

Richard Noyer Westley -- WWII Participation



1942 Tampico, Mexico.

Pictured is the ship's carpenter (left) George "Chips" Gilliate and the ship's radio operator, Dick "Sparks" Westley.

The Amateur Radio Relay League publication entitled "QST" published an article stating that the U.S. Maritime Service would train licensed amateur radio operators to be commercial radio operators aboard U.S. merchant ships. The magazine article appeared during the summer of 1941. I had received my amateur status earlier that year, and I applied for acceptance at the U.S. Maritime Service Radio School located on Gallups Island in Boston Harbor. I was sworn into the Maritime service in November, 1941 and arrived on the Island later that same month. It was a 10 month course of study and I was graduated with an FCC issued second class radio telegraph license in August of 1942 whereupon I left the school immediately for the port of New York. On arrival I went directly to the union hall in downtown Manhattan and was assigned to an oil tanker registered by the name of the *S/S Toteco*. She was a rather small vessel with a capacity of 75,000 barrels and had been built in 1916, and registered under the name of the *S/S Los Angeles*. She had been built for the Union Oil Company of California. By 1941 she was owned by the Mexico Shipping and Trading Company with headquarters offices in lower Manhattan. I boarded the ship at her berth at a New Jersey oil refinery and signed onto the ship's articles as the chief Radio Officer on August 20, 1942.

The *S/S Toteco*, as stated previously, was small when compared to newer faster vessels. She was oil-fired, steam driven and had sunk two German submarines during World War I by ramming them. For this action she carried two gold chevrons on the port and starboard sides of the stack. She wasn't very fast but was capable under the right conditions of making 8 or 9 knots per hour. She was the only tanker I ever saw that had a bridge located mid-ships with the radio shack and radio operator's stateroom combined and located aft over the engine room. She had a 42 man crew of merchant seamen and a 12 man U.S. Navy gun crew. She was armed with a 5" gun mounted on a gun platform on the stern and two 50 caliber machine guns mounted in tubs on the extremities of the flying bridge. Her radio equipment consisted of a very old converted arc transmitter, a short wave communications receiver, a manually operated radio direction finder, an auto-alarm receiver, a crystal set and an armored bank of batteries.

In addition to my duties as "Sparks," I was additionally assigned the duties of Ship's Purser and prepared typewritten manifests, etc. for the Captain. When I signed on in August of 1942 I was 19 years old and the youngest man among the crew. Captain Oscar Beling was 82 years old and had been a seaman since his early childhood in the Netherlands having made his first voyages in sailing ships before the age of steam power. The other deck officers were also extremely experienced. The First Mate, whose name I am unable to recall had been born in

Norway and had served aboard sailing ships in his youth. Mr. Johansen, the Second Mate, was a Dane of vast nautical experience who taught me a great deal on such varied subjects as fundamental seamanship techniques and how to deport oneself in the officers mess.

All in all I made ten voyages aboard the *Toteco*. The date of my final discharge was November 12, 1943. During that period we had visited many interesting ports of call such as Tampico, Mexico, Aruba and Curacao in the Netherlands West Indies, ports in Venezuela and Cuba as well as Port Isabel in Texas, Norfolk in Virginia, Philadelphia, New York, and Boston in the USA and Halifax in Canada.



Originally the *S.S. Los Angeles*, a 6876 gross ton tanker, built at San Francisco, California in 1916. Placed in commission by the Navy on 9 August 1917 as *USS Los Angeles*, ID#1470, she operated with the Atlantic Train Force for the remainder of 1917 and was assigned to the Naval Overseas Transportation Service when that organization was established in January 1918. Between January and November 1918 the ship made five round trip transatlantic voyages, carrying fuel oil to British naval ports and to Brest, France. In November 1918 *Los Angeles* took a cargo of fuel oil from Philadelphia to the Panama Canal Zone, then brought a shipment of crude oil to New York from Mexico. Decommissioned on 17 January 1919 and returned to her civilian owners, resumed commercial service as *S.S. Los Angeles*. The tanker was renamed *S.S. Toteco* in 1941 and was scrapped in Mexico in 1966.

It was reported by the news media that all ships sailing from U.S. ports did so in convoys escorted by U.S. Navy or Coast Guard vessels. This was not necessarily factual, and we frequently sailed without escort. I recall distinctly that first trip. We did depart the port of New York and sailed in convoy to the port of New Orleans where we left the convoy and proceeded by ourselves toward Tampico, Mexico. One day shortly after noon a small airplane (Piper Cub size) flew low over our foredeck and dropped a crescent wrench with a note tied to it advising that a German submarine had been reported in the vicinity and that we should steer immediately for Port Isabel, Texas. We heeded the advice and made haste into a berth in Port Isabel where we spent the night out of harm's way. The following day we proceeded to Tampico. On another voyage, it may have been my final trip aboard Toteco, we departed from an oil port on the north coast of Venezuela and ran the short distance up to Aruba where we went into un-escorted convoy with another tanker bound for Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. During the night the other tanker disappeared and to my knowledge was never heard from again. Sometimes convoys weren't the safest way to travel. On one trip we departed Boston in a convoy bound for Halifax, Nova Scotia. WE had been advised that in the event we encountered fog that maneuvers would be conducted by means of radio signals. Sure enough, the whole convoy became engulfed in fog. The problem developed that we remained in fog for many, many hours and night fall was upon us. Most of the vessels being convoyed had only one radio operator on board. Part of the strategy in those days was to follow a zig zag course rather than sail in a straight line from point A to B thus confusing any submarines which might be stalking the convoy. IT became evident that exhaustion had overcome some of the radio personnel when a maneuvering signal was missed, and collisions did occur in the dense fog.

The Toteco never had a collision while running in convoy. However, we had arrived in New York Harbor with a full load of fuel oil. IT was at night and we were anchored in the harbor awaiting a harbor pilot to arrive the following morning. We were anchored in a cluster of ships—some loaded and some in ballast, meaning they had discharged their cargo and had taken on water to act as a ballast to stabilize the vessels. Sure enough, the pilot arrived in the light of day to move us from our anchorage in the Hudson River to a berth at an oil dock in New Jersey. The river current was very strong and we were loaded down to the Plumsil mark. As luck would Have it the Pilot misjudged the speed of the river current and/or the capabilities of that old tanker, and we wound up clipping and entangling with the anchor chain of a high test gasoline tanker in ballast and at anchor near us. The alarm bells on board both vessels set p a dreadful clamor as the Toteco floated stern first directly into the port side of the gas tanker. When two objects of that many tons of weight collide, they don't bounce off one another. We were fortunate in the extreme that there was no explosion aboard the gas tanker and no one suffered any physical injuries on either vessel. The *S/S Toteco* was laid up in the Todd Shipyard in Hoboken, N.J. for several weeks for repairs.

In summary, I was not by any measure the world's greatest sailor. I never got past the "queasy stomach" associated with sea sickness although I carried out my duties in spite of the discomfort. In contrast, I served as a flight crew member on aircraft flown by various U.S. airline companies for another ten years following my ocean travels and never experienced air sickness.

P.S. In 1988 the Congress of the United States of America recognized seamen of the American Merchant Marine serving during the period of armed conflict, December 7, 1941 to August 15, 1945, as members of the armed forces of the United States of America.

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