VOYAGE

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She was the United States Merchant Ship *North Star III,* the third of her class to carry that name. Originally a WWII Liberty ship named *Emory Victory,* now a bit worn but well-kept as befitted her duties as a U.S. Government vessel, she was owned by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), an agency under the Department of the Interior. Twice a year this old lady sailed from Richmond Beach, a few miles north of Seattle, all the way to Barrow, Alaska and return, resupplying schools along Alaska's long coastline, carrying general cargo and construction material, transporting entire villages of natives and Eskimos from one place to another, and in general supporting the mission of the BIA.

About the time she reached the village of Unalaska and the passage through the Aleutians northward to the Bering Sea, I started to listen for her radio call sign, KPXT. From our first contact until she had reached Barrow and was again heading south past Unalaska, our Alaska Communication System station at Nome handled her radio traffic. I was the primary CW, or International Code, operator, and the *North Star's* radio officer, Roger N. Darby, was the "voice" of the ship.

In the late fall of each year after her second voyage south from Barrow, *North Star* stopped at Nome. This was actually an unnecessary visit, but the custom had evolved, not only to give her crew a few hours of shore leave, but for the ship to invite the staff of the BIA field office at Nome aboard for "coordination" and, coincidentally, dinner. Shortly after my arrival in Nome in 1956, that staff had grown to include certain non-BIA folks who furthered the mission of the ship.

Not surprisingly, that came to include me and a few of the other ACS operators, and we enjoyed our visits aboard.

After hanging on in Nome for ten years, I was finally destined to leave in the summer of 1965. I had seen many folks come and go, both among the town's citizens and personnel assigned to our station. Being a part of Alaska's history since 1900, ACS was intimately interwoven and involved in every community it served. The organization, directly under the control of the U.S. Army's Chief Signal Officer, enjoyed special status. As opposed to "other" military, ACSers were looked upon as residents, and it was not uncommon for members to spend entire 30-year careers shuttling back and forth between the headquarters in Seattle and various stations in Alaska. One member, Johnny Johannesson, actually spent his entire 30-year career in Petersburg, Alaska.

Needless to say, it was painful to think of severing my close relationships in Nome, but the dissolution of the System was imminent, and I didn't look forward to returning to a "military" way of life in the Lower 48.

I was surprised one afternoon in early Fall 1964 when, after clearing traffic with Darby, he mentioned they were stopping for a few hours in Teller, a village to the northwest of Nome, and if I happened to be standing on the beach at Teller on a certain day, they might send the LCM (Landing Craft, Man, a converted flat-bottomed World War II boat in after me. It all sounded intriguing and, to make a long story short, I took an open-ended leave (another advantage of being in ACS), bummed a ride with

a pilot friend to Teller, had dinner with Helen Blodgett, the owner of the Teller Commercial Company store, and found myself on the beach the next morning watching *North Star* anchor in the Bering Strait. The LCM arrived on the beach, I climbed aboard, and we immediately returned to the ship. No cargo in or out; no other passengers, and no obvious reason for the stop at Teller. Puzzling.

Once aboard, I found that I was being given a sort of thank you trip, courtesy of the BIA and Charles Salenjus, *North Star's* longtime skipper, for my years of service. The ship was heading directly for Little Diomede Island, some hundred miles farther to the north, where she would discharge cargo for two days, then head back to Teller via Brevig Mission, a smaller village across Lopp Lagoon from Teller, before resuming her stop-and-go journey back to Seattle.

My profuse thanks and appreciation might not have been so heartfelt had I known what was in store for me.

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Being a U.S. Government vessel, the crew of USMS *North Star* was similarly affiliated. All the officers were regular Civil Service employees, with the rest of the crew being contract personnel. Duty aboard the ship was considered a plum and highly sought after as far as maritime service went. Seniority ruled, and many familiar faces were seen year after year. Darby, in particular, had it made as far as official duties went. He kept two regular radio schedules a day and was otherwise officially on standby. He was more ambitious than that, though, and being also a qualified "gear" operator (winching cargo on and off using the ship's booms), earned overtime and additional duty pay.

Darby was also a bit devious of thought, and it didn't take him long to observe that, gee, here I was, a military (hence "Government") radio operator aboard a U.S. Government ship, and thus authorized to operate its U.S. Government radio equipment. I saw the light, and Darby saw his way to more overtime.

En route to Little Diomede I happily earned my keep with two schedules a day to Nome and chatting via both CW and voice with other ships and various BIA school teachers at villages in the area. The weather, typical for fall in the far north, was showing signs of restlessness, and we anchored off the island almost two days later. Little Diomede lies almost in the middle of the Bering Strait, and its closest neighbor is Big Diomede Island in then-Soviet Union territory, two and a half miles to the west. The International Dateline runs between the two islands and, when standing on the beach of Little Diomede, one looks directly into tomorrow. On a sunny day, the snow-covered mountains of Siberia can be seen.

Sunny days were not in store for us, though, and shortly after we dropped anchor the storm broke. No discharging of cargo was possible, and for over two days we watched the seas slowly build and the winds strengthen. The single high hill of Little Diomede rose and fell with dull regularity against the dark gray clouds as it swung past the ports, and I began to wonder how long this would go on. Surprisingly, I did not succumb to seasickness. The bountiful meals kept my stomach full; the (somewhat illegal) beverages that mysteriously had found their way aboard helped my equanimity, and the endless poker games kept my mind occupied. The storm showed no signs of abating and the weather reports in those days of no weather satellites or way to receive imagery, only told us what we already knew. Captain Salenjus finally decided to run for shelter. I was certain we were either going to swing to the lee side of Little Diomede or run south to Port Clarence and its protected harbor.

To my surprise, Salenjus swung the bow of the ship straight for Big Diomede.

There's something to be said for "custom." I soon learned that, over the years, ships had customarily sheltered from storms in the small though protected inlet on the south end of Big Diomede Island. This had begun in the years of friendship with the Soviet Union just before and during World War II when the U.S. was supplying her with war materials. Even after the Cold War's onset, U.S. vessels servicing Little Diomede took advantage of the custom. The Soviets had established a military garrison in the saddle between Big Diomede's two large hills, and their troops kept a sharp eye on visitors.

We continued bouncing up and down inside Soviet waters for two more days, and I managed to keep myself occupied. When I wasn't eating, reading, keeping radio schedules, playing cards or sleeping, I played. I particularly enjoyed standing at the very bow of the ship, being lifted like an express elevator and swooping to tremendous height as she met the waves, then plummeting down to crash into green water in the troughs. I explored the ship, crawling up the shaft alley along the keel at the stem of the ship to the narrow point where the whirling shaft, inches from my head, penetrated the hull through the watertight gland and out to the propeller. In the surprisingly clean engine room the diesel engine, stretching in a single line on its bed, jumped and oscillated visibly while under full power. My favorite place was the bridge where Salenjus, the stem-faced Finn who captained a ship to Antarctica for Admiral Byrd in 1947, held sway.

Every morning a Soviet MiG jet appeared and flew directly over the ship, waving its wings as it passed. Every afternoon a U.S. Navy Orion, a four-engine Constellation carrying radar, flew directly over the ship, waving its wings as it passed. Every day, while looking through binoculars at the buildings and antennas of the Soviet garrison, I spotted someone looking back at the ship through binoculars, and we both invariably waved at each other.

There was no question about where the MiG came from, but I've often wondered where the Constellation was based.

Finally the weather broke and we returned to Little Diomede and began working freight. I kept up my radio duties while Darby spent every waking minute working overtime. The seas were almost placid and, in addition to the LCMs, virtually every skin boat on the island shuttled back and forth between the ship and the beach helping haul cargo. I took advantage of this and visited the school teachers, Don and Erika Abbott, with whom I normally talked via radio from Nome.

Back to Teller, and back on the beach. Another night in Helen Blodgett's camper trailer. Finally, a bush plane with an empty seat and a courtesy ride back to Nome.

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There is a bond among people in like professions, but I believe a stronger than usual bond exists among we who "met" people before actually seeing them. Today's technology allows instant voice, visual, and almost instant personal communication. Yesterday's old-fashioned radio technology using only dots and dashes, that unbelievably came to an official end only several tens of years ago, was born at the beginning of the 20th century, grew up and flourished over the years in a way that molded its practitioners into a community where everyone knew everyone else, by reputation if not personally.

The chatter of those dits and dahs after working hours among friends, be they separated by mere miles or wide oceans, evokes memories of stormy or snowy evenings where the operating room is lighted with the friendly, orange glow of tubes and perfumed by the waxy smell of warm radio components. Distance vanishes, and whether through a speaker or intimately confined by earphones inside one's head, the "voices" are heard, each individual's "fist," or manner of sending recognized, the friends are there, and the conversations are deeply etched into memories in a strange, long-lasting way.