

Voyage 11 of the SS ROBIN GRAY – December, 1950

By: Richard J. Ryan, Master

Foreword:

Richard J. Ryan was one of many young men who chose a career in the U.S. Merchant Marine, which had been revitalized by the United States Maritime Commission under the Merchant Marine Act of 1936. This legislation provided for a cadet training system in which young men without previous sea experience would undergo a four-year course of practical and theoretical instruction, and after passing the applicable U.S. Coast Guard examinations would become licensed officers on seagoing merchant ships. In order to enter this training program, applicants were required to pass the same national examination required of applicants for the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis.

For those who enrolled in this program during the years of 1939 through 1941, U.S. entry into World War II affected their training in several unexpected ways. Cadets became Cadet/Midshipmen in the U.S. Naval Reserve; the course of training was drastically shortened; some were assigned to continue their training as Midshipmen on Navy ships; and all completed their allotted sea time under threat of military action. Some, indeed, lost their lives while they were still undergraduates. The survivors comprised the Class of 1942.

Mr. Ryan entered the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps program in 1939, served as Cadet on several merchant ships, and graduated in 1942 after license preparation at Fort Schuyler, NY. He served as Third Mate on the SS ROBIN LOCKSLEY during the relief of Malta in November, 1942, and thereafter rapidly advanced in rank, being appointed Master in 1945 at the age of 25. Captain Ryan pursued a maritime career with Robin, Moore McCormack and United States Lines until his retirement from the sea in 1985. He received the Silver Mariner Award from the USMMA Alumni Association in 1997.

The story of Voyage 11 of the SS ROBIN GRAY attests to the fact that Captain Ryan served as Master under combat conditions during the Korean War as well as World War II. The attached letters of commendation from the Department of the Navy, Military Sea Transportation Service, speak for themselves.

This document was prepared as part of the ongoing History Project of the Class of 1942 of the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps. Copies were donated to the Bland Memorial Library of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York, and to the American Merchant Marine Museum, also at Kings Point, New York.

Mark E. Campbell
Chairman, Class of '42

May, 1999

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From the Voyage Narrative Report:

Discharging of the damaged vehicles loaded in Pusan November 3rd to 16th continued from November 19th to November 25th at Buoy #8 Yokohama, on which date the ship was shifted to North Pier to commence loading.

Loading a general cargo of about 3500 tons weight continued until December 2nd.

The cargo consisted of supplies for the Tenth Corps. About 1000 tons of cargo was destined for Wonsan and the balance for Hungnam. Two minesweepers loaded on deck were bound for Sasebo.

The last few days in November saw much confusion in Yokohama as the reverses in the field had thrown the Logistical Command out of gear and consequently there were many sudden changes in the status of loading and sailing of ships. It was a very difficult period for the "Brass" in Tokyo and we had much sympathy for them at the same time quietly cursing them for fouling us up so much and so often.

After many changes of orders, including stoppage of loading, definite orders were issued to sail at 1700 December 2nd. The ship was ready to proceed to sea at that time when the port authorities canceled the pilot. I could get no explanation for the delay and could only follow the verbal orders of the Harbor Master to stand by with crew aboard and engine ready. Late in the morning of December 3rd we received orders to sail at 1330 that date.

Upon leaving the pier on December 3rd the pilot cast off all lines thereby having no control of the ship. The wind blew the bow off the pier thus causing the stern to touch the dock. It is believed the rudder and propeller touched the dock but this fact could not be observed from the deck. The ship was drawing 24 feet aft so the screw could not be observed. No tug was used in undocking.

The Chief Mate was sent aft as soon as it appeared the stern might touch the dock. He observed no apparent damage. The screw was stopped before the stern touched.

As a proper inspection of the screw and rudder would have consumed much time, probably necessitating the discharge of cargo, on a spot decision I decided to proceed out of Yokohama, having first verified from the Chief Engineer that the rudder was performing normally and no vibration was observed in the shaft.

To the present time we have been unable to get the ship lighter than 23 feet aft so still lack a good examination of the screw, but from performance and limited observation we believe there is no damage.

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We sailed from Yokohama four men short. The 2nd Electrician had developed a disease whereby he was losing his hearing and at the same time was subject to dizzy spells. I talked to Col. Graham, the CO of the Army Hospital in Yokohama, and on his advice released the man with a request to the Agent to repatriate him to the U.S.A.

One of the firemen developed a serious case of dysentery so he was unable to join the ship on departure. It is expected we will pick him up on our return to Yokohama.

The Boatswain and Third Cook failed to join through their own neglect or intent.

Stores were checked before departure and it was determined we were well stored in commodities until January 6th, the end of our 120 day storing period. Coffee was in short supply so 260 pounds were purchased. Checking on the coffee consumption I found 11.7 pounds per day had been consumed. This amount works out to about 10 cups of coffee per person per day (roughly) and with the great deal of port time with its inevitable coffee time guests this figure, while high, did not look too excessive.

Six passengers embarked in Yokohama; two Army officers and four enlisted men.

Departure from Yokohama was taken at 1524 December 3rd. Arrival at Sasebo was taken 1 day 21 hours and 18 minutes later at 1242 December 5th. The run of 709 miles was accomplished at an average speed of 15.65 knots. The passage was made against head winds of force 4 to 6 and against the Japanese current.

A pilot anchored the ship in Sasebo. Soon after arrival at the anchorage we discharged the two minesweepers. No pilot was provided departing Sasebo. The narrow entrance was navigated in darkness with the very valuable assistance of the radar set. Departure for Wonsan was taken at 1915 December 5th.

Arrival at the Harbor Entrance Control Vessel (HECV) off Wonsan was taken at 2145 December 6th after a passage of 422 miles in good weather. Steaming time was 1 day 2 hours and 30 minutes. The average speed was 15.93 knots.

The HECV informed me we could anchor near him in 42 fathoms of water or steam around all night. The ship was anchored at 2216. We were informed enemy planes were in the vicinity and to black-out the ship.

During the night artillery flares and flashes could be readily observed toward Wonsan, 23 sea miles away. We did not know it at the time but the night we were anchored off was the night our troops evacuated to the north along the coast to Hungnam.

At 0950 the next morning a radio message was received from Tokyo ordering the ship to Hungnam. We proceeded there immediately, arriving at the HECV at 1200. Chart overlays showing the swept channel through the mine field were passed from the HECV and we proceeded to the harbor. Arrival off the lighthouse was taken at 1512 December 7th and the ship was anchored at 1553.

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On arrival in the harbor we observed a medium sized Japanese freighter with her bow awash and learned she had struck a mine entering Hungnam a few days previous. She had entered without data on the swept channel and had cut across the minefield.

During the night of December 7th snow commenced falling until about six inches had fallen by noon of December 8th.

An Army Captain was aboard at 0930 December 8th with orders for the ship to dock. The snow was falling heavily at this time, reducing visibility to 400 feet. No pilots were available at Hungnam so with the aid of our trusty radar, two Navy tugs and local knowledge supplied by Captain Dawson the ship was brought through two miles of crowded anchorage and docked in a blinding blizzard. A Skipper on one of the other vessels in port later remarked I had an excellent docking pilot on board in Hungnam. I agree – sometimes he was sitting inside the radar and at others on my left shoulder!

As soon as the ship was docked we opened three hatches and prepared to completely discharge the ship. All Hungnam and Wonsan cargo was to be discharged.

After starting discharge in a burst of energy for thirty-six hours we did no more than get rid of a few hundred bags of mail. It gradually became apparent Hungnam was to be the last port in a general evacuation of North East Korea, although at this time no order had been issued to commence evacuation. The 1st Marine Division was trapped to the northwest of Hamhung at the Chosin Reservoir plateau. As soon as a road to the Marines could be held they would commence retreating to the sea and be evacuated to the south.

On December 10th an LST came alongside with a request to discharge two minesweepers she had on deck. We were asked to pick up the boats and lower them in the water as the LST drew away. Much to our surprise (we just can't get used to these things) these were the same boats we had loaded in Yokohama and discharged in Sasebo a few days before. We discharged one of the boats, then orders came down to commence discharge of about 80 vehicles in No. 3 hatch. We discharged vehicles during the night. It was now no secret the port would be evacuated. A 24 mile perimeter had been set up around the port and the Marines had begun to come in.

The vehicles and equipment we discharged were for a unit of the Army who were to be the last troops in Hungnam. I talked with the Colonel in charge of this unit and he showed me the hill on which he was to make his last stand and then run for the beach. When we arrived in Pusan a week later we found this entire unit, vehicles and all, had been airlifted from Hungnam to Pusan and preceded our arrival there by several days.

On December 11th we commenced reloading mail and on the 12th commenced loading Marine vehicles in place of the army vehicles we had discharged. During the night of December 12th an air-raid alert was sounded.

December 13th saw the completion of our loading. Approximately 190 vehicles of all types had been loaded and 79 enlisted men with 2 officers embarked. Orders had been received from MSTs to proceed to Pusan. The ship left the dock at 1731 and departed the lighthouse at 1815. The swept channel was run at 12 knots and the HECV was left astern at 2002.

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Four of our six passengers embarked in Yokohama left the ship in Hungnam, two remained aboard and disembarked on arrival in Pusan.

When I think back to Seattle in early August and how I thought the Army and Navy were confused and inefficiently run I had little hint this confusion would grow to enormous proportions. After Hungnam December 7th to 13th I realize our Army has never been in such a confused state. People have compared it to Dunkerque but I believe it was worse because at Dunkerque everyone had but one purpose, and that was well known. In Hungnam no one knew what was going on and acted accordingly.

At times we were discharging out of one hatch and loading the cargo in another hatch a few hours later. Another hatch would be loading vehicles when all operations would be suspended while a few reels of telephone wire were discharged. We spent an hour looking for some dynamite and caps for an engineer who had to blow up a bridge. We found them stowed side by side, marked Engineer Equipment. Japanese longshoremen were kicking hand grenades out of their way as they worked cargo. We had to send a soldier in the hold with a box to pick up all the loose grenades he could find and then throw them overboard. Two 10.7 ton tractors were loaded one night with 5 ton gear – against the Chief Mate's and my protest – but they were loaded. The Marines were loading and the Army was discharging. Whichever outfit had the highest ranking officer standing by the hatch was usually the one that worked its cargo. The Robin Gray was in the middle and I am ever thankful for Mr. Williamson's calm disposition. An excitable Chief Mate during this period would have been an anticlimax.

The passage from Hungnam to Pusan was accomplished in smooth weather. The passage of 332 miles was made in 21 hours and 59 minutes for an average speed of 15.09 knots. Arrival at Pusan was taken at 1614 December 14th.

The 79 Marine enlisted men were quartered in No. 5 Upper Tween Deck. They had cot stretchers and mountain sleeping bags and after temperatures of 17 below zero at Chosin they were comfortable.

I had talked with their CO, Captain Ira Hayes, before embarkation and attempted to work out a satisfactory arrangement about food and toilet facilities. All of the men were vehicle drivers or mechanics so I had agreed the ship's cooks would heat any food the Marines supplied. They raided a nearby warehouse and amply repaid the ship in excess stores for whatever overtime or trouble they caused. The Chief Engineer was very cooperative regarding water and the men had showers; the first baths in over a month for many of the men.

The ship laid at anchor in Pusan for about 48 hours after arrival, docking at 1600 December 16th. Work commenced immediately on discharging the Marine equipment and continued on until 0720 December 20th discharging part of the other cargo originally destined for Wonsan and Hungnam. On completion of discharge on December 20th there remained approximately 1800 tons of cargo still in the ship consisting mostly of drums of asphalt, landing mat, building shell and building insulation.

Orders had been received to proceed back to Hungnam and departure for there from Pusan was taken at 1030 December 20th.

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On departure this date three men were left ashore. The Chief Electrician had been ill for several weeks and on the recommendation of Col. Cirlot of the Army Hospital he was repatriated to Japan and then to the U.S.A. The Baker was left in the hospital with fever and a heavy cold. A wiper failed to join of his own neglect or intent. At this time we were seven crew members short of full complement. We had no electricians, only one cook and were short a Boatswain, a fireman and a wiper.

The passage from Pusan to Hungnam was made in smooth weather with good visibility. Arrival was taken at 0700 December 21st after a passage of 16.19 knots over the distance of 332 miles in 20 hours and 30 minutes.

The ship was anchored at 0813 the day of arrival. Orders were received to have all hatches open and the engine ready so the ship could shift at a moment's notice.

The ship lay at anchor December 21st. During the night were treated to a display of fireworks horrible in its destruction and yet beautiful in color. Fire bombs were dropped all along the hills and ridges, tracers of orange and red screamed through the sky and whiter than white artillery flares made the surrounding hills as naked as bright daylight. Tracer answering tracer could be seen around the extremes of our view. We estimated the enemy fire to be only three or four miles away. Naval ships in the harbor were constantly firing toward the hills creating a steady crump, crump of shellfire.

The ship was docked at 0930 December 22nd; this time in clear weather.

The Marines and the 7th Division had been completely evacuated by this time as well as most of the ROK's. The only units now remaining were two regiments of the 3rd Division. We commenced loading as much of the 3rd Division vehicles and equipment as they would give us. By this time a system had been set up where a loading list was presented to the ship and the Mate made a stowage plan. A loading officer was assigned to each ship and he had plenty of help in getting the cargo alongside where he needed it. Loading went fairly well and we had good cooperation from the loading officers.

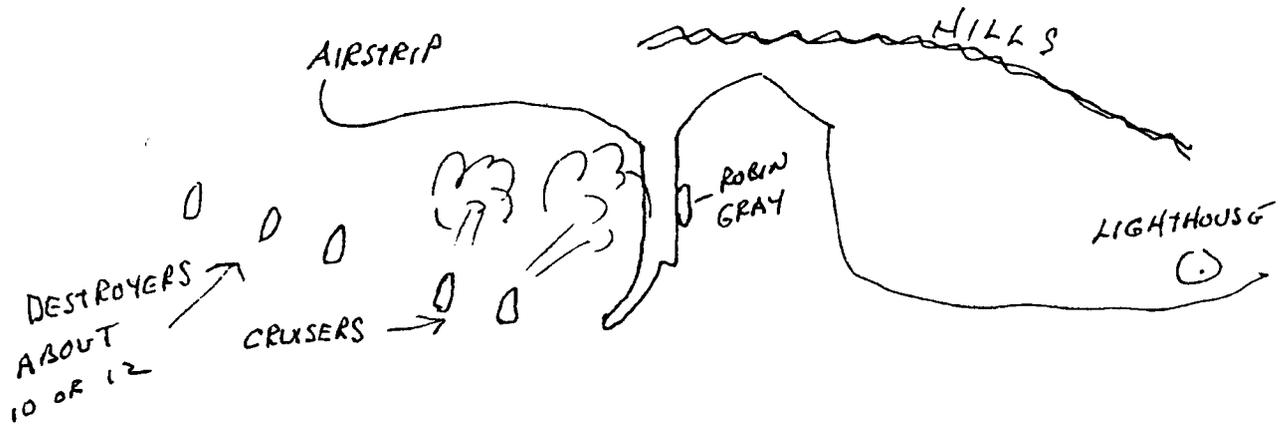
We loaded during the night, completing at 0240 December 23rd. Tugs were alongside shortly after completing discharge and we were clear of the dock at 0334. We proceeded directly out of the harbor, taking Departure at 0424 and passing the HECV at 0645.

The night of December 22nd-23rd was the noisiest night I have ever spent. Even the air raids in Malta couldn't compare to the deafening roar of gunfire at Hungnam. The defense perimeter had grown so small it barely existed. We could see the CCF firing along the airstrip to the south of the town and also out past the lighthouse to the north of the town. Directly in front of the ship was a hill so our view was cut off to the west.

The cruisers St. Paul and Rochester were anchored off near the dock and their constant fire of 8" or 10" shells drove us all for ear plugs. We were evidently in some sort of pocket created by the harbor and the hills to the west so the concussion of the heavy guns hit with a great force. We had a double sound effect that was very loud and heavy. The concussion was enough to make the glassware rattle. It was necessary to keep doors open so they would not vibrate when the shells were fired.

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The position was something like this:



We could hear the shells swooshing overhead, and could look straight down the barrels of the guns as they fired over the ship.

We embarked 196 Army enlisted men and 8 officers for Pusan. As these men were a unit and considerably more men than we had carried before I refused to allow the ship to do more than allow them the space and facilities to help themselves. The unit had cooks so we allowed them to use the galley when our cook was finished and they cooked their food and were self sufficient in their rations. We were getting low on water so the Army was not as fortunate as the Marines regarding showers. Perhaps we are partial!

The voyage from Hungnam to Pusan was accomplished in moderate weather. Arrival at Pusan was taken at 0200 December 24th. The passage of 332 miles was accomplished in 21 hours and 36 minutes for an average speed of 15.37 knots.

The ship remained at anchor until 1450 the day of arrival when we docked and commenced discharging troops and equipment. Discharge continued throughout the night and was completed 0700 December 25th. The ship left the dock at 0857 Christmas Day for the anchorage where a quiet day was spent by all hands. The only incident to mar Christmas Day was an ordinary seaman who had been running around the alleyways with a loaded "burp" machine gun. The man was locked up to cool off for a few hours and the Chief Mate and I searched the quarters, recovering two rifles, one machine gun and two loaded .45 automatics amongst the crew.

The ship remained at anchor until 1930 December 27th at which time we shifted to the pier to discharge the remaining 1800 tons of cargo loaded in Yokohama a month previous.

Discharging continued until 0530 January 1st, at which time the ship was completely free of cargo and all holds cleaned. Departure from Pusan was taken at 0754 January 1st, vessel bound for Yokohama.

It was necessary to purchase some stores from the Army in Pusan. Approximately \$180.00 worth of staples were purchased.

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The wiper who had missed the ship returned but it was necessary to hospitalize an oiler with a rupture which the doctor in Pusan deemed serious enough to require surgery in Japan, as there were no facilities in Pusan. Departing Pusan we were still seven men short of full complement.

Richard J. Ryan, Master

Submitted by: Capt Richard J. Ryan
1717 Homewood Blvd. #461
Delray Beach, FL 33445-6806

(Received March 22, 1999.)

Transcribed by: Mark E. Campbell
Chairman, Class of '42

Attachments: Letters of Commendation from the Department of the Navy, Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS):

From: A. F. JUNKER
Captain, U.S. Navy
Deputy Commander, MSTS
Western Pacific

To: Master
SS Robin Gray

From: W. R. THAYER
Captain, U.S. Navy
Deputy Commander, MSTS

To: Williams Dimond and Company
215 Market Street
San Francisco, California

From: William M. CALLAGHAM
Rear Admiral, USN
Commander, MSTS

To: Seas Shipping Company, Inc.
39 Courtlandt Street
New York, New York

MAR 22 1950

IN REPLY REFER TO:



DEPARTMENT OF THE NAVY
MILITARY SEA TRANSPORTATION SERVICE
WESTERN PACIFIC
APO 500 C/O POSTMASTER
SAN FRANCISCO, CALIF.

DEC 3 01950

Master
SS Robin Gray

Dear Sir:

It is with sincere pleasure that the expression on the part of Commander Naval Forces, Far East, Vice Admiral C. T. Joy, U. S. Navy, is quoted below for your information and the information of your officers and crew-members, whose loyal performance has contributed to this accomplishment:

"MY MOST SINCERE CONGRATULATIONS ON A JOB WELL DONE X YOUR PERFORMANCE THROUGHOUT THE KOREAN CAMPAIGN HAS ALWAYS BEEN NOTABLE X IN THE SUCCESSFUL REDEPLOYMENT OF GROUND FORCES FROM NORTHEAST KOREA YOUR INITIATIVE AND YOUR ENTHUSIASTIC AND PROMPT RESPONSE TO ALL DEMANDS INDICATE THAT YOUR ORGANIZATION IS AT ITS BEST WHEN THE CHIPS ARE DOWN X THE MERCHANT MARINERS WHO PERFORMED FOR YOU DID SO SILENTLY BUT THEIR ACCOMPLISHMENT SPEAKS LOUDLY X I FIND IT COMFORTING TO WORK WITH SUCH TEAMMATES X C T JOY"

The cooperation and assistance of the Merchant Marine in the above mentioned operation adds but one more page of glory in Merchant Marine history, and I desire to add my own congratulations to those of Admiral Joy.



A. F. JUNKER
Captain, U. S. Navy
Deputy Commander, MSTS
Western Pacific

COPY

DEPUTY COMMANDER
MILITARY SEA TRANSPORTATION SERVICE, PACIFIC
23 Berry Street
San Francisco 7, California

MSTSP-31A-Ty
P15
Ser 310317
26 Jan 1951

Williams Dimond and Company
215 Market Street
San Francisco, California

Gentlemen:

It has come to my attention that the time chartered vessels,
S. S. WOUTHWIND, S. S. ROBIN GRAY and S. S. ROBIN KIRK,
were noteworthy for the high caliber of their performance
during the evacuation of Wonsan and Hungnam, Korea.

It is my desire to extend my own congratulations to the
Masters and crews of the S. S. SOUTHWIND, S. S. ROBIN GRAY
and S. S. ROBIN KIRK.

Sincerely yours,

(Sgd)

W. R. Thayer,

W. R. THAYER
Captain, U. S. Navy

Encl:
(1) Ltr from Commander
Task Force NINETY

C O P Y

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COMMANDER
MILITARY SEA TRANSPORTATION SERVICE

7 MARCH 1951

SEAS SHIPPING COMPANY, INC.
39 COURTLANDT STREET
NEW YORK, NEW YORK

GENTLEMEN:

I AM INFORMED BY CAPTAIN A. F. JUNKER, USN, COMMANDER, MILITARY SEA TRANSPORTATION SERVICE, WESTERN PACIFIC, THAT THE FOLLOWING VESSELS WHICH YOU HAVE OPERATED UNDER CHARTER TO MSTs HAVE BEEN OFFICIALLY COMMENDED BY REAR ADMIRAL J. H. DOYLE, USN, COMMANDER TASK FORCE NINETY, FOR THE HIGH CALIBER OF THEIR PERFORMANCE DURING THE SEA EVACUATIONS OF WONSAN AND HUNGNAM, KOREA:

ROBIN KIRK
ROBIN GRAY

PERMIT ME TO ADD MY PERSONAL EXPRESSION OF APPRECIATION AS WELL AS THAT OF THE ENTIRE MILITARY SEA TRANSPORTATION SERVICE FOR THE SPLENDID ASSISTANCE, EXEMPLIFIED BY THE PERFORMANCE OF THESE SHIPS, RENDERED BY YOUR ORGANIZATION IN THE PRESENT EMERGENCY. SUCH SUPPORT IS INDICATIVE OF THE CONTRIBUTION WHICH THE AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE HAS SO OFTEN MADE TO THE NATIONAL SECURITY THROUGH ITS ASSISTANCE TO THE UNITED STATES NAVY IN THE FULFILLMENT OF ITS MISSION.

SINCERELY,

(SIGNED)

WILLIAM M. CALLAGHAN
REAR ADMIRAL, USN

cc: Capt. Richard Ryan, ssROBIN GRAY,
% Wm. Cotts & Co., Ltd., DURBAN

cc: Capt. Jas. C. Herbert, ssROBIN KIRK,
Baltimore, Md.

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(mailed April 2, 1951
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