

4. UNDER THE SOUTHERN CROSS

Maurice reported to his first ship, USS Hawk (AM 133) in December, 1942, as her Communications Officer. He would later add Gunnery Officer to his duties as he gained more experience. The Hawk was not one of the new AM's. At 147 feet long, with 12 knot max speed, she was a large converted steel fishing trawler, about 3 times longer than today's Provincetown-based trawlers. She was built in 1937 and named "Gale" by the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Co. in Quincy, Mass.; and acquired by the Navy from the General Sea Foods Corp. on January 1, 1942, less than a month after the Pearl Harbor attack. Hawk was commissioned in May 1942, after conversion into a minesweeper by Bethlehem Steel's east Boston yard. The ship performed minesweeping duties in the vicinity of Boston from the time Maurice came aboard until about mid-1943, when it was assigned to patrol in what was called the northern ship lane.



Enlargement of officer portion of larger photo. Maurice is far right rear.

Officers and crew of one of Maurice's ships, most likely YMS 308 in the Caribbean.



There Hawk protected ships gathering into convoys en route to Nova Scotia before they made the voyage to Europe. So, for the first months onboard, Maurice was near to home when not at sea, with concerns about his marriage and child certainly weighing on his mind. The time on Hawk would also be later remembered for the useful learning, and good friends made.

In August, 1943, Maurice was transferred to YMS 308, one of the new wooden minesweepers, which was just being commissioned when he joined her at a yard in City Island, New York. His duties were Gunnery and Communications Officer; also Executive Officer, the second in command on a ship. His battle station was on the bridge. It is clear that the Navy decided he had high potential, and he was being prepared to become skipper of a YMS that would be sent overseas.

The log books of YMS 308 were not researched, so there are no details on where she sailed or what events she was part of from August 1943 to April 1944 when Maurice transferred again. But we know he didn't go home from April 1943 until after the war's end, a period of 32 months. In January, 1944, he was promoted to Lt (jg). At some point while on 308, he went ashore at Barbados, and played golf for the first time. The ship was assigned at that point to patrol the Caribbean, a key area for tankers and a major focus of German U-boat activity. The Navy put many units in this general area, including many air squadrons. Lt (jg) Richard B. Purdy, USNR, my father-in-law, flew torpedo/depth charge bombers, such as Grumman TBF Avengers, and amphibious patrol bombers, the PBV, along the east coast, in the Gulf of Mexico, but especially in the Caribbean. He flew as far south as Brazil. He logged about 1,500

flight hours from December 1942 to mid-1947.



Maurice (R) with fellow officer Ensign John Jennings, probably on YMS 308.

It is also likely around this time, that Maurice played a game of bridge with an admiral, the subject of another story. It was at an officer's club perhaps, and the admiral, with 2 other senior officers, needed a 4th player. They discovered that Maurice played, and he was shanghaied into the game as the admiral's partner. Maurice had bad luck that night, which the admiral loudly and repeatedly blamed on Maurice's bad play, not the cards. When he finally could make his escape, Maurice went to the coat room—seeing the admiral's cap, he proceeded without thinking to tear off the "scrambled egg" decoration on the bill, ruining it. Just then one of the senior officer players came in, and to Maurice's surprise, told him to leave before he was caught by someone else. Either the senior officer, himself not an admiral, felt badly that he had not defended this junior officer earlier or believed the admiral had it coming—or both. In any case, what would the admiral have done in retribution? Sent Maurice into overseas minefields where he was going anyway? Most likely he wouldn't have done anything except yell more, and insist on payment for a new hat. The lesson, probably, was not that all admirals are bullies, which obviously isn't true, but rather that being in charge is no excuse for taking unfair advantage of subordinates.

Maurice continued learning the business of minesweeping, and of leading men at sea. In April 1944, he was assigned to 11 weeks of minesweeping school at Yorktown, Virginia. He completed the course in July, which may have included some training time on YMS 33, as there is brief mention of that ship in his service record. The Navy judged he was now ready for command, and he left for Panama to join YMS 339. He was no longer a 90 day wonder. He had likely experienced storms at sea on a small vessel, and had learned key tactics and the details of mine warfare and of ship operations. He would now experience, with his crew, crossing the world's largest ocean and their fated share of the chaos and violence of war.

YMS 339, with her new skipper, got underway from Coco Solo on August 23, 1944, and traversed the Panama Canal and its locks, into the Pacific. The weather was fine, 84 degrees



YMS 308 on her launching day, July 21, 1943 at City Island NY. Young woman, 5th from right, holds traditional champagne bottle.

with light winds. They were in convoy company with 2 amphibious ships and YMS 68. Three days out into the Pacific, 68 had engine trouble, and it, with 339 escorting, returned to Panama on August 29th. On September 1st, 339 left Panama again, this time for good, with a new convoy including YMS 68 and 4 LST's, numbers 577, 626, 707, and 775. LST's were 4,100 ton, 330



LST 583 going through the Panama Canal in 1968.



LST 516 underway.

foot long amphibious landing ships, with large doors at the bow to offload tanks and other equipment. Over one thousand of them were built during the war. "LST" stood for Landing Ship Tank or, as their crews often called them, Large Slow Targets. They also went without names.

September 1st was a Friday, a day notorious in ancient sea lore as the worst day to start a long voyage. Sailors have time at sea to learn the old superstitions and hear warning tales of those who ignored them. Maurice had already successfully defied another superstition—never to serve on a ship whose name had been changed, remember that Hawk had been originally named Gale. But the action in the Pacific would not wait, and 339's deck log makes no mention of Fridays and superstitions. Of the vessels in their small six ship convoy, one would not see war's end. LST 577 was cut in half by a Japanese torpedo, with the loss of 166 men, in February 1945 off the Philippines. It had been in commission exactly 7 months.



Who were the men going to sea on 339 that September day? The archived micro-filmed Master Roll of the 29 crew members as of September 30th gives some clues. It shows 18 were "plank-holders", as those onboard for a ship's commissioning are always thereafter unofficially known. They each had eleven months experience on the ship. Five others were assigned less than one month before the Pacific deployment. None of the 29 had been in the Navy before Pearl Harbor. Some were first class petty officers, with leadership roles. Eight were, or aspired to be, machinist mates, the keepers of the diesel engines and all the related equipment. Seven were deck hand seamen, the workers of the sweep gear and responsible for topside condition and paint. Two were gunners mates, two electrician mates, and two coxswains. The remaining eight were a quartermaster for charts and navigation, a yeoman for the paperwork, a signalman hopefully not colorblind, a pharmacist mate called the doc, a radarman, a sonar-man, a steward, and of course the cook. The names read like the cross-section of America that one would expect from a WWII movie script, including: Baker, Berdella, Christian, Freeman, Gonzales, McCaffrey, Quinn, Schneider, Solito, Stewart, Strassell, and Warren. They were young, many in their teens, although the Roll does not give ages. One, the steward, was black, this being the 1940's, listed on the Roll as Rutherford (no middle name) Poindexter. He would have been the butt of jokes about his name, but Maurice said years later that there was no room for discrimination on a small warship—they were, after all, in the same boat.

The officers were not listed on the Master Roll of the Crew. Rather they were entered in the deck-log as they came aboard or were transferred. In addition to Maurice, there were 3 other officers onboard:

- Ensign M. A. Barrett, Jr. of Glen Ridge, New Jersey; Executive Officer, onboard since April, 1944.
- Ensign Thomas B. Sellers, Jr. of Bay Saint Louis, Mississippi; Communications Officer, a 4 month veteran of 339.
- Ensign Stacey F. Pickup of Denver Colorado; Engineering Officer, onboard since only July 27th, coming straight from his honeymoon. He was 22 years old. He and his wife Catherine were found through the Internet and shot-in-the-dark phone calls in November 2005. They still live in Denver, at a different address than in 1944. They celebrated their 61st anniversary in 2005! [2009 note: Stacey Pickup died in January, 2008 after a long illness].



Modern destroyer escort being refueled at sea.

So this was the 339 team that motored out into the Pacific. By long tradition, a ship's captain is also known to the crew as "the old man". Coincidentally, at 30, Maurice may have been the oldest onboard. The convoy set a base course slightly south of due west, with speed ranging between 7.5 and 9 knots. They were at sea for 33 days, crossing both the equator and the international date line, before landfall. The ship was refueled and her food supply replenished about once per week during the voyage. The LST's were large enough to carry more than sufficient quantities of fuel and supplies to make the whole transit—not so the YMS's. They would pull alongside one of the LST's, in a maneuver known as "underway replenishment", without slowing down, to avoid becoming an easier submarine target. Progressively thicker lines would be passed from ship to ship, which would then support hoses and nets full of supplies. Each week, 339 would take on about 5,000 gallons on diesel fuel, fresh water, food, and perhaps an exchange of movie reels that off-duty crews could watch in the evenings. The US Navy invented this

replenishment procedure. It allowed for much longer at-sea deployments and it was secret in WWII, as the Japanese never developed it.

From the diary of Quartermaster Hartford Holden, September 2nd: Here is my daily routine. Up at fifty minutes before sunrise; "shoot" the stars about forty minutes before sunrise. Plot them on my chart and determine my 0800 fix. Take a couple of sun shots during the morning to determine time of local apparent noon. Get local apparent noon and my noon position. Then the afternoon is mine for sleeping or such. Then at about twenty five minutes after sunset, "shoot" the stars again to find our exact position. All I can do is hope that I am right as we are well away from land now and the least mistake should put me off. The "old man" has given me the entire thing so it is quite a responsibility. But it is very interesting.

HH diary, September 8th: Today was a hectic day! We refueled from a LST but had a hard time of it. The sea was a bit rough and first the towing cable broke, then water got into the fuel hose. At night the engines stopped, the generators died and the LSTs just kept lumbering along not paying any attention to us. Finally we got the water separated from the fuel and we



YMS 441 underway.



YMS 373 in San Francisco Bay.

caught up to the convoy. September 10th: War is hell! When they say a woman's work is never done, I believe them. We have no wash machine now so I have to wash my clothes by hand. We have a couple of scrub boards that somebody thought about and did buy before we left Panama. Well, today I used them for the first time in my life. And right now my knuckles - or rather what's left of my knuckles - are sore and stiff. And also we don't get to use fresh water - only salt water. The next time that we go to small stores I'm going to buy me a scrub brush. My routine is still the same and I hope that I know where we are. I figure that we should cross the equator about 1800 [hours] at 120 degrees 30 minutes west longitude on the 13th of September.

HH diary September 11th: Another day. When I was back in grade school I always figured that the closer one got to the equator the hotter it got. But unless I and the convoy are lost we are within sixty miles of it and traveling almost parallel to it. Last night it was so cold that not only I but everyone had to sleep with a blanket on sheet, and also wear a shirt or jacket out on deck. The days are getting longer and also duller. There isn't anything for us to talk about or even argue about that we haven't talked or argued about before. Some guys have started to play poker to pass away time but I don't go for that - anyway not yet. I've just been thinking that if I can maintain this diary it will be something to look back on years later and maybe there will be some things of interest and adventure to read about.

Also during the voyage, 339 would hold daily drills. An alarm would sound and the boatswain mate of the watch would announce over the loudspeakers: "this is a drill, this is a drill, general quarters, general quarters, all hands man your battle stations." During the first half of the trip, the daily drills would last about 1 hour. Later they would be twice per day, at random times, and be longer. Drills were needed to practice for airplane and submarine attacks, for fire fighting and repair of battle damage, and to effectively handle the minesweeping gear. Sailors usually do not like drills—they can be tedious and repetitive—but perhaps there was less complaining than usual, since everyone knew where they were going. The normal at-sea routine, besides battle drills, called for rotating duty shifts, known as "the watch"

most of 4 hour duration. Unless on higher alert, the typical watch schedule was "one on, two off", so that each crewman was on watch a total of 8 hours per day. Every third day, one had to stand the "mid-watch", from midnight to 0400 hours military time, or 4am. In addition, each man had his normal duties when not standing watch, such as machinery maintenance for the machinist mates. Sleeping and eating were the other main activities. An uninterrupted 8 hour night's sleep at sea was very unusual; as was fresh food, since refrigeration space was quite limited.



King Neptune and his court on a battleship in the 1930's.

On heightened alert, as when underway going to an amphibious landing site because the chance of being attacked was greater, the crew would be on a 2 watch schedule. These are called "port and starboard" watches, and result in each man being on watch 12 hours per day. And finally there are battle stations, when minesweeping or in other combat action or imminent action, when everyone is at his assigned station wearing battle gear. This can last for many hours at a time. The watch schedules apply to everyone, except the captain, who is essentially always on duty at sea, to be called to the bridge if not there already whenever the officer of the watch decides the situation warrants. Under Navy Regulations, a captain is responsible for whatever happens at sea. Standing orders contain a long list of situations that require notifying the captain, so he would be expected to get less sleep than most. His battle station was the bridge, where he would direct the ship's course, speed, communications, and weapons.

On some Sundays at sea, ships can go on "holiday routine" to let the crew get some relaxation. Normal watches are held, of course, but the other daily duties are not carried out, unless needed to keep the ship underway. And reveille is sounded a little later in the morning. Another common naval practice was to hold a hazing ceremony initiating new sailors into the fraternity of "shellbacks", as those who have crossed the equator at sea are called. One of a ship's old salts takes the role of King Neptune, and dresses the part, as does his court including Davie Jones and Jonah. The King runs the initiation ceremony, which varies, but is characterized by much laughter for the previously initiated at the expense of the neophytes, called pollywogs. The hazing could be quite severe. But 339 may not have had any old salt shellbacks onboard. And perhaps such ceremonies were not as prevalent in war-time, especially on small ships. So the day 339 crossed the equator on this voyage seems to have passed without anything out of the ordinary. [The HH diary proved these suppositions

wrong, as detailed below].

HH diary September 12th: Today King Neptune reigned about his kingdom aboard this ship. Actually we don't cross the equator until tomorrow. Both the celebration and initiation took place today as tomorrow will be a full and busy day as we go alongside an LST for fuel, water and provisions. There are a number of new guys aboard and the majority have never been over the equator before - so the shellbacks had quite a time. As you know in the Navy you are a pollywog until you cross the equator - then after your initiation you are taken in by King Neptune and made a shellback. The pollywogs were made to eat soap, get a salt water shower with 65 lbs. pressure on a water hose. Run the gauntlet. Get their hair cut and heads shaved. Quite a day. But in the end the shellbacks took as much of a beating as the pollywogs.



Maurice's certificate from King Neptune, proof of crossing the equator on a warship.

September 15th: The days are getting duller. The only entertainment we have is listening to "Tokyo Rose" beat her gums. Quite a gal. We also manage to hear "Axis Sally", which is supposed to originate in Germany. September 19th: Had target practice today. Blow up a balloon with gas and after it floats away, the guns open up. The boys on the 20mm appear to be good shots. I have been

trying to get on a gun but the skipper says no soap. My quarters during GQ is on the flying bridge as sky control officer of the main battery - the 3". It is quite interesting although you have to be fast in thinking and figuring out wind speed, direction and estimating speed, height and course of the enemy plane. September 20th: Refueled again today. Went off smooth. Came within forty miles of a small island last night - Starbuck. But it was (is) so small that we couldn't pick it up even with our radar. My navigation seems to be okay. September 22nd: We have picked up a strong westward current which pushes us at about thirteen knots. I think that we could arrive in Espiritu a few days early - but orders are orders - so we slowed down the speed of the engines.

The Pacific weather mostly lived up to its name on this voyage. The only unusual event included in the deck-log occurred on September 25th, when 339 changed course to investigate a sonar sound contact that could have been a submarine; nothing was found.

HH diary, September 29th: About noon today we passed abeam of the Ellice Islands. About all we could see was the tops of the trees. But that was the first land we have seen since September 1st. About four more days to Espiritu Santo.



Ammunition ship USS Mt. Hood (AE 11) in camouflage paint, in August 1944. 459 feet long.

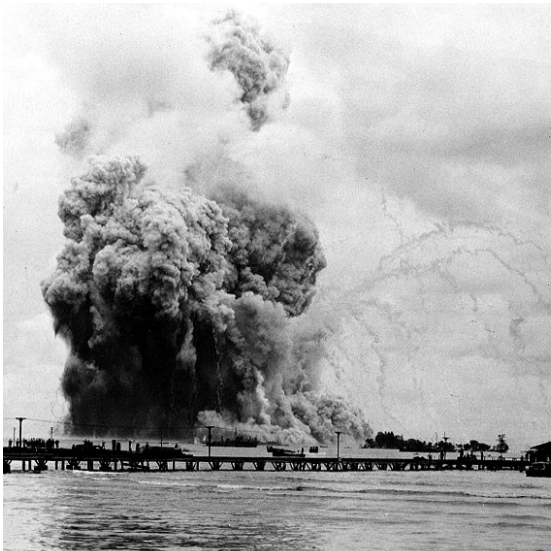
On October 4th, they arrived at Espiritu Santo Island in the New Hebrides. Comprised of 80 volcanic islands, this chain is located about three quarters of the way from Hawaii to Australia, west of Fiji, in the vast Pacific. It had been a joint British and French outpost since the 19th century. In 1980, it became the independent county of Vanuatu, and it continues to have about 100 native languages today. In 1944, it was a major staging point for Allied ships going to war in the western Pacific. Fresh provisions were taken onboard 339.

HH diary October 7th: Liberty was granted today. Went over to the recreation center on Aura Island. Really had an enjoyable time. Played a little basketball and ate coconuts.

On October 12th, at 0640 hours, a new convoy got underway, comprised of YMS's 339 and 68, along with five LST's under tactical command of the captain of LST 710. Base course 293 degrees, west northwest, at 9.5 knots. The weather cooperated, with winds no greater than Force 3, or 10 knots, and wave heights at 3 feet or less.

After brief refueling stops at Tulagi Island and Finchaven, New Guinea, the next stop was October 19th, at Seeadler Harbor, Manus, Admiralty Islands. This is now part of Papua, New Guinea, north of Australia. The Admiralties are about 40 volcanic and coral reef islands, with a native population speaking 35 languages. They had been captured in 1942 by the Japanese, and recaptured by the Allies in May, 1944, as part of the "island hopping" strategy of General Douglas MacArthur and the Navy. This called for bypassing some Japanese strongholds in favor of less heavily-defended islands, to save time and minimize casualties. Manus was turned into a major Naval base and jumping-off point for further invasions going north and west towards Japan. Hundreds of buildings were erected, and an airbase set up. There was a small officers' club in a tent. 339 went to the repair dock for one day, probably to fix some machinery. The ship stayed in the harbor until October 29th when it got underway for anti-submarine exercises. It anchored back in the harbor that night.

HH diary: October 19: The island looks quite large. We are still having our G.Q. morning and evening. As we near the island we can see what havoc our big naval guns played with the island of Los Negros, which is next to Manus. The two islands are the main ones in the Admiralties. Anchored off the mine repair base about 1500. Looks the same as the other islands - jungle and coconuts. October 20th: This place is definitely not for small craft. We seem to have about the lowest priority that can be had. The water that we get is so heavily chlorinated that one has to hold his nose and shut his eyes when he drinks it. We heard today that the VMS 19 was lost at Palau [struck a mine September 24th]. October 21st: We scheduled our first ball game in the South Pacific today against a team representing a submarine (S-41). We defeated them 7-6. I collected two doubles in four times at bat driving in three runs. Still batting in the clean-up slot. This is the first time that I've played with many of these guys but it looks like we should have a good team if we get enough practice. October 25th: Brought aboard some hundred cases of canned beer today. We are rationed two per day. November 3rd: The wounded from Leyte are starting to come in to this place now. The USS Mercy [hospital ship AH-8] just came in. November 6th: Played another double header this afternoon on Rana. Took the CVE 76 [USS Kadashan Bay] in the first game by a score of 20-1. Collected 4 for 4. Defeated the destroyer "Preble" [DD 345] in the second game 2-0. Got 1 for 2.



The explosion of 3,800 tons of ammunition; and the death of the Mt. Hood and all her 296 man crew onboard. 6 men ashore survived.

Maurice told of his minesweeper being near the site of an ammunition ship explosion. In all directions, like spokes going out from a hub, other ships had holes in them from the massive blast. He said it was eerie, with nothing on the central site but an oil slick.. Nothing else was left of the ammunition ship and her crew. He didn't



Port side of repair tender USS Mindinao (ARG 3), 350 yards from the explosion. Note the numerous holes; 82 of her crew were killed.



YMS's on the starboard side of USS Mindinao (side opposite the explosion); protected from much of the blast yet still heavily damaged. 5 YMS men died, 86 injured.

say where it happened, nor does 339's deck-log mention such an event. But by matching 339's location by date to historical information on ship losses, it was determined that the ammunition ship was the USS Mount Hood (AE 11), and the place was Seeadler Harbor, on November 10, 1944. They had been lucky not to be closer when the explosion occurred, unlike some other YMS's. They had, however, been initiated into the real possibility of the sudden destruction of a ship. 36 of about 200 ships in the harbor then were damaged. The precise cause could never be determined, although enemy action was ruled out. The radius of the explosion cloud was 1,500 feet, and it rose 7,000 feet in the air. It made a trough in the harbor floor, 19 fathoms down, that was 100 yards long, 50 feet wide, and 30 to 40 feet deep.

HH diary November 10th: Just after chow this afternoon we heard and saw a terrific explosion. The USS Mount Hood blew up along with one YMS and one DE. Seven other YMS were put out of commission, with their casualties high. The Mount Hood was commissioned ship carrying ammo. The sweeps were alongside the "Mindanao" for repairs. We were about two miles away on the other side of Rana. [In the confusion after the explosion, not all circulating information was accurate - no YMS or destroyer escort (DE) were sunk; but the rest of the information was correct].

Electricians Mate Harper Gruber recalls a screen door blown off its hinges on 339, again two miles from the explosion.

On November 21st, 1944, USS YMS 339 left Seeadler Harbor for Leyte Gulf in the Philippines. It was no small convoy this time, but units of Task Force 78, a large amphibious group with defending escort warships. Initial base course 340 degrees, north northwest, speed 8 knots. It would be a 7 day voyage. En route they would encounter tropical temperatures in the 80's but windy with waves of about 8 feet, many whitecaps and some spray—not a storm, but definitely unsettled.

The men of YMS 339 had come more than 7,000 miles from Panama. And now they were going in harm's way.

