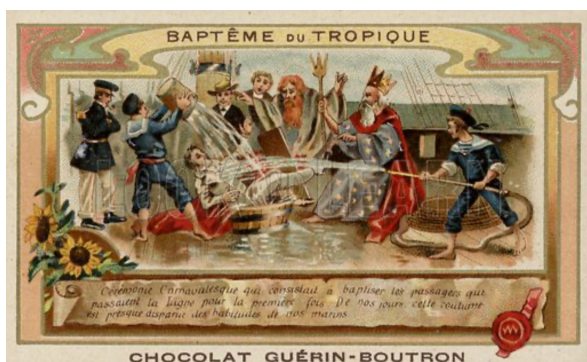


Of Honorable Shellbacks and Slimy Pollywogs

Throughout maritime history sailors the world over have generally been considered to be a parcel of ritual following, tradition-bound fellows. One such tradition, starting in the 1700's among sailors of the great naval empires of Britain, Spain, and France was the "line crossing ceremony," referring to the crossing of the earth's equator. Whenever a ship was about to cross that imaginary border between the north and south hemispheres the sailors who had never yet crossed it were separated from those who had, and upon crossing it the new inductees were the subjects of the ceremony, presided over by King Neptune (a fellow sailor costumed in a robe, crown and trident for the occasion), and which usually involved the bewildered subjects getting soaked in some way or another. They were also usually the recipients of sometimes elaborate practical jokes. As may easily be imagined with a group of sailors the ceremonies often tended to get out of hand, with some getting injured or at times even killed.



Yet the tradition remains strong throughout the sailing world in one form or another. In the U.S. Navy for example,



sailors who have previously gone through the line-crossing ceremony are known as "Honorable Shellbacks," with some ships issuing elaborate fantastical certificates or even makeshift medals memorializing the occasion. In contrast, those sailors who have not yet crossed the line are known as "Slimy Pollywogs," a contemptible lubberly designation indeed.



Being a parcel of sailors ourselves here in our own Shell Point Sailboard Club it occurred



to me that there ought to be some sort of Club equivalent to a line-crossing ceremony. Idly pondering the question one afternoon, it suddenly struck me like a skeg hitting a submerged oyster bar —the Tripods! Yes, those two big three-legged wood pole markers at the far seaward-end of Shell Point Channel. Starting out from the beach in front of the Training Trailer, sailing outwards down Shell Point Channel, around both

tripods and then all the way back again, would seem an appropriate kind of rite of passage in the spirit of the line-crossing ceremony; a worthy accomplishment; an honorable distinction for those who have done it. By the numbers: The round-trip route is 1.6 miles. At 3.2 miles per hour (an average walking speed) such a trip would take all of 30 minutes; an unlikely span of time in which to die of dehydration, and a distance from shore being not so great for one



to lose sight of land and be lost forever to friends, family, and civilization.

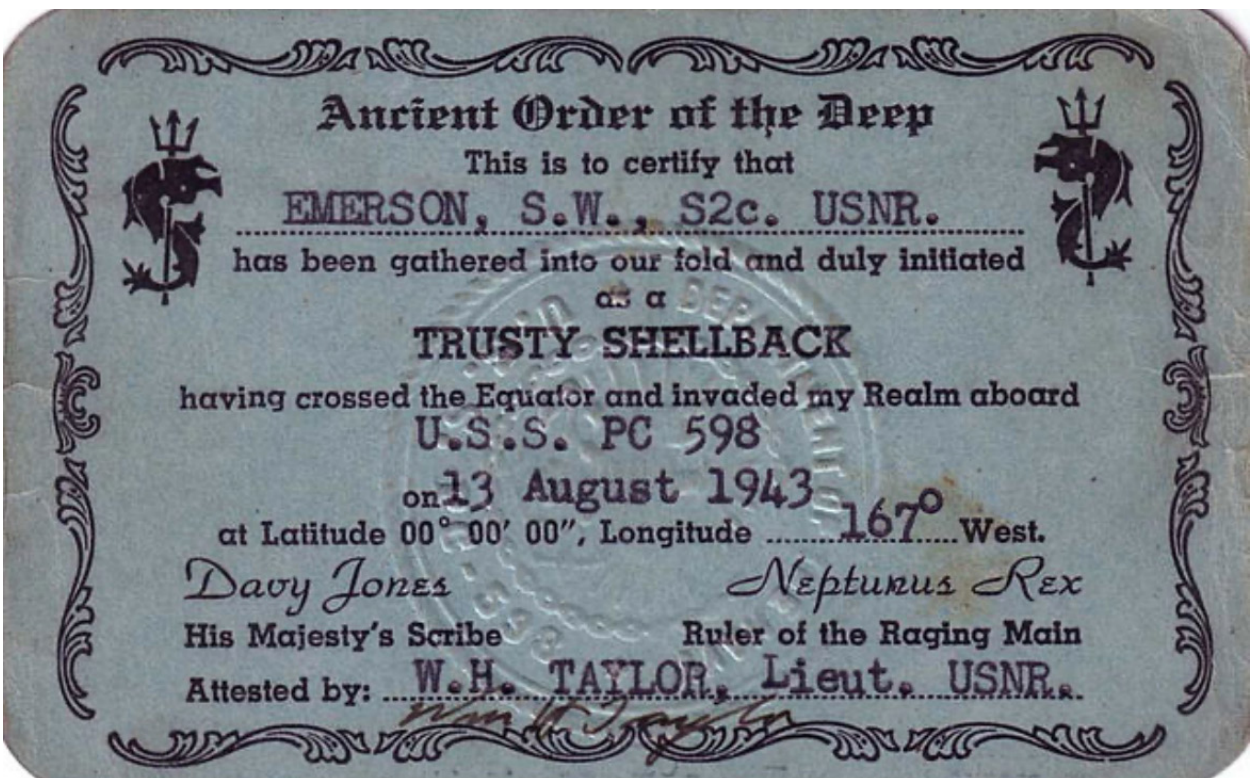


Lest one think that going around the Tripods is no big deal, some kind of figurative walk in the park, consider: Such a harrowing trip would require the navigation of a straight channel flanked its entire length by shoals of soft sand and mud, as narrow as 325 feet across in places! Then, at the channel's terminus,

where the intrepid sailor's course called for rounding the twin wooden giants before heading back, lies the Deep. The dwelling place of Leviathan. A place where the ominous dark shadows of rough sea-beasts lurk. Where cold currents thrud beneath unmeasurable fathoms of black water. A place and a distance so far removed from the safety of firm warm dry land that the sighing wind in one's rigging becomes the whispering of sirens luring you to destruction; where a flight of pelicans becomes a gaggle of shrieking harpies; --where one begins to question even one's own sanity itself. And unlike the harrowing, sometimes ankle-soaking cross-chop experienced within the channel, in the Deep where the silent Tripods loom, the Rollers



come, those great dark grey-green waves birthed from beyond the Ochlockonee Shoals grown more massive with each landward league from the Kraken's roaring breath itself; lifting, reeling and plunging in their disordered macabre dance, tossing board and rider in a nightmarish tango nearly as deadly as the rise and fall of a rider on a merry-go-round horse. Then for those lucky and skillful enough to round the Tripods, it's back, back through the gauntlet of the channel, a bleak journey where time has no meaning, back towards terra firma, back towards safety, warmth, the beach, to finally collapse on the sand in a catatonic stupor, aimlessly crawling, then staggering from the sheer emotional shock of realization of just having endured and survived this soul-testing odyssey. And then, upon hearing the words uttered by a fellow Club member, "Well done, Honorable Shellback, well done," fully rising and standing tall, composed, alive, with penetrating eye and courageous heart, knowing you have conquered the Tripods.



~ Ted Avellone