My Nantucket Lightship LV-112 Tour of Duty

By Paul M. Sabo

I was stationed on the Nantucket Lightship from June of 1972 until I completed my enlistment on October 12th 1973. I was transferred there from the Bermuda Loran Monitor Station which was a "Most Desirable" duty station. This meant that my choices for a new assignment only included "Least Desirable" duty stations. Only after arriving aboard the Nantucket Lightship did I learn that she was the Coast Guard's most hazardous duty station.

As an Electronics Technician (ET3), I spent my first two weeks aboard the Nanny with the ET2 that I would eventually replace. This allowed him to show me the ropes and me to learn my new duties. After these first two weeks he returned ashore on the buoy tender Hornbeam and I remained on the Nanny for my solo two weeks. It was the middle of summer and the weather was peaceful the entire time. After one month aboard I got to go ashore when the 95 foot Cape Horn brought out our relief crew.

As hurricane season approached we had near misses from several storms. One memorable event was transferring from the Point Bonita to the Nanny in 20 foot seas. The Nanny's small boat was used to shuttle us between the Nanny and the 82 footer. Timing your jump from the small boat to the ladder of the lightship was difficult, but extremely important. If you missed jumping onto the ladder you could be in serious trouble. Miscalculation when jumping from the ladder to the small boat could add several feet to your drop.

Each crew got to ride out a hurricane. My experience included 60 – 70 foot seas and 115 knot winds. As the storm passed, the winds shifted. We continued heading into the wind which meant we started taking the waves on the beam. Walking anywhere on the ship caused you to be thrown against the bulkhead. Everyone had plenty of black and blues from that adventure. The other crew had it even worse. During their hurricane the anchor chain broke and they drifted south. After the storm passed they were towed back from off the New Jersey shore.

In the fall of 1972 I was promoted to ET2. The other ET2 onboard was also transferred out. This made me the senior ET onboard and the "Electronics Officer". There was a large military exercise that fall that included NATO. Although the Nanny was not an active participant, we did receive "Secret" messages that had to be decoded and responded to. I had received a "Secret" security clearance during my time on Bermuda LorMonSta. The Captain and I decoded the messages in his cabin, much to the chagrin of the EMC who did not have clearance to read them!

Winter came and we made ready to make our first trip into Boston. The process began during the night. The main engine was started. It remained idling while we began hoisting the huge mushroom anchor. This was a tremendous experience. The noise was incredible. As daylight approached so did the Relief Lightship. She assumed our station and we began the trip to Boston at a blistering 5-6 knots. The next morning we arrived at the dock in Boston. Our Captain sure knew his stuff. He smoothly maneuvered the ship into her berth with ease.

The three weeks in Boston allowed me to go home every night as I lived in northern Rhode Island. During the day I spent time working with technicians from the base. I also bought a new television antenna and rotor. I installed the high gain antenna above the main light. The hope was to be able to watch football games on TV from Boston and New York when we returned to our station. Having been assigned duties as the Moral Officer I also acquired fishing gear, movies and games.

After our time in port we departed the day after Thanksgiving to get back on station. Due to a fierce storm, we traveled through the Cape Cod Canal for protection. It was quite interesting being in this narrow canal compared to the open sea. We eventually arrived on station and the Relief departed. We were scheduled to stay on station until a couple of days after Christmas, before heading into Boston again. So much for plans, another bad storm caused us to remain on station until after the New Year before the Relief was able to return. This made the crew somewhat unhappy as we had not brought enough refreshments for the extra week.

During our last trip of the season to Boston we were put into dry dock. The hull was cleaned and repainted. I got to get a few pictures of myself beside the propeller and also the mushroom anchors. Being able to actually walk under the ship was a crazy experience. After leaving the dry dock we returned to station to begin another 9 months of transferring port and starboard crews instead of going into Boston.

Some of the interesting occurrences during this time included having a whale use the ship as a way to scratch its back. Another was when the massive 947 foot Sea Land Exchange container ship passed by us. They made regular trips past us and I had become friends with her captain. He asked our captain if they could come between us and our mark buoy. We were anchored within one quarter mile of the buoy. The seas were completely flat calm. The Sea Land Exchange came by at her normal cruising speed of 33 knots. Words cannot describe the sight of her going by so close and fast. The waves of her wake were huge.

Many other ships were constantly around. We saw many US Navy ships. The coolest was seeing a sub fly out the ocean while practicing one of those emergency surface procedures. Just before she surfaced, the water near her turned yellow from her beacon. She was about a mile away when this happened. It was quite a show. Too bad I didn't get a picture of that.

Our ships weren't the only ones around. The Russian so called fishing fleet was always near. Their fishing boats had more antennas than we had. They were obviously doing more than just fishing. Once we got to see their mother ship which processed the fish they caught. One evening around dusk we had many of the Russian ships within sight. I counted 31 blips on our radar. Another time when it was flat calm I came out of the radio shack to see one of them pass very slowly and close. I swear I could have handed one of the guys on their deck a cup of coffee.

It goes without saying that it gets foggy out at sea. You really haven't experienced really thick fog until you've been at sea. At times it actually gets so thick that you cannot see your hand when you

extend your arm to full length. Whenever it got foggy we had to turn on our fog horn. It was so loud that you experienced pain if you were caught outside when it sounded. Our galley was directly below the horn house. If the horn went off while you were eating you had to hold onto your plate or the vibrations would cause it to move around and fall off the table.

My two worst experiences were caused by fog. When it got foggy we also turned on the radar. We used it to keep a careful watch on approaching ships. If one came with two miles, and many did, we would contact them on the radio and ask them to give us a wider berth. The ramming and sinking of Nantucket Lightship LV-117 by the RMS Olympic, the Titanic's sister ship, was something we were all keenly aware of. Our rule was that whenever the radar showed a ship within a quarter mile of us, we put on life jackets and mustered on deck prepared to jump overboard.

This happened twice while I was aboard the Nanny. The first time the ship passed by us by a couple of hundred yards, a close call. The second time was much worse. We were all getting ready to jump when we finally saw the inbound ship pass by a mere few hundred feet away. I was definitely scared that we were going to have to jump.

So, that brings me to my best experience. I must tell you that I have no fear of heights. I frequently climbed to the top of our masts just for the view. On one occasion during a storm Chatham Station called us and said they could no longer hear our radio beacon. Since our sole purpose was being an aid to navigation, having our radio beacon not being able to be heard was a problem of the highest degree. I immediately went to the radio shack to check on the situation. The standing wave meter for our antenna coupler clearly indicated the problem.

Our radio beacon was transmitting, but the signal was being bounced back by our antenna. This is called a standing wave and happens when there is a mismatch in impedance between the transmitter and the antenna. I tried turning the coupler to no avail. I switched to the standby transmitter. No change. Using binoculars, I inspected the antenna from the top of the coupler to the top of each mast. The insulators between the mast and the antenna were caked in salt.

The salt had to be chipped away. If I couldn't do it, then we might as well head for Boston and have the Relief come out! The storm had passed but we were still experiencing 20 foot seas. The Nanny was rocking and rolling. It was time to earn my pay. I climbed to the top of the aft mast. In 1973 the antenna was mounted to a frame above the radar. I climbed to the top of the frame and shimmied out the extension and chipped the salt from the insulator. I went to the forward mast next. There was an extension above the light in 1973. I climbed to the top of that and chipped the salt away from the insulator.

After cleaning both insulators I powered up the radio beacon and tuned the antenna coupler. Chatham Station called and said they were able to hear our radio beacon loud and clear. We were able to stay on station and perform our primary mission. This was my greatest and proudest day on the Nantucket Lightship.