TOM MIDTLYNG

S: Today is the 29th of May, 1988, I am visiting Tom Midtlyng at his farm home not far from Helmville, Montana. Tommy has consented to give a review a bit of his career in the Coast Guard. Tommy, take it away...

T: I graduated from the Coast Guard Academy in May, 1933 and I went to the MOLHOVEY at Boston, then commander Coffin and cruised to north Europe. It wasn't long until I had orders to the OSSERFY in Portland Maine, reported there in January 1934 and was detached in August of '35. It was a very pleasant cruise, one of the most competent sea going captains I ever served under, P.K. Perry. I learned all about piloting. He was an expert and I think some of it washed off on me. If there was any port on the Maine coast, we were there. We had a lot of ice breaking experience with a small ship, coal burner. I'm not much of an engineer but with that old engine, I was able to figure out what made it turn.

After that, I went to the AREADMEE, Coast Guard yard. This was the end of the 165 footers, after they phased out of rum running. They were called the squadron of the damned, the North Atlantic chase and rum runners.

S: Why was it deemed the squadron of the damned?

T: Running around the Gulf of Maine and off Lurcher light vessel shoal in the wintertime, or almost anytime with a 165 footer, it was pretty rugged.

The trip around to the West Coast, our home port was going to be Oakland, the old Coast Guard base at Alameda. Had an interesting cruise. Admiral Hamlet was being phased out at that time and he was aboard hoping that the salt water would improve his health. I was aboard the AREADMEE from August of '35 to the end of 1937. We still had some rum running on the West Coast. I was more or less horrified; I

thought when I got orders that I was going to sunny California and after places like Boston and Portland, Maine and the Maine coast, I was fed up with fog. I found out that the West Coast of the US, from California up to Alaska, was just about as foggy as anyplace you can get.

After the AREADMEE, I went to the SHOSHONE in December of 1937. I was not aboard the SHOSHONE under commander Treebees very long before headquarters put out an all coast asking for volunteers to go whaling and that sounded good to me. And that was one of the most frantic experiences of my life.

I had just bought a new car; had to get rid of that and off the ship in a hurry and in those days I went by train. I remember the only animals that could go through Chicago in those days were cattle or sheep or pigs, passengers had to change stations, so in some manner I got to Washington DC and then it was quite a hassle getting my passport and so forth. I really don't know how I made it. I went across from New York on the Manhattan. Got there and they were pulling up the gangplanks. My possessions were in one trunk. I had an officer's cap and a civilian suit. Loaded down with movie cameras, still cameras, books on whaling, books on Australia.

I was to join the whaler Norway, but the whaler sailed before I could get there, so I went into Hamburg Germany, and that was another frantic experience. By rail across from Hamburg to Holland, across in a channel steamer and then through to the big railroad station in London, and down to South Hampton, where I joined the Frango whaling expedition.

I was about seven months at sea while they whaled in Shark Bay western Australia. We went to South Hampton and stopped in Africa to pick up some killer boats to cross the Indian Ocean to Shark Bay, which in those days was quite a primitive place, more or less of a desert, and very thinly populated.

We got on the whaling grounds around the end of June, 1938 and then I put in my trial by fire as an inspector on a whaling ship. The Department of Fisheries from Perth, Australia sent an inspector up, Matthew Goodlad, who was a hard-nosed Scotchman, but he knew nothing about whaling and I was in the same category. Nobody had briefed me and I had no reports from previous people but I did have all

the regulations. Something hit the fan in a hurry when the illegal whales started coming aboard. I don't think the expedition I was with was any different from a German or Jap, they were all out to kill as many whales in the shortest period of time. The basic wage for everybody, gunners, the captain, and the crew, depended upon the amount of whale oil, so things got pretty rugged.

Western Australia was the breeding and calving grounds for the humpback whale and they could only kill them during the day, so most of the whales show up at night on the flensing deck and that's where I was. And that was not appreciated. I was told I should not be on the flensing deck at night.

I educated the Australian inspector, what little I knew, but I could read the whaling instructions, so without going into a lot of details, things got pretty tough with illegal whales, short whales, whales with milk, showing they'd been killed while having a calf alongside. So I made up messages to Goodlad's boss in Perth about the violations and he came out to the whaler and informed the captain that any more violations and he was going to send a cruiser and bring the whole whaling expedition down to Perth. I was not very popular.

But fortunately, I had a lot of friends, including the gunner of the Torfin, Andres Annlee, and he told me a lot I wouldn't have known, about a letter from a gunner on a Norwegian expedition off Madagascar, where they were killing everything, including right whales, which was a no-no, and they would measure the whale over the round.

After the captain of the whaling expedition was warned, I can't say it was very enjoyable. The officers wouldn't talk to me, so to get even with them, I'd go to the ward room on the early chow and sit down till the late chow, and they'd all squirm around because they weren't to talk to me. So I gave some of them ulcers.

I had a few pleasant experiences, had a lot of friends in the crew and some of the engineer officers, but it was not what I'd call a pleasant experience. I do think I profited by it in my later career when now and then I have something to do with running boarding teams, to use a little milk of kindness, how to board people and not make enemies for the Coast Guard and also not to put up with any law enforcement , Coast

guard or otherwise, who have the ability to look askance when there should be a violation.

So I got back from the whaling cruise to New York harbor at the end of 1938 and the whaler had the tanks sealed and I never did find out what the violation. I estimated that the Scotchman and I, between the two of us, the Frango would have had about a million dollars more whale oil if we hadn't been aboard to inspect.

S: Who sealed the tanks, was it Customs?

T: Yes, I didn't have to appear in court or anything.

S: Why did the ship come into New York?

T: The Frango was registered under the American flag. Around that time, they revamped all the laws for the Merchant Marine about the number of American citizens were officers and crew, but they forgot all about whaling. All the Norwegians had to do, they got the Frango registered in this country and then brought her to Norway and fitted out and manned 100 per cent Norwegians. They had a few Norwegian officers that were American citizens and most of them lived in Norway. I guess I can't blame them.

One day they hoisted the American flag upside down- that didn't bother anybody but me. I figured that was very appropriate for that time- things were getting kind of hot- I figured the thing was out of control.

After getting back from whaling, I went to the TAHOMA, in Cleveland Ohio, she was 165 foot ice breaker. Pretty bad ice in Lake Eerie and I think I learned a little bit about breaking ice or bumping into it. I was not aboard the TAHOMA very long before I got orders to Coast Guard headquarters, to be the commandant's aid and that was a pleasant experience.

We had three ear admirals, Admiral Wacey was the Commandant, the assistant commandant was Leon Colville, and the Engineer and chief was Harvey Johnson. I'm a lieutenant junior grade and we had a pay clerk, Bailey. That was the staff.

Admiral Wacey was a wonderful man to work for. He treated me like I was his son and I gave him my whole life if necessary. He had made commandant from commander and there was a lot of old hard-nosed captains that didn't want to accept him. But Admiral Colville, another fine gentleman, protected him and I did too in that if he told me that he was busy and nobody was to get into his office, I didn't care who it was, they didn't get in there unless over my dead body.

One of my rewards was a certain officer that would get me to his command so he could discipline me. That same officer finally got in trouble and was given the option of retiring or having a court marshal. He blew into the office one day and informed me that when he retired, he was going to go up to Pennsylvania where he would have a farm and raise hogs and he would name the hogs after his friends in the Coast Guard. So I appealed to Admiral Wacey that he ought to have a little more horse power there, at least a lieutenant commander, that was no place for a JG and a pay clerk.

One highlight of my experience as aid to the Commandant was we had a Captain Wakeman, a very fine gentleman, and he decided to retire on thirty years service. All hands from the ship were amazed-why was Captain Wakeman retiring? Did he inherit money? Does he have a wonderful job? People just didn't retire in those days. I forget what the age limit was, this was astonishing. Now when you look at the retired list in the Coast Guard.

After headquarters, I went to the ITASKA in August 1940, in San Diego. Captain Willie Perkins was skipper and a very wonderful man to work under. I was the navigator. We made three trips through the Panama Canal in about three months. Went around to the East Coast, I forget what they were going to do, put on guns or something and back to San Diego and then back to the East Coast, Brooklyn navy yard. We turned the ITASKA over to the British, to a commander Caslet, quite a British hero. He took some British cruiser in China down the Yangtzee River or something.

I was with the British Navy for quite a while and my big problem was they were bringing these British ships in from the Mediterranean that had been dive-bombed and so forth and one day this British officer said: The poor Deli! I said: Put it in English- what are you talking about?

I called it the Del-hi. Then, the Hood got sunk by the Germans and this British officer was bawling: The poor Ood! I said: For gods sakes, put it in English. Then I found out it was the Hood. They were all nice people- they drank a little too much. I was with a skeleton crew, we went out on Long Island Sound. I will say our standards of cleanliness were far superior to the British, but again most of them had come of ships in the Mediterranean.

Then I was sent to the DAPHNE for just a few months, in June of 1941 and September 6th, I detached to the PERTHIUS, a 165 foot patrol boat in San Diego.

I wasn't there very long before we go to Alaska, to Dutch Harbor. That's not a very nice place to be in the winter. In all my seagoing career of some 19 years, I was in more danger of losing my life and the ship in places like Chelicoff Straits and Unimak Pass, trying to land heavy freight with a 165 foot patrol boat. Had a very harrowing experience at Scotch Cap and Cape Seracheff. We ended up in Cordova Alaska and that's where Pearl harbor happened.

Communications were very sad in that part of Alaska in those days. They had the Army signal corps, and people came down to the ship and wanted to know what happened. I didn't know. We were there for quite a few hours before we got the idea that there was a war going on and then I had to be in command of the only major war vessel in Alaska.

We got sent down to Juneau and then out the icy straits to the open ocean- north and south Indian pass- we were supposed to maintain a patrol night and day. In Alaska in that kind of weather in the wintertime, it was only matter of time before we ended up on the rocks. I was very happy to leave Alaska.

After Pearl Harbor, we got in a horrible storm leaving Cordova and we had our depth chargers all armed and rolling around on deck, some set for 25-50 feet, but we got them back on the racks, I don't know how.

We finally got out of Alaska, down the inside passage and we had no recognition signals. One time it was getting dark and we saw a ship, didn't know what it was. So we ran our search lights out toward him and all of a sudden, big red balls came flying through the air. My exec suggested we get out of there before they sank us. I was so disgusted by

then, I said: Hell's bells, that wouldn't be bad at all. It was some freighter with army and they had some small canons or something and thought we looked like a submarine. We got to Seattle and down back to San Diego and first we went into the shipyard at Mare Island. We had a cracked propeller shaft.

We finally got out of San Francisco and were to escort a new submarine down to San Diego. We were all pretty green, didn't know much about anything, and we thought we had a contact on a submarine, so we dropped a depth charger or two and the submarine thought they'd run into a log.

Then we got into some more storms coming down the Coast and one engine went haywire and while we were working on it, someone dropped a wrench on the cam shaft on the other engine, so I thought we were going to blow ashore on the Oregon coast. We finally got off San Francisco at night and they had an anti-submarine net, but there was a Coast Guard 125 footer and we thought we'd sneak alongside and scare the hell out of him. He called somebody and they opened the net for us and we got into base Alameda.

S: You had a submarine with you all this time?

T: Not the whole time, maybe he got disgusted and felt safer without us. I think it was the Silversides. We had no recognition signals- kind of weird.

Then I went, in September 1943, to the PF 34, the LONGBEACH. The first of the PFs and the navy asked me to find out if it was twin screw or single screw and how many RPMs it would make.

Just before Christmas, 1943, we took off for the southwest Pacific with the GLENDALE, Gobler was the skipper. We beat our way across, first stop was Pango Pango, then Newmeeha, then through the Great Barrier Reef went up to Gladstone ,Australia, then up to Kerns, Australia. We were supposed to have a pilot for the inside passage there, between the mainland and the coral reefs. I thought it was about the easiest navigating after being in Alaska and the inside passage in Portland Maine. We went up the river to Gladstone, an army base, I forget why now. We never knocked a wheel off on the coral reefs. We went from

Australia to Milne bay, to Bewak Island, to the Philippines and then, as Admiral Sprow said, they sent us back to the States in the middle of winter and ended up in Boston.

I was very happy to leave the LONGBEACH. I went to a Coast Guard base in California, and they going to put me on some transport as the exec, and Hadley Evans was running the show. I knew him very well, a wonderful person, so he got me the WINNEBAGO, to put the first of that class in commission. They had the first three bladed propeller and everything; it was unbelievable. I think we ended up with a five bladed propeller. We had a twin five inch gun forward and aft and a quad 40 millimeter in front of the bridge and another aft and hedgehogs and you name it. Twenty millimeters all over the place.

I thought we'd take all the precautions, boresight the five inch guns because we were going to shoot it at a sled target, which we did. Some of these young officers had never heard a shotgun before in their lives We went out and had radar control, pretty primitive, somebody out there looking with the radar and the gun would follow it. Here the old sled targets tearing along and we're off it 5000 yards and let go with the twin five inch and we damn near hit the tug. The skipper said it ricocheted and went through the damn rigging. That canceled everything in a hurry. The officer that was supposedly looking through the telescope was scared to death. I wonder what kind of medal I'd got if we sunk the tug.

The WINEBAGO, I had Joe Nab for engineer and we had one horrible time, but we finally got through shake down with the navy, then we got sent around to the Coast Guard yard for take off guns and peace time armament and ended up on the North Atlantic weather patrol out of Boston. That was in the days when they were scraping the barrel for help. You'd go out on weather patrol and come back and they'd strip your ship to put on another ship.

We were on those northern stations and in the wintertime, I remember one storm where the dikes in Holland let go and we were out in it. Air force planes would drop us a Christmas tree as a gesture. I learned how to ride out storms, believe me, and experimented with storm oil and it makes a wonderful difference if you use it right, to be able to turn a ship around in heavy weather. After the WINEBAGO, I went

to the KLAMATH in Seattle and ended up on weather patrol and plane guard in the Pacific.

S: Did you use sea anchor with your storm oil?

T: No. We never lost any boats. One patrol, a 327 south of us looked like he'd been dive-bombed and I found out that he tried to turn around when he shouldn't. Some people don't know how to handle a ship in heavy weather. I weigh a lot of my experience to P.K. Perry in the Gulf of Maine in the wintertime, icing up in heavy weather. It really paid off in later assignments.

I was on the KLAMATH from '47 to '49, then I got Thirteenth District A to N, which was a pleasant experience. Then Captain Ross thought he'd do me a favor by sending me off to the Great Lakes in the Ninth District, headquarters Cleveland.

Admiral Ranney was the head officer and a wonderful man to work for. I made one inspection trip and prevailed upon captain Ross to come up to look the lakes over. We made a trip north on one of the oar boats and we rode the buoy tender from one light station to another and discovered some astonishing things. Captain Ross wanted to go home, but I asked him to stay with me because nobody would believe what we saw.

We went to one light station, Detour Reef, where nobody had been aboard for five years. They couldn't even find the emergency lantern. One of the reef stations in the Strait of Makinoff, nobody had been there and there was one man aboard, all the rest ashore. We went up to another light station, civilian manned, and one of the keepers was dying of cancer and his wife was doing his job. Probably a good job too. We were at an isolated station on Lake Superior and there were women and kids running around.

When I got back, I told Admiral Ranney what was going on and I said they ought to call the upper lakes "upper slobovia," and the lower lakes "lower slobovia." I told him some of the things we saw and had Ross to back me up. We both didn't think they should discipline these men out in these isolated stations with women and kids- what do you expect if nobody pays any attention to them?

I also had a trip down to the southern part of the district, about the end of June 1938, and then I put in my trial by fire, in the southern part of the district. Pat Moore was the chief of staff and Admiral Ranney was the district commander

S: I have a little sideline remark to make. I was in Cincinnati at that time and had taken a leave, gone to Minneapolis and was on my way back and we went out to some state park on the Lake Michigan side where there was a lifeboat light station. I started out there to take a look and the people were still in shock. I asked what was going on and they said some guy named Midtlyng was here...

T: You can't win 'em all. From the Great Lakes. I appealed to Ross; I said after getting me up there and all the trouble, I think I did a good job and so did Admiral Ranney, so they promised they'd give me base Ketchikan in Alaska and I ended up there in November 1952 and detached in May 1955. That was a wonderful experience. The district commander in Juneau was Willie Kenner and I had only one complaint; he used to come down to base Ketchikan and we had those slot machines days in Alaska, so we'd go in partnership, but he got to pull the lever and I just got to drop the money in. I didn't think that was quite fair. Didn't really matter though, because we always ended up broke.

I enjoyed that tour of duty very much and I was also Captain of the Port in Ketchikan and Base Ketchikan. During the war, it had been turned over to the mayor, so one fine day they tell me the Harlem Globetrotters are coming up and they're going to have a game in the base. I wondered who would be responsible for injuries, so I called Admiral Kenner and said I didn't think it was a good idea. I wasn't popular with the citizens of Ketchikan, but ended up as friends. I kept Admiral Kenner informed of what was going on.

From Base Ketchikan I went to San Francisco, aids to navigation, from June 1955 to May 1958 and that was also a pleasant experience, no problems. From there, I went to the NORTHWIND, Seattle, and was detached in November 1960. They did three trips north, Behring sea patrol, and up to the ice, in case the DEWLINE got in trouble we were

supposed to be backup. We carried a dentist and a doctor, worked the Eskimo villages over. I made a very good friend with an Eskimo at Wainright Alaska, Raymond. He told me he'd rather be a hunter than a millionaire. I had brought up a lot of experimental foul weather gear from the Antarctic and Raymond insisted I go hunting with him. I made the mistake of telling him if I went hunting we'd get lost. He got real mad and said Eskimo never got lost. I backtracked there.

On the NORTHWIND we went north in 1958 on Behring Sea Patrol and the EASTWIND had a fire aboard, so we took their place and went south to Deepfreeze Four in November of 1958. We came back in about six months, damn near got stuck in the ice down there. Ended up rescuing a British expedition down on the Palmer Peninsula, they had a little freighter not built for the ice. We earned out pay.

When I went up the Inside Passage the first time, in '58, some of the officers were leery. I was the only one that had been through there. But all the officers got along; everything gelled. Ben Chiswell was my exec. Because we had to take the EASTWIND'S turn in the Antarctic I got to keep the crew aboard, from the Behring Sea and Deepfreeze Four and back to Seattle.

The last trip I made on the NORTHWIND, there were only two officers aboard when we started. Why did I go through the inside passage when I could be a lot safer going around? I had an Eagle and figured I was about as good a pilot as they have in the Coast Guard and I enjoyed going up there. But it meant I stood on my feet from Seattle to Ketchikan and Ketchikan to Juneau, and the whole Behring sea patrol I don't think there's a day when you don't have land on the radar someplace.

So it paid off in the Antarctic, cause when we had to land on the Palmer Peninsula to rescue the British expedition, it was quite a rock pile and not too well surveyed. When we could we'd send a Bisco ahead of us. If he sunk, we'd retrieve him. We never damaged a propeller or anything, but the Bisco punched a hole in their bow. It was a bad year for ice.

We realized we'd run out of oil so the British came out with their dog teams and I learned something about sled dogs down there. The British were kind of nasty to their sled dogs- the hand that fed them was

the hand that beat them. Sometimes I think we should raise our teenagers that way.

I got off the NORTHWIND in October 1940, then was captain of the Port Seattle until 1962, worked under Admiral Winbeck. He was very pleasant, all he wanted me to do was to let him know what was going on and I could run it. You work very hard for a man like that.

Then Admiral Ned Sprow needed a chief of staff, so I went to LONGBEACH and retired in July 1, 1964. And that was another very pleasant experience, you couldn't find a better man to work for than New Sprow. He was also with me in our division of frigates in the South Pacific.

My only claim to fame, on the way home, we stopped at Bora Bora and had a little celebration in the officers club. I don't know how it happened, but we ended up on the dock and I threw, Dobler and Sprow and some execs off the dock and then they threw me off. Then we got into Panama and Dobler said- damn you, if I've got to retire it's your fault. He got cut up in the coral and Ned and I didn't have a scratch.

Then the only other thing- when I was in the southwest Pacific and after Holandia was taken from the Japs, I was on the dock one day and a navy captain came up to me and said: What's that insignia? I said: That's the US Coast Guard, what's yours- merchant marine? I never saw fire come out of a man's eyes. The one victory I made in the whole damn war.

S: Well Tommy, you've told some very interesting things here. I've pointed the camera a couple of times at a bearskin wall covering. Where'd you get that?

T: That was at Elum, a little Eskimo village south of Nome, about at the end of the tree line, which is black spruce. I happened to be ashore and this old Eskimo was worried because he had a lose tooth and so I made arrangements to take him to see the dentist. His wife was cleaning the meat off the bear and I asked how much he wanted for it. He said the bush pilot that brought the mail in wanted it, but never had the twenty dollars. I happened to have it, so I bought the bear. I learned a very valuable lesson- I could tell people I shot it.

When I was at Base Ketchikan, I went bear hunting with a good friend and there was a bear on the beach and my friend with another guy went ashore to shoot the bear. The enforcement for the fish and wildlife had a big magnum rifle and I watched him and he pulled the bolt back and loaded the magazine and then slid the bolt over the shell so it was on an empty chamber, then he handed it to my friend. He told him it was loaded and locked, so be careful. So this officer and my friend got on the boat, went to the beach and crawled on their hands and knees over the rise. I was watching with binoculars. Sure enough, he aimed at the bear and click, and then he got excited and didn't pull the bolt back far enough to get a shell and the bear ran and the other guy killed him.

Years later I was in Oakland California and this officer had retired there and he had this nice bearskin on the sofa and he started to tell me how he shot it and all of a sudden he gulped, realizing I was there.

So I never made the mistake of telling somebody I shot this bear- those kind of things are liable to catch up with you, even in Montana.