



It was gigantic in size and required a great deal of engineering to construct. The wheels were slick-tired, 10 feet in diameter. With deflated tires it stood 15 feet high, 55 feet long and 20 feet wide.

## Chapter Four

### First Trip to Little America III

#### Establish West Base

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I graduated from China High School in 1935 and enrolled at Cheniers Business and Radio College in Beaumont, Texas where I studied and completed a course in communications, i.e., radio and electricity. I obtained a commercial radio license upon completion of my courses. When trying to find work in that field, I found the East Coast shipyards were all tied up in a strike. I decided to put my newly acquired education to good use and concluded a good place to begin would be with the United States Navy. Upon enlisting in the Navy on March 11, 1938, I suddenly realized that I would be leaving my little home, my father Theophile Daigle and my sister Willene who all lived in China, Texas. (My mother Ida was deceased.) I was to seek adventure and have an opportunity to "see the world" as promised by the Uncle Sam posters. As it turned out, my Navy enlistment encompassed 20 years of my life, since I chose to make it a career. I would like to point out that my career in the Navy was based on the education I had received at Cheniers.

After enlistment, I was sent to boot training at the Recruit Training Center in San Diego, California. From there I went to the Naval Air Station at Coronado, California as a radio operator. Inasmuch as I had attended radio school and received a commercial radio license prior to enlistment, I was detailed directly to the air station as a radio operator.

One of my first acquaintances in this new career was a radioman named Clay Bailey, ARM 1/C (Aviation Radioman First Class). During our conversation, he asked me if I would be interested in going with the Byrd expedition to the South Pole. I had no idea what I was getting into — but, I said "Yes!" He knew I had a commercial radio license, second class rating, so he recommended I serve as radio operator on the *USS Bear*.

The whole aspect sounded so interesting and adventurous. I pondered the offer for a while and am glad I decided to take part in this venture, as the radio played a big part in the overall exploration of the expedition. In early 1939, Clay received orders to report to Washington, D.C. After he arrived in Washington, D.C., those of us that had been recruited received a letter confirming our appointment, and it stated that the Navy would release us from duty in order to carry out this mission. The letter also stated that the Navy would be the prime sponsor of the expedition along with the Department of Interior.

After receiving our orders, "Pookey" Odom and I reported directly to Boston. There we were assigned to the *USS Bear*, in charge of readying the radio room with proper communications equipment. Elmer L. (Doc) Lamplugh, RM 1/C, USN, was in charge of communications at the East Base that was to be established on this trip, and he helped us to set up and tune the equipment on the ship. (I learned, in later years, that he had been killed in an accident in WWII — not related to the war.)

Clay and I went into a plant in Cambridge, Massachusetts prior to loading equipment and learned the capabilities and assemblage of the 500-watt crystal control transmitter we were to use; and, also how to operate and maintain same. We found it to be a very reliable piece of equipment.

After the ship was loaded with supplies and personnel had reported aboard ship, we prepared to sail from Boston. It was a very fine crew that sailed the ship out of the Boston Shipyard in a snow storm on November 22, 1939. It was the beginning of a long journey to Antarctica and Little America. My thoughts were those of apprehension, mixed with a great excitement as we left the shipyard, for this was my first experience on a ship — and at sea! You must remember I had been in the Navy 1-1/2 years and most of that time was spent in recruit training and as a base operator at NAS, San Diego. This was quite an experience for a "newcomer" and, I must admit, was not expecting to ship out on assignment so soon. So you see, with "full steam ahead," I had to get my "sea legs" on this — my first voyage.

On November 25th, the *USS Bear* cleared the Virginia Capes sailing to Philadelphia to pick up additional crew and supplies. From Philly we sailed to Norfolk on November 26th to take aboard one of the twin-engine airplanes — Barkley-Grow. It was equipped with facilities to gather information during exploratory flights. From Norfolk we sailed toward our first destination on this Antarctic journey that was to be laden with scores of adventures.

The *Bear* was under full power, full sail, and a tail wind that would make 8 knots. She was a beautiful sight to behold, with billowing full white sails rushing us through the water. An exhilarating experience!

On all Navy ships, training to become familiar with one's vessel and handling is an important factor. In this case it was additionally important, for the crew had to become familiar with sails and learn to manipulate the canvas. The deck crew had to be trained to set various sails for different wind conditions. It was a new procedure for all personnel, including the commanding officer. During this integral training, the crew was whipped into a special and distinct part of the expedition.

The *Bear* was a fairly comfortable ship. There was an evaporator onboard capable of making fresh water. It was sufficient for our drinking purposes and to supply the galley. Water hours were observed in order to conserve it. The evaporator was not very large and did not produce large quantities of water at one time, which was needed to accommodate such demand as required by the ship's personnel. Rainwater was also collected and used as it was needed to wash small amounts. Our main wash and shower water was cold saltwater. One learns to cope with all types of situations. It was a strict discipline period for all of us. Later on, one of the machinists in the engine room devised a method of heating saltwater. That was a tremendous help as it provided us with suds not enjoyed with cold saltwater — even with saltwater soap. We learned to do without the luxuries and dealt with the bare necessities. The diesel engine onboard

provided the ship with a heating system and steam heat. Our living quarters consisted of one big room with tables in the middle and on the sides — plus folding bunks. The radio room was no larger than 10' × 10', which was loaded with equipment that provided us with the heat generated from them. That solved our heating problem.

As we were a month late in sailing from Boston, Captain Cruzen was ordered to steam directly into Little America from Panama. Normal procedures would have been to sail to New Zealand and use that point of departure for the South Pole, but that was not true in this case. Admiral Byrd flew from Washington to the Canal Zone where he boarded the *North Star* and continued the rest of the journey on that vessel.

We were in Panama for a week taking on fresh supplies. Swede Nylund and I were instrumental in getting cases of canned fruit, especially great quantities of pineapple which we added to the list. He and I ate so many slices of the fruit that I quickly lost my taste appeal for it. Some 15 years after the expedition I was finally able to eat another piece of pineapple.

We sailed on December 5, 1939, going through the locks at the Panama Canal. That was an experience in itself, to feel the ship rise from one level of waterway onto another until we passed through the locks and entered the Gulf of Panama. Our waterway took us from the Gulf of Mexico into the Caribbean Sea, through the Canal Zone into the Pacific Ocean, heading toward the South Pacific while crossing the equator, the Tropic of Capricorn and then on into the Antarctic Circle. Our path went into, and through, the "Roaring Forties." They are westerly winds that blow strong and steadily throughout the year, becoming boisterous between the fortieth and fiftieth parallel — thus, the name.

I recall one incident. One morning, as we were sailing on course between Panama and Little America, we travelled through the "Roaring Forties" at latitude 40° which is one of the roughest areas of latitude for maneuvering a ship. The ship was rolling quite a bit. I had just relieved Swede for the 4:00 a.m. to 8:00 a.m. watch. As I watched him on deck through the porthole of the radio room, he walked to the ladder leading below deck, he cleared the deck and went below. As he disappeared below, I looked forward and saw the *Bear* begin to roll starboard and then briskly snap back with a port roll. I just knew we were going to roll over. The lifeline, which was about 32 inches high, was in the sea. Yessirree!! I envisioned Old Davy Jones eyeing another shipload of people. I just knew we were headed for the deep, but the ship straightened and resumed a normal roll. Other than this rough passage through the so-called treacherous forties, the rest of the journey was uneventful.

So far, communications had not been a problem. My prime effort, on this long voyage, was to maintain communications with a station in Washington, D.C. or Maryland — Station NAA. We naturally had to report our positions to assure those interested in the progress of the project as to the headway the expedition was making and to report any unforeseen incidences. We must be reminded that President Roosevelt was especially



interested, as he induced Congress to support the effort on behalf of the American people. Consequently, Admiral Byrd sent many dispatches to the President and to present and former supporters within the United States. His messages were long — lasting 30 to 45 minutes each.

The radiomen had various duties to perform. We had regular schedules to keep with Station NAA. We had to check in whether we had messages or not. On the other hand, we kept a key open at all times to enable Washington to keep in touch with the ship. We were tuned in to all four frequencies on which they transmitted simultaneously.

We had to maintain the equipment and keep it in operating order. Luckily our equipment was new and required very little maintenance. We were also required to publish a daily newspaper for the captain and crew. We compiled news from various radio stations that transmitted news items. Sometimes the news stations were from Australia, China or Britain, as well as the United States. Most of the news was transmitted in Morse Code speeds of 20-35 words a minute, which was easy copy. If signals were good we could copy WCX, a press station.

This station was the one that separated the men from the boys, for their code speed was 35-words per minute and sometimes up to 40-words per minute. One did not have time to think about what he would do on liberty, what's for lunch, or any other thoughts for that matter. Copying code at such a rapid rate kept one alert and on one's toes. There was no time for daydreaming.

Swede and I were pretty capable receivers and we managed to put out a good front sheet and copies. It kept everyone informed about the news at home and in the world, in general. The progress of the war in Europe was especially important for we wondered if the United States would get involved. As it happened, two years later — we did! The newspaper was certainly one of the first priorities for the captain and crew.

As we approached the equator, the ship's personnel began preparations for the initiations to commemorate the crossing. Those who had not experienced this procedure before this time were initiated into the world "of the shellbacks." Anyone who had been through it before set up the program to initiate the novices (polliwogs) across the equator. This is the day that Davy Jones (the spirit of the sea) and Neptune (a god identified with the Greek Poseidon, god of the sea) "perform the initiations."

The equator is an imaginary circle on the earth's surface, equidistant from the poles and dividing the earth into northern and southern hemispheres. The celestial equator is the line from which the declination of stars and planets are measured. (I would say we were about 40° latitude, 0° longitude, off the coast of Brazil, South America.)

The initiation could get pretty rough. One might find oneself stripped and spattered with paint; or in uniform wrapped around with toilet paper and painted all over; or in places that food was served — but not edible. Neptune is the ruler of the raging main and his majesty's scribe is Davy Jones. There is someone of the ship's personnel that portrays that charac-

ter on this day. It is really quite a sight to behold, and an experience that those crossing the equator never forgets. At one time, I had several snapshots of the event, but over the years of moving from place to place they were lost. I still possess the card issued to me as a "trusty shellback." The commanding officer of the *USS Altamaha* during World War II gave mine to me. During the initiation on the *USS Bear*, I also received one. The *Altamaha* card reads as follows:

"Ancient order of the deep, this is to certify that Joseph A. Daigle, having crossed the equator on the *USS Altamaha*, December 12, 1942 (the longitude was deleted due to wartime conditions). Initiated on latitude (deleted) on a mission of war and having been initiated then and there in the realm of the main, shall be recognized as a trusty shellback."\*

Crossing the 180th meridian, one also receives a certificate, and it is noted in your naval records. In those days it was a rare event to travel to such great distances, it was just not being done.

\*One who carried this card on his person avoided future initiations.

