the LOOKOUT

SEAMEN'S CHURCH INSTITUTE OF NEW YORK

JANUARY 1971

Institute Loses Illustrious Member of its Board of Managers

Mr. Michalis as he appeared in a painting made some years ago

Clarence G. Michalis, a member of the Institute's Board of Managers from 1924 to 1970 and President from 1932 to 1957, died December 13 in New York after a long illness. He was 85 years old. Mr. Michalis had long been the chairman of the Institute and a leader in many other philanthropic, community and civic causes.

the LOOKOUT

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SEAMEN'S CHURCH INSTITUTE OF NEW YORK
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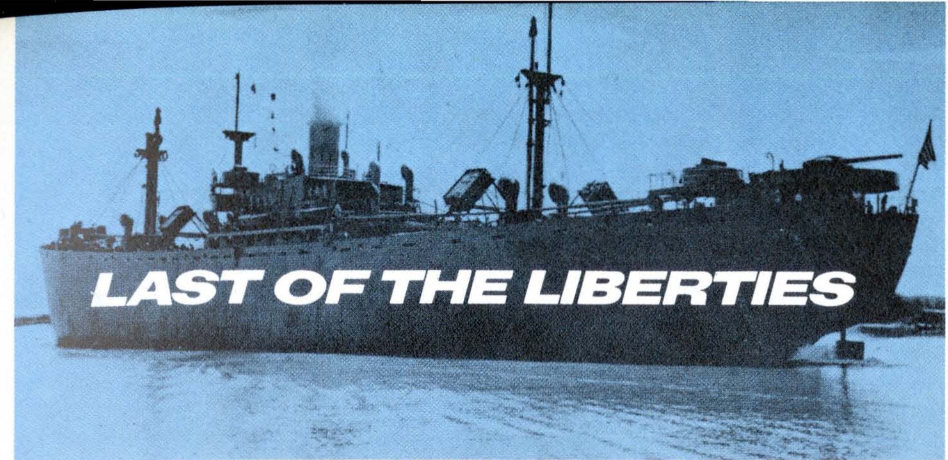
COVER: Spray and freezing temperatures combine to coat a ship's lifeboat with a thick glaze of ice.



A typical wartime Liberty ship. Note gun and turret mounted aft on fantail. Such guns were manned by sailors from the Navy's Armed Guard.

Last of the Liberties

by Bill Riepe

There aren't very many relics of World War II still around. By relics I don't mean the Samurai swords or SS helmets, or Lugers or swastikas; or any of the other curios the GIs brought home to prove to their grandchildren that they really had fought in the greatest of all wars. (Some of those swords were actually made in Japan *after* the war for the tourist trade.)

I'm talking about the big hardware, Flying Forts, Mustangs, Shermans, LSTs, Jeeps — the kings and queens of ordnance that Americans flew, sailed or drove into battle.

Some of them survived the war by quite a few years. In the late 'Forties you'd occasionally see a newsreel showing acres and acres of surplus military equipment waiting to be auctioned off, or maybe shipped to one of the little countries we always seemed to be supplying in those days.

Or you'd hear the recurring outraged rumors about millions of dollars worth of rolling stock dumped from docks into the Pacific because the Pentagon figured that was cheaper than shipping it back home.

Or you'd read about a wealthy insurance executive who bought a surplus P-38 for the sheer pleasure of doing aerobatics in it without having to worry about a Zero getting on his tail.

Eventually the attrition of time, foreign aid and souvenir collectors almost wiped out the World War II relics.

A notable exception was a fleet of Liberty ships, moored peacefully in Tompkin's Cove, a quiet little backwater of the Hudson River.

With the end of the war these ships constituted an embarrassment of riches. They were too slow for profitable conversion to the competitive merchant trade, but not even the affluent Americans could simply scuttle the millions of dollars worth of ships out of hand.

We didn't want to give them away because that would injure our own newly-rejuvenated merchant marine.

The Cold War and Yankee ingenuity teamed up to ease our embarrassment. With the Russians becoming more obstreperous daily, possible emergencies were foreseen which might again require millions of tons of shipping to supply American forces around the world. Why not "mothball" the Liberties and have them readily available in case of need?

And so it was done. The old girls were rounded up, gun turrets were removed from bows and fantails, weatherproofing processes were applied, and they docilely allowed themselves to be towed into retirement as part of the Hudson River Reserve Fleet.

Here they waited with stoic patience for a recall to active duty. For a time they served as floating silos to store some of the country's vast surplus of wheat. They even became something of a tourist attraction for motorists passing on nearby US 9-W.

It hadn't always been that way; once they were neither docile nor retired, and certainly not tourist attractions. Their story began back in September 1941 with the launching of the first of the line, appropriately named *Patrick Henry*. She displaced 10,800 tons and could make 11 knots. Built in just over eight months, the *Patrick Henry* promised help with one of our big problems at the time — the need to build ships in a hurry.

This was almost three months before the attack on Pearl Harbor, but the certainty of our involvement was recognized and plans were being made for the American war effort. Abroad only the British stood between Hitler and total domination of Europe. England began the war with the largest merchant fleet in the world, but the U-boats were slowly bleeding her to death. We would have to provide not only material but also much of the shipping required to deliver it.

By the time we got into the war the basic plans for Liberties were thoroughly developed. Improved production techniques eventually lowered construction time for each ship to an amazing 42 days! In all we built more than 2600 of them, as well as 531 of the faster Victory types.

They were crewed by seamen from all over the world, not excluding the Axis countries. Poles, Filipinos, Chinese, Italians, Lascars — every conceivable nationality was represented on the rosters of the Liberties, and they ranged in age from eleven to seventy. They were relatively well paid, but many of them never got to enjoy their wages. By the end of the war thousands had been killed at sea.

If the ships were armed, it was usually with a four-inch gun for dueling with surfaced subs and a variety of machine guns for beating off aerial attack. These were manned by sailors of the Navy's Armed Guard and, if the ship were travelling unescorted, were its sole protection against attack. Sometimes this not very formidable armament was very effective; it had been known to drive off and even sink subs.

When the fledgling Liberties were manned, armed and loaded with troops and supplies for the war zone they were ready to face the crucial test of performance. The precious cargoes had to be delivered across the hostile seas to such places as Murmansk, Archangel, London, Loch Ewe, Cardiff, Vladivostok, and Black Head.

It's almost impossible now to remember how grim and deadly a war these men and ships sailed out to fight in the early months of 1942, when the U-boats were having all the best of it.

The slaughter was terrible. Ships on the American coastal run were torpedoed less than two hours sailing time out of New York — crewmen had lunch in Staten Island and were dead before supper. From Nova Scotia to the Gulf of Mexico the bottom of the Atlantic was littered with the hulks of Allied shipping.

East Coast residents soon grew used to the sights and sounds of submarine warfare. The beaches were dotted with empty life jackets, ship's gear, splintered rafts, bodies — all the debris of war at sea.

The Liberties, in most respects models of virtue, were found to have a secret vice. Under continuous pounding by the huge waves they had a fatal tendency to crack and split in two. It wasn't a common happening but it did give the men who sailed them something to ponder on those nights when howling storms eased the threat from the U-boats.

As they neared Europe the convoys faced yet another peril — attack by *Luftwaffe* squadrons based in Norway, Denmark, Belgium and Holland.

The *Luftwaffe* pilots, desperate to prevent these hundreds of thousands of tons of supplies from reaching their enemies on the battlefields, hit the envoys savagely.

How about the crews of the stricken ship — what were their chances of surviving this merciless combat at sea? Fair to nil, depending upon when and where they were sunk. Ships in convoy were strictly prohibited from stopping to pick up any survivors. This was a job for the escorts, if any.

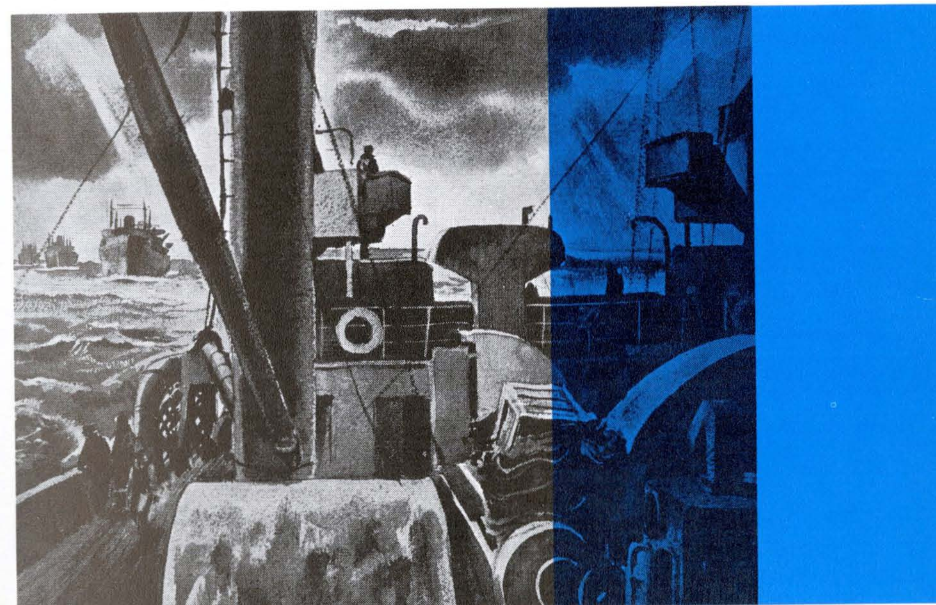
If a ship went down in daylight in calm or moderate seas, and if the escorting naval vessels could spare a few minutes from hunting the sub that did the job, then the men clinging to rafts and bits of floating wreckage would probably be picked up.

Also, the nature of the cargo was a big factor in the crews' chances for survival. Tankers frequently exploded, showering flaming oil and condemning men in the water to hideous deaths. Ships carrying munitions sometimes simply disappeared with a thunderous roar and a blinding flash, and no trace at all of the crew. In the winter, a man could expect to survive approximately four minutes in the freezing waters of the Murmansk run. More than 5,000 civilian members of the Merchant Marine alone were killed during the war.

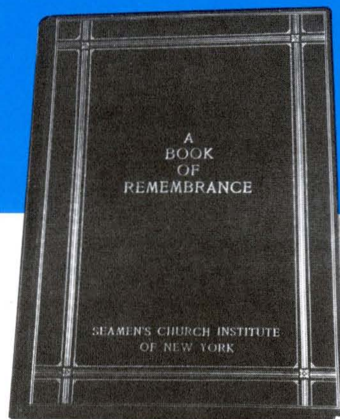
Of course, all this happened more than a quarter of a century ago and seems like ancient history as time is measured by today's fast-moving events. The exploits of the Liberties have long since been relegated to the archives of legend, mostly forgotten except by the men (and, sometimes, the women) who served on them. Obsolescence has finally caught up to the relics.

Someday a "burner" will light his torch, adjust the mixture, pull down his goggles and then cut into the last of the Liberties, but it will be a long time until they're entirely forgotten.

There are still some ex-GI's who remember long nights when, lying on canvas bunks tiered five-high down in the stuffy holds, they listened to the slap of the waves against the thin hulls, and prayed silently that the subs were prowling elsewhere in the North Atlantic that night.



Twentieth Anniversary "The Book Of Remembrance"



Twenty years ago the late Stephen and Martha Comstock of Newark, New York, brought to fruition a desire which they had long cherished.

Their benevolent project was inspired by the custom of hand lettering and illuminating the very early Bibles, wherein the names of the most important saints were lettered in red, and the saint's day was designated a "Red Letter Day".

It was the concept of the Comstocks that all of us have a particular red letter day which we wish to commemorate, not just during our lifetime, but in perpetuity. Their first concern was a means through which a "Red Letter Day" Gift, as well as the memory of the giver, would endure.

The Comstocks, who were devoted supporters of the Institute's work, consulted with the Seamen's Church Institute to determine how best their mission could be accomplished.

It was determined that the annual interest on an investment of $10,000 would (at that time) close the gap between the Institute's income and the actual cost of ministry to men of the sea for a twenty-four hour period.

Subsequently the Comstocks presented the Institute with a magnificently carved, glass-topped oak case containing a hand-tooled maroon leather-bound "Book of Remembrance". Between its covers are vellum pages for the days of the year. This gift was accompanied by their "Living Endowment" check for the Red Letter Days they had chosen. An individual page was handsomely engrossed for each of the days they selected, and inscribed with the special message indicating the event or occasion they wished to memorialize.

During their lifetime the Comstocks paid visits to the Institute's Chapel on their "special days," when the Book of Remembrance reposed in its place of honor, open to their page. The Comstocks have passed away, but not their memory or their benevolence.

Others have followed their inspiration, either through Living Endowments or bequests. Each year, on the anniversary date of the event cited, the person or persons memorialized are included in the special prayers during religious services held in the Institute's

Chapel. The book remains open to their page for that day, and so it shall be, in perpetuity, through "The Book of Remembrance."

Do *you* have a "Red Letter Day"? What better way in which to honor some loved one, or an event, whose memory is cherished?

Why does the Institute have a "gap" between its daily operating cost and its earned and special income?

The explanation is simple: it is because most of the various institute services to seafarers are given without compensation; only the hotel and food services "pay their own way" — as the expression goes — out of the Institute's total operations. A perusal of the Annual Report makes this abundantly clear.

The Institute, its Board of Managers, its founder, its Charter, have mandated that ministry to seafarers means a *total* ministry to the whole seaman — with all that *total* implies.

Functioning within this concept and context, then, it is likely the Institute will continue to incur an annual deficit until an Institute endowment of sizable proportions is achieved. The *Endowed Red Letter Day Memorial* plan is a way toward such an achievement.

Some persons may prefer to "build up" the sum of ten thousand dollars with the Institute over a period of time. This is acceptable within the Red Letter Memorial plan and should probably be discussed with their attorney from several viewpoints, tax deductibility being one.

If there is a Red Letter Day in your life, please write to me.

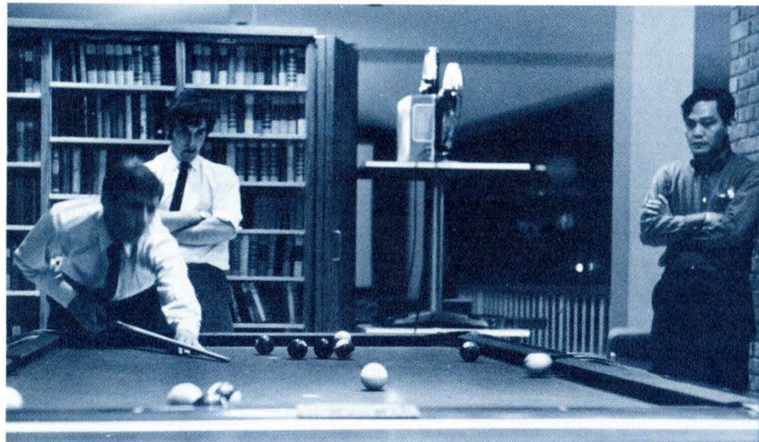
THE REV. JOHN M. MULLIGAN, D.D.
Director

SUGGESTED RED LETTER DAYS

Birthday
Wedding Day
Child's birthday
Anniversary
Memorial to a loved one
Occasion for giving thanks
Beginning or end of memorable event
Escape from near tragedy
A cherished, but undisclosed, event.

We are a kaleidoscope of the waterfront

Seamen from ships in Port Newark find evening movies at the SCI Center there a pleasant experience. Movies of all varieties to suit all tastes are exhibited. Seamen not interested in movies may prefer billiards or some other games of skill.



The SCI lobby is often piled high with luggage on days when a crew of an ocean liner is replaced by a relief crew. Men here comprise some of the incoming replacement crewmen waiting in the early morning to board busses for transportation to their ship, the Rotterdam. Slightly over one hundred of them stayed overnight at the Institute.

The Women's Council of SCI, the industrious volunteer arm of the Institute, is composed of women devoted not only to its major year-around project — knitting for seamen — but to the Institute as well, evidently.

Some volunteers knit for SCI from far-off places. Some may come in to the Institute during various times of the year for special short-time projects from communities nearby to New York. But hardly ever — maybe the word is never — do they come expressly to the Institute to work in its behalf from as far away as the west coast of the U.S.

Mrs. Charles Polhemus of Palo Alto, California, did just this in December.

A veteran knitter for the Council, she has made over *1,000* woolen pieces for it since 1955, a feat of considerable dimension in itself.

But there is more.

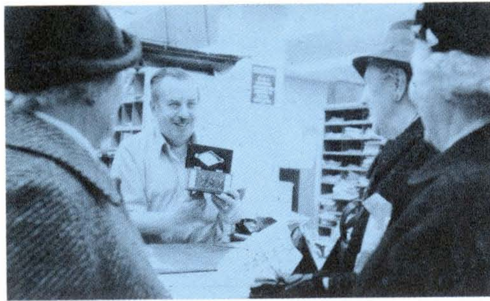
While knitting in her home this past late fall she experienced the impulse to plane to New York and the Institute to see for herself how the annual Christmas box project she had heard so much about was actually handled; to actively participate in the processing of the 10,000 gift boxes to seamen.

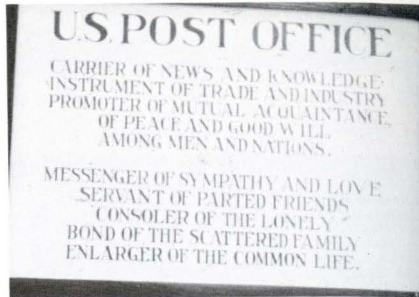
Acting on the impulse, she called the Council headquarters from California to tell it of her wish. She arrived at the Institute in December as planned and agreed, to be greeted by the staff who had never witnessed anything quite like it before.

From the time she arrived, Mrs. Polhemus, widowed for a year, a slender woman with boundless energy, worked each day in the Council "Christmas Room" along with other volunteers from nearby communities.

When she wasn't packing gift boxes or engaged at the many other details entailed in the project, she was, you guessed it — knitting.

As the big holiday project drew to a close, Mrs. Polhemus, exhilarated by her experience at the Institute and the Big City holiday decorations, prepared to return to her home in early January — this time to recruit knitters for SCI from her town.





The U. S. Post Office branch on the third floor of the Institute is a busy spot and popular with seamen because it is here that they hasten for mail immediately after getting off ship.

Harry Bernstein, a postal clerk with the branch since 1964 and possessing an excellent memory for names and faces, is able to greet the seamen by name and tell them — without looking in the "call boxes" — whether he has mail for them.

"Naturally," he says, "I'm most happy when I can say, 'Sure, Jack, there's mail for you.' Sometimes, when you have to tell a man there is nothing for him, well — the sad expression that comes into his face sort of gets to you."

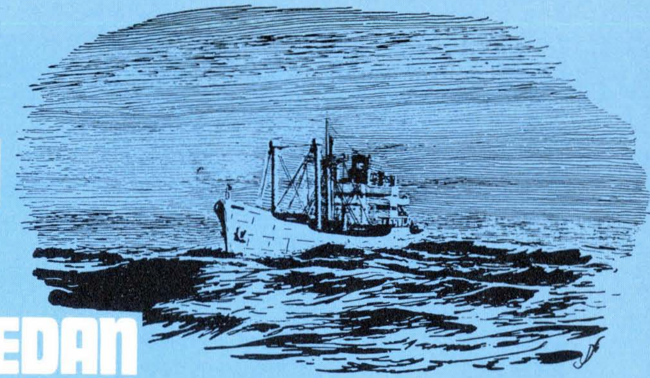
Mr. Bernstein in the photo shows some SCI volunteers a gift he received from an American seaman in Japan.

The sign mounted nearby the postal counter was brought from the old South Street SCI Post Office as a souvenir, its message as apt now as before.

Cunard Steamship Lines was recently awarded an official U. S. Naval Oceanographic Office citation and plaque in recognition of its "significant contribution to oceanography" at a noon luncheon held at the Institute.

The plaque was received for Cunard and its president, R. B. Patton, by Charles S. Dickson, the line's vice president in charge of operations. The presentation was made by Capt. F. L. Slattery, commander of the Oceanographic Office, and was in recognition for helping in research on the Gulf Stream, particularly.

the unsolved mystery of the S.S. OURANG MEDAN



by Neill J. Harris

On a warm, sunny morning in early February, 1948, the *S.S. Ourang Medan* steamed through the Strait of Malacca, bound for Jakarta in Indonesia. All appeared calm and peaceful . . . yet something menaced the Dutch freighter: her radio operator suddenly flashed a series of S.O.S. signals followed by his ship's location. He repeated the distress calls, alerting British and Dutch radio centers on the coast of Sumatra and the Malay Peninsula.

What danger threatened the *Ourang Medan?* All anxiously awaited his explanation; instead, the radio crackled out the ominous news: "Officers including captain lying dead in chartroom and on bridge. Probably whole crew dead."

Immediately after this the operator rapped out another S.O.S. with desperate speed; however, as if struggling with deadly fear, his next transmission came hopelessly garbled: the radio listening posts received only a series of indecipherable dots and dashes. But then, quite clearly, the operator dispatched his last message, pathetically telling its own tragic story: "I die." Silence, unbroken silence, followed.

The British and Dutch radio centers confirmed the location of the stricken freighter with the directional finding gear, then quickly notified all vessels in the Strait of Malacca. Rescue craft rushed from Sumatra and Malaya to the area of the distress calls and sighted the *Ourang Medan* within hours, right where she had reported herself.

At first sight she appeared in A1 condition, a thin ribbon of smoke trailing from her funnel; but on drawing close they noticed that she drifted helplessly with the current. The rescue ships hove to within hailing distance of the drifting freighter, but received no response to their repeated calls nor could any movement of life be seen aboard her.

After fifteen apprehensive minutes salvage parties rowed across to the *Ourang Medan* and clambered aboard her deck . . . and what they found appalled and horrified them: they had boarded a ship of the dead!

Corpses lay scattered everywhere about this floating morgue! The silent bodies of the officers and crew were sprawled along the deck and across the hatches, lying in the chartroom and wheelhouse. Even the captain's pet dog was killed, its lips drawn back and fangs bared in agony — or anger!

On the bridge the captain lay dead; the bodies of two ship's officers were stretched across the floor of the chartroom. In his tiny radio shack they found the operator who had tried so desperately to bring help, his body slumped in a chair and his lifeless hand still resting on the transmission key.

The bodies of the crewmen lay scattered about the ship, some where they had fallen in the line of duty. And the corpses of both officers and crew lay

on their backs, sightless eyes staring upward, faces reflecting some nameless horror seen before death struck.

The dead captain lay on his back, one hand shielding his eyes. The officers and crew also lay stretched on their backs, frozen faces upturned, mouths gaping wide and eyes staring. And on every face an expression of stark terror!

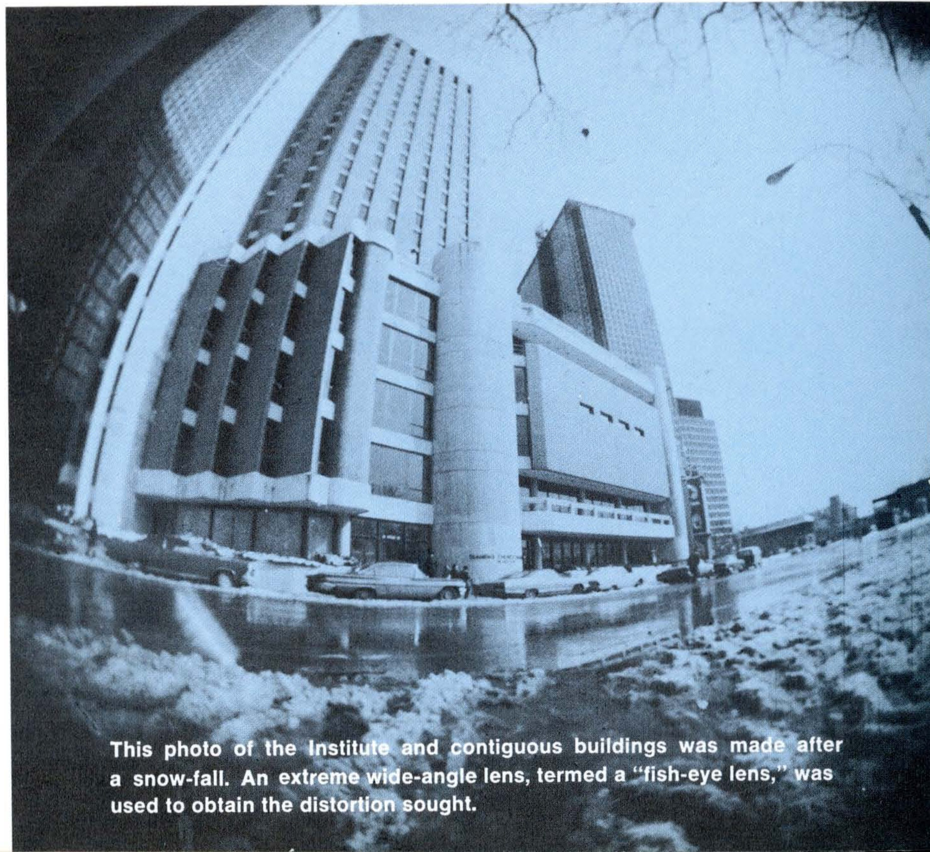
However, an examination of the bodies showed no signs of physical violence, nor any trace of wounds or injuries; and there were no weapons lying about; yet death had struck down every living creature aboard the doomed ship! But how? Perhaps autopsies on the corpses would tell.

The salvage teams held a meeting on deck and decided it best to tow the undamaged vessel with its grisly cargo of death to the nearest port. But then, mysteriously, a fire broke out below deck and soon was raging out of control, and the boarding parties hastily abandoned the floating coffin. Minutes later the boilers exploded and the stricken *Ourang Medan,* erupting smoke and flames, rolled over on her side and sank beneath the waves.

Who or what killed the captain and crew and officers of the Dutch freighter? No satisfactory answer has ever been proposed. Perhaps carbon monoxide or other deadly fumes from a smoldering fire caused the deaths. After all, such tragedies occur easily in closed spaces — yet it would be most unlikely for poisonous gas to suffocate crewmen on an open deck!

The horrifying fate that overtook the captain and crew of the *Ourang Medan* remains yet another mystery of the sea. But there remains a mystery greater still: Why were all the ill-fated crew staring up at the sky when death struck them down on that beautiful February morning in 1948?

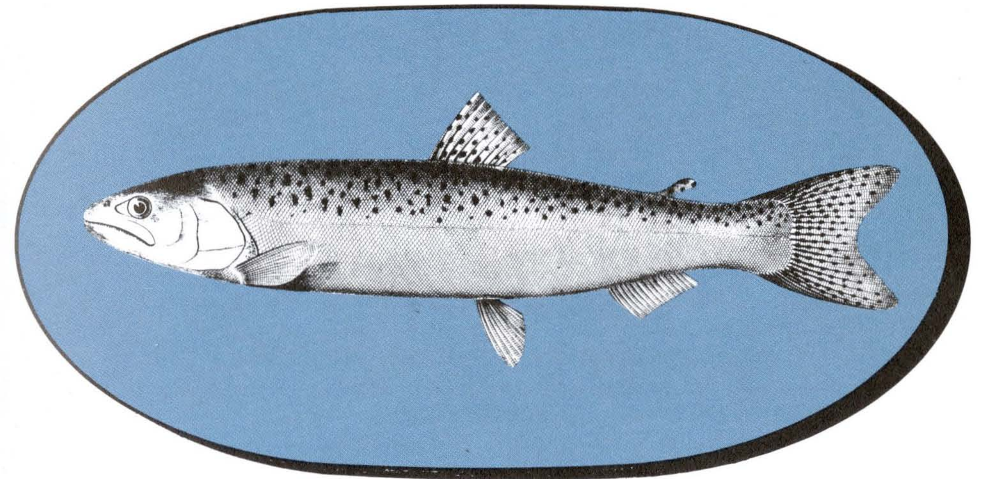
Perhaps death came, not from below, but from above!



This photo of the Institute and contiguous buildings was made after a snow-fall. An extreme wide-angle lens, termed a "fish-eye lens," was used to obtain the distortion sought.

photo contributed by photographer Charles Fenner

Migration Mysteries of FISH



by Alan P. Major

It is a well-known fact that some bird species migrate over vast distances from one country to another, often crossing seas and oceans to do this. It is less often realized that certain fish also migrate, sometimes thousands of miles, from one sea to another, or from a river or creek to the sea or ocean and vice-versa.

Like the birds, there are gaps in knowledge of fish migration. It is known, however, that fish move from one habitat to another for a period of time, principally for two reasons: to follow a food supply that also migrates or to find a new one; and to spawn.

A famous example of the latter is the salmon. The Atlantic salmon from

freshwater rivers in Britain live for several years in the North Atlantic Ocean, off Greenland and Iceland. Then, when mature, some mysterious instinct prompts them to gather in schools and to swim thousands of miles to precisely the exact spot where they were spawned.

Upon arriving at the mouth of their "home" river they must avoid hazards such as seals, fishermen, predatory birds and animals, waterfalls, rapids, etc. — leaping up and over obstacles in the water to finally reach the *very stream or rivulet gravel bed they descended from years earlier.*

Here they spawn and then again leave, followed by their offspring, to make the long journey back to the Atlantic. They leave and return to spawn several times before they die.

Similarly, the Pacific salmon begin life in the cold freshwater rivers of Oregon, Washington, south British Columbia, etc., which they leave *en masse* to the Pacific Ocean. Here for two to five years, according to their species, they range over an area from Alaska to the Asian coast. After this phase of the life cycle they return to their original spawning place. Unlike the Atlantic salmon the Pacific salmon makes the trip only once, never sees its offspring before it dies.

Much of our knowledge of fish migration has been discovered by affixing date and numbered date tags on the fish; some remarkable journeys have been recorded. In August, 1952, 215 albacores were tagged off the Californian coast by the California Department of Fish and Game. One of the albacores tagged 18 miles southwest of Los Angeles was caught by a Japanese fishing boat 550 miles southeast of Tokyo 324 days later, having traversed about 4900 miles during that time.

In 1954, two bluefin tuna were tagged near Martha's Vineyard, Massachusetts, and later caught, in 1959, by French fishermen in the Bay of Biscay, having increased in weight from 18 to 150 lbs. Similarly, two bluefins caught off Bergen, Norway, had covered 4500 miles in 120 days from Cat Cay, Florida, where they had been tagged in October, 1951.

A king salmon tagged off the west coast of Queen Charlotte Islands, British Columbia, was caught 60 days later near Marshfield, Oregon, having covered 870 miles. An Atlantic salmon tagged at Loch na Croic, Scotland, was caught 11 months later, 1730 miles away, in Eqaluq fjords, Greenland.

How the fishes cross the trackless oceans and seas, leaving and returning to one feeding ground, sometimes thousands of miles apart, or finding their way to their native river, is a mystery.

In the case of the salmon it has been proved they have a remarkable sense of smell and by using it the salmon is able to trace its return by the special odor of the water, gravel, mud and humus in the river mouth and spawning place, amazingly avoiding all the hundreds of other odors from alien tributaries and streams.

For other fishes there have been several theories put forward. One is that they are guided by temperature gradients and changes of the water; another is they have a mysterious sense called "flow attraction" which they use to swim with or against the right or wrong currents.

Other suggestions are that certain fish are able to migrate by the angle of the sun's light upon the water and even that they are guided in direction by the position of the sun and moon. Although some puzzling actions of fish have been solved in recent years with research, many of the questions about their migration remain unanswered and work is being done to increase our sparse knowledge.

CERTAINLY—A GOONEY BIRD

Surviving each crash landing,
He manages to stagger;
Air-borne again at last,
His wing-dip hints a swagger.

Then orbiting his world
Above the earth and ocean,
He glides with a dancer's grace—
A feather-cloud in motion . . .

Until another landing,
Another slight—uh, stagger,
Another awkward take off
Foretell his certain swagger.

—Emily Sargent Councilman

From WRITERS NOTES AND QUOTES
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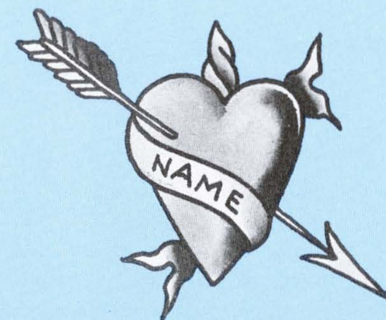
TATTOO

I hope that somewhere sails the sea,
A ship called Betty-Lou.
How else to explain this name on my chest,
To my bride-to-be named Sue.

—Robert W. Leach



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