

SLATER SIGNALS

The Newsletter of the USS SLATER's Volunteers
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January. Usually a slow, dull mid-winter month. The SLATER remains moored as before, starboard side to, the old Rensselaer lumber dock just forward of the scrap yard. The interior work continues as before. It's always too cold to paint. We write grants, solicit foundations, acknowledge Winter Fund donations, and Les and Annette sell dog tags. There usually isn't much to write about in January, except 'maybe the occasional' Fire!



photo by Mike McMahon -- The Troy Record

Erik Collin is our shipboard custodian. He also has a degree in environmental biology, is a computer expert who wishes we'd all switch to Linux, maintains all our financial contributions lists, our computers and their databases, and generates all the thank you letters you receive.

He is also our painter, and primary restorer of ordnance equipment. But, for this story we need only concern ourselves with Erik's janitorial skills. He is a very good janitor. He is reminiscent of the bosun's mate who used to put up rat guards between his ship and the other ships in the nest. Sometimes his penchant for keeping the ship clean puts him at odds with other members of the crew. In the wintertime the crew tends to view the ship as a construction site instead of a museum, and they get a little less tidy than they are during the tourist season. Erik's perspective is that the rest of us are a bunch of Neanderthal slobs and his purgatory is to spend his life picking up after us and cleaning up the messes we make.

A couple weeks ago Erik threw a fit. The welders were cutting wasted metal out of the forward crew's head as part of the restoration. Gene Jackey had taken up the tile in the CPO head, and there were many holes in the deck and the bulkhead. The ship fitters had run the air lines, oxyacetylene lines and welding lead from the main deck down through the mess decks, through forward berthing, through the CPO passageway into the forward head. With all those lines run through the watertight doors it was impossible to close them and isolate the work area. As a result, the dirt and grim from all the grinding, cutting and smoke were going through the whole forward second deck. Erik angrily took a napkin to a table on the mess deck and showed me how it was covered with black soot. "It'll take me forever to get this place cleaned up for opening day! They need to rerun these lines topside, keep these damn doors closed, and keep a fan in the fo'c's'le hatch to keep the smoke out!"



photo by Mike McMahon -- The Troy Record

That Monday, I got with Doug Tanner, and we reran all the welding lead and hoses topside from the breakwater to the fo'c's'le hatch so we could keep all the second deck doors closed while they were working up forward to keep the smoke out. We also rigged a window fan in the fo'c's'le hatch so that we could suck the smoke right out of the area under restoration without dirtying up the rest of the ship. Nelson Potter had been sewing up tears in a large fire retardant piece of canvas that we use to cover gun three. Since it was conveniently located in the Chief's Quarters, the shipfitters rigged it as a tarp aft of the bulkhead they were cutting on to keep the dust and dirt confined. Erik was mollified.

If I may, for a moment, digress from my digression, until very recently we had a mentality aboard that the challenge we have accepted here on the SLATER is to figure out how to get the SLATER restored and maintained with what any normal business would call "insufficient resources." We have always made up for the lack of resources with our talent, dedication and enthusiasm. You know the mentality, "We've done so much with so little for so long, we are now qualified to do anything with nothing." And it's always been important for us to show our donors how much progress we are making thanks to their money. Thus, we probably tended towards pushing the envelope and trying to accomplish too much with too little. Fortunately, we have the chance to learn from our experiences, and in many ways we were lucky because it was a relatively inexpensive lesson.



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In the true fashion that, "No good deed goes unpunished," Doug Tanner took Wednesday January 4th off from work to come in and work on the SLATER. Now, those of you who have been following this saga know that Doug is the safest and most qualified shipfitter in the crew. A former Coast Guard Damage Controlman and a retired level three welding inspector for GE, when Doug opens his wallet, safety certification cards fall out like the pictures of grandkids most of the other less-qualified volunteers carry. Doug will not permit hot work in the machinery spaces for fear of oil in the bilges. He normally carries safety to extremes and worries about problems none of the rest of us see. Since there were several volunteers working in the area, I didn't feel we needed to designate a fire watch. Doug went to work cutting out a section of deck. As is routine procedure when doing hot work, I had notified our fire alarm monitoring company that there would be welding going on and to disregard any alarms going in from the SLATER because they would be false. All the second deck watertight doors were closed.

I was up in the ship's office, either working on a grant, or taking a nap, depending upon whom you talk to. Around 1100 I headed down because I knew I needed to lock the pier gate for security reasons. I ran into Doug who said, "We have a fire." For once I had the good sense to take him at his word and immediately went back to the office, dialed 911 and reported the fire. My second move should have been my third move. What I should have done was gotten on the PA system and yelled, "Fire, evacuate the ship!" What I actually did was run down to the maindeck and open all the topside doors so the fire department would have easy access. Then I went below to make sure everyone was out of the area. Doug was still down there trying to combat the fire with CO₂. By that time the passageway was full of smoke and you couldn't see anything except the flames. I went into the CPO mess, which was still clear of smoke, grabbed that CO₂ extinguisher and emptied it onto the fire. At that point it got too hard to breath and we couldn't see, so Doug and I headed up topside. I just wish I'd closed the door to the CPO mess.



Fire damage - starboard side.



Fire damage - port side.

We caught our breath and accounted for all hands. Then we secured electrical power to the ship so there would be no problems spraying water around the inside of the SLATER. By then smoke was pouring out of the fo'c's'le hatch and the starboard side hatch behind the hedgehog launcher. We waited on deck and it was only a short time before the fire trucks started to arrive. We handed them a copy of the Damage Control Book to give them an idea of what they were dealing with. About that time aerosol paint cans that were in the passageway started to pop off and that spooked everybody. When the fire department learned that no life was at stake, they decided to use a thermal imaging camera to determine the location and extent of the fire before sending personnel below. We were concerned that we had a hatch to the forward magazine open for fire watch, and in the smoke they might fall in. The Fire Chief instructed most of the crew to remain on the pier while they rigged their hoses and their own ventilation fans in the hatchways.

By now we observed smoke escaping from every hatch and door in the superstructure all the way up to the pilothouse. You can't imagine the feeling we had watching this and envisioning that flames were consuming the entire forward section of the SLATER. The fire had become a true media event and by now the parking lot was full of emergency vehicles, personnel and media. Mark Bruno and Richie Hendrick from the Port came over. And I later heard that even Mayor Jennings was so concerned that he drove over from City Hall to make sure we were okay. About twenty minutes after arrival of the first emergency personnel, the location of the fire was pinpointed to a shelf in the CPO passageway. A pile of WWII kapok life jackets that had been left on the shelf had ignited from the canvas, causing a very hot, smoky fire. Hot enough to melt a silver solder connection on the LP air line running along the overhead. The line opened up and air blew into the existing fire. The blaze was quickly extinguished at this point. The volunteers went into the superstructure and opened all doors and hatches to air out the ship. Fire investigators sifted through the debris to make their report. An hour after it had started the SLATER was ours again.

Considering the devastation we expected to find, we were amazed at how little damage was done. The fire was actually confined to a 10' x 10' area on the forward starboard side of the CPO passageway. All the uniforms normally hanging there had been stowed below and were undamaged. Wire ways above were damaged. The CPO mess was covered with soot, as was the passageway above. But, remember that digression in the beginning about Erik Collin's fit and his insistence that all the watertight doors be secured to keep out the welding dust and smoke. Thanks to him the soot damage to the remainder of the forward end of the SLATER, including officer's country was minimal.



Overhead fire damage - starboard side.



Overhead fire damage - port side.

The crew immediately set to work cleaning up and dewatering. The Albany Water Department loaned us a beautiful pump. Electrical circuits were checked out, damaged circuits isolated and defused, and we powered the ship back up. We removed about 200 gallons of water from bunk lockers and the magazines below. We were anxious to get it out for fear that a hard Albany freeze would make it very difficult to pump. One interesting note is that I went into the blackened CPO mess about three hours after the fire, and there was only one little light on in the darkness, one critical circuit. The Joe Pot. The media was very kind to us, even quoting Bob Callender's comment to the crew, "Sorry boys, but all your pay records have been destroyed."



Overhead smoke damage in the forward passageway. The CPO Mess looks much the same.

As I write, this January 16th, our insurance underwriters have sent in a marine surveyor to assess the damage, and our insurance agent and DEHM member Mike Barry has been aboard. We are in the process of getting quotes from a fire restoration cleaning company and our regular painting contractor to restore the ship. I expect work to begin in earnest next week. Much cleaning and prep work has been done by our volunteers. The electrical gang has volunteered to undertake all the electrical repairs ourselves as they

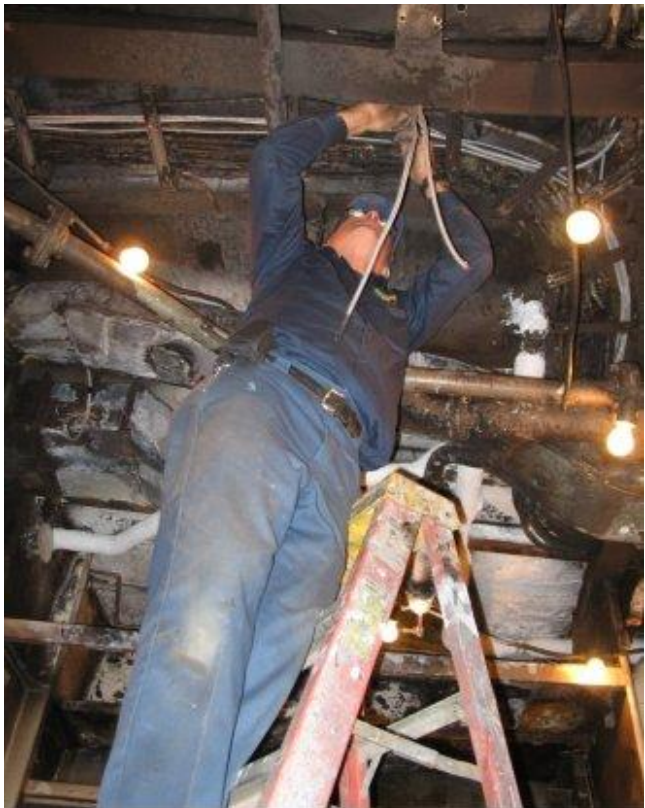
have more experience with shipboard wiring than anyone else in the area. The cable they need is already on order. Our insurance policy has a high deductible to make it affordable. When word of the deductible got out, Russ Padden put up a note about us needing help on his Amphibs website. Also, thanks to Terry Miller and Chan Zucker, Tin Can Sailors donated \$5,000, and to Bob Cross and Frank Keane, the Port of Albany donated another \$5,000 towards our deductible.



File of ashes where it all started.

photo by Rosehn Gipe

We will probably spend another \$5,000 making safety improvements and improving our fire fighting capabilities. We were very lucky, but now the whole crew is thinking safety and noticing things we never noticed before. We've re-formed our safety committee and we're moving all the flammables out of the machine shop. We're planning fire suppression systems for the paint lockers. We're going to activate the CO2 system for the emergency diesel generator. We've bought ABC dry chemical extinguishers to supplement our CO2 extinguishers in all main compartments and purchased pressurized water extinguishers to keep on site wherever we're doing hot work. The Saturday after the fire twenty volunteers showed up and we held a safety meeting to review what we did wrong and what we did right. The lessons are as old as shipbuilding. I'll review them for all my friends in the ship restoration business. Learn from us. Always assign a specific individual as fire watch. Make sure you have equipment on the site of hot work to combat all classes of fire, A, B, and C. We keep a bucket in the CPO mess that we dump the old coffee into. I should have grabbed that and dumped it on the fire. Make sure that your fire retardant canvas is fire retardant. And remove all combustibles from the area, and make that area wider than we did.



Electrician Gary Sheedy replacing burned cables.



RPI NROTC student and Electrician Barry Witte.

We were very fortunate that this accident did not occur during tourist season and we have nearly three months to effect repairs before re-opening to the public. The Board of Directors, staff, and volunteers express their sincere thanks and appreciation to the firefighters and emergency workers, Mark Bruno and Rich Hendrick from the Port, and Bob Cross, John Kosa and the Albany Water Department. And I want to thank all the volunteers helping with the clean up and repair. One is never truly prepared for a fire, in spite of safety procedures and precautions that may be in place. We all realize that accidents may happen at any time, but we always hope they won't. In addition, it is virtually impossible to budget for this sort of disaster. To our genuine surprise, financial contributions are arriving already and we are grateful. Again, our thanks to Tin Can Sailors, Inc. and The Albany Port District for their major donations to our recovery effort in such a timely manner. They will also help pay for the safety improvements we are making. The public's generosity and continued support of this project is overwhelming. And finally, let's thank the SLATER herself. Her design as a warship to be watertight and withstand battle damage, truly helped minimize the effects of the fire. She can still take it.

It's not all bad. It's been a very mild winter. Usually by now you can walk across the Hudson here in Albany. This year the river has not yet gotten cold enough to freeze. Saturday it was in the fifties. Of course, this Monday morning it was four above zero, but hey, it's Albany and we've still got twelve guys out working on the ship. The weather is going back up into the upper thirties this week, so even this brief cold snap wasn't enough to freeze the water around us. I also want to take this opportunity to thank everyone for their support of the Winter Fund. I was signing a stack of thank you letters when the fire started. It was three days before I finished them. News reports I've heard say that on the National Level, all organizations fund raising appeals have been in decline this year due to the string of natural disasters that seem to have befallen our planet--the tsunami, Katrina, and the earthquake. But your support has been as strong as ever, and to date we have raised over fifty thousand dollars in Winter Fund donations. Your support has been amazing and most gratifying. **See you next month.**