

# The World IS OUR CLASSROOM

By Midshipman First Class James C. Billings III, U.S. Merchant Marine Academy

Sea duty—360 days out of four years—is demanded of all graduates of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. But it's more than a requirement, it's an education.

**S**ea Year is the most formative experience for midshipmen at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. More than simply meeting the sea time requirements for a Coast Guard merchant mariner officer's license, it ties midshipmen one to another from the earliest days of the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps. It also exposes today's midshipmen to the world around them, which will serve our nation well in an increasingly complex and uncertain era.



The World War II exploits and victories of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific often overshadow the great success it achieved in Europe and the Atlantic. While the invasion of Normandy on D-Day is best known, perhaps the most significant role the U.S. and Allied navies played was in the Battle of the Atlantic. Unlike Midway, or other traditional naval conflicts, this battle was not a single event, but a sustained search and destroy mission for U-boats and surface raiders. Plus, it wasn't a virtually all-Navy theater. The Merchant Marine was the prime mover. The German stranglehold on Europe and Great Britain was the greatest threat to a free Europe and a considerable obstacle to any invasion attempt. The battle was waged to build what President Franklin D. Roosevelt called the "bridge across the Atlantic," to deliver supplies to Britain through the German gauntlet.

The U.S. wartime merchant fleet constituted one of the most significant contributions made by any nation to victory in World War II. Unfortunately, these mariners' contributions have been all but forgotten by the general public, as demonstrated by the lack of federal recognition until 1988. The merchant mariners of this era were as courageous as any Soldier, Sailor, or Marine, braving not only the enemy but fighting the sea itself to deliver troops and supplies to our Allies throughout the world. They suffered the highest rate of casualties of any service (See [www.usmm.org/casualty.html](http://www.usmm.org/casualty.html)).

During this period, the U.S. Merchant Marine was in the midst of a significant transformation because of several maritime catastrophes in the prior decade, including the disastrous fire on the passenger liner SS *Morro Castle* in 1934. Federal action in response to these events included passage of the Merchant Marine Act of 1936, various Coast Guard regulations, and establishment of the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps in 1939. Three years later, it was given a permanent home as the United States Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, New York.

## Real-World Experience

From its earliest days, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy distinguished itself from its sister academies by sending its midshipmen to sea, often into danger, as an integral part of their undergraduate training. While the cadets at West Point and midshipmen at Annapolis were studying

and preparing to go to war after graduation, the students at Kings Point were actively fighting, making runs on board the Liberty ships to England and Russia, carrying provisions to support the invasion of Africa, and transporting fuel, ammunition, and troops to battles in the Pacific. Dur-



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**AUTHOR AT SEA** The combination of shipboard duties, at-sea education, and six sea projects assigned by shore-based professors left time for little else. There was enough time, however, for a little sightseeing as the ship passed islands off the south coast of Japan.

ing the war, 1,768 merchant ships were sunk, damaged, captured, or detained. Many midshipmen who survived for days or weeks on rafts after their ships had been attacked and sunk were sent back to sea immediately after they returned to shore. In all, 142 Kings Point midshipmen made the ultimate sacrifice while training at sea.

As during World War II, today the Merchant Marine Academy continues to be the only federal service academy that routinely places its students on board ships that may go into combat. Its midshipmen have contributed to every war effort since that time. More than 700 Kings Pointers have participated in Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom while studying at the academy. Because of this service record, the academy has the honor of being the only one among its peer academies to carry a battle standard as part of its color guard.

The practice of sending midshipmen to sea is necessary because every graduate is required by Congress to earn an unlimited Coast Guard mate's or engineer's license; and to do so they are required to complete 360 days at sea. To meet this mandate, midshipmen spend one-third of their third-class year and two-thirds of their second-class year at sea. Today we train on board a wide range of U.S.-flag passenger, cargo, and tankship vessels in ocean and coastwise trade, as well as on board Navy and Coast Guard ships. For me, the opportunity to support our country's effort in Iraq and honor the contributions of those who have gone before led me to volunteer to serve on a ship carrying military cargo.

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**SEAGOING CAMPUS** The M/V *Alliance New York* was the author's classroom for his first stint of four months at sea. She was the first American-flag vessel to dock in Iraq since the 1990 embargo.

## Living the History

While most assignments of this kind are to Military Sealift Command vessels doing underway replenishment for ships in the Fleet, I was detailed in June 2006 to a new American-flagged vessel, the *M/V Alliance New York*. She was the first American-flag vessel to dock in Iraq since the 1990 embargo and one of the largest ships ever in the port of Umm Qasr. My first voyage sailed from Wilmington, Delaware, two days after President George W. Bush delivered the commencement address at graduation. We carried a cargo of more than 2,200 Chevrolet pickups—support from the U.S. government to the Iraqis for their military and police forces.

After sailing across half the world to reach the Persian Gulf, we anchored outside the Al Basrah oil terminal. Looking at the charts of this area was an experience in itself. Most of them were covered with markings that said “Danger—Formerly Mined Area,” not something you would see in many other parts of the world. We sailed up the Khawr Abd Allah, a small river slightly to the west of the Tigris and Euphrates. This river was Iraqi territory before the first Gulf War, and was a concession to Kuwait after Saddam Hussein’s defeat in 1991, but there are still remnants of Iraqi control. Among them were a number of wrecks from the Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, again, something I would never see anywhere else.

When we docked in Umm Qasr, the massive freeboard of our Roll-on/Roll-off ship loomed above the gantry cranes used to move containers on other ships docked there. As we were putting down our loading ramps, we could see the Iraqi longshoremen waiting to get on and start moving cargo. Along with them were a few U.S. military personnel, some assigned to organize the cargo and others to just take pictures.

As the longshoremen came on and the cargo came off, I was assigned to cargo detail, logging any damage and helping the longshoremen with various tasks. While it was tiring just watching the stevedores work nonstop for most of the 17 hours we were discharging, they seemed to

have an enthusiasm about them, which made my job more enjoyable. The Iraqis would come up, have a “conversation” using hand signals and the few English words they had learned; I would even occasionally pose for a picture with them. After we pulled up our ramp and waited for the tide to come in for our departure, I finally got some sleep before we left port the next morning. Our next stop was Shuwaikh, Kuwait, to discharge the last of our cargo and take on bunkers.

## Pirates and Propriety

After leaving Kuwait, we continued to sail east, past the Horn of India into yet another danger area of the world. The Malacca and Singapore straits—two of the most congested areas of the world—are also home to the majority of the world’s pirates. Every year, hundreds of ships are attacked by sea-borne bandits. They usually select low-riding ships, generally fully laden tankers. We nonetheless maintained a vigilant watch that night. The difficult part of looking for pirates is that they typically work from fishing boats, which often work close to transiting ships. It is not until they are next to a ship that they display their true colors.

Piracy is even more potent in this day and age, where terrorists could easily hijack a ship and run it into a port. Fortunately, we were able to pass through the straits unscathed, and continued north to Japan.

There, we sailed to five ports in five days and loaded more than 6,000 cars. The skilled Japanese longshoremen can load nearly 300 cars an hour. Our voyage then continued to Mexico, through

the Panama Canal, to Puerto Rico, and five ports in the United States where we discharged the cars and loaded more cargo for Iraq.

We returned to Iraq and the Middle East during the holy month of Ramadan. The captain gave the crew strict orders not to be seen eating or drinking during the day when pilots or local officials boarded the ship. The doors to the mess, which were normally open, were closed, and even bottles of water on the bridge were kept out of sight until after sunset. This is typical of the real-life cultural



**MARINERS WAR MEMORIAL** On a slope facing Long Island stands the monument erected to the memory of 210 midshipmen and graduates who lost their lives at sea during World War II.

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lessons Kings Pointers learn at sea.

These lessons are complemented by academic lessons at sea. The academy professors would never dream of allowing students a four-month cruise without book work. I am earning a bachelor of science degree in marine transportation and preparing for both my naval commission and third mate's license. I was given six projects to be completed during this first four-month period at sea. Between the few hundred questions ranging from the

organization of the ship to how one would handle certain situations at sea, I had to draw diagrams of the ship and various engine systems, and memorize the entire *Nautical Rules of the Road*. In addition to the basic paperwork, my project required hands-on training as well, in both fundamental seamanship and navigation.

## Student and Swabbie

My favorite of the six projects was navigation. It required taking azimuths and amplitudes, acquiring bearings off objects on land, and even finding where in the ocean we were using nothing but the sun and stars. I was able to accomplish most of this during the four hours I stood watch each day. While on watch, my duties ranged from being a basic lookout, steering the ship, checking the compass for error, and doing the necessary chart work required by all of the mates on board. I was even occasionally given command of a watch while at sea. Additionally, my daily workload consisted of routine deck work. My work for the boatswain and with the ABs (able-bodied seamen) included swabbing and painting the decks and maintenance on the mast and stack. It gave me an extraordinary opportunity to work with, befriend, and learn from these professional Sailors from many different backgrounds.

I was not sent to sea alone. While I was up on the bridge taking in the sights, my sea partner—Midshipman Robert Sanchez of Albuquerque, New Mexico—was in the heart of the ship, down in the engine room. Considered by the crew in the pit to be an underpaid third engineer, Robert was given the responsibilities of an engine officer and exceeded all expectations. He worked the gamut from cleaning up small spills to fixing the ship's elevator when it broke down.

While sometimes wondering why he decided to major in marine engineering when overloaded with his sea proj-



**NO TOURIST CRUISE** The merchant mariners in training get real-life experience in their 360-days at sea. Part of that experience are sights such as this sunken tanker in Iraqi waters that many people will never see.

ect or crawling around inside the engine itself, this grease monkey thoroughly enjoyed himself throughout the trip. Studying to graduate with a civilian third engineer's license, yet planning on flying for the Navy after graduation, Robert is the embodiment of the Kings Point mission, "To educate and graduate professional officers and leaders of honor and integrity who are dedicated to serving the economic and defense interests of the United States in our Armed Forces and Merchant Marine, and who will contribute to an intermodal transportation system that effectively ties America together."

Much as Kings Point produced the right people at the right time during World War II, the balance of practical military and commercial experience gained at Kings Point today produces men and women singularly qualified to lead and serve our country in a dramatically complex and changing world.

As I once again pass through the Strait of Malacca and sail north to Ulsan, South Korea, a week after North Korea tested its first nuclear weapon in October 2006, I am reminded that everywhere I go is an experience to be appreciated. My travels are something few other people in the world ever get to do, much less before the age of 19. And, while the world is filled with great opportunities for peace and prosperity, I know it is also dangerous. I take comfort in the memory of those who have gone before me, especially the 142 who never returned for their graduation, serving their country and what they believed in—*Acta Non Verba*. ☼

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Midshipman Billings, a member of the class of 2009 at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, is majoring in Marine Transportation and is a student in the Ethics and Leadership Program. During his time at sea, he sailed on four ships to more than a dozen countries and has accumulated more than 300 sea days.