



## ECHOES OF PROHIBITION

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The year was 1927 and the place was Portland, Oregon. There I was, just fresh off the farm and after a few months in radio school, the proud owner of a first class radio license and ready to make my mark in the world. My license, duly signed by O.R. Redfern and Herbert Hoover, Secretary of Commerce, proclaimed I was a First Class Commercial Radio Operator, though some of the Coastal Station marine operators probably questioned that in the ensuing months.

Jobs were not so plentiful at this time and after reading about the action along the coast between the rum runners and the U.S. Coast Guard, I decided that maybe the Coast Guard could use my services. Reports of the gun battles between the "Rummies" and the Coast Guard sounded intriguing and exciting.

In early 1928 I learned there was a vacancy on the Cutter Algonquin/NRA stationed in Astoria. Executive Officer Lt. Hibgee replied to my query that I could ship on as Petty Officer Third Class, since I possessed a license. Now this sounded like a very important and impressive rating. Things were beginning to look good. My travels during high school days had taken me as far south as Roseburg, Oregon and north to Portland, but now I could see the Pacific Ocean for the first time and perhaps see some of the rest of the world.

I boarded the riverboat Georgiana in Portland for the trip down the Columbia to Astoria. I thought this would be the proper means of transportation for a sailor. Enlisting in the Coast Guard turned out to be quite an experience. The Algonquin was a thirty-year old ship with an ice-breaker bow and had recently been retired from Bering Sea patrol duty. She was also manned by a full complement of cockroaches. After a few trips over the Columbia River Bar I was having second thoughts about my adventure. That Willamette Valley farm where I had lived for so long didn't seem so dismal and foreboding to me after all. But there were bigger and better things to come.

About the only contacts we had with the Rummies were to make sure they were out beyond the 12-mile limit, while most were bound for the sunny climes and more lucrative trade off the California Coast. The final destination of their cargoes were places like the Noyo River, Tennessee Cove, Half Moon Bay, Pt. Sal and Dana Point, to name a few.

While on the Algonquin it was my pleasure to operate what was said to be one of the two remaining spark transmitters in the Coast Guard. It was a Kilbourne & Clark and, like all spark rigs, spoke with authority. In retrospect, I guess this made me feel like an old-timer.

In the latter part of 1928 I was transferred to the new Cutter Tahoe which was to be based in Oakland, California. This was like moving up to the big leagues. In the ensuing two years aboard the Tahoe, I became familiar with the smuggling activities along the Pacific Coast while picketing and keeping check on the larger ships. Among these were the 245 foot five-masted schooner Malahat, which became known as the "Queen of Rum Row", the 191-foot French Motorship Tooya, the French ship Moana, the steamer Nidareid, and the Motorship Mogol. The smaller or intermediate Canadian Vessels, usually of the 110-foot class, were classed as "boats" and they handled cargoes between the larger ships and the shore boats of U.S. registry. These Canadian boats also replenished their cargoes in Vancouver, B.C. occasionally. We spent much time around Guadalupe Island off the Mexican Coast keeping the Malahat under surveillance. We were often told that the Coast Guard served as protection against hijackers.

As sailors we learned something about the consumption of the booze which was being imported. The "Speakeasies" became a fact of life with their traditional double doors and peep holes through which customers could be identified. I gained some first-hand knowledge of the plush establishments down in the industrial district of Emeryville, as well as the Pubs in the back alleys of Sausalito, and such watering places as the Colonial Club, Cabrillo Club and the Brick Palace in San Pedro.

After two years aboard the Tahoe and a brief tour at Point Bonita Radio Station NMC, I was transferred to the Coast Guard Intelligence Unit in San Francisco, which had recently been organized. This was an intercept station at Fort Funston which was engaged in breaking the rummies' codes, and thereby keeping tab on all their activities. The personnel of this office consisted of two officers, a yeoman and six radiomen. One of the Coast Guard's 75-foot patrol boats had just been assigned to this unit for intelligence work. It was the CG-257 and was equipped with some of the latest radio gear, including a high-frequency direction finder. Yes, a radioman was needed for this duty on the CG-257, and guess who got the nomination. I just knew that I was picket for my super ability and expertise, but as time went by I sort of realized or suspected that no one else in the office wanted the job.

I hardly had time to hang my hat in the "Inner Sanctum" before I found myself boarding the CG-257/NRXY in SF Bay with an arm load of instructions and code books. We were to operate along the California Coast, being stationed in Oakland but later transferring our home base to San Pedro. I sharpened my technique on the HF direction finder by practicing on the coastal marine stations as well as station NPL. It worked quite well within a reasonable distance or on the "ground wave".

There were perhaps a dozen or more Canadian boats off the coast at any given time. We became more intimately familiar with such boats as the Ray Roberts, Ragna, Audrey B., Taiheiyo, Chief Skugaid, Zip, Ryuo II and many more. Each carried a radioman

who observed one day and one evening sked each day with the control station in Vancouver, B.C. They used a frequency just above the 7 MC ham band, or "39 meters" as we called it. These skeds were well organized. The Vancouver operator called the roll, using two-letter calls, and cleared traffic directly or with the help of relays. The boats used the same call letters back to Vancouver. Landline was used between Vancouver and U.S. contacts to arrange rendezvous positions.

All messages were encoded and the operators engaged in very little "small talk" between the boats. They usually used four-letter code groups but sometimes used substitution cipher code which differed each day of the month. The four-letter code groups had numerical equivalents and in this way they could use numerical additives as indicated by a key code group in each message. This posed no problem for us "expert" cryptographers.

There were a few independents who had mobile stations ashore to facilitate the transfer of contraband to the shore boats. One which we became more familiar with was a character who had a Model-A Ford sedan equipped with radio gear and would set up shop in the San Bruno Mountains near San Francisco or in the hills which is now a part of Pacifica. The Prohibition Agents ashore didn't bust him because he was a source of information for the Coast Guard.

The names of two prominent Southern California financiers had found their way into our code book. One owned the Caliente Race Track as well as a prominent hotel in LA and one down Mexico way. The other tycoon was apparently connected to the entertainment industry and they both had their own shore boats to import booze for their clientele.

Getting back to our specific duties on the 257, our chief claim to fame was in breaking up the contacts between the Rummies and shore boats by being on "position" before they arrived or by giving pertinent information to some of the speedier CG boats who made the seizures. We were also involved in a few pursuits in which the shore boat operators would dump their cargo in the ocean before being caught. In such cases the boats were impounded until a stiff fine was paid. The boat operators had an ingenious method of ditching their cargo. A huge iron weight was tied to the end of a line, then each case of liquor was tied in series with the line looped around it. As the boat increased speed the stern would be low in the water and the weight thrown over the stern. In a matter of seconds the cargo was headed for the bottom of the ocean. This method was used chiefly by the boats with the smaller loads. We apprehended the boat "Zeitgeist" in the Santa Barbara Channel one night after such a chase. The operator and only one on the boat was a man named Carrillo, well known to the Coast Guard. This boat was later involved in an act of piracy when one of the offshore gambling ships and all its patrons were robbed early one morning.

One of our favorite hangouts was Pyramid Cove on San Clemente Island which seemed to be about the center of operations in Southern California waters. Our skipper was an Ensign and he always kept a low profile in our contacts and conversations with the crews of the Rummies because it was unusual to have a Commissioned Officer assigned to a small boat with only seven crew members.

There were many interesting, and often humorous, side-lights to this business of enforcing prohibition. One was the apparent shrinkage of contraband between point of seizure and final storage or disposition by Customs. Such was the case of the "Merrie Ann" which we captured off San Diego with 105 cases aboard. We brought the boat into San Pedro where 100 cases were turned over to the Government authorities at the dock. The next day an LA newspaper, in reporting the incident, said 75 cases had been turned in to Customs in LA.

In an incident off San Francisco in early 1932, one of the Canadian boats was "conned" out of several hundred cases of liquor. Apparently the shore boat had given the proper identification, password or whatever. We learned of this incident when the Vancouver station advised the vessel to the effect that they had been hijacked. This particular load ended up in a well-known Sausalito Pub, according to our shore contacts. There were other bits of trivia to add spice to our monotonous sea duty. When the skipper wasn't around we occasionally bartered cigarettes for a bottle of booze. I also found out that the Canadian radiomen were receiving an average of \$300 per month. This was a far cry from my \$92.40, but then I didn't have to stay out at sea for eight and ten months at a time as they often did. Another item of interest was the fact that many of the Canadian boats would shut down their engines at the same time each evening to listen to the Amos 'N' Andy radio broadcast. It took us quite a time to figure this one out as we had suspected they were stopping for a radio sked which we didn't know about.

In late 1932 the speakeasies were losing their glamor and patronage. This was probably due to the fact that booze was easier to come by and also the depression was taking its toll. In 1933 FDR ascended the throne in Washington, the 21st Amendment was being ratified by the States so the repeal of Prohibition was just a matter of time. This was panic time for the Rummies. Their radiomen referred to it as their "last hurrah". Some of the Canadian boats were taking direct action by unloading their cargoes on the docks in various ports, presumably with the help of local authorities. Such was the case in Half Moon Bay, Port of San Luis and the Santa Monica pier. The Santa Monica pier was closed to fishermen and the public for two successive nights to take care of the business rush. In the San Luis incident, one heavily laden truck loaded with liquor crashed through the pier into the ocean.

Most of the larger vessels of the rum fleet were now returning to legitimate business, but one, the MS Mogol, was caught short with a cargo of 60,000 cases of liquor worth \$300,000 and no

"takers". Seven months after clearing Vancouver, B.C. for the "high seas" she was still gathering barnacles off the Mexican Coast. As to the MS Tooya, she entered LA harbor from Ensenada, Mexico and was immediately charged with failure to file a cargo manifest and a consular bill of health. After posting a \$10,000 bail she sailed for Tahiti on a South Seas trading venture. The once proud ship Malahat, known as the "Queen" of the rum fleet, was later knocked down at a sheriff's sale in Vancouver for \$1,100 and was to become a lumber schooner. The French ship Moana returned to Tahiti and it is unknown what happened to the Scandinavian ship SS Nidareid.

Thus ended the "Noble Experiment", but a postscript to this saga was yet to come. In July 1934, six of us radiomen were summoned to appear in Federal Court in Seattle as witnesses in a suit filed by the U.S. Government against the Reifel distilling interests of British Columbia. The Government was suing for seventeen and one-quarter million dollars for what it claimed to be unpaid revenue on smuggled liquor, plus penalties. It seems that one of the Reifel brothers was arrested in Seattle and thrown in the slammer pending the trial. And then we got our biggest surprise. We were introduced to Jimmy Cummings, the Vancouver radio operator, whose traffic we had been intercepting for the past few years. He had been short-changed by his former employer after having been promised an interest in the company, so had shown up in Seattle armed with code books and documents to substantiate the U.S. Government charges. It was quite a thrill to compare our code books with the authentic ones and find that we had done quite a reputable job in all of our work.

The case was set for trial in Federal Judge Jeremiah Neterer's court. To give the trial an impartial flavor, Judge Neterer was imported from somewhere in Tennessee, which was ironic as that is a moonshine country. The case was twice continued and an out-of-court settlement finally made for the sum of one million dollars. Assistant District Attorney DeWitt let each one of us feel the million dollar draft. It didn't feel nor look like the good old green stuff, but we had to take his word that it was negotiable. This was also our "last hurrah" as we could look forward to being transferred and once again become involved in the mundane duties of saving life and property at sea.

These are a few of my own personal experiences during Prohibition, but anyone with a yen for research could write volumes about the different aspects and effects of this era.

I became familiar with many more interesting incidents involving the Rummies through various newspaper stories. Briefly, some of these were: The scuttling and burning of the boats Coaster and Pilgrim in separate incidents while being pursued by the Coast Guard off the central California coast; The grounding and burning of the boat "1772" in the Coast Royal area of Laguna Beach amid gunfire from the CG-979 and the loss of its \$100,000 cargo; The capture of the Mizpah with a full load of contraband by the CG-256 off Monterey, and the mystery of the grounding of the Adanesne.

The Mizpah was taken over by the CG and used as a Harbor Patrol boat in Honolulu in the late 30s. She became known officially by the less romantic name "CG-838" but to the Coast Guardsmen she was always known as the Mizpah.

Then there was the mysterious case of the Adanesne (Ensenada spelled backwards), which was found beached at Pedro Point near San Francisco one foggy October morning in 1932 by fisherman Philip E. Phillips of San Francisco. Neither crew nor cargo were found and she had bullet holes in her hull and pilot house windows.

We, on the 257, didn't know whether to take the credit for this one or not, as two nights previous to this we had chased a Rummy out of Half Moon Bay with our guns firing away but this one had too much speed for us.

Registered out of Vancouver, B.C., the Adanesne was valued at \$35,000, which was a tidy sum in those days. She was indeed a "dream" boat, capable of 30 knots, with twin Liberty motors and auxiliary diesel and bronze propellers. Mr. Phillips claimed salvage rights but the Coast Guard had other ideas and used dynamite to blow up the "menace to navigation". This was the Adanesne's first venture apparently as no record could be found as to where she was built or her departure port. As to her fate, the possibilities were that she had been hijacked while landing her cargo, or had been fired upon previously by some CG vessel in pursuit and subsequently lost in the fog off the Golden Gate. There was also speculation that Prohibition Agents on the beach had taken the cargo in return for the release of the crew. So apparently this remains one of the unsolved mysteries of Prohibition days.



1931 H. Allen tracking mobile rummy station in San Bruno Hills