

Reminiscence
of
Vernon W. Sperry



Contributed by Mel Bashore, grandson of Vernon W. Sperry

U.S.S. Saturn

I had the urge to join the Navy. I wanted to get into the Navy because 1917 had shown up and War was declared on Germany in April of that year. I left ZCMI [in Salt Lake City] and joined the Navy. My dad took me down to the recruiting station and signed the necessary papers because I was under age and I boarded a train after the farewell of my relatives and friends at the depot and was sent down to Gold Hill in San Francisco Bay to do my training and to become familiar with the ways of the Navy. I spent a few weeks there doing marching and odd jobs and finally I had a chance to go aboard ship after a couple months at the training station. They were outfitting the U.S.S. Saturn that was to do radio expeditionary work up in Alaska. They passed the word that anyone who could operate any kind of machinery could drive a three wheel buggy or anything like that and I thought well, gee, that looks like a soft job so I volunteered for this work. So finally we and several of our people went aboard and we were part of a work force to work in Alaska radio expeditionary work. We weren't part of the ship's crew, so when we got aboard ship we were given a certain amount of drills and were taught about things pertaining to the job that was coming up. We went through the Golden Gate and that was the only time I was sea sick. Those swells going through the Gate made me really sick. I stayed aboard the Saturn until mid 1918 and we were in Juneau and Cordova and Sitka, Ketchikan, the Pribilof Islands, Dutch Harbor. The Pribilof Islands are a seal rookery under the protection of the U.S. Government. There are thousands of seals on these islands and the government would allow a firm to go in there each year and kill off a certain number of seals and the skins would

be shipped to St. Louis for tanning. The procedure in killing a seal is—the person doing the work would have a long stick like a baseball bat, 6 or 7 feet long. They would bat these seals over the head which would kill them, then the skinners would go in and take the skins off sometimes before the flesh was quieted down. It was still quivering. They would go in there with their knives and skin these seals. It was a sickening sight. I didn't like this idea very much. The meat was eaten by the Eskimos. They would dry it and make jerky meat out of it and put it away for winter. Our work there with the radio expedition was manual labor, believe me it was. We'd have to haul sand and gravel up to where the site was we were working on and we'd have to paint the radio masts and any job that happened to come up where they needed anything but experienced labor. The man in charge of us was a chief gunner, a chief warrant officer. He was a very fine person and taught us a lot of navy procedure—how to tie knots and how to splice and how to send signals wig-wag and he would put one sailor in charge of the group to teach you how to handle men and that was a good experience. Some of the boys were kind of tough on us and I suppose I was tough too when I had the chance to do the job. When we got down to Sitka, Alaska, we'd work at night. They would assign a sailor to take a boat and go from the Island. The radio station was on an island—maybe a mile out in the water and we had to run sort of a ferry from the Island to the mainland to bring any people or workers who wanted to come home and this one night I had the job of doing that. It was foggy and I never knew a boat from a bicycle but I could see a little pinpoint of light across the water and that would be where I was headed for in this put-put boat (motor launch). I had the job of getting over to the other side and coming back and making about every hour. It was nerve wracking because I didn't know whether I was headed out to sea when the light would blink off. Anyway I would finally make my round trips. That was more arduous duty. I was kinda frightened but it was all in the game and making me more worthwhile in accepting responsibility. After a while we went back to Mare Island in San Francisco Bay. It was in the winter time. We had to get out of Alaska because it was so cold. We were doing a lot of cement work at that time so we went down to San Francisco to pick up supplies. We had to go into dry dock for a while.

U.S.S Isanti

I learned of a ship called the "Isanti" that was going to Europe with a load of flour. It was a brand new ship called a "Liberty" ship. So I put in for a transfer to that ship. I wanted to get over seas and I made it. I had been rated a 3rd class yeoman on the USS Saturn so I had a rating and they wanted a rating on the ship, so I went all of the way up to chief on the USS Isanti. It was a fantastic chance for me to get ahead on my rating. I got aboard this ship and after a lot of preliminaries, was assigned the captain's yeoman. The captain's yeoman has to write whatever letters he wanted me to send and handle the log work. That is the record of the ship, of the work on board. Finally we got the crew all assembled and we headed out through the San Francisco Bay. But we loaded down with a load of flour from the Sperry flour mill and we were to take that flour to Dunkirk, France, and of course the war was going on at that time. This was about September or October. We proceeded along the west coast of the United States to the Panama Canal. The weather was awfully hot and it was so hot that we'd go upon deck because it was stifling below deck in the state rooms and then the rains would come and practically

wash us overboard so we'd go back down below. Finally we got to the Canal and proceeded through the canal. They have electric mules that have tracks along the locks and they would pull the ship into a lock and then fill the lock full of water. That would raise the ship to the level of the next lock and then the mules would pull us into that lock and then we would proceed to the level of the lake inside the isthmus. Then we would go on through and have the same procedure as we went out. These electric mules would handle the ship and the ship would not be using any of its own power through the lock. When we went through the canal, past Cuba up the east coast, the orders were to show no lights. The port holes were dimmed by having black paint on them. No smoking on deck, no lights to be shown at any time because the submarines were out there looking for ships and we wanted to not be identified. So we arrived safely in the New York Harbor past the Ambrose light ship and docked in Brooklyn side of the Bay, tied up there, waiting for a convoy to be organized to take us across the Atlantic to France. We stayed there quite a while waiting for the convoy to be organized. So I saw quite a bit of New York City—went to dances and shows. By golly this was November by now—November 11. They had the Armistice and the war was over. Even so we had orders to take this load of flour to Europe, which we did. It was a long voyage. The ship was rather slow—only about 10 knots an hour. We finally got over to Europe and into the English Channel—past Brest, France to Dunkirk, France where we pulled into the harbor and tied up at the dock to unload our flour. The French men would come aboard and work all the winches and unload the flour and each night when they would go home they'd have a little bag of flour that they would take home with them that had been spilled from sacks, maybe on purpose, maybe not. While in Dunkirk, I saw the city and they had a lot of German prisoners working under guard and they would look at us rather interestingly and we would look at them rather interestingly because they were prisoners and we were American sailors. I had a chance to go out to Roulers, Belgium to the Ypres Battlefield where the English lost so many soldiers. We took a train and saw the battlefield. It was quite a sight. The French train cars have small compartments on them. They're not like our trains. The compartment would take maybe 6 or 8 people. Then we returned and the ship was still being unloaded. We didn't have much to do on that part of the work, but just to keep out of mischief. Finally we got unloaded and set sail. This was January. We had our Christmas there in Dunkirk and we allowed some soldiers to come and have Christmas dinner with us and they sure did enjoy the good old navy chow. Compared to what the army had I guess it was pretty good. Well, we pulled out of Dunkirk and headed out through the channel toward home. We were light and had very little ballast. We had no cargo, so we had to have some ballast on there. The Navy or Army was sending back to the States (the soldiers were sending) boxes of souvenirs back. Oh, boy, the ocean was rough. Out there in the Atlantic in January is about the roughest time of the year. The fog was so thick that you could almost cut it with a knife. As we proceeded further west we got, the ocean got really rough. We would stand on the aft end of the ship (we would call it the poop deck) and when the waves would approach the rear end of the ship they seemed to be about 20 or 30 feet deep and the ship rode on top of the wave. It was very scary. The only time I could get up to my office was to go down a shaft through the propeller shaft and up into the engine room and from there we were on the top deck and we would walk about 20 feet to my office. The fog settled in as we proceeded and we had our ship bell ringing and the fog horn was tooting every 2 seconds to notify other ships that were in the vicinity and later on we could hear a ship's bell of another ship on our starboard side. At that time the fog lifted and

this four masted schooner was headed in the opposite direction from us and it stood out just like a—oh golly it's hard to explain—all of the men were lined to rail looking at our ship and after a few seconds or so the fog came back and covered that ship up and we proceeded on to our destination and that ship went wherever they were going to go. We arrived to our home port and this time we docked at the New Jersey side. We were going to decommission our ship and put it out of service and the ship's crew were going to be sent to whatever receiving ship that the Bureau of Navigation had designated for us. I, being the mail clerk, had to go to New York and pick up all the mail for our ship to distribute amongst the ship mates. I asked the captain at this time would it be alright if I transferred myself to a receiving ship out in San Francisco and he said, "I don't know why not." So I made out the necessary papers to transfer myself to San Francisco and he gave me a little leave so that I might go home and visit my people on the way. So I packed up and left. There wasn't much I could do about the ship because it had to go to the Navy Yard for decommissioning. However, I was made a chief on board this ship and I got an order from the paymaster that I had to go over to Brooklyn to buy. I felt very proud. I had brass buttons and a different kind of uniform entirely. I came back aboard ship and the skipper congratulated me. He gave me my orders and proceeded on to San Francisco by way of Salt Lake City. I stopped off at home and saw the folks and went on the California to the Navy yard, a receiving ship in the San Francisco Bay.

USS New Mexico

I didn't stay on the west coast very long so I went back to the East coast again and had to report to a receiving ship at Bay ridge, New Jersey and from there I was assigned to a battleship that I never dreamed I'd be on called the USS New Mexico. This ship was in the Brooklyn Navy Yard undergoing changes in its mode of power. It was being changed from a steam driven battleship to an electric driven battleship. The first electric driven battleship in the navy. We were there for several months undergoing this repair and of course I saw lots of Brooklyn and a lot of New York. Well, when the New Mexico was ready for sea, we were so crowded. We had a bunch of midshipmen going to take their annual cruise and go around to the west coast and there were about 1600 personnel on board this ship and there was no room to bunk. We had to sleep on mess tables. Some of the chiefs who had families were living ashore and I would use their bunk when they weren't using it. It was sure a mess. Knowing that our ship was going around to the west coast I didn't know whether it would go through the Panama Canal or not. It may have had to go around the Cape of South America, Cape Horn. I asked for a discharge—the war was over—and they granted it and they sent me to St. Louis, Missouri for discharge but I ended up being on demobilization duty. I was there for several months doing this kind of work—helping them get their discharges—and here I was stuck. I was living ashore with a per diem allowance and I told skipper, I said, "Gosh this is monotonous work—if I re-enlist will you send me out to Bremerton, Washington?" And he agreed to that. So he discharged me and I re-enlisted for 2 years and they sent me out to Bremerton, Washington.

USS Wyoming

Well, I arrived there after visiting the folks for a while in Salt Lake City and they put me on another battleship. In the meantime I went to the superintendent of the Pacific Coast Communications service who happened to be Commander Luckel, who was my commanding officer up in Alaska. He needed to have a chief to fill a billet up in Alaska. He was really upset when he found that I had already been given a billet on the USS Wyoming. The Wyoming was the flag ship of Division 6 of battleships. There were 4 ships—the Arkansas, the Texas, the Wyoming, and I can't remember the other name. I was the Chief Petty Officer and I was given the job of being the ship's writer. That's the executive officer yeoman who has charge of all personnel and he has the title of ship's writer. Well, I was temporary chief and I asked the commander, Commander Smead, it was, if I could take an examination for a permanent appointment. It would make more money to me and he agreed. He wrote out the necessary papers and went over to the Arkansas for an examination. The Arkansas was one of the ships in the Division and the officer that was to give me the examination was the former first yeoman who served on the Wyoming as the chief writer. He said, "Well Sperry, if you are serving on the Wyoming as the ship's writer, you are O.K. for a permanent appointment we won't do anything but pass you without even asking you your questions and that was great with me so he gave me the necessary papers and I took them back to the ship and my pay went up quite a bit. Well, I stayed on the Wyoming for a while. She was in dry dock getting outfitted. I stayed on her for several months. Of course my enlistment was now for 2 years and I stayed on her for about that length of time. We went out on fleet maneuvers in the Pacific. We went to Honolulu for battle practice. I was assigned to fire control—Ship #2—a spot on the ship in case the bridge where the captain was, was shot away and inoperative. The executive officer was on the number two spot and I was his communications man. We had the big 14-inch guns on the Wyoming that would boom away and battle "2" was right along the side of me—it would almost blow your head off with the concussion. But it was all in the game and I enjoyed it. . . . On our way back to the states we had more battle practice out in the Pacific. Eventually we pulled into Los Angeles Harbor and tied up. We had a coal shop. At that time the ship was burning coal. We didn't have oil. Electricity was coming into its own as energy. A liner would come along side, load her with coal and the winches would handle a bag that would handle maybe a couple tons of coal. The people would fill it full of coal and would bring it up top side, dump it into the hatch into the coal bunker and we would have people down below that would shovel it into the coal bunker properly and we had men would keep track of the number of bags of coal that came aboard.

Every part of the ship was dirty, was all covered with coal dust so after the coal loading operation they'd get the fire hoses and hose down the whole ship, scrub paint work and clean it all up ship shape and then the ship was all painted. The sides where the paint was chipping off,

it was chipped off and touched up with red lead and painted with battleship gray. It was a great experience being on a flagship of the Wyoming's caliber.

USS Nanshan

I learned later on that a job opened up on the USS Nanshan, that was tied up at the break water at San Pedro. This was a target repair ship. The person that was able to get that job was able to get liberty every night and no more sea duty. That would be pretty nice. I was accepted. The fellow that took my place as ship writer on the Wyoming was a fellow named Carter, who served with me up in Alaska, on the Saturn—strange world—small world too. Of all the number of ships around the world—that we would meet again. I was transferred over to the Nanshan, the target repair ship. These targets were pulled out by a tug out to sea. They were probably 50- 75 feet long, and about 3 feet wide, made out of timber and had a mast on them that stuck up in the air. Between these masts would be lattice work where the battleships or the people who were firing the guns would aim at these marks and see how close they could come to a bullseye. When the lattice work was disintegrated, the target would come back into our ship and be repaired for the next target practice. We had a camera crew on board our ship and they would go aboard and film the guns as they hit the target with hits or misses, just keeping record. This was good duty. I enjoyed being out there. We had a commander named Pinkham, who was a swell guy. He was from the reserve of course and I had lots of nice friendsFinally my enlistment expired I was discharged from the navy at Mare Island where the “Nanshan” had gone for decommissioning and received an honorable discharge.