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Merchant Marine Days: My Life in World War II

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Lee, David LaMont. *Merchant Marine Days: My Life in World War II*. Charleston, S.C.: Narwhal Press, 1998. 178pp. \$19.98

David Lee's autobiography of his service in the American merchant marine is a gem.

Lee is gifted with near-perfect recall of events that took place over a half-century ago. This small book is not only the story of a teenager who matured into a capable officer during two and a half years at sea in World War II but a time capsule of what it was like to be a child of the Depression and grow up to young manhood in the California of the early 1940s. It is a story of family values, Ford 1936 V-8 coupes, the big bands, a Los Angeles composed of many small towns linked by Red Cars, the Hollywood Palladium, and America at war.

David Lee introduces us to a West Coast wearing the blinders of isolationism, suddenly struck by the thunderbolt of 7 December 1941. Two young men who had been out on the town for a Saturday night meet the next morning for breakfast. They are greeted by the waitress with "What'll you boys have this morning?" and "When'ya gonna join up?"

Joining up was not a simple matter for two nineteen-year-olds in early 1942, who needed parental permission (denied) and who had been rejected by the Army Air

Corps for poor eyesight. Desperate to overcome their 4-F status, the young patriots sought the expensive services of a local eye doctor who claimed he could improve vision through a combination of exercise and diet. The diet consisted of raw carrots and canned carrot juice. The exercises consisted of rolling their eyes and staring into the sun while lying on their backs, in order to toughen their eyes.

Having survived the regimen with their vision intact, the two friends attempted to enlist in the Marine Corps and the Navy. Again they were rejected for 20/30 vision.

A banner flying from an office building soliciting young men to join the U.S. Maritime Service lured the two buddies into a recruiting office. A Coast Guard petty officer informed the pair that the Maritime Service was really the merchant marine, which was about to be taken over by the Navy or the Coast Guard. Signing up immediately would ensure their entry into one or the other. Imperfect vision was no bar to passing the physical.

A short while later, with parental permission, the chums were en route to the U.S. Maritime Service (USMS) boot camp at Port Hueneme, California.

Established in 1938 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt under the authority of the Merchant Marine

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Act of 1936, as amended, to provide crews for the merchant ships then being ordered into mass production, the Maritime Service was a voluntary training organization. Ranks, grades, and ratings were to be the same as those of the Coast Guard. Over 250,000 recruits were trained in the USMS during World War II, under the supervision of the Coast Guard, and later the Navy. The USMS was to be disbanded in 1954.

David Lee received four months of rudimentary training and left boot camp ready to join his first ship in June 1942. Along the way, he had to join an unlicensed seaman's union and seek a ship through the union hiring hall. The merchant marine of World War II maintained its civilian structure, under the operational control of the War Shipping Administration. Private shipping firms continued to manage the ships, and union agreements remained in force.

This autobiography is a valuable addition to the history of World War II at sea. Lee details the shipboard routines and the organization of the naval Armed Guards and the crews. He faithfully reproduces the friction and the tensions—first, between the politicized, professional union crews (who had improved their living standards in a series of sometimes lethal strikes in the 1930s) and the militarized and mainly inept

juveniles supplied by the USMS; and secondly, between the Armed Guards (who regarded themselves as patriots) and the crew, whom the Navy men thought to be moneygrubbing draft dodgers. *Merchant Marine Days*, however, is also a story of bonding. Eventually the young men of the USMS no longer wore their uniforms ashore, so as to share the taunts of being draft dodgers directed at their veteran shipmates who had no uniforms.

This is also the story of ammunition ships and tankers in convoy or sailing independently; the tranquility and typhoons of the Pacific; the hazards of the Caribbean; the threat from the enemy, which was sometimes realized; the eternal threat of the sea to ships both overage and ill maintained, overloaded and tender due to the exigencies of war.

However, the book remains a story of people who manned the ships—the 4-F volunteers, the misfits, the certifiable; the men like the seventy-year-old second mate and former captain who returned from retirement to answer the call for seamen; and of the young David Lee, who rose to third officer. He served his country well, even if he could not see an entire convoy on the horizon.

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