

Crossing the Line

by John Lloyd

This ceremony is an initiation rite in the Royal Navy that celebrates a sailor's first crossing of the Equator. The tradition may have originated as a test by seasoned sailors to ensure their fellow uninitiated shipmates were capable of enduring the long, rough, sea voyages, when every man's courage would be challenged.

Sailors, who have already crossed the Equator, are nicknamed 'Trusty' or 'Honourable Shellbacks', while those who have not, are nicknamed 'Pollywogs'. The ceremonial event is a custom in which the Shellbacks are formed, into a 'Court of Neptune', to induct the Pollywogs into the mysteries of the sea.

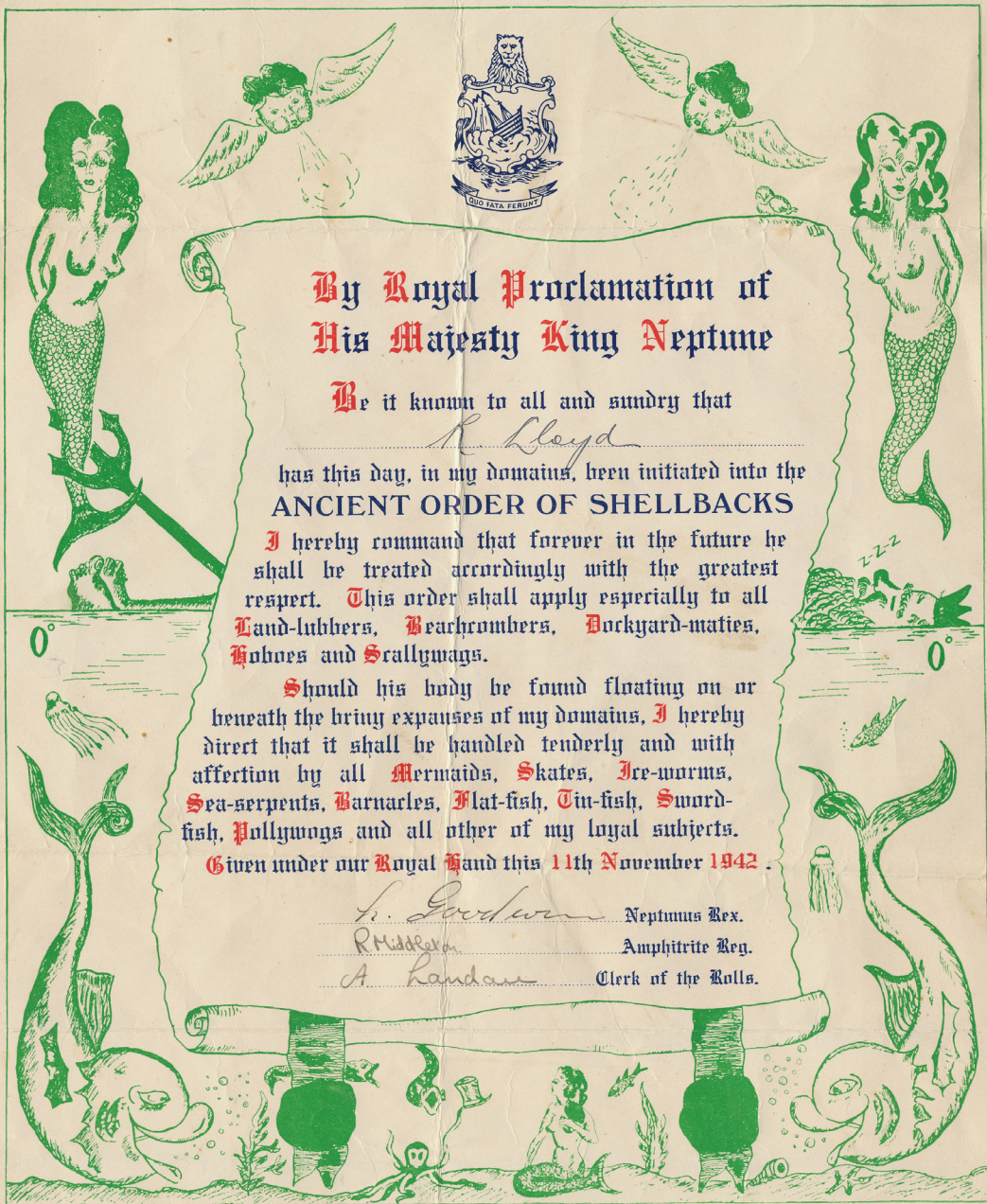
Physical discomfort, in the spirit of the initiation, is allowed and each Pollywog is expected to bear this in order to become a Shellback. This is a test of their capabilities to endure prolonged and arduous sea voyages. At the end of the ceremony, the Pollywogs are considered to be inducted into the Fraternity of Seasoned Sailors and acknowledged as fellow Shellbacks.

The tradition of 'Crossing the Line', lived on during World War Two, even through the theatre of military conflict. On the 11th November, 1942, whilst sailing on HMS Queen of Bermuda, en route to engage with enemy ships, who were raiding the Whaling Stations on the islands of South Georgia and the Falklands, in the South Atlantic, (an article I wrote for Book 13), my father, Reg Lloyd, took part in the induction process. During the ceremony, he and other Pollywogs, underwent a number of initiation rites, largely for the entertainment of the crew members and he was finally accepted into the Ancient Order of Shellbacks. He was duly presented with a certificate to mark the occasion, declaring his new status as an Honourable and Trusty Shellback.

This ceremony of 'Crossing the Line', was a welcome distraction from the realities of World War Two, serving as light relief and a morale booster for the crew in what were grave and perilous times.

The tradition is still maintained in the Royal Navy and other navies to this day and, sometimes, is also carried out for the amusement of passengers on civilian ocean liners and cruise ships, which is a far cry from the dark days of World War Two.

The following photographs are of the actual ceremony my father, Reg Lloyd, took part in when crossing the Equator for the first time.



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The Ancient Order of Shellbacks Initiation Certificate. My father's name, R. Lloyd, is written on the Certificate and it can be seen that the 'Court of Neptune' comprised of:- Neptunus Rex - King Neptune, Ruler of the Raging Main, Amphitrite Reg - Her Highness Amphitrite and Clerk of the Rolls - Davy Jones. These were all represented in the ceremony by the highest ranking officers of the crew.



Pollywogs awaiting the commencement of the 'Crossing the Line' initiation ceremony.



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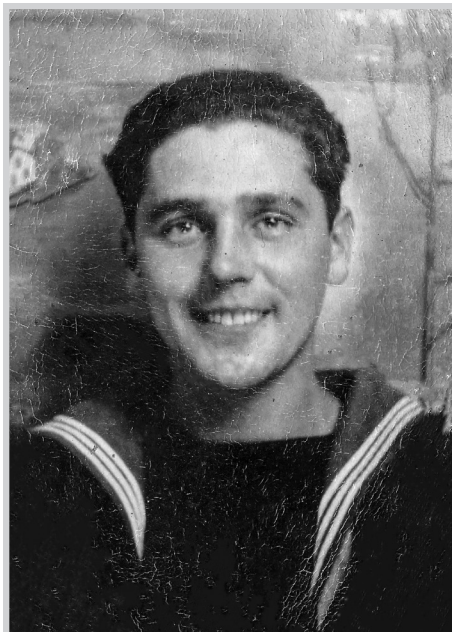
The 'Court of Neptune', left to right: Clerk of the Rolls, (Davy Jones), Amphitrite Reg (Her Highness Amphitrite) and Neptunus Rex (King Neptune).



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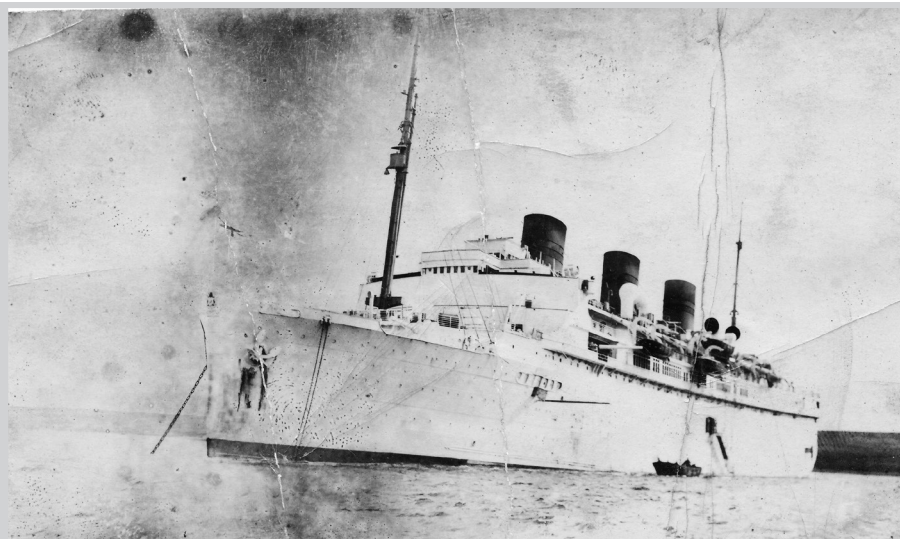
Pollywogs undergoing the initiation ceremony onboard HMS Queen of Bermuda, being overlooked and urged on by the rest of the crew members.



Leading Seaman Reg Lloyd, Royal Navy, September 1941 - December 1945. Originally, from Bryn Place, Seaside and later of Denham Avenue.



Autographed photograph of Commander Geoffrey (Tim) Healey, Commander of HMS Queen of Bermuda, November 1941, wearing the uniform with epaulettes and cap badge of a Royal Navy Commander



HMS Queen of Bermuda. An armed merchant cruiser equipped with 7 six inch guns and 2 three inch guns as armaments. A ship my father sailed on as a Radar Operator from September, 1941, to May, 1943, before joining HMS Redpole from May, 1943 to October, 1945.



HMS Redpole. Modified Black Swan Class Sloop captained by Lt. Commander, Ian Montague Carss.

Further information on the 'Crossing the Line' ceremony can be found on the Wikipedia, free online, encyclopaedia.

The photographs and the Initiation Certificate are from John Lloyd's private collection and his copyright.