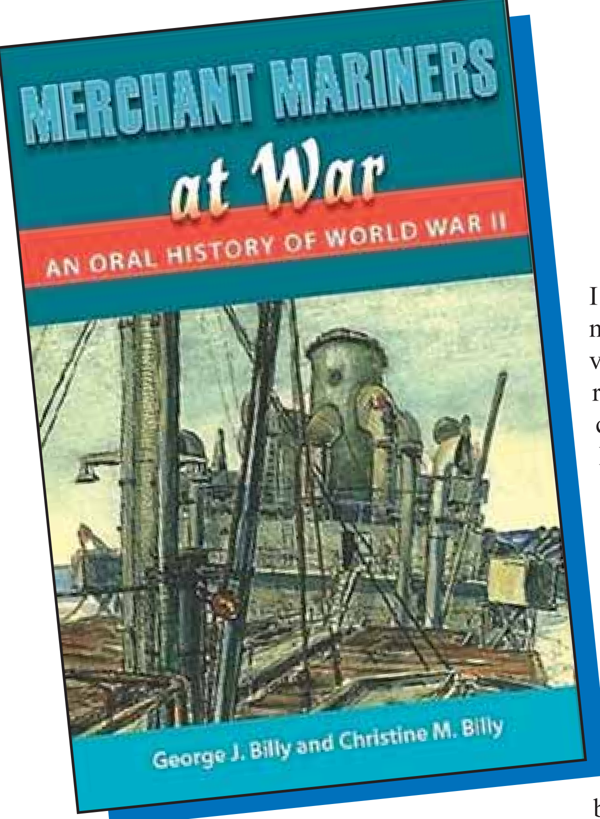
Boating World Book Review

by Bill Bleyer

Merchant Mariners at War

An Oral History of World War II



George Billy has spent two decades interviewing U.S. Merchant Marine Academy graduates who survived prowling German U-boats and other dangers during World War II. And he has been impressed by one common thread: None of them thought they did anything special. "No matter how unique or dangerous their wartime assignments, Kings Pointers do not regard their travails as worthy of special attention," Billy and his daughter Christine write in their new book, Merchant Mariners at War: An Oral History of World War II. "Many mariners braved extraordinary dangers with little or no protection. Yet, they consistently stated that they were only doing their duty," this despite the fact that 142 Kings Point cadets died in action before graduating and of the more than 200,000 men who served in the U.S. Merchant Marine during the war, about 7,000 died.

In the book, the Billy's note that "during World War II, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point was a beehive of activity. Kings Point graduated more than 6,000 students in a feverish effort to provide badly needed officers for merchant ships. Yet few Kings Pointers have told their story." Billy, the academy's chief librarian, said the impetus for the book was the academy library's Mariners at War Project, an oral history undertaking that began in 1990 at the suggestion of the superintendent at the time, Adm. Thomas A. King, Class of 1942 and merchant mariner who sailed during the war. He suggested Billy run the project because of his interest in maritime history. Born in 1940, he grew up during the war in which his uncles fought and later earned a doctorate in military history from the City University of New York Graduate School.

Seventy-two graduates were interviewed, most by Billy. Then he and his daughter, who had worked at the school doing public relations before going to law school and becoming a clerk for a federal judge in San Francisco, edited them into the book. What motivated him, Billy said, is that "the story of the contribution of Kings Point graduates was not well known. I wanted to capture their stories before they were no longer alive because they were getting on in years. I wanted to publish their contributions so everyone knew about it. What I was not prepared for was the extraordinary stories."

Billy, an Army veteran who has been at Kings Point for 32 years, said that along with his surprise at how dramatic some of the accounts were, "What I did not realize was how many theaters of operation many of them served in. Whenever I talk to most veterans, they served either in the Pacific or the European theater or North Africa and maybe the Italian campaign." Over the course of the war, a Merchant Marine officer could end up carrying cargo to Europe, Russia, the Middle East and the Pacific.

Before the project, Billy, who previous wrote Palmerston's Foreign Policy: 1848, did know that the merchant mariners suffered "exceptionally high" casualty rates compared to the armed services and received very little recognition at the time or afterwards. He said their low profile stemmed from their unusual status. "The officers were trained at a federal facility but they served on civilian merchant ships that were contracted by the U.S. government and built in private yards and operated by private ship operators," Billy said. In addition, "I think the Navy would have preferred if all seagoing operations were under their jurisdiction, but it didn't turn out that way."

After the U.S. entered the war, the government designated the former Chrysler estate on Little Neck Bay to be the central site for training for Merchant Marine officers. Instruction began in January 1942 and the academy was dedicated in September 1943. "Wherever the U.S. military forces went, so did the civilian Merchant Marine, bringing the necessary supplies that tipped the balance in favor of Allied success," the authors write.

"During the early years of the war, the German U-boat commanders had a relatively easy pick of targets. The merchant ships were often unescorted, and the convoy system had not reached its full potential," the author says. "By 1943, however, the tide was changing." Escort ships protected merchant convoys and new innovations and code-breaking made the German submarines the hunted rather than the hunters. But "U-boats continued to sink American ships until the war's end," the Billy's write. "The merchant mariner was never completely out of harm's way."

Some of the merchant mariners speak out in this book :

Karl J. Aarseth, 86, of Lynbrook, Class of 1943.

He was the son of a Norwegian shipmaster and by the time he was 24 he was licensed to serve as captain for anything afloat. During the war, he made trips to Europe, India, Russia, the Mediterranean and the Middle East. After the war he handled logistical support for American forces in Vietnam.

In the book, he describes ferrying troops home at the end of the war. "In the North Atlantic, we ran into the worst storm I've ever been in in all my life. The ship was small and with no cargo. We heard that an aircraft carrier had turned back because of damage to the flight deck. Finally... I got to Boston. The ship had several cracks all over it."

Perry Jacobs of Seaford, Class of 1944, died in 2001.

After the war he worked with the Military Sealift Command and received his license as chief engineer in 1951. He participated in several NASA programs including Gemini, Apollo and Skylab. After retirement, he was an active volunteer at the Cradle of Aviation Museum East in Garden City.

He first served on a Liberty Ship freighter in 1943 when he was 19. "I can recall some of the waves being 30, 40-foot-high... you held onto the lifelines for your dear life."

Jacobs described working in the engine room in the Mediterranean on his second voyage. "If you were near the tops of the boilers, it would exceed 130 degrees." In 1943, while traveling in a convoy during his first voyage in the North Atlantic, Jacob saw the results of an encounter with a German U-boat. "On the ship directly ahead of us, there had been an explosion. It slipped down our column and passed by astern of us…. it was severely damaged… the crew had already abandoned the vessel."

As they were approaching port in England, Jacobs recalled, "There were two seaman's boots that were inverted and floating in the water. The way they were positioned, I'm sure there was a body underneath."

George Kraemer, 84, of New Hyde Park, Class of 1944.

After the war and until he retired in 1986, he managed towing and tugboat operations, culminating in his being operations manager for McAllister Brothers. Returning in a convoy from Britain on Christmas Eve, 1943, he remembers, "We took a horrendous beating in the storm. It was almost like a hurricane… we lost several of our lifeboats."

On a trip to Russia, "We were under submarine alert… the escorts were dropping depth charges especially for the last two days out. As we approached the coastline, I remember noticing hundreds of dead fish (victims of depth charging) floating dead or stunned on the surface."

When his ship was too slow in maneuvering in concert with the convoy, the escorts converged on it and ordered it to speed up. "They were getting a little indignant about this. All of a sudden, one escort vessel came right across stern of the ship, and he dropped a depth charge close to our stern. And boy, I'll tell you, that shook everybody up! So then we sped up. I can remember sleeping with my clothes on, continuously, day after day. We all had a 'scram bag' packed — just extra stuff that you might not have available in the lifeboat."

Charles Renick, 82, of Great Neck, Class of 1947.

He worked at the academy starting in 1961 and was director of the Office of External Affairs when he retired in 1993. He helped establish the American Merchant Marine Museum on the campus and still runs it.

Renick served on an Army transport carrying thousands of troops to Europe in convoys of 40 to 60 ships. "It was like being on a busy parkway and having cars speeding 60 or 70 miles an hour on each side of you, and in front of you, and in back of you, and tailgating because one of the things that a convoy had to do was keep very close quarters. You had to be 100 yards apart and sometimes even closer. If the ship in front of you slowed down suddenly, you could go right into its stern. You were also zigzagging all the time. There was always some ship in the

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convoy that didn't get the word. When everyone else was turning right, it was turning left, and that would cause a lot of confusion. You would never, in peacetime, consider ever getting that close to a ship. All around the perimeter of the convoy were the naval escort vessels…occasionally, they would get on something, and they would come rushing up in the middle of the convoy and drop a depth charge or two."

After D-Day, Renick said, the transport would sail to France and return to America with wounded troops. "For a young fellow on the ship coming back with the young men with arms missing, blinded, in wheelchairs, it was very, very sad."

Renick was on a ship in the Pacific when he learned the war was over. "I am the first one on the ship to know about the atomic bomb…. I was going down telling everybody they dropped a bomb on Japan that was [the equivalent of\] 10,000 tons [OF TNT]. I have the greatest story of the century, and no one believed me until two days later when they heard it over another broadcast."

Robert Wells, 88, of Great Neck, 1941 graduate of the U.S. Merchant Marine Cadet Corps, predecessor of the academy.

After the war he became a professor of engineering at Kings Point until his retirement in 1980.

He sailed on a tanker to various ports in the United Kingdom carrying fuel for the Normandy invasion.

He describes sailing along the east coast in 1942 when it was known by mariners as Torpedo Alley. "There were U-boats off the coast, but we were very lucky. We never got shot at by a German submarine, but we became, as the Army calls it, targets of friendly fire. When we were coming up from Texas in March 1942, … a fellow American or English ship collided with us…. the ship caught fire. Fortunately, we put the fire out, but we had a hole in the ship that ran two thirds of the way through. We managed to limp into port."