

Fog...



As Experienced from a Lightship

By George Rongner



f all the scourge of the sea, fog is by far the most contemptible. On the lightship LV 511 [BUZZARDS Lightship Station near Cape Cod,

MA] sailors learned to distrust fog more than the dreaded southwest wind – detested its influx. It was an unwelcome visitor. It became a hated arch-enemy. Most preferred the hoisting of storm warnings to the invasion of fog, which was cursed more than any other single object, condition or person.

There are several types of fog, several known causes for its formation and various reasons why it was so unpopular. First, then, let us deal with types of fog.

Dense or “Pea Soup” Fog

Dense or “pea soup” fog, the kind proverbially sliced with a knife, is the most accepted, recognized and understood. There can be no mistake when one is encompassed in the swirls of this form, you know you're in fog. Out there on the lightship station, this dense fog enveloped us completely. It was

never so compact that one couldn't see the bow of the ship from the stern, but you couldn't see much further than perhaps the length of the ship. Only on a couple of nights was the stern greatly obscured when looking aft from the wheelhouse. Those were abnormal conditions. The “soupy” fog however, for all practical purposes, cloaks one entirely, day or night. It hides everything but moisture. At night, deck lights cast grotesque shadows and encountering a shipmate on deck is similar to encountering an apparition. We were alone out there on station, a tiny blob upon a great ocean. Occasionally, during this type of fog, there was a southwesterly swell, but the seas were seldom rough. A combination of the two can be particularly maddening. When you curse at the motion of the ship, your voice is drowned by the roar of the fog horn. Conversely, if you curse at the unbearable sound, a tilting deck may throw you off balance. If lucky, you might land against a bulkhead; if not, you might stumble over a chair, a table, or a deck fitting. Then you curse at both elements. A person has to learn to channel energy into something constructive. But, it's not always easy.

Soupy fog is definite in its characteristics. When it exists, it is everywhere. When it leaves, it disappears completely. It may return, but it will do so as a body. It does not disintegrate to a point and then mold together again. Ordinarily the sun cannot be seen through this type of fog except when at or near its highest point in the sky. This is the only time the “soup” becomes thin enough to lessen in texture. Otherwise, when it disperses, it leaves abruptly. The line of demarcation between it and good weather is distinct.

Those aboard willingly accept their lot when weather conditions envelop the ship. The horn is the lifeline, protection against huge vessels that may be bearing down on the lightship. Of course, it is distracting and wears on the nerves, but it is acknowledged, to a man, as a necessary safety factor. Radar is far from a cure-all, as collisions between new modern vessels equipped with radar have occurred. The horn, then, was our main protection. It served as a protection to others as well, and a cautious mariner will grope along, listening for our blast to verify his position. Unfortunately, mariners are not always cautious or wise.

Ground or Layer Fog

The second type of fog, for want of a better name, is "ground" or "layer" fog. This can be divided into two branches, one a low layer hugging the water and the other a thin layer suspended a few feet above the water. The former is the more common.

Layer fog is found primarily on cold nights that follow warm days. It is a close relative of water vapor that forms when air temperatures dip well below the temperature of the water, and is the coldest of the types. During low layer fog, masts of ships often appear as floating perpendicular sticks without a base until the rest of the superstructure ultimately emerges.

Fog of this type frequently was observed on the BUZZARDS station. We saw the flash of the Gay Head Lighthouse on Martha's Vineyard, ten miles away, and the red topped antenna poles in Mattapoisett on the Massachusetts mainland, twenty miles away, all the while squinting unsuccessfully through binoculars for a buoy two miles from our ship's station.

When a strata of layer fog lies on the water a landlubber, safely ashore, might think a night completely devoid of fog. To him, the

twinkling of starlight available to his untrained eyes might lull him into a false sense that the weather is clear. Even if he is looking seaward, the lights of large vessels may come into sight, and he would assume that the night was perfectly clear, without a trace of fog. He would be only partly correct, for the fog would be upon the water!

Although the mainland was visible when layer fog surrounded our ship, the fog signal was placed in operation for the benefit of small craft. Anyone who has ever been at sea in a small boat under these conditions can well appreciate the comfort such a signal provides. The sailor is reassured at the sound, and sometimes might even become convinced that he indeed is a great navigator. "There I was," he might relate later to a disinterested acquaintance, "in my little boat and the fog shut in tight! And do you know what? I hit the lightship right on the nose!" We are not specifically opposed to using our fog horn during periods of layer fog because we know it's of short duration. We do not even dignify it by classifying it as a nuisance. It invariably dissipates before the warming sun and soon vanishes.

The second branch of layer fog is that which remains suspended a few feet above

water. This type is rare. I saw it only twice when I was on the lightship. It is an actual layer of cloud likened to smoke emitting from a train or a chimney on a windy day when it is blown horizontally. When observed aboard the BUZZARDS the water was uncovered for many miles and the nearest buoys could be easily seen. The hull of a freighter two miles away was clearly sighted, but the superstructure of the vessel was not visible. The mainland and the top of Cuttyhunk Island loomed boldly. Thus we had two extremes, top and bottom in view, but not the narrow belt in the middle. The life expectancy of this particular fog is short. It passes so quickly one wonders if he has actually witnessed it.

Haze

A third type of fog is haze. We called it "halo" fog or "discouraging" fog. It resembled a huge halo as viewed from the BUZZARDS, with the ship being in the center of a perfectly clear area of four-to-six miles, that area, in turn, being surrounded by a wide band of haze, or fog. It was discouraging because it lingered and aggressively refused to leave. When Cuttyhunk Island, 4.6 miles to the east, no longer was visible from our ship we turned on the foghorns. It was most exasperating to assume visibility to be 4.5 miles, the final tenth of a mile being held prisoner by the haze. It meant the difference between shutting off the blasted horns and being compelled to endure them.

Haze may linger for several days, particularly during summer and autumn. Never completely obscuring, it impedes vision somewhat less drastically than other fog. It can make solo visits or it can bring along a companion – a southwest wind. Smoky southwesterers are common to the northeast section of the country and are miserable to endure aboard an unsheltered lightship. Haze without wind is bad enough, for it means that the fog signal must be sounded. With a violent pitching due to wind, it becomes even more disheartening.

On such days it would appear, at first glance, that the visibility was fair-to-good. However, you cannot see the shoreline or familiar landmarks lying just beyond the fringe. It's maddening. Looking through an open porthole on the second deck and it seems as if you can see for miles.

"Why, I can almost see Cuttyhunk. By golly, of course I do. Or is it a figment of my



imagination? No, of course not. There it is!" The man on watch is accused of not paying attention. "What's the matter, are you falling asleep? Can't you see Cuttyhunk yet? Do you think we want to listen to those damn horns forever? Here, let me take the binoculars. I'll show you." Eyes were strained in vain. There was nothing to see except the disappearance of water as it faded into the haze. "Well, you're right. I thought I saw it but I must have been mistaken."

When this type of fog finally leaves it may be for days or it may be moments. Many times a joyous watchman has phoned the engine room to discontinue the air compressor because the fog cleared. A few minutes later the same man, now disconsolate, requests resumption of pressure. The fog returned. There is nothing more cheerless than the dreary reactivation of a foghorn before it has had time to stop vibrating. The crew sometimes referred to haze as a female fog because "it can't make up its mind." It leaves and returns leaves, stays a little longer, returns again. Indecision is one of its irritating traits.

Reasons for Fog

There are several known causes for the formation of fog. It may form when warm air, sufficiently high in vapor content, flows over water or land that is cooler than the air. The reverse sometimes occurs when very cold air lies just above warm water or land areas. It can be caused by the cooling of the earth's surface throughout the night. This is more common over land than over water. Radiation fog, when mixed with smoke, can cause smog that is so common in some of the larger cities. Another way in which fog is created is when warm, moist air moves from low to high altitudes and becomes sufficiently cooled in the process. Still another, is rain falling through cool air that has a high vapor content.

Two Aids for the Mariner

Before launching into a discussion of the reasons why fog was unpopular it's necessary to note our defense against the element. We called it a defense because we were living aboard a ship located in harms way. The BUZZARDS station was strategically located at the western entrance to Buzzards Bay to provide the mariner with a means of determining his position by our fog signal, when visual signals were obscured by

inclement weather. Whether the signals were considered an aid or a defense depended on where one was situated, that is; on the lightship or on another vessel. Regardless of the point of view, there were two such signals on a lightship, radio-beacons and fog horns.

Radio-beacons were the most valuable of the fog signals. Beacons of the type on the BUZZARDS had a transmitting power capable of being heard from fifty-to-one hundred-fifty miles. For station identification, most beacons transmitted a Morse signal (combinations of dots and dashes) which was heard on radio direction finders of other vessels. Direction finders were instruments used to determine the direction from which a signal originated and by obtaining a signal from several different radio-beacons a mariner was able to fix his position on a chart. Radio-beacons operated continuously, day and night, clear weather and during fog.

The following warning was quoted from the Coast Guard Light List:

"Caution must be used in approaching radio-beacons on radio bearings [All Coast Guard radio beacons have been discontinued and replaced by more accurate electronic aids to navigation], and care must be taken to set course to pass safely clear. The risk of collision will be avoided by insuring that the radio bearing does not remain constant. This caution is applicable to those lightships and stations on submarine sites which are passed close to."

Unfortunately, this warning sometimes was unheeded by a careless mariner, and danger of collision was possible. On some occasions mariners remained on a constant bearing until the last possible moment, changing course barely in time to avert a disaster. Ships passed close to the BUZZARDS in bad weather, much too close for comfort or safety. This sobering occurrence was experienced by most men who served on a lightship.

Second in importance (but first in distraction to those on board) is the fog horn. Ours was a triplex diaphragm type which produced a chime signal by means of compressed air. The fog signal was distinguished from others by its assigned characteristics, such as tone, type and number of sound emissions, and intervals of time between these emissions. Fog signals on lightships provided a designated number of blasts and silent periods each minute to provide identification, much as different flashes identify lighthouses from

each other. This data was obtained from a chart or Light List of the area to which a lightship was assigned.

On the BUZZARDS we listened to the horn eighteen seconds out of every minute the signal operated. It sounded in groups of two blasts every twenty seconds. There was a three second blast, a silent period of two seconds, another three second blast and then a silent period of twelve seconds. From there the cycle repeated itself, over and over and over. During a twenty-four hour period of thick weather the horn actually bombarded the crew a total of seven hours and twelve minutes.

Should both the starboard and port horns have become inoperative at the same time, the ship's bell was used as a standby signal. Strokes on the bell were manually sounded in groups of two every thirty seconds.

The Light List provides several warnings to mariners concerning the audibility of fog signals.

"Caution, Mariners are cautioned that the hearing of fog signals cannot be implicitly relied upon. Experience indicates that distance must not be judged only by the intensity or apparent direction of the sound. Occasionally there may be areas close to a fog signal in which it is not heard, and, that the mariner must not assume that a fog signal is not operating because he does not hear it. Fog may exist not far from a station, and yet not be seen from it, and that, therefore, the signal may not be in operation."

The influx of fog in our immediate vicinity was always dreaded for a variety of reasons: the feeling of being isolated from the world, the grating and constant sound of the horns, and the ever-constant danger of collision.

Isolation

While on board for our customary twenty-eight day tours we realized and accepted our isolation from civilization. But, when fog set in the separation seemed more extreme and it was more difficult to take.

We began to feel hemmed in, shunned by the outside world. A claustrophobic person would be very uncomfortable in this situation. One could not see the mainland, or any of the islands. Aircraft could sometimes be heard but not seen. We saw no boats or ships except for the few that passed close by and were quickly gone. At times we couldn't even see

the sky or the sun or clouds. We saw nothing but ourselves, our ship, and a minute portion of the Atlantic Ocean. Occasionally a gull's wings came into view, hoping for a morsel of food. That's it. That's all we saw! We were indeed locked in a closet, with strict limitations of freedom and movement. We walked along the deck looking seaward or we gazed dejectedly through a porthole. The same sights were out there – fog and water, nothing more. During periods of fog, we watched through the portholes more than at any other time, as though some great unseen force was drawing us.

Hour after hour passes and a sailor continues his frequent vigil at a porthole. How we longed for a view of the mainland. A glimpse of anything would be so welcome! We realized how grand, after all, to be able to see lights and land and objects. On clear nights the beach appeared so tantalizingly close and yet it was a forbidden fruit and we became morose. How lovely to be able to have that feeling right now, if only the damned fog would go away – fog and water, water and fog. Let's go on deck. We'll be able to see better. No, that gray blanket still persists – fog and water, water and fog.

This segregation became depressing. Our ability to think was dulled. Our concept of life was lusterless. We became spiritless. Constructive thinking was relegated to the dark recesses of our mind. Fog, fog, fog. If we were ashore we could have gone some place. We could have talked to somebody different. We wouldn't experience this acute craving for a change of scenery. Out here we talked to the same old shipmates. We could go from the main deck to the second or third decks and back again. Tiring of this, we walked from bow to stern, covering an overall distance of one hundred twenty-nine feet and nine inches. Ship's work continued unenthusiastically. During off-hours we wrote to our families or acquaintances, but our letters were vague and poorly worded. Some read, but remembered little of it. A few watched television, unimpressed, or listened to the radio, discovering no joy in what was heard. Besides, the radio-beacons interfered with television and radio reception. The television screen flickered, the picture became slightly distorted, and a scratching noise was clearly audible, all at the beginning of each coded groups being transmitted by the beacon. The radio became a receiver of beacon tones. Dit-dar-dit-dit, thirty times a

minute every third minute. It jumbles the program. If only the fog would lift, our spirits would surge. Fog and water. Fog is everywhere – infiltrating our very souls. The outside world? Where was it? It must have been there but certainly we couldn't see it. We remained locked in our closet. We busied ourselves in work or a personal project, trying to forget our enforced isolation. But we did not forget, as we continued to look through a porthole, hoping, hoping.

Distressing Sounds

The fog signals are the most distressing elements aboard ship. Although the horn possesses the greater influence, the continuous transmittal of radio-beacon signals also becomes wearisome. The first few hours are insignificant in their effect. The first twenty-four hours, in fact, didn't seem to be a bother. Beyond that, the constant dit-dar-dit-dit, dit-dar-dit-dit, dit-dar, dit-dit begins to assert itself. It became offensive to the man on watch in the radio-room. It became objectionable to those who would like to hear a radio. The exasperating interference brought minds sharply into focus only to the fog that still encompassed the ship.

This irritation is mild, however, to that produced by the great booming sound of the foghorn. If you ever stood on a pier and heard the harsh resounding signal of a ship about to leave for sea you probably were startled. If you can picture six such blasts every minute of the hour, a few feet away, you will have some idea of what it's like on a lightship during periods of fog.

The first such blast is always startling, even to the man who turns on the switch. He knows when it will begin its series of blasts, yet tenses and jumps ever so slightly when it first sounds. To those taken unaware, the initial blast can be frightening. A man painting, for example, invariably takes a longer stroke with his brush or dips it deeper into the can. A man writing will break the pencil lead or leave an undisciplined line on the paper. On one occasion a cook, walking aft toward the galley, timed the initial roar of the horn with an acrobatic toss of a pan of potatoes. A man walking along the main deck involuntarily expedites his pace as though suddenly feeling a sharp object jutting into the seat of his trousers. A sleeping man is aroused instantaneously in beads of sweating terror. His head swiftly leaves his pillow and his nerves

are a confusion of activity as he becomes rudely aware of the horn.

Being exceptionally fond of fresh air, I slept with two portholes open. One faced in the direction of the foghorn platform twelve feet aft and ten feet higher than the cabin. Here the piercing effect of the horn is most ear-shattering of all. When first assigned to the vessel I knew not what to expect and twice was taken by surprise. The noise exploded with a dreadful detonation and I am quite sure I left the bed, horizontally, at least six inches. Whether it was fright or repercussion I'll never know. It was devastating. It was terrifying. I leaped up, closed the portholes tightly and buried my head in a pillow. The clamor followed and clung tenaciously. My heart beat faster, my blood pressure soared, my eardrums vibrated. Sleep was gone, never to return the remainder of the night.

I soon became used to the invasions of fog and learned to barricade myself from the sound of the horns. The compressor that furnished air for the diaphragms became my ally. When the man on watch in the radio-room wished to place the horn in operation he first had to telephone the engine room for air-pressure. The engineer on watch then started the compressor and telephoned the radio room. When an adequate amount of pressure was reached, the horns began. This process consumed about five minutes. I always woke up at the sound of the compressor starting and, after the first couple of times, knew what to do. I would instantly leap out of bed, close the portholes, make certain the doors to the cabin were shut, and insert cotton in my ears (an ample supply being kept available for such times). This defense had its drawbacks, for the muffled sound still penetrated the cotton and I never was able to sleep well under those conditions. The supply of fresh air was drastically reduced and the room became warm, uncomfortable and stuffy. On warm nights I moved to the wardroom with a pillow and blanket to sleep on the built-in cushions. They were constructed in a sweeping arc to conform with the contour of the ship and I had to sleep in a similar curved position. Fresh air was obtainable, however, and the discomforts of the wardroom were preferable to those of my cabin.

The crew's berthing space was directly beneath the foghorns. There was a deck hatch above this space, normally kept open for ventilation. The clamor of the horns boomed

through this opening to disrupt the sleep of the sleeping crew. On many foggy nights, particularly at the onset of the swirling mist, a white skivvy-clad figure could be seen in motion, frantically closing the hatch to muffle the sound. There were no sound-proof bulkheads, however, and the great jarring noises continued, although slightly dulled. A few of the men slept restlessly, one or two catnapped, others found sleep beyond reach. Bunk lights came on, magazines were brought out, and the unhappy night wore on.

Diaphone horns of the type described in the following article produce 142 decibels at one meter. This is enough power to completely puncture eardrums at that distance. To give you an idea of the loudness, or power, a Boeing 707 jet plane, or a rock band, produces about 122 decibels. From that level to increase the sound three decibels requires a doubling of power. Double the power to get 125 decibels and double it again to reach 128 decibels, and so forth.

Most of us never became completely adjusted to the foghorns at night. Men tossed and turned in bed. Their eyelids sagged. They almost recaptured sleep and then they were suddenly wide awake. The horns wailed on. The night moved slowly. The watch changed. "What, are you still awake?" "Yeah. Those damned horns keep me from getting to sleep!" A glance at another bunk revealed a second sleepless body. "You awake, too?" "Yes. Isn't it ever going to clear up?" Quiet again crept over the bunkroom. It was quiet, that is, except for the insistent chatter of the horn. BEEEE—OOOH. Silence. BEEEE—OOOH. Slowly, ever so slowly, the night continued. Sleep did not come. It was snatched away by the signals blasting in the darkness. Thoughts drifted to home. They were interrupted. They returned fleetingly only to be scattered again. The horn will not be denied. Seconds were counted. A three-second blast. Two seconds of silence. A three-second blast. "Ah! Now we'll have peace and quiet – for twelve seconds! . . . ten, eleven, twelve. BEEEE—OOOH! There we go again. Damn, I wish I could get to sleep."

It's also interesting to note that sleeping men were awakened just as suddenly by the silence of a horn when it's secured, as by the occasion of its first blast.

The intense sound produced by these horns, even though received with a consenting mind, is totally accepted. We did, however, adhere to the philosophy that it was better to live uncomfortably than not to live at all. It was far better to lose sleep than to become involved in a collision with another ship. Then, too, we were doing our job of playing a prominent role in assisting mariners who were navigating in the area.

The dreadful roar had its daytime effect as well and it did not take long to set one's nerves on edge. It preyed on the mind and attacked the power of concentration. It was upsetting to all forms of activity.

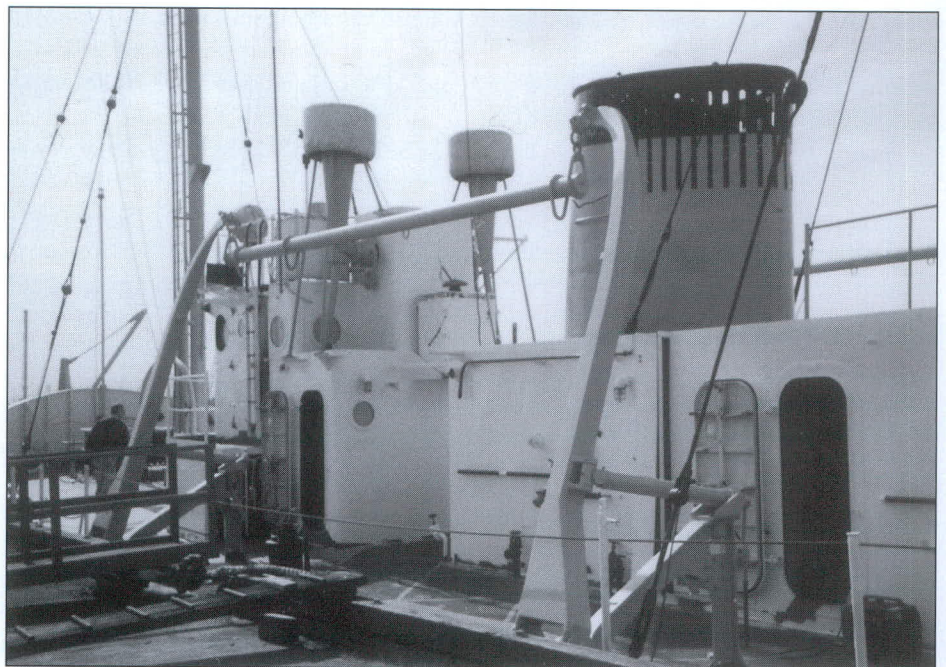
The first blasts would be accepted with a nonchalant shrug of the shoulders. "Well, I guess we'll have the horns for awhile", was followed by a glance through a porthole to try and determine the probable duration. Everyone would go about his duties with no appreciable change of attitude; for the noise had not yet become a challenge to the emotional senses. An oft-repeated query, to which there was no tangible answer, was "I wonder how long they'll be on?" one hoped for an optimistic reply, but who could possibly know how long the fog would remain?

In a couple of hours the crew became conscious of the perseverance of the fog signal. By now it grated on our nerves. One always hoped the fog, and signal, wouldn't last too

much longer. Still it persisted, and the terrible constant noise became very disconcerting. You had to try developing enough interest in an activity to offset the paralyzing effect it could have on your mind. You could not allow the horns to dominate you. You had to stop thinking about it. "Ah, but how wonderful it will be when the fog leaves and it's quiet once more!"

The horns reached their maximum volume at the entrance to the wheelhouse (bridge). If the door is opened while the horn was blowing the vibration was felt as well as heard. The sound flowed through the open door and then could go no further than the bulkheads inside. There it bounced off and came back out only to be met at the open door and driven inside again as a whirling dervish. The sound was incredibly piercing. Papers on the chart table fluttered, the binnacle cover rattled, handrails vibrated and one has a moment of near panic as the door to the bridge was hurriedly closed. Should a second blast follow before this could be accomplished, the blast reverberated around, over, under, on and through the wheelhouse. It was without doubt the noisiest explosion of sound one experienced aboard the BUZZARDS lightship. Vibrations were felt on the arms, the legs and the eardrums. It was not a pleasing sensation.

On the main deck, we waited for the second blast of a series, then scampered to our



The two, white, "marshmallow" objects over the bridge are the foghorn trumpets. Note how close they are to the bridge and weather deck. Society vessel RELIEF. U. S. Lighthouse Society photo.

destination. If we lingered for any reason we covered our ears with our hands, the forefingers tightly pressed into our ears. One didn't loiter. One remained on deck only if something required immediate attention. If repairs, or necessary work, were to be accomplished in this sector we used cotton as a protective and muffling agent. The men presented a ludicrous appearance indeed, with a stream of cotton protruding from each side of their head. In the radio room, on the main deck behind the foghorn platform, the noise was resounding to a somewhat lesser degree. It was especially irksome when testing electronic gear, monitoring other stations, working the radio or synchronizing time clocks. The noise from the horn platform drowned out everything else. Radio dispatches, unless repeated, were received with great difficulty. The several tests of electronic and monitoring schedules were superimposed with a tremendous wail of foghorn outbursts. How could anyone remain composed with such blasts in the ear?

Below deck the tone was somewhat subdued in comparison, but still the sound permeates, of that there was no question. Vibrations were not so apparent, but the wail was unmistakable. It became pervasive. It intervened in every form of normal living. We became adjusted to speaking in one of two ways. We learned to shout at one another and even

then we were often forced to repeat what we'd said. The most satisfactory method of conversing during fog was with the "interrupted - wait a second" method. In this manner we spoke in a normal tone, stopped at the exact beginning of a foghorn blast, then when the signal was quiet, continued as though nothing had happened. Sometimes it was stop and go several times before a full sentence was completed. It was less nerve wracking this way, every party to a conversation knows when a sentence was finished and realized that nothing was lost in the exchange.

The uninterrupted din wore on the nerves more and more. Steadily you became less and less unruffled until finally you could not listen any longer. "God, I wish we could secure that (blankety-blank) horn!" You curse the noise and the fog and the ship and your lot. "By —, I'll sure be happy to get ashore this time on my leave." The horns continue. The sound dimmed your enthusiasm for the everyday routine of life aboard a lightship. It traveled with you wherever you went, from compartment to compartment, from deck to deck. On the verge of becoming irrational a peace of mind sweeps over you and we stopped thinking about the horns and sought relief in being constructive.

Suddenly we became aware that something was drastically changed. Then we heard the dying pulsations of the air compressor

and you realized the horns have been discontinued. The silence was strange, golden. We smiled. You were human again. We stopped shouting. We talked without interruptions. Morale was restored. Life continued. The routine went on. You felt differently toward it, and became inspired with freedom from noise. It was strange, too, that shortly upon cessation of the horns the trying conditions under which you had existed were soon forgotten. The memory of the discomfort of the sound failed to linger more than a few moments. We are at peace again, with ourselves, with our fellow man.

The horns provided several amusing and interesting incidents. There was the time an electronics technician tested our horns at the Coast Guard base in Boston on a quiet serene afternoon. The sudden booming noise echoed loudly as it bounced off nearby buildings. Immediately many windows were raised and peering inquisitive faces appeared. While a minor annoyance to the lightship crew, the test had given unsuspecting residents an awesome jolt. Clem, our senior cook for fifteen months who "just didn't like the sound of foghorns," said the noise and the vibration were so great that afternoon it knocked packages of spaghetti off the shelves of the Hanover Street markets.

Fear of Collision

The third and most disturbing result of fog, was the very real possibility of collision, a potential danger recognized by all. Rarely a topic of discussion other than at "abandon ship" or "collision" drills, the sole exception was when a ship glides by closely without reducing speed. Then the situation was openly evaluated — pros and cons heard in detail.

Assuming we were struck by a freighter or a tanker, what chance for survival would we have? Our ship certainly was not unsinkable. Lightships have been rammed and sunk before. Even vessels having complex systems of watertight integrity are vulnerable. The luxury liner *Andrea Doria* was sunk by a single blow, and a single blow was all that was necessary to sink our lightship. We realized that, and undoubtedly our primary contention would have been a fight for survival. It is doubtful that our ship could have survived even a glancing collision. It was a question of how long she could remain afloat. Probably not long enough to launch lifeboats. Probably not long enough to bring the wounded out of the



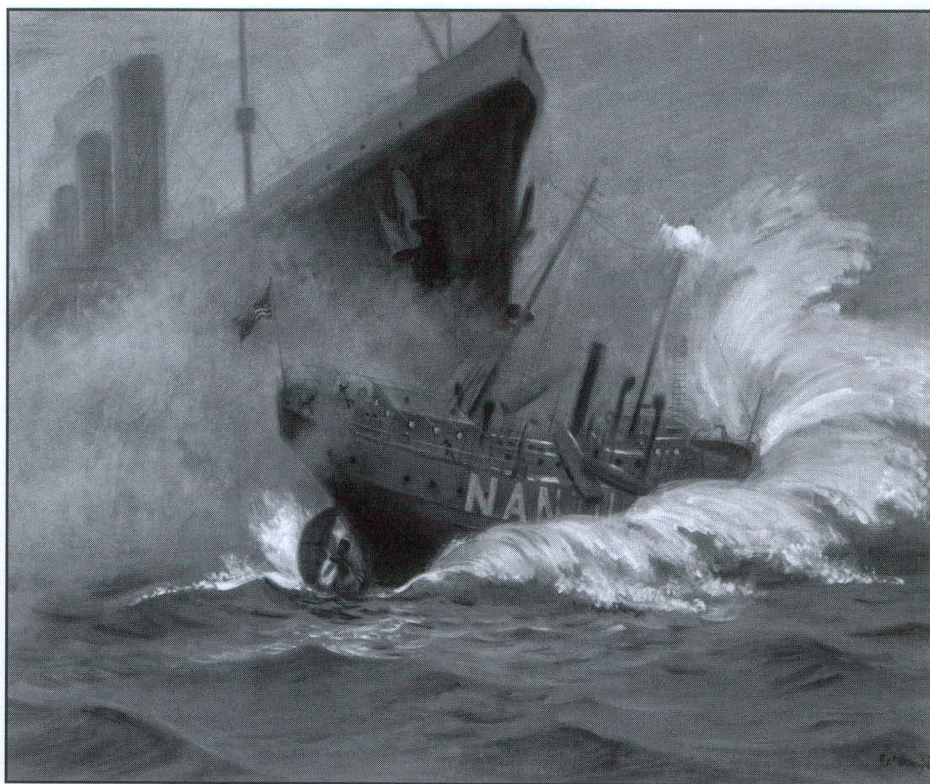
LV 86 (WAL 511) as RELIEF, the ship that the author served on while anchored on the BUZZARDS Lightship Station. Photo courtesy of the U.S. Coast Guard.

engine room or lower decks. We would have tried, of course, but most likely we would have a chance only to gather a life jacket and leap into the water. We might have been able to release life rafts. Then it would be a question of survival. What if the accident occurred during winter with the thermometer below freezing? What if seas were running high? What if fog, rain, snow or sleet prevented a rescue ship from spotting us? How long could one survive in a storm-tossed ocean?

We prepared for such an emergency by holding frequent collision and abandon ship drills. Each man was assigned a duty that he had to be able to perform perfectly. Discipline was a necessity during any emergency and drills ensured the men were prepared. When holding collision drills on the lightship we first made certain that all hands were on the weather deck. Realizing that the time the ship remained afloat may be limited if struck, it was most important to make sure that no one was trapped below. In a typical drill, the ship's emergency alarm was sounded several times. The man sounding the alarm shouted "Collision!" and word was passed throughout the ship as men scurried to their assigned places. They grabbed a life jacket, put it on as they raced topside, and mustered in double ranks on the stern near the dory. A man was issued an individual life jacket the day he came aboard. It was his to keep and care for as long as he was attached to the ship. Life vests were equipped with safety straps, a whistle, and a one-celled flashlight, they were Indian orange in color, to be easily seen. After the muster and all hands were accounted for, the men assumed their assigned duties for action that would save the ship, unless it was apparent it could not be saved. The crew practiced shoring and bracing bulkheads, pumping flooded compartments, and sealing holes in the hull of the ship. Every man was expected to know the location of each item of damage control equipment and how to use it.

A collision drill usually was followed by orders to "abandon ship." Each man went quickly to the boat to which he was assigned. We had rafts in addition to lifeboats, one on each side of the ship.

There were several instances, recorded in our log, when ships passed close aboard during fog. They ranged from twenty-foot pleasure craft to four hundred-foot commercial vessels. Sailboats swept so closely around our stern that their rigging brushed our flagstaff. An inbound



The White Star Line vessel Olympic cuts the LV 117 in two, killing 7 of the 11 crewmembers aboard. Painting, courtesy U.S. Coast Guard.

fishing boat passed within twenty feet during an early evening in September of 1955. The fog was extremely thick at the time, practically zero visibility, yet the engines of the fisherman were carrying him to port as quickly as possible. He appeared out of nowhere and was gone almost immediately as we listened for, but could not detect, his foghorn.

Mariners are expected to use prudence during periods of low visibility. Unfortunately some were careless, while others were overconfident. This always brings to mind a quote made by a chief boatswain's mate noted for his vast knowledge of seamanship. He said, "There are old skippers and there are bold skippers, but there are no old, bold skippers."

Two Close Calls

Two close calls involving vessels capable of cutting our ship in half served to emphasize the necessity of an efficient watch and to broaden the realization of our position as a potential unwilling target.

At 3:00 P.M. on the afternoon of May 16, 1956, Louis Schaefer, a seaman from Haddonfield, New Jersey, had the radio room watch. Five of us were changing into dress uniforms, for the buoy tender *White Sage* was expected in half an hour to take the liberty party ashore. The remainder of the crew was

busy below deck.

At 3:10 P.M. Schaefer knocked excitedly at the door to my cabin. "Skipper," he reported, "there's a large ship around here that's getting closer and closer. I can hear its horn but can't see the ship, and it seems to be getting awfully close."

I ordered him to alert the crew instantly. Within seconds everybody was on deck, and many anxious eyes peered into the fog. We stood on the bow and the horn of an approaching vessel confirmed his report. There was indeed a big one out there, and she was getting mighty close to us. Her signal dueled with our own foghorn. We strained our eyes, trying to glimpse this monster bearing down on us. It was not necessary to strain our ears. We not only heard the horn, we could hear the echo of our own blasts reverberating off her hull. Often, before and after, we have received an echo from passing ships whose steel construction caused our signal to return to us.

We maintained our nervous vigil for seven or eight minutes until, at 3:18 p.m., a three hundred-foot gray hulk appeared. A moment later it was directly off our bow, no more than a ship's length away, a modern military vessel. Crew members on deck showed much interest in us. They were clearly outlined along the starboard rail, for their ship was headed north-

eastward. They passed directly over, or nearly so, the spot where our own anchor dug into the bottom seventy feet down. We were riding at the five shot mark that day, a length of four hundred and fifty feet.

We exchanged glances with one another and with the men on the other ship. We did not wave to the members of the gray vessel, for we saw no humor in the situation. The navigator had committed the unpardonable sin. He had homed in on our horn. True, the pilot had his ship under control, but several hundred feet is not a great distance at sea. We had performed our own duties to the best of our ability and had used our foghorn as a guide for all shipping interests. We did not, however, appreciate any pilot who allowed his vessel to remain on a course directly towards us until the last split second when he barely had room in which to maneuver.

Much more terrifying is a similar situation occurring in the blackness of a fog-shrouded night. If sound is infinitely more difficult to hear in fog, seeing becomes a virtual impossibility, and both are compounded in darkness.

On July 27, 1956, two days after the sinking of the *Andrea Doria*, I was asleep in my cabin. I awakened with a start and glanced at my watch with the luminous dial. It was fifteen minutes after midnight. I sensed that something was amiss. I was shaking, although the night was warm. I got out of bed to look through my screened port. The fog was impenetrable and there were no horns operating! I grabbed the sound-powered phone and called the radio room. As the man on watch answered, I heard the beginning strains of the air compressor swinging into action. Simultaneously I heard the roar of a foghorn off our port bow.

"Why aren't the horns on?" I asked with a shout.

"The fog just came in, Captain, and we're fixing to put them on right away," Was the answer.

"Do you hear that ship off our bow?"

"Yes sir, I do. I'm going on deck now."

I slammed the phone back onto the receptacle, dressed hastily, raced outside and peered into the inky darkness. I could see nothing but eddies of wet fog and the beams of our main light as it flashed on and off. The bellow of a foghorn off our port bow was repeated. A strong tide held our bow into the southwest. That meant the ship was coming from sea-

ward and would therefore pass us as closely as practicable in order to have a good point of departure as he headed east into Buzzards Bay. At this point our own horns were ready and it was a colossal relief to hear them. They were like beautiful inspiring music and how pleasant they sounded. Again I heard the horn to port, and it electrified me.

"Nothing shows on radar, Captain," the watch announced.

Well, no matter. It wouldn't help much anyway. We gazed intently toward the direction of the sound. We saw nothing. Fog swirled. Our foghorns boomed their warning blasts. The suspense was eerie. The incoming ship sounded her horn. Deceptively it seemed to be at our side.

"God," I thought, "she can't miss us." I ran to the alarm lever at the outer bulkhead of the cabin, intending to arouse the crew and get them to the main deck. "This is what we have been drilling for. This is the real thing. I wonder where she will hit us. How long will we stay afloat? Damn! What a night for this to happen!" Numerous thoughts raced through my brain during those few terse seconds. Did I hear a great clanging of bells and a grinding of gears? Is my imagination playing tricks? Are the men on the other ship aware of the drama about to take place?

As my hand touched the lever a great mass of lights came into view. In that instant I could tell she would miss us. The alarm was not sounded. The ship slithered by, a scant hundred yards away. Distance is deceiving on the water, and doubly so at night. Maybe the vessel merely looked huge and maybe it was two hundred yards off instead of a hundred. The pilot, if he was concerned, showed it in no way. He did not slacken speed and the vessel passed from view as quickly as it had emerged. It happened in a matter of minutes, perhaps seconds, but I shall always remember it.

On shaky knees I returned to my cabin, where I undressed with trembling hands. I admit that I prayed that night. I offered my thanks to God for saving the ship and my crew.

On a less serious note we occasionally became the middle of a tiny city of lights and activity. For reasons known only to those aboard, there were a few times when cabin cruisers, sailboats, fishermen and larger seagoing vessels lingered nearby our vessel waiting a break in the weather. Our foghorn had a merry time as it became the center of attrac-

tion. We had a warm friendly feeling for those craft, for we knew they were paying attention while we were doing our job. Besides, it was nice to have company for a change.

We have heard tell that lightship sailors who have experienced a particularly foggy tour will continue to talk with a "hitch" after going ashore. That is, talk for the length of time between blasts and then, out of habit, stop when the expected blast is to begin.

The author, George Rongner, spent 32 years in the Coast Guard. He enlisted in 1938 as a surfman and served at the Cuttyhunk, Chatham and Monomoy Point stations in Massachusetts. As a 2nd and 1st class Boatswain's Mate he was assigned to a Navy attack transport at Guadalcanal. He later served at Nauset CG Station (MA). Advancing to Chief Boatswain's Mate, he served at the Coast Guard Academy (CT), as Executive Officer of the Fire Island CG Station (NY), as Officer-in-Charge of the Race Point Station (MA).

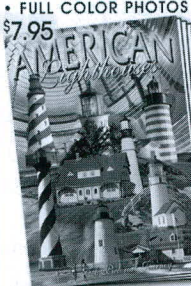
As a Warrant Officer his assignments included: Officer-in-Charge of the BUZZARDS Lightship Station (MA), Executive Officer at Base/Group Woods Hole (MA), Commanding Officer on USCGC *White Sage* (MA), Engineering Officer at Group New Orleans (LA), Commanding Officer on USCGC *White Alder* (LA), Commander – Group Cape Cod (MA) and Operations Officer and Personnel Officer at Group Southwest Harbor, Maine. He retired in 1970.

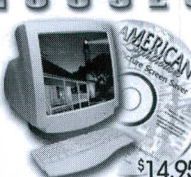
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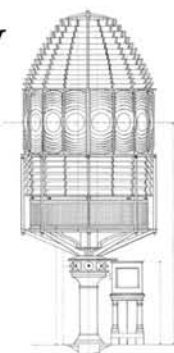
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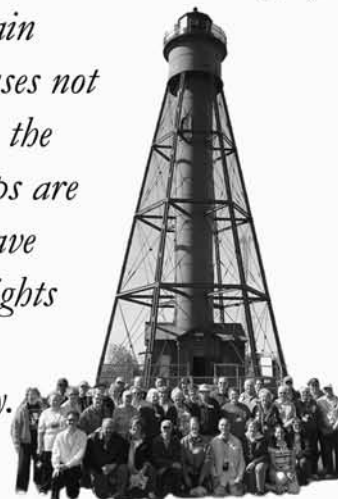
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