

Fire on the Boat

Adversity does not build character, it reveals it. – James Lane Allen

The chief's angry eyes searched our faces for guilt, "Who pulled the alarm?" His fists were clenched, neck tendons bulging. I wanted him to strike me. "It was me." I craved redemption. He stared at me intently. After a look that said, "It's just not worth it," he whirled to face the 1st assistant engineer, "We've got to go down to the engine room and open the hatches and get the generators going. Where are the oilers?"

We were on fire, adrift in the middle of Lake Michigan, pirouetting in a 20-knot breeze on a cold 4:00 A.M. November morning, without power, steerage, lights, navigation or communication. We had no water pumps to fight the blaze.

My offense had been to pull the alarm for an engine room-only fire, which instantly released 3,700 pounds of CO-2 gas into the bowels of the ship that held our generators and coal-burning steam engines. CO-2 is heavier than oxygen. The discharge was intended to smother a fire. The oilers down there had ninety seconds to get out alive before asphyxiating.

A siren sounded eardrum-piercingly loud throughout the ship at every berth. Half the crew slept through the alarm or did not want to hear it. What followed was bedlam. Sailors smacked into each other, running helter-skelter down the dark deck. Flashlights were retrieved. Nobody seemed to know what to do. The captain was nowhere to be seen.

At 24, I was only an ordinary seaman, not able-bodied. 'Ordinary seaman' is lofty terminology for a lowly, unskilled deckhand laborer. The ship's captain abused his crew, routinely working us 16 hours straight, from 4:00 P.M. until 8:00 A.M., without overtime pay. The work spanned two days, and we did not work more than 8 hours in one day. So went the refrain.

Stooped over, battening down the hatches, I was the only crew awake and on deck, exhausted after 12 hours of manual labor. The task was mindless. I calculated and recounted the fasteners, over a thousand, knowing the futility of the work, for we never got all of them clamped down before reaching port.

The ship was a collier. We supplied the city of Milwaukee with all the coal needed to generate its electricity. The coal had been mined in southern Illinois and barged up the Illinois River to Chicago, transferred to our hold, and self-unloaded to the coal-powered electrical generating facility on shore. From Chicago, the journey was a short 90 miles. Once offloaded, we returned to Chicago for another load, 36 hours roundtrip, with no respite allotted for deck crew shore leave.

The upper Midwestern winter cold quickly froze anything exposed to wind. Our potable water was stored in tanks abaft, two stories above the galley, up on the stack deck to facilitate water pressure. A wood frame had been erected to support a canvas shroud to ward off windchill and capture any heat rising from the quarters below. The stack deck refers to the chimneys that spew coal smoke and unintentional igniter sparks downwind. On deck, I was anxious about the embers trailing the ship. The

chimneys were not tall enough to keep a few from alighting the canvas. The wind had dried the canvas, fed a spark and whipped a flame into conflagration.

The fire flared tens of feet high, bright against the black sky. Aware that our propane cooking gas was in tanks next to those of the potable water, I worried about an explosion. My instinct was to alert the crew. I could have run forward to the sleepy wheelhouse atop the fo'c'sle, but that was hundreds of feet away.

A couple of days before, we deck crew had been 'squeegeeing the aft bulkhead,' that is, scrubbing the walls at the stern. I had noted a fire alarm box by the engine room door and filed its location away for use in an emergency. Aboard ship, one must be vigilant. At least, that is what I had been taught.

Earnest young mates fresh out of the Great Lakes Maritime Academy sprang into action. After some deliberation, they assessed the situation and collected every fire extinguisher on board to fight the blaze. Their effort was futile. The blaze was too hot to get close, and from a safe distance, the canisters proved hopelessly ineffective. The situation was dire. There is nothing like a fire to underscore the finite nature of a boat on water. Several sailors suggested that we get the lifeboats ready.

There was still no captain on the scene. I stood helpless by the door to the engine room, waiting for instructions. The gasping oilers emerged from below, terrified. The 1st assistant engineer refused the chief's order, "I'm not going down there." The brave chief tied his handkerchief around his nose and mouth and clambered down. We heard a banging as hatches were opened; the generators started. Lights came on. Then, the engines rumbled. We had steerage and the water pumps were engaged. The young mates extinguished the fire, but not before it melted critical infrastructure.

The bosun's mate ordered me to my berth. I laid in my bunk in disgrace, not leaving for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Three veteran deck crewmen came in the evening to tell me that my actions had been discussed and judged at length. I should not feel guilty; I did precisely what they would have done in the circumstances. I was forgiven. Hunger overcame emotion, and I slinked to the galley for leftovers.

What followed was comedic at best. Once the gas had been released, Coast Guard regulations required that the incident be reported. The vessel could not depart until the empty canisters were refilled and repositioned. A thorough Coast Guard inspection had to be performed. On Thursday, the 37 heavy tanks were wrested up from deep in the hold. The passage was tortuous and took the entire day. Once on deck, how were we to get them to shore? A makeshift sling on a boom was fashioned. Several slipped into the drink.

No depot was open over the weekend to refill the canisters. And no one in Milwaukee sold those particular tanks. A diving company was engaged to retrieve the ones dropped in the lake between the collier and the dock. When a diver finally arrived at the ship on Tuesday, he refused to dive until the ship was moved. He feared a wind might push the boat to shore and crush him against the pier. A special permit had to be issued to move the vessel at all.

All this took ten days, and the company lost \$50,000 a day, a lot of money back in 1971.

After the inspection, the Guard investigated and filed a report. This led to a meeting between a 'full-bird' Lieutenant Commander and the captain. The two met amidships, on neutral ground,

intentionally out of earshot but in full view of the crew. After a moment or two, I was summoned to the meeting. The Coast Guard officer was succinct in questioning me, "Why did you pull the alarm?"

"To alert the crew."

"Did you know that the lever was to be pulled only in the event of an engine room fire?"

"I do now."

"How many days were you on board before you pulled the alarm?"

"Fifteen."

"Did you not attend the fire and emergency drills?" (Mandatory every seven days.)

"There weren't any."

"Was the alarm placarded?"

"What do you mean?"

"A sign stating the alarm was to be pulled only in case of an engine room fire?"

"No, there was no placard."

What followed was an obscenity-laced, nose-to-nose rebuke of the captain, complete with threats, recrimination, admonition and censure, spitted out and accompanied by a sharp jabbing of the solar plexus. The captain was warned, "I could have your license and you would never sail again as an officer on any U.S. flagged vessel," loud and clear enough for the crew to hear. The officer turned and stormed away. My exoneration was complete. The humiliated captain stared at me with rage.

Guess who disembarked when we docked in Chicago? At the insistence of the chief, the cowardly 1st assistant engineer. The placard went up, and I followed him down the gangplank. *No good deed goes unpunished*. Before I packed my bags, I was visited by the National Maritime Union (NMU) steward on board. He told me the union was not going to come to my defense. The guilt-ridden union boss said that the company needed a 'fall guy,' a scapegoat, and I was expendable, rationalizing, "With the education you have, you're not going to stick, anyway." And anyway, I could be terminated without cause within the 60-day trial period. Besides, the negligent captain could not abide my presence on 'his' boat after he had been disgraced before me by the Coast Guard officer. I told the steward what I thought of his so-called union, that the whole world knew it was corrupt. Of course, the 'brotherhood' would not protect me from company abuse. What union would allow its members to work 16 hours straight without overtime pay? The steward could only shrug his shoulders. He knew what I said was true.

This episode ended my maritime career. I turned my back on the fourth laker I had crewed and the unseemly world that boat's sick culture fomented. I still have my seaman's papers. I could ship out today. But never again have I worked for a company I did not own.

Written by and copyrighted to M. Dunkin Conner November 2023, all rights reserved.