

St. Patrick's Day, 1945/4

For me, St. Patrick's Day, 1945, started out much earlier, New Year's Day, 1931, to be exact. On that day, the Wolf family of Hermosa Beach, consisting of my Mother and Dad, my two brothers, nine and fifteen, and we twins, eleven, were on the steamship, S.S. Catalina, on a one-day trip from San Pedro to Catalina Island. The trip was a surprise Christmas present from a distant cousin.

The S.S. Catalina was a stately, all white, tall and narrow wooden ship with a sharp vertical prow and a single smoke stack. Its main cabin featured huge glass windows and row after row of varnished wooden slat benches. We children eagerly explored it from stem to stern, and from the top deck to the near water-level deck where the lifeboats were carried in open wells, flush with the outside of the hull.

I was excited to see twin-engine amphibian airplanes darting past us on their quick trips between San Pedro and Avalon harbor at Catalina Island.

Everything about that day was wonderful. The sights around Avalon, the rain, the cold wind, even the cold sandwiches, but, it went by much too quickly. Huge red and green neon signs greeted us in our rainy after-dark return to San Pedro.

It would be many years before I would be on a steamship again.

Fast forward to March 1945. 4

I am now a twenty-four year old Private in the U.S. Army, temporarily stationed at Camp Stoneman, near the small town of Richmond, on the banks of San Francisco's East Bay, back towards Stockton. I am one of an endless stream of Infantry replacements being readied for deployment overseas.

I had completed Infantry Basic Training at Camp Roberts in January, enjoyed a brief furlough at home in Burbank, had three weeks of advanced combat training at Fort Ord, and then sent here. Who knew when I would see my wife and our nine months-old daughter again?

This facility is well organized, but it operates in the classic Army tradition of hurry up and wait. We sweat out long lines for physical exams and shots. Lots of shots. In other buildings, we go from one line to another as uniforms and equipment are checked and replaced. Every personal item we will need overseas is going with us, carried by us. A gruff Sergeant shows us how to roll each item of clothing into a tight roll and pack it all into a sturdy, olive drab-colored canvas duffle bag. "You will take **no** civilian items", he bellows. And he is watching.

For what turned out to be our last week, we have been cut off from the outside. No passes. No visitors. No phone calls. Where are we going? And when?

March sixteenth turns out to be **the** day.

The Sergeant bellows, "Fall in". It is raining and windy. We struggle to get our duffle bags up on our backs and snarl at the way the wind lifts the light-weight plastic ponchos draped over our backs and our bags. We're getting soaked.

We march past one huge warehouse after another on our way to the wharf.

As we round the corner of the last warehouse, we see our ship, much smaller than I expected. I stare in disbelief. I am looking at a ghost from my past. This isn't a troopship. It's the once-proud S.S. Catalina, now painted dull gray for wartime service. We're going overseas in that? I blurt out my discovery. The G.I.'s around me lose no time telling me what they think I am full of. Her overall lines and the way she carries her lifeboats are major clues.

We struggle up the narrow gangway under the weight of our gear, and move into the main cabin, passing a large cast bronze plaque that reads: "S.S. Catalina".

The varnished wood benches are gone. The cabin is empty.

The Sergeant again; "Drop your gear in rows, and park your butts".

The boarding now completed, we slip quietly away. No whistles. No parade. No families waving goodbye. Now that we are inside, it has stopped raining.

Once underway, we march past a mountain of box lunches, and return to our duffle bags or go out on the open deck. Each white box contains an apple, an orange, two sandwiches and a pack of cookies. The Sergeant warns us to use the trash cans, but lots of debris goes overboard.

Looking astern, we see an endless trail of boxes and half-eaten fruit in the wake of our ship. The Sergeant is really angry. "Of all the stupid asses", he bellows, "Out at sea, a trail like that could lead a Jap ship or plane right to our ship." "Wake up, damn it. We are at war!"

It is getting dark. No one out on deck now. Moving along with no lights is spooky. We wonder where we are going.

Hours later, we tie up alongside a huge, dimly lit warehouse. No one tells us where we are, but after the war, I deduce that it must have been the Oakland Army Base. We pick up our duffle bags again and form lines in the warehouse. Leaving our bags for awhile, we walk past rows of tables where smiling Red Cross Girls are handing out doughnuts and coffee. They are the last civilians we see.

With that break finished, we retrieve our duffle bags, make our way across the warehouse, and struggle up the gangway of a huge gray troopship looming ominously in near darkness. We learn later that this ship is already loaded with more than two thousand troops who have arrived by bus and train and who are now in their cargo-hold quarters, as many as five decks below.

Those of us from Camp Stoneman have been organized into casual companies of precise sizes to match some of the smaller spaces on the ship. Our company of about 120 men is assigned to a small, dimly lit, windowless hold, immediately

under the top forward deck, just behind the anchor chain hold. The canvas bunks are five-high, each so close to the one above that we can't sit upright. There is more headroom on the top bunk. Another guy helps me get my bag up there. There's not much talking. I lay back and wonder about a lot of things. A sense of motion tells me that we are underway. I look at my watch. It is two A.M.

Hours later, I awake with a queezy feeling, very queezy. We're rolling side-to-side, combined with a slow pitching up, a pause, and then a crashing down. The ship shudders ominously. What's happening? Are we in a storm?

With daybreak, we are allowed on deck. There is no storm. It's a clear day with blue sky, white clouds, and large swells on an otherwise smooth ocean surface.

Someone reminds us that today is St. Patrick's Day. That's a good omen.

I am surprised to see that we are traveling alone. The training films had always shown ships in convoys. I learn that our protection comes from our speed of sixteen to twenty knots. Our diagonal path across those swells at that speed leads to lots of wasted food for the first few days.

Our ship is on a generally south-westerly course but with occasional changes in heading as a matter of safety. I think we all expected to go to Hawaii, but no, we are headed much further south, and then west to the South Pacific.

There is very little to do, and almost no space to do it. The Navy food is great, but with so many troops to feed, the chow lines snake all over the ship. We joke that since we've finally finished breakfast, we might as well get in line for lunch.

We've been at sea for twenty boring, tedious days in tropical heat and humidity before we drop anchor at Hollandia, New Guinea. The noise in our compartment is beyond description as the anchor chain pounds its way out of the hold. Once we stop moving, the heat and humidity become even worse, but we can't take off our shirts for relief. With the risk of catching malaria from the ever-present mosquitos, we must keep our shirts and sleeves buttoned, wear metal bicycle clips around the cuffs of our pants, smear our faces with mosquito repellent and keep our fatigue caps in place. The anti-malarial Atabrin tablets we have been taking for the last two weeks have turned our skin a sickly yellow. We look bad and smell worse.

By now, we know that we are headed for the Philippines, but in this part of the Pacific, it is no longer safe to travel alone. We stay at anchor for about a week while a vast array of cargo and fighting ships are assembled into a convoy. There is no escaping the close quarters and the awful heat and humidity. This is the tropics. So far, I don't like them.

When it is our ship's turn to move out, we endure awful mechanical growls and clunks in our compartment as the anchor is lifted and its chain falls back into its hold. We're underway at last, but at a painfully slow pace. We've all heard that there is safety in numbers. It turns out that they are right.

We are thirty days out of San Francisco by the time we drop anchor in Leyte Gulf in the central Philippines. Debarking this vast load of troops into landing craft is a noisy operation and takes all day. Our small company from Camp Stoneman debarks quietly the next day.

Sitting on my duffle bag in a small landing craft, with our troopship towering over us, I can finally see just how big our ship really is, and appreciate the task that has just been completed. While fierce fighting continues in some not-too-distant parts of the South Pacific, we have been able to avoid it.

Some would say we were mighty lucky. I'm not Irish, but I believe we were blessed. We left San Francisco on St. Patrick's Day, not on the S.S. Catalina, but on what must have been St. Patrick's own troopship. Incredibly, it was named, the **General Patrick**.