon, no,
it wasn't an abandon ship precaution drill.

And we all went outside.

I was laying under the bunk because
it was my time off of the engine room.

I went outside with a tee shirt and a life jacket,

And we seen smoke
coming out of the rear end,

and we thought that the ammunition
was gonna blow up.

And you don't think about it at the time, then.
One of the boys said,



“I’ll go.” And it was still very rough seas,
so he tied hisself to the catwalk.

With a chain, he tied hisself to the
catwalk, and walked back there.

That’s when we found out it was just one
of those drums that had broken loose,

and was creating all the smoke.

And it’s a funny thing. After he said that,
then I’d like to froze to death.

I had no coat on or nothing. But it, you
run so high, your adrenaline runs so high

that you don’t feel anything.

But after you find out it wasn’t anything,
then I’d like to have froze to death up there.

The devastation of Le Havre

And from there, we went to the Isle of
Wight, to go across to the English Channel.

We started across once,
and the German E-boats,

which were similar to our PT-boats,
they were very fast.

They hit the ship in front of us, so we turned
around and came back to the Isle of Wight.

This was at night, then.
Then we started off again.

And the V-2 bombs went overhead,
and the captain got scared and

blew the abandon ship whistle.
We all got scared,

and sure enough, it was nothing

but the bombs going to England.

Then on the third trip, we made it across.

And in Le Havre, there was nothing left.

What we didn't tear up with bombs,
the Germans blew up themselves.

There were no docks left,
we had to unload with amphibious trucks.

An amphibious truck, it's a truck that
gets off the land and goes right into the water

just like a boat. Then it hits
the land and goes right on.

And Le Havre was very, very torn up.

I was there, and I know it was torn up.

-fin

