

Transcribed by Kara Kralik 06/11/2020

Sumner T. Bernstein

Yesterday we crossed the Equator - we entered the domain of Neptunus Rex, his mermaids and his court. All those who had previously crossed the equator are [*loss*] who haven't are lowdown, stinking, slimy, land-lubbing, loathsome [*sic*] polywogs, [*sic*] they are the uninitiated. The day before "Davy Jones" came aboard for an inspection and several polywogs [*sic*] were called up for offenses like taking eggs from the crows [*sic*] nest and had their behinds paddled. All this is accompanied by great pomp and ceremony. All the characters are guadily [*sic*] dressed and there is an air of false austerity. Yesterday was the big day - all the polywogs, [*sic*] officers, Navy personnel, and army enlisted men went through the initiation. First down on your knees and a strong stream of salt water is played upon you as you run the gauntlet of some 15 shellbacks who paddle your wet fanny with pieces of canvas. Then you "praise Allah" and pay homage to Neptune and his court; from there you stick your face into the mustard covered posterior of some shellback. Next you sit in

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hot seat - about 100 volts and your wet clothes assure you getting a shock. Then the "royal" barbers clip odd sections of your hair out - leaving you looking like a patch work quilt. Then you were smeared with French [*loss*] and sprayed with blueing. And that was it. It was over fast - it was fun to watch the others especially in the hot seat. So now we are all honorable shellbacks [*sic*]

Love

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Today is our second day at sea. It has been a fine trip so far. We are on a Navy transport which has been chartered for this trip by the Army. That means we got Navy chow - and the food is good; 3 superb meals a day. The enlisted men only got 2 meals and a noon meal of sandwiches and fruit. (Another reason I am glad I endured those 13 weeks at O.C.S.) It is tough on the G.I.'s. There has been little sickness as far as I have seen; the sea has been smooth. Sleeping is excellent; it is like being rocked to sleep. Time does tend to hang heavy; The chaplain runs a very adequate library; I am browsing through several anthologies when I am not playing cards - bridge, poker, hearts what have you. The sea air gives you an appetite despite the fact that life is inactive - I spend a lot of time on the upper decks; it is the best place to read.

I got the mail distribution today - a card

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from Florida and the Bulletin with H.B.'s picture. There may be a second distribution when they dig up more sacks of mail - I hope so. We, of course, can send no mail while in transit. I will have these letters ready for mail (and censorship) as soon as we hit somewhere where we can post them. I will also write a V-Mail letter and post it at the same time. You can then judge which service is best. As yet we have not been informed as to what we can write and what we cannot - for that reason, I am writing only to you and at that forced to skip the specific details of our ship etc. I know damned little, anyway. I am

only sorry that so many days have gone by without your receiving any word from me. Perhaps later on it will be permissible to tell you our direction etc. Needless to say conjecture and rumors are running rampant around here.

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Another note - and nothing special, still en route. We are getting books and pamphlets orienting us on the Southwest Pacific. Yesterday wasn't yesterday, it was the day before yesterday because we lost Thursday when we crossed the dateline. I must be almost  $\frac{1}{2}$  the way around the globe from Portland. Bridge playing is still the rule; doing lots of reading as well. Days pass very very quickly although we gain time as we move west daily. Incidentally - I now play cribbage and even chess and I still kibitz every game in sight - I'm incurable. I just wish I could remember half the dirty jokes I hear. My gang at mess are a

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cheerful bunch - we kill ourselves with our humor and with our ribbing of a violently southern warrant officer. I have not missed Friday night services in my 3 weeks on this boat. They are short and not very satisfactory but I'd rather go than fail to attend. On the whole I like ship board life - it is certainly easy enough - better enjoy it while I can.

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Strangely enough I feel very unphilosophical about this whole business of going and being overseas. Perhaps

when I get there, get assigned, and  
have something to judge by, I can  
write something intelligent. Right now  
I guess I am lazy enough to just  
avoid thinking too seriously.

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The Pacific remains as blue as ever. Sunset  
is really beautiful on the ocean - yellows, reds,  
mirrored by the clouds against the very  
blue sky. You really get to know what  
"sky blue pink" is, for that is really the  
color of that last glow of sunshine. I  
guess I should have been a poet.  
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I don't remember when I first met him or  
even saw him. In the Army, you come in contact  
with so many people that first meetings are  
usually vague since they are group affairs. I do  
remember his being called out to take charge of  
some troops when we arrived at somewhere; I  
remember my surprise when on the train to  
somewhere he explained that those blue chips were  
worth a dollar. And I shall never forget his  
d disdain, his caustic remarks, his air of superiority  
when he found us playing our usual nickel and  
dime poker. We played "baseball" - a wild game, yet  
compared to "wildcat" and some of the others relatively  
mild - his comment, always with a self-appeasing grin -  
was "Nell, that's not poker." The story of a friendly game  
and of the fact that were [*sic*] playing to pass time, not  
for blood, affected him not the least. He was quick to  
organize the 25¢ games and on up.

I don't know when I finally associated the name  
[Harner] with him; Roy [Harner]. He [*illegible deletion*] is in his  
thirties I guess; average physique, small features,  
a somewhat flabby face and chin. His two classic  
expressions are his grin - which appears smirking  
and supercilious and his grimace - which is a dour

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dispirited look, almost pleading for sympathy. His eyes are small and are rather expressive. The game of poker was my first common game with him - usually he was a participant and I the kibitzer. I quickly learned several things about him - or shall I say that I gained several impressions - the first was that he was sure that Roy Harner is the best poker player in the world and that he is - perhaps by poetic justice? - The worst card holder. I will admit that he plays poker well; he knows when to stay and when not to, when to draw and when to drop out. In the long run he undoubtedly is ahead. But his manner, his superior line of chatter is oppressi[ng]. He is never beaten by skill, but only on luck. As soon as someone (like Howie Baumgarten) figures out how he plays, he can easily be beaten. It was Roy who talked Howie into playing; now Howie always has Roy's goat all the time since he plays the same type of game and has the advantage of Roy's having given his game away while luring Howie into his clutches. When Howie wins, no matter who the opponent, no matter what the game, Roy always places the blame or the credit on luck with some comment like "he went in like a skunk, and came out smelling like roses." Roy isn't angry, he just seems really disallusioned [*sic*], he doesn't hold it against anybody, he

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doesn't begrudge his losings to the winner, he takes it all somewhat philosophically - why does it just have to happen to me, the best card player around these parts? Bridge, rather than poker, proved to be the medium for the true expression of our chum; for we were to meet the Harner system - the perfect system - to replace Culbertson, [Van V Leck] and all the rest. It is based on point value, indicative bids, forcing bids and the rest. But just a word - Part of Harner's makeup, it seems, is the need of a stooge; someone to keep his ego up, to second

his ideas, to echo his words, to support his case. In this instance Dick [Brag] (pronounced [Braves] by Harner) fits the bill. In poker he plays against Roy but they are always whispering together, scowling or chuckling like two old crones, obviously trying to make the others feel the lack of the Harner system and blessing of Harner brilliance. In Bridge Dick was the obvious person to be let in on the system to learn it, and then to go [batty] with the master and his point count and his key bids to conquer the world.

As yet Harner & Co have conquered no one. Roy is a good player, his system has its merits and its faults. The biggest fault is [Brag] - he has not

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got the fine points of the system mastered despite his many protestations. "Next time" is his cry but sometimes Roy feels so bad that he has to say "Maybe we ought to play Culbertson!" Incidentally, Roy with his system never errs in his bidding. He is right when he says that the system has never really been tried but he keeps on hoping that [Brag] will see the light and they will move on to newfound success. The amusing point to the doubting Thomas's who are playing against the system is to hear & see Harner with a look combining Angelic disgust and resignation explain to his partner what should have happened. It is all a negative assertion of his brilliant system, a negative boost to his cocky conceit which is really amusing rather than overburdening sine Harner takes his brilliance as a recognized fact. If only [Brag] could see! this bid means 16 points and that one 10 points etc. and Brag's play, after the bidding - I think Roy wonders whether it is better that he is unique or if [*illegible deletion*] it might be better if he had one soulmate. I don't think he wants to win money; he just wants a subtle sort of recognition, aside, of course, from his personal grudge against Baumgarten, which is rather secondary, any way [*sic*]. Harner is good natured - for the most part he takes Brag's

errors well in stride because they are Brag's

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errors; he just gets somewhat peeved after a while. It is a classic now for him to explain his 2 heart bid which forces his partner to pass. "Now I have invented a bid which forces my partner to pass..." is his refrain, explaining his old difficulty with partners who refuse to pass. Brag, of course, ignores the invention, bids & monkey wrenches the works and Harner just curls up a little [more] and looks pleasantly, if dispiritedly, around for sympathy. All of Harner's [sic] expressions, his trials with Brag, his sayings from "I have invented a bid" on down, are ready laughs for us all and, in fact, a satisfaction probably to Roy since they afford him recognition. Harner is not smug, but he is pleasantly sure & certain. I guess my writing this would tickle him. He is different, no doubt about it. His pride is not ordinary; if you are not awed by him or repulsed by him in your reaction to him, he proves enjoyable company. In fact, at the Poker & Bridge tables it is Brag with his smug homage to Harner who proves somewhat disgusting. A last word on Harner; he recognizes the judgment of others, is in fact seeking the justification and the acknowledgement he has already accorded himself. He does not hesitate to praise the good play of others unless he thinks it may be blind luck - he feels himself very unlucky - probably considers it the handicap to compensate for his abilities. A last incident for the

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present writing: on the boat deck this morning, I noted that Harner hadn't shaved his mustache or a well defined area on his chin. I asked if he were trying to grow a beard. "Trying?" he responded. Why how could I say trying - he is Harner - he so good as had his spade goatee - granted only 2 days growth right now.