

# **WHY I CHOSE TO JOIN THE MERCHANT MARINES**

*By Richard Sena*

At the age of 17 ½ I had to make up my mind what part of the service I would join. It was 1943 and on October 6 I would turn 18. I had to make up my mind or I would be drafted into the Army. While hanging around with my friends, we were talking about what service to join. One of my friends said if you join the Merchant Marines you could get on a ship and go any place in the world. Well, that's all I had to hear. I'm joining the Merchant Marines. My father came over from Italy when he was 21 years old. He came to New York City in 1903 to get a job, but never made enough money to get back to see his family. He had 2 brothers and a sister that came over after he did. They all had children. My grandfather never saw any grandchildren, so I made up my mind to go see him.

I was 17 ½, not thinking very clearly that we were at war with Italy and Germany. I had to wait for the war to end.

I went to Sheepshead Bay Maritime School. I graduated Able-Bodied Seaman. I went to the NMU Hall in New York City. They were looking for volunteers for the Army Transportation Corps. I volunteered and was signed up on the Y69 Army Tanker as a Seaman.

Our ship joined a convoy to South Hampton, England. We had no experience with the anti-aircraft gun on the bow. The captain needed some of us to help man the gun on the bow. He picked me and two others because we were 18 and the youngest. He figured whenever there was an alert he wanted the fastest to run to the gun. You know we had to help. We weren't stationed on the gun like the armed guard did. Wherever we were, on the helm or on the bridge on look out, we were to run to the gun. I'll never forget the Captain telling me: "Sena, when you hear the alert you run like-a-hell to the gun." He had a Swedish accent.

While crossing the South Atlantic on our way to South Hampton, we had to layover in the Azores. The rumor was that a German submarine wolf pack was sighted off the coast of Africa. We stayed there a week. Finally we got orders to leave. If the subs were there I am sure after a week they must have run low on fuel and took off. A few years ago, while wintering in Florida, I came across an article in the Florida Today newspaper. A former German submariner who was now an American citizen was telling his story about being in the South Atlantic on a submarine patrol. He was in that wolf pack. Because at the time he was near the Azores when we were there. So the rumor had been true. Isn't that

something? I can remember the exact date.

When the convoy split up and we were traveling alone, we had to train and learn the gun and practice shooting. I was the loader. The man on the magazine would hand me a clip. It had 4 shells in the clip. I would jam the clip in the top of the gun and the gunner would shoot the gun. There were no other ships around; that's how we trained. Every time we left port going to Normandy on the English Channel, between England and France, we would practice. I was about 2 feet from the gun. We didn't have ear protection. My ears are still ringing from shooting. We practiced every chance we could. The captain timed us to get to the gun station—after while we improved as we went along. I lost some of my hearing. My ears haven't stopped ringing after all these years. The only time I don't hear the ringing is when I am asleep.

After arriving in South Hampton and taking on a load of gasoline going to Normandy, we had to wait for a call to go. We had time to go to London. A bunch of us wanted to see London. We took a train and got there. We went to Piccadilly Circus in the heart of London. It was late in the afternoon. It reminded me of Times Square, NYC on New Year's Eve. It was crowded with servicemen from all over the world—Australians, New Zealanders, South Afrikaners, Canadians, Americans, Indians, Free French—you name it. You could hardly move at all. We were waiting to go to Normandy. When nighttime came, nobody left. They were excited like I was to be there. Never did I think I would see London. Well, I did, and I don't think I ever will again. I had always heard about Big Ben. Nighttime came and it was black-out. Then I heard what sounded like a piper cub plane coming in the distance. They called it a VI rocket. Well, all it was was a flying bomb. It never reached us. What happens is, when it runs out of gas, that's where it drops. We heard a loud noise. Then we heard another coming, same thing—not enough gas to reach Piccadilly Circus. We looked up to see. We never saw it. Another loud bang. Good thing. Like I said, it was so crowded. Can you imagine how many would have been killed there?

Another incident happened a couple of days later in South Hampton. We got our call to go to Normandy. We were supposed to stay in the Channel and between the buoys to get out of the port. Here we are, loaded with gas and on our way. I was on the helm and the Captain was in the wheel-house. He said to me, "Sena, never mind staying in between the buoys." He said, "Go straight across." Wouldn't you know we struck a sand bar and got stuck with engines running? The captain said to me, "Get us off!" With no orders what to do, the only thing I could think of was to spin the wheel hard to starboard and then hard to port. I kept doing this then. We kind of inched ourselves off of the sand bar and we headed for the channel between the buoys. The captain was relieved. What if we didn't get off the sandbar? We would have had to unload some gas to get off. I'll bet the

**captain would have been embarrassed to call for help. He should have stayed in between the buoys. I think I saved him some embarrassment.**

**The first time we went to Normandy to deliver gas, we arrived about 5:00 P.M. What a sight to see. I never saw so many ships—thousands of them. We had to wait to unload our gas. When we got orders to unload it was dark. We went in to Port Embessin to unload. Port Embessin was on Gold Beach. English soldiers were waiting for us to dock the ship. It was very dark—no lights to help us. I heard a soldier yell out “Hello, Yank! Over here!” When I heard his voice I could barely see him. Good thing he called out “Yank” to me. That’s the first time I was called “Yank.”**

**I threw him the line; we docked the ship. He says to me, “Black out, you know. We can’t have any lights on, but look over there at Omaha Beach. Look at them bloody Yanks.” It was all lit up and he says, “Looks like Coney Island.” We made six trips to Port Embessin from South Hampton.**

**While we were making a trip to Port Embessin, we could hear the bombers bombing Le Harve. The waterfront was bombed all to hell. When the big tanker could come to the Le Havre, we would pull up along side to unload, and then go up the river Seine to an Army gasoline terminal. We would unload in a small village south of Rouen. The American soldiers would unload us. This is where they would fill up Jerry cans. The Army trucks would come from the front and fill up with Jerry cans. We made about 50 trips from Le Harve to the Army Terminal.**

**One day after we unloaded around the first of March, when we returned to Le Harve to load up, we had to wait for our turn to load up. We had to drop anchor. While pulling in, we were looking to drop anchor, a British freighter was pulling up anchor getting ready to leave. I was on the helm. The chain from the anchor pulled the ship to the mine and the mine went off. It blew the bow and first hold completely off. That shook us all up. The ship’s carpenter and a Seaman lost their lives. Two trips later we returned to get another load of gas in the same area. I just got off the helm. I was on the 4:00-8:00 watch. I had breakfast and I took my coffee out on the stern. We were looking to drop anchor near the same spot where the British freighter was. A mine about 100 yards off our stern went off in our wake. There must have been something wrong with it, it went off late. Good thing or I wouldn’t be writing about it now. I guess it wasn’t my turn to go. I know the Navy cleared a lot of mines but they also missed a lot of them.**

**Well, the war ended in Europe and in July of 1945. I was discharged off this tanker and came home. I took a month off. I went to New York City looking to make more trips. I wanted to go see my grandfather. While I was in NYC I found out I could go to school to**

become an oiler and fireman water-tender in the engine room. I had enough of the deck as an A.B. It was too cold in the winter on deck. I wanted to go below where it was warm. That North Atlantic was colder than hell in the winter. I made many trips. You remember the Marshall Plan...we had to rebuild Europe and Japan. After many trips to Europe, we got orders to go to Japan with a load of soybeans. We went to Yokohama. There were about 200 Japanese soldiers waiting on the dock to unload us. They put planks on the dock up to the ship to unload us. The Japs would run up one plank, put a sack of soybeans on their shoulder and run down the other plank. They are short people and they worked like a bunch of ants. They were strong people. Up and down the plank all day. It took four days to unload us.

Another time, we had a load of wheat which we took to Dubrovnik, Yugoslavia. We were there a few days. About the last day before departure some Italian prisoners of war snuck on board. Here it was, about two years after the war ended, they were still being held captive waiting to be sent home. The Yugoslavians were keeping them and making them work on the docks. Just before we pulled away from the dock, maybe a few hours before departure, a crew man came to me and says, "Sena, we found a prisoner hiding and begging us not turn him in." Being Italian, they wanted me to talk to him. I couldn't speak Italian--only a little. But I could understand him when he talked. He said they did not have warm clothes and with winter coming on they would probably freeze to death. I felt sorry for him. We didn't like the communists very much anyway. You all remember the cold war with Russia. Well, being an oiler, I took him down in the shaft alley, put him under the last bearing, gave him a bottle of water and a bunch of Hershey bars and told him to keep quiet. I told him we were going to Naples, Italy. He was so happy.

The reason we were going to Italy was to bring home 400 GI's who were in the African Campaign, Invasion of Sicily, and the invasion of Italy. It was a day and a half to get there. When I had a chance at nighttime I took him up on deck, brought him to the back hold, and gave him more Hershey bars and water. Down in the hold he went. We arrived at nighttime and anchored in the bay. The Port of Naples was fenced in and guarded by MP's. Now what do I do? I went out on deck. It was nighttime. There was a ship anchored about one hundred yards from us. He told me his name which I don't remember. He asked me for my name and address--he said he wanted to write me and thank me. I said I couldn't. I didn't want to get in trouble. I was happy to help him.

We could hear the men talking on the ship. They were speaking Italian so we knew it was an Italian ship. I put a line over the side. The last I saw him he was swimming to the ship. He said he was a good swimmer. I sometimes wonder if he made it. I'm sure he did; he looked like a good swimmer. A hundred yards isn't far when you are swimming

for your life.

We came back to the states to take on a load bound for Palestine in 1947. We picked up a cargo of everything they could use on the West Coast. We landed in Haifa. The last English soldiers were leaving. That's when the English left and left them the country they had had enough of there. We couldn't unload in Haifa. We went to Tel Aviv to unload. There were no docks in Tel Aviv. We unloaded our cargo off shore onto barges. All Jewish young men were unloading us. They all had 45 calibers in back packs for protection. At supper time they quit for the day. Then the shooting started between the Palestinians and the Jewish people. We weren't allowed to go on shore—too dangerous. It took us 40 days to get from California to Palestine.

After supper I came out on the deck with a cup of coffee looking at the shore line. I was mad as hell that we couldn't go ashore because it was too dangerous. The shooting started again. I was the only one on deck looking at the shoreline. The shooting stopped for a minute and then one shot rung out. I heard the bullet come at me. It went right over my head. It sounded like a bumble bee. A little bit lower and it would have been curtains for me. He had it lined up all right—it was about a foot or two over my head. I said, "Let's go in before he takes another shot at me." That was a long time ago and they are still shooting at each other. When is it going to end over there?

I came home and took another trip back. This happened to be the last trip. It was July, 1947. I got lucky. We were loaded with coal and going to Genoa, Italy. But when we reached Gibraltar our orders were changed to go to Catania, Sicily. My next and last trip paid off. This was what I wanted. Finally, I would see my grandfather. This is where my folks came from in 1906. The crew took my watch for me for four days. They knew and were happy for me. I took all the money I could get from my wages and bought clothes and anything they could sell to make money on. They were poor. And they had nothing. Poor after going through the war, you know.

I had to take a train to the city where my folks came from, and then I took a cab. I told the cab driver the name of the street where my grandfather lived and the number of the house. When we got to the street where he lived, we stopped and started to look for the house. A young fella' came over to help us. I told him the number of the house and who I was looking for. He looked at me and saw that I was dressed in Khaki clothes. He knew I was American. He went over to my grandfather's house, stuck his head in the door and said, "Uncle." (In Italy, out of respect, they always call older people "Uncle"). He said, "There is an American kid out here to see you." I got out of the cab and walked over to my grandfather's house. I was a little emotional, and was holding back the tears. My grandfather looked at me for quite a while. I didn't say anything. I made him look at me.

I said, "I'm your son, Jack's, boy." Well, he looked at me and said, "My son finally come home." My father was 21 years old when he left Italy and I was 21 when I saw him. We shed tears for a while. It took a war and four years for this to happen. I made the right choice by joining the Merchant Marines. I spent four days with my grandfather. He was 84 at that time. A couple of years later he passed away. Out of 18 grandchildren I was the only grandchild he saw. That must have been terrible to have so many grandchildren and only see one. I'll never forget it. I remember it like it was yesterday.

My mother had a sister over there, also. When she heard that I was there she came running down the street. She had been out on the farm. There weren't many cars over there. I can still see her and how she looked just like my mother.

A couple of years later my grandfather passed away. My father never went back. He never had the extra money. That's why I made up my mind to see him. It took four years and a war for this to happen. It was worth it. We both shed some tears. I always remember him. That was my last trip.

I served my country. I saw my grandfather and many, many countries. From what I saw I have to say that this country is the best country in the world. We have everything here.

God bless America and this is truly the best country in the world.

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