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Leatherneck Bards:

Marines Embrace Unusual Duty Aboard Navy Ships

By David E. Johnson, Ph.D., Gary M. Guinn, Ph.D., & Kenneth D. Keith, Ph.D.

Marine Detachments (MarDets) aboard U.S. Navy ships have a history as long as the Corps itself. By the time World War II loomed on the horizon, the duties of seagoing Marines were well established. They provided ceremonial details, manned secondary gun batteries and oversaw overall ship security and brig operation to name a few. When the United States entered the nuclear age, MarDets guarded shipboard “special” (nuclear) weapons. Seagoing Marines served aboard aircraft carriers, battleships, cruisers and attack cargo ships. One of the lesser-known activities performed by MarDet officers was the role of officer of the deck (OOD) while a ship was in port. Some OODs participated in an even more obscure tradition by writing the first log entry of the new year (midwatch) in verse.

Writing the midwatch deck log in verse on New Year’s Day has a long history but an unknown origin. The earliest documented midwatch poem appeared in the 1926 log of USS *Idaho* (BB-42), when Ensign E.V. Dockweiler ended his midwatch entry with the following:

That’s all the dope this morning
 Except, just between us two
 If the Captain ever sees this log
 My gawd what will he do?

The captain added the following annotation to his approval of the log: “The Captain is glad to see that the old Navy custom of writing up the first watch of the year in rhyme is known to the younger members of the Service. The watch stands as written.” Clearly, the tradition predated Dockweiler’s log entry, yet no earlier deck log poem has been found.

Deck logs are legal documents of noteworthy ship activity. Significant events regarding the crew, state of readiness, materials and operations are logged to allow for future reconstruction of these events. Specific information contained in a deck log might include absentees, combat actions, accidents or injuries of crew, navigational information, mooring information if in port and propulsion plant status. Logs can even be used as evidence to settle legal disputes.

The difference between a typical deck log entry and the first midwatch of the year, when written in verse, is apparent at a glance. Most of the midwatch verses *look* like a poem on the page—lines, stanzas, rhymes, creative imagery. And though the log is still expected to carry the necessary information of a regular entry, the midwatch poets obviously feel free to go much further, experimenting with both structure and content.

Common Themes

Midwatch deck log poems tend to possess several common characteristics. OODs often employ humor in their poems, sometimes yielding creative rhymes. ENS P.S. Wisnewski, aboard USS *Rankin* (AKA-103) in 1961, exemplified this approach:

You see, in the Navy by tradition
 The mid log is penned in poetry fashion
 I’ll write my epitome or trashery
 Along the style of Ogden Nashery.

Complaints about feeling pressure to write the midwatch log in verse also appear in many poems. Sailors sometimes take great care to prepare the reader for their lack of bardic prowess. On Jan. 1, 1965, Lieutenant Junior Grade J.N. Lorton

and ENS R. W. Lewis expressed this well in their USS *Midway* (CVA-41) midwatch log:

Tis hard enough these words to weave
 On every duty night.
 But when we come to New Year’s Eve
 This curse in verse we write.
 We’re bound by duty, per Navy regs,
 To give our hard earned time.
 Yet this question for an answer begs
 Why must this _____ thing rhyme?

The blank in the last line was a case of self-censoring!

On July 1, 1914, General Order No. 99 stated, “The use or introduction for drinking purposes of alcoholic liquors on board any naval vessel, or within any Navy yard or station, is strictly prohibited, and commanding officers will be held directly responsible for the enforcement of this order.” So it is not surprising that the Sailors who kept the watch on New Year’s Eve bemoaned the lack of alcohol while many of their shipmates were ashore on liberty imbibing freely. ENS L.E. Leugers, USS *Castor* (AKS-1), in 1964, combined humor with complaints about writing in verse as well as the lack of alcohol:

The rabbit has become a dragon
 So down with work and hoist a flagon
 But woe to him who has the watch
 He’ll have to do without his Scotch
 Enough of this, it’s time to write
 The log in verse and seem real bright.
 To write in verse is not too hard
 If you happen to be a blind Greek bard.

Marines Write the Midwatch In Verse

In a review of over 10,000 midwatch poems entered in Navy deck logs between 1947 and 1978, 20 were written by Marine officers serving aboard ships. Marine-written midwatch poems usually resembled those written by their Navy counterparts with respect to content and form, but some differences appear.

Marine officers writing the New Year’s Eve

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midwatch recognized the tradition, and rather than issue complaints about writing in verse, they seemed to accept it as a fait accompli. They did their duty and followed tradition. Several stanzas written by Captain B.A. Adams, USMC, in 1958, aboard USS *Macon* (CA-132), exemplify his duty:

Whoever thought to write in rhyme
 Had naught to do to pass the time,
 But tradition is tradition and here we go
 With a brand new log and a ho-de-ho
 (Ho and go, they rhyme you know,
 Like futch and glockenspiel).

Later, Adams wrote,
 I did it, I did it, I knew that I could;
 I ’rit’ this in rhyme like Longfellow would.
 My work is now finished ’til dawn early light.
 A Happy New Year to all and to all a good night.



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But at 2:20 a.m., a Sailor was cited by the commanding officer for several serious offenses that had to be recorded in the official ship's log. Adams acknowledged this in a postscript prior to naming the insubordinate sailor and his offenses in prose:

P.S. It's criminal, it's criminal, a horrible shame
A sailor's good name to bard or defame,
Yet duty is duty and reports I must add
Not written in rhyme—I'm a terrible cad!

After the brief deviation from rhyme to record the sailor's offenses, Adams closed with:

If you've read all of my song, my thanks I extend
And repeat one more time this is really the end.

This same Birney A. Adams was the recipient of the Silver Star for action in Korea in 1951. He also received the Purple Heart on three occasions.

In one of the stronger statements made by a Marine articulating his duty to follow tradition, First Lieutenant C.R. Keith, on board the USS *Ticonderoga* (CVA-14) in 1958 wrote,

The OOD has taken the deck
As is typical of a good leatherneck
And in standard Marine Corps tradition
The OOD has vowed to complete his mission.

Marine References to the Lack of Alcohol On Watch

As with their Navy counterparts, Marines writing midwatch poems frequently mention alcohol or the lack thereof. On Jan. 1, 1959, First Lieutenant W.M. Carlson, USS *Thuban* (AKA-19) painted a celebratory picture, but only for those ashore. First Lieutenant Carlson even spelled the name of his ship incorrectly in order to maintain the rhyme:

Ear splitting noise tells the New Year is born
Steam to all whistles and lips to the horn
Sirens a'screaming and bells are a'peeling
'Twould cause a sober man to start reeling
Most the team's on the town sucking up bourbon

This the crew of the USS *Thurban*
Phone service and water emit from the pier
For the latter, no doubt the crew'd prefer beer.

While aboard USS *Washburn* (AKA-108) in 1966, 1st Lt A.D. Brewin related his observations about his own crew as well as an adjacent moored ship, USS *George Clymer* (APA-27):

This eve our crew is downing brew
While snug in port we lie;
NAVSTATION (Dago), 4 the pier
Our berth is forty-two
Old George's crew came tramping through
At all hours day and night
We know their home when aboard they roam
By the delicate scent of brew.

Marines Make Sure It's Clear Who's on Duty

After their midwatch entry, OODs must apply their signature to make the log official. Signatures are usually followed by the writer's rank and service branch. "USMC" after the signatures makes it clear that the writer is a Marine, yet fully half of the 20 Marine-written logs also contained a statement that ensured that there was no mistake about who was on duty.

First Lieutenant A.N. Manella, aboard USS *Hancock* (CVA-19), in 1975, began his midwatch entry with the following:

It's an honor I'm told and a sight to behold
Amid frolicking, bells, gongs, and screams
The first watch of the year—be assumed and it's clear
By a Lieutenant of the U.S. Marines.

First Lieutenant G.R. Johnston, while on USS *Mathews* (AKA-96) as a ship combat cargo officer, finished his 1960 midwatch poem with these lines:

And throughout the midwatch, this big gray machine
Was guarded by her only U.S. MARINE.

Aboard USS *Rankin* (AKA-103) in 1957, 1stLt M.M. Bruner concluded with:

The Exec's on board, the Captain's not on the scene
But no one is worried, the OOD is a United States Marine.

First Lieutenant A.D. Brewin implied divine intervention in his role aboard the transport *Washburn* (AKA-108):

Our Navy dear with many a tear
Provides for all our wants;
But God indeed fills every need
When our Marine came here!

In his 1963 log, 2ndLt J.A. Shepherd, on board USS *Coral Sea* (CVA-43) states:

About the ship there is not a sailor to be seen
The OOD is a United States Marine.

During the midwatch, 2ndLt Shepherd learned of a crew member returning to ship after being absent without leave. He concluded the poem by writing,

I learned at 2355 [redacted name and service number] returned
from over the hill
And I in disgust spilled my ink and returned to my quill.

With a nod to the quality of the crew and with a little swagger on the part of the writer, the following appears in the 1974 midwatch log of USS *Midway* (CVA-41):

But one resolution I would like to make
Is that our proud crew remain so great
And as they sleep after a night of cheer,
That they sleep sound and have no fear,

Because they're guarded as they rest
By the Midway Marines, the very best.
C.S. Sharples Jr., Captain, USMC

First Lieutenant G.G. Evans Jr., of USS *Ranger* (CVA-61) finished his 1958 midwatch poem by acknowledging his duty to write a poem and recording his service identity:
Naval tradition dictates that this be done in theme;
At long last it's finished by a U. S. Marine.

Finally, 1stLt Keith, 1958, defied grammar to close out his midwatch poem with a phrase that appears in several other deck logs, suggesting that there was some borrowing of wording over the years:

Well, it's over, it's done—Navigator, please note
If the log doesn't rhyme, at least it was wrote.

The same final line appears in the log of USS *Fechtelor* (DD-870) written by LT R.O. Pyle, USN, in 1954 and was published in *All Hands* in December of that year. LTJG C.E. Pausa also used the closing phrase in his deck log poem aboard USS *Montrose* (APA-212) in 1956.

JFK Memorial Poem

The pride in the Marine Corps shown in the poems above is part of a powerful loyalty to the Corps. Part of that loyalty is to the chain of command, and at the top of that chain sits the Commander in Chief. On June 6, 1963, President John F. Kennedy visited USS *Kitty Hawk* (CVA-63) during a fleet review. He toured the ship, watched operational demonstrations and made remarks about the importance of the United States' control of the seas. The President made a lasting impression on one of the young Marine officers; Captain J.J. Burke Jr., CO of the *Kitty Hawk* MarDet, wrote a tribute to JFK in the 1964 New Year's Day midwatch log. Of the thousands of logs reviewed, this is the only one that memorialized a leader with such eloquence and poignancy.

00-04 In Memoriam

It is truly fitting that we of this mighty aircraft carrier pay our last farewell to our departed shipmate.

He was a young man, dynamic in mind and personality who was

destined to be the great leader of our nation.

This was the world leader who on January 20th in the year of our Lord

Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-One, observed not a victory of party but a celebration of freedom.

Yes, this was our shipmate.

This was the gentleman who paid honor and praise to us on that cool

day in June in the year of our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Sixty-Three

This was the same man who walked about our decks exhorting us in the performance of our tasks.

Likewise, this was an individual who braved the elements of the sea in a world war not so long ago.

This was our shipmate.

Forty-two times our hearts pounded at the roar of the guns but only half rang out in joy...

the other half cried out, "Farewell Shipmate."

Dazed and bewildered our minds could not comprehend,
"How could two cursed shots rob a great nation?"
And our hearts continued to cry out, "Farewell Shipmate."

Bear with me now as I must honor a custom and tradition that he,
I am sure, once honored some years ago:

Authors' Note: We do not report this section of the log that contains typical information about ship's condition.

And now that tribute has been paid to custom and tradition, may all my shipmates join with me in his famous words,
"And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what America will do for you, but what you can do for your country.
My fellow citizens of the world, ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the Freedom of Man."
Brother of the sea, your words shall always be treasured

*The Exec's on board,
the Captain's not on the scene
But no one is worried, the OOD
is a United States Marine.*

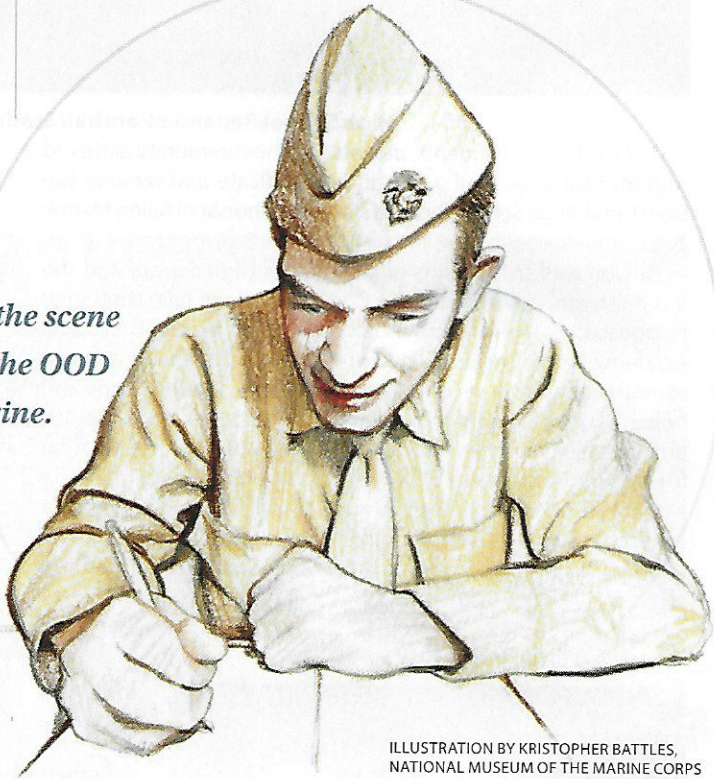


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and we shall always remain poised and ready to continue to carry the flag of freedom.
May your soul rest in peace and may God bless all the shipmates who have gone before us and also those who shall come after us.

J. J. BURKE Jr.
CAPTAIN
"SOLDIER OF THE SEA"

Authors' bios: The authors are retired university professors (Psychology, English & Psychology, respectively) and staff the Midwatch in Verse Project that promotes awareness and knowledge of the U.S. Navy tradition of writing the first log of the new year in verse. Guinn served as a corpsman in the Navy Reserve from 1968 to 1974.