

From the Society of Wireless Pioneers Jack Binns' Chapter Historical Record

Compiled by Dr. Erskine H. Burton, Historian

Transcribed and copyedited by Bob Rydzewski

With notes by CHRS Archivist Bart Lee

Gordon H. Pascoe, 33-P

"Gord" has had a most colorful career within the ranks of professional wireless pioneers. Perhaps because of a sense of responsibility to the security of his country, he found himself involved in several incidents, any of which might have sent lesser men back home prematurely to a life of safety. Possessed of a rare sense of humor, Gord has derived satisfaction to the full from his experiences.

Remaining as Chapter president since charterhood, Gord is also a charter director of the Society. He is retired and living in Seattle. His story is best told in his own words, in the original. (EHB 6/20/1971)

Wars seem to change our lives. Instead of continuing my schooling through Tulane University as I had planned, I felt I should volunteer for one of the military services. First, I tried the Marine Corps but was turned down because I was underage at the time. However, the Navy took me right off. They needed "wireless operators" and of course that's what I was, though I hardly knew the code. But my high school physics prepared me well for the academic part. I started in at the Brooklyn Navy Yard Radio School and was later transferred to Harvard University for an electronics course in that high seat of learning. We called it the College Navy, and it was the most interesting "semester" I ever spent. Upon completion of the Navy course, I was assigned to the *U.S.S. Des Moines*, one of the smaller cruisers. We were assigned to convoy duty.¹ I cannot remember how many convoy trips I made, maybe nine. We lost only two ships that I know of, one to a hurricane and another to a submarine which later we were credited with sinking. We fired at many of them however, though some no doubt were whales. The first SOS I picked up was a British ship whose cargo had shifted during a severe hurricane. We

steamed at full blast toward his position but did not make it against the mountainous seas in time. The radioman's last words were "Goodbye, boys, the water's fine." Are radiomen traditionally the brave ones?

After the war I found myself "on the beach." Jobs were few, the stay-at-homes probably sealed off all the good ones. I found myself working in a molasses factory, filling and loading huge barrels of syrup. It was a sticky job. I tried some longshoring. Heavy work! Next, selling, but I wasn't much of a salesman. So when someone told me that the Merchant Marine needed radiomen very badly, I applied and was assigned to the Mexican Fruit & Steamship vessel "San Ramon" which I joined April 1, 1919 at my home port, New Orleans.

My next assignment was, while only semi-officially, actually in the Mexican Navy, the convertible cruiser *Jalisco*.² This ship while in use in the passenger trade was easily convertible to a warship. This was in the latter days of the Villa Revolution.³ It seems that Villa and his officers had finally discovered that it was by radio that his troop movements were being anticipated by the Federal Governments' radio reports, ruining his carefully planned element of surprise. So, since most land radio stations were located on the outskirts of the cities, his troops had an easy time to move in and capture the Mexican radiomen. To eliminate this menace to his troop movements, they stood them up against a wall and executed them, as told by Mr. J.A. Pohl, superintendent of the RCA Gulf Division. Yours truly volunteered to help the Mexican government and found myself assigned to the *Jalisco*. In our trips to evacuate civilians from some of the pressure points, we had several exciting cruises with the Villistas.

My next assignments were with the *S/S Ampetco* (Belgian flag) and the *S/S Walter Jennings*, both oil tankers. Interesting trips to Rotterdam, Antwerp, and Brementhaven on the *Ampetco*, and to Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires aboard the *Jennings*. Nothing much on the way happened with these well-regulated ships, except the *Jennings* ran onto a reef just south of Haiti. It seems there is a slight rise in the tide out there in the ocean and at that peak time we slid off. I remember working the US Marine field stations on Haiti. We had occupied it in 1922.

On November 20, 1920 I signed on aboard the *S/S Shooters Island*. I wonder if all Shipping Board vessels were hard luck ships? The two (this one and the next one) certainly were. The captain, J.M.D. Simmons, was in bed with asthma most of the time and the chief

mate turned out to be a user of dope. The whole engineering staff had been pulled off by a strike at Savannah, Georgia, and a motley engine room crew was recruited. To make matters worse, a large foreign element in the deck crew were feuding with the natural born Americans. The first thing the new engineering crew did was pump saltwater into the water tube boilers (which must use fresh water from the condensers) and tubes were popping like anything. On Christmas Day we were still in mid-Atlantic, wallowing in heavy seas, practically disabled. I was the only one that showed up in the salon for Christmas dinner. I will never forget what the messman said: "HOW CAN YOU EAT WHEN I'M DYING?" The storm subsided and the engineers managed to affect some repairs to the boilers, so we were able to limp into Genoa, Italy. We were off the mole, the captain was taken to the hospital, the mate as usual in bed needing a fix, when fighting broke out between the Finns using knives and the rest of the crew, defending themselves as best they could. Our bosun ran into the salon where the second mate and the second engineer and I were finishing lunch. All the others were ashore or out like lights. The bosun had been cut severely across the face. The second mate tried to staunch the blood, while the second engineer and I ran to our staterooms where we had revolvers. As I emerged from the radio cabin, I saw a knife fighter sink his knife into a stout chap who was running backwards. I fired over their heads, soon joined by the second engineer. The mutineers retreated into the fo'c's'le (forecastle), where with the help of the loyal crew members we nailed the entrance shut until I could radio for the Italian police, who took over the ship for a while, until we could get the captain back aboard and get things settled.

The *S/S Connes Peak*, enroute for Mediterranean parts, hit a gale in mid-Atlantic, causing the cargo to shift. It looked pretty bad for a while. Captain Pearson ordered me to send out an SOS. Just as I was about it, I made contact with one of our sister ships, *S/S Eastern Star*, thinking it might save the company salvage,⁴ I contacted the captain, who ordered a belay of the SOS. When the ship came alongside, some of her engineers made it aboard and they were able to pump some ballast or something to get the ship on a more even keel. Its engines out, the other ship towed us into Gibraltar, an 800-mile tow.

My last sea going effort as a wireless operator was aboard a molasses tanker, the *S/S Dulcino*,⁵ running between New Orleans and Cuban ports. Hot weather, lack of refrigeration

and poor food gave me something that must have been very close to SCURVY. In August of 1921 I left the sea and went to land stations with the Tropical Radio (United Fruit) onshore stations. I served while at WNU New Orleans, then went to the tropics (UC) Puerto Castilla, Honduras and later took charge at the high powered (UG) Tegucigalpa, Honduras station, where I also acted as division manager for a while. The tropics were an interesting experience, mainly revolutions, banana plantation life, and fighting tropical disease. After two spells with malignant malaria, I left the country and a good job, at which time I got in on the ground floor with the Bureau of Air Commerce (predecessor agency to the FAA), where I continued on in communications, air traffic control and administrative work. Quite a career from the early days of my Navy Alma Mater, which gave me a good start.

Gordon Henry Pascoe

¹ In World War I.

² June - July, 1919.

³ Pancho Villa (1878-1923).

⁴ Once a distress call—SOS—goes out, any vessel that comes to aid and does so successfully is entitled, under maritime law, to a money award for salvage proportional to the value of the vessel, freight, and cargo (but usually not passengers). See Gilmore and Black, *The Law of Admiralty* (1975) Ch. VIII, Salvage. Many a ship's Master has sought to avoid an SOS, despite danger, to avoid the consequences of salvage (including maybe his job). For example, the ship's officer having command of the *Morro Castle*, on fire in 1934, did not sent out an SOS. [BL]

⁵ The timing of his *Dulcino* service, said to be in 1921 here, conflicts with the May - August 1923 dates cited in Pascoe's membership application.