



*Interview with Emil Babich, MOMM2/c (Retired)  
Conducted aboard CGC Eagle enroute Bermuda 1-10JUN2009  
PA1 Thomas McKenzie*

*Emil Babich was born October 8, 1924 in Ridgefield Park, New Jersey. He was drafted into the Coast Guard in April of 1943, and is one of a remaining handful of the original assigned to sail the German sailing ship Horst Wessel to New London, Connecticut from Bremerhaven in January of 1946. Horst Wessel would be re-commissioned USCGC Barque Eagle on May 11, 1946. As a Motor Machinist Mate 2<sup>nd</sup> Class (MOMM2/c), his responsibilities included making repairs to the engines, translating the various placards and tags located about the ship from their original German into technical English, and carrying out additional responsibilities. What follows is his eyewitness account of not only his time aboard Eagle, but of the Second World War as well.*

“My named is Emil Babich. My family came from small islands in Croatia, where they did a lot of boat building and fishing. On the day I was medically accepted for service there were two openings for the Coast Guard. I’d heard about the Coast Guard and the work they did, and since there was a lot of maritime history in my family, that was that. I went to the third Naval district in New York to sign up, and a week later I entered boot camp in Manhattan Beach. Afterwards, I attended Hemphill Diesel School in Long Island for three months of diesel training, commuting from the Dutton Hotel in New York City each day.

Then I was sent to Norfolk for my first ship, the U.S.S. Mills, a destroyer doing convoy duty in the Mid-Atlantic. Our first convoy was between Norfolk and Casablanca, and Norfolk to Tunisia on our second. On the second convoy, we were called to quarters thirteen times in one night for various submarine and aircraft sightings as we passed Gibraltar. The convoy was eventually attacked but only one cargo ship carrying medical supplies was hit. It caught fire, and the Mills was assigned to save them. We separated the stricken vessel from the convoy, tied up alongside and put the fire out. Then we took it in tow to the port city of Bizerte, Tunisia. We’d eventually receive a star on our Mid-Atlantic service ribbon for the medical supplies we saved. Just before our third convoy, the Red Cross took me off the ship for emergency leave.



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From there, I was assigned to an Army freight and supply vessel (FS255), a 400-ton cargo ship built at the Higgins Ship Yard in Long Island. We took it out for the shakedown cruise and sailed her from New York through the Panama Canal to Los Angeles to make it more seaworthy for a trip to New Guinea.

Our first cargo was 400 tons of 3.2% beer that we took on in New York. The skipper told us that if we didn't touch the beer, when arrived in New Guinea we could have two cans of beer with our meals, provided we weren't going on duty. I don't remember the brand, but we had so much beer we had to store it in our lockers!

On our first day underway from LA to Hawaii we hit a bad storm and the steering cable broke, so we had to rig a tiller with a capstan to steer the boat. With the wind and all the other problems, we wound up drifting to San Francisco, where we put in for emergency repairs. Then we went back to LA to check our work in a shipyard. Finally, we set out for Hawaii, where we spent a week waiting for two other ships of our class so we could sail as a group to New Guinea.

We sailed up and down the coast of New Guinea carrying different cargo; mainly munitions and oil. For amusement on these cruises, the officer of the deck would keep a look out for porpoises, because they feed on tuna. Then the wheel watch would sound general quarters, and we'd run for our fishing poles! The skipper would just laugh and say the Japanese were gonna get us. We figured if the Japanese saw us with fishing poles, they probably wouldn't bother us.

Next, we were asked to take part in a small invasion in the southern Philippines, so we joined a convoy. Our destination was the Daveao Gulf. While we were sailing, we had a mishap with one of our engines – the cylinder liner had cracked. Another ship in the convoy had a spare, so we transferred it via small boat. The convoy slowed down so we could keep up. As soon as we entered the gulf, we thought for sure that we'd be fired



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upon from the mountains. Instead, locals in outrigger canoes paddled out and sold us trinkets and other goods.

We motored to Taloma Bay and anchored for four days while we were being used as an ammo dump. Every day, when it got late, the Japanese would fire shells down at us from the mountains, four or five of them, each one getting closer. We'd pull anchor and motor out of the area. Now, on the fourth night it didn't happen – they didn't shell us. But around midnight, we were torpedoed and the ship sank in about fifteen minutes. That was May 11, 1945. Ironically, it was one year before the Eagle would be commissioned.

Of our crew of 25, we lost four men. We floated in a raft for about an hour after the attack before a Navy personnel carrier found us and took us aboard for the night. Then they transferred us to an Army aid station on the beach to get us checked out before sending us to Luzon. To this day, I have no idea how I got there. I've thought and thought about it, but I don't remember. The remains of the men were never found, but they are memorialized in the national cemetery in the Philippines.

A week later, we boarded the *USS General R.L. Howze*, a Coast Guard-manned troop ship headed for San Francisco. We were being sent back to the States, first for R&R and then to pick a temporary duty assignment. I chose the Staten Island buoy tender station in New York.

I was supposed to wait there three months when suddenly, the war was over. They had some kind of a point system for discharging people from service, and as it turned out another fellow at my station had been picked to go to New London to work on a sailing ship. I wanted to go, so I was able to convince my chief to switch our names and let the other fellow go home.

I went to the interview and as it turned out Lieutenant Jascak, my Engineering Officer from the U.S.S. Mills, was interviewing people for the engine room position. It was at



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the interview that I learned of the Horst Wessel. I joined Commander McGowan's team of four officers, 3 chiefs, and 2 enlisted personnel.

The skipper and a couple of the chiefs went to visit another ship in Germany, which I believe was the Albert Leo Schlageter. It was one of two ships available at the time, both in the British-controlled sector of Germany at the end of World War II. The English didn't want them, so they offered them to the Coast Guard to replace the sail training ship Danmark. It was on loan to us from Denmark and returned to them after the war. So we had a choice between the Horst Wessel and the Albert Leo Schlageter, which had been damaged by a mine. As a result, the Horst Wessel was chosen because it required less effort to make her seaworthy. The British would also provide us with the ship's German crew for the voyage back to the United States.

We showed up in Bremerhaven to a town completely destroyed, and there was Eagle lying in the mud. We got there six months after the war. By then, they had all the streets clear. People were trying to get re-organized and get living again. A lot of people were living in basements, or in some kind of a house that was made out of the bricks that were piled up like an igloo. I couldn't believe they were living in there.

It took sweat and brute force to clean the engine room and get the place cleaned up so we could see what we had. First we had to change the name plates that described the functions of the valves and pipelines. They couldn't be translated normally. The average person on the street can translate everyday language, but as soon as you put them in a technical situation like being on board a ship, you need a technical interpreter. I tried to get one to help me go through this business of translating the different components, but I couldn't find one.

Let's say you want to identify a pipeline and put a name tag on it. To start with, it's all one long word. That word says what it is, where it's coming from, what it carries and where it's going. That was going on throughout the whole ship!



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I'd work on the tags for awhile, then I'd work on the engine. We weren't looking for any trouble in the engine, but the air starting system had to be overhauled, so we fixed that and got the engine running. Then we found a crack in the block.

I went up to Hamburg and talked to some of the people there about replacing the block. Fortunately, we were able to get a replacement. At the same time, I was pointing out spare parts we could use, which we stored under the main deck.

I was able to get instructions on how to start operate of the non-standard compressors that we had onboard. The problem was we had no other prints to work with. No blueprints, no schematics, manuals, nothing like that. We were trying to learn these things from the Germans, but we were starting from scratch, and had no clue of what needed to be done. As I think back, they were helpful. I wouldn't say they were forthcoming, but with the language barrier maybe they didn't know what we were asking for. We had to do a lot of probing.

There were other problems. The transmission on the motor launch didn't work. Again, no blueprints, no schematics, and we couldn't see inside to repair it. It was a question of going by feel. I finally got it fixed, but that meant every time they wanted to use the launch I had to go along to nurse it.

### **The Story of Eddie Didion**

While we were working on Eagle, a young boy came aboard. I don't know how, maybe somebody brought him on board. He became a sort of mascot, and he started working on the ship. He ate with us, he lived with us, and he stayed with us all the time. He was a good little worker as I recall. But again, I didn't work with him directly because I was part of the engine room gang. I think our sail maker even made him a uniform. He was a regular Coast Guardsman then! The boatswain's mate more or less took Eddie under his



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wing and tried to adopt him, but just before we left Bremerhaven the paperwork fell through. They found Eddie at the last minute and took him off the ship. During the 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in Hamburg, they were still trying to find out what happened to him.

We got Eagle out of the mud using the tides to float her. Again, I did most of my work down in the engine room, so I wasn't aware of the complexity in getting it out of the harbor. We had an escort of some sort, a tugboat or a minesweeper, because the place was loaded with mines. We were escorted from Bremerhaven on our way to England, where we anchored in Falmouth for two days. From there, we headed to Funichal.

We hadn't been paid for a couple of months. The Coast Guard just ran out of money. As we were crossing the Atlantic and pulling into ports, we could go on liberty but we had no money to spend. When we got to Funichal, the captain pulled some strings to get supplies from the locals. Things were so bad in Funichal, we were selling our clothes for pocket money.

There wasn't much free time on board. To break up the monotony on the voyage, they held boxing matches between the Germans and the Americans up on the waist. We took it easy on the Germans, because they were suffering from malnutrition. They'd been living on less than a thousand calories a day. We were getting double that. Once our cooks showed up, they started getting built up again.

### The Hurricane

My recollection is poor as to how long we weathered the hurricane, but I know it was close to a full day. We didn't have weather forecasts back then to help predict the changing conditions.

We began the morning in a following sea, with the wind at our stern. As the day progressed the wind and wave action grew worse, and we started blowing out all the main



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sails. We needed to come about to be able to motor into the sea, but with the royal set we'd heel over for sure. The problem was the rigging, which was fouled. We couldn't do anything about it from deck, so one of the German sailors volunteered to climb aloft and unfoul it.

Green water was coming up over the deck, nearly knee high. In order to walk around, you had to wrap one arm around a hemp life line, which ran the length of the waist, and grab your vest with that hand. Some of the guys were bleeding from the crook of their arms because of the sheer friction and the power of the waves.

We were coming about with a severe list to starboard as the rain pelted down like BB's banging onto our skin. The ship was approaching its limitations. We hung there, hoping for the best, waiting to see what was going to happen next. After what seemed like forever, she righted herself and we made the turnabout to head into the sea. We still had the storm to deal with, but the ship was under control now, heading into the sea with engine power. From that point on it was duck soup. I've always been a little sad that I never found out who that German sailor was, because he was the one who saved Eagle. Luckily we survived, and here's the Eagle today.

### New York

We were motoring up the Hudson River. I was on the starboard side with several of the Germans looking over the rail, when one of them asked me how we managed to rebuild New York so fast. The propaganda that they'd received back in Germany said that New York had been bombed, and the city had been destroyed. We tried to explain to them that we were never bombed, and that submarines never came up the harbor, so their information was false. It was hard for them to believe the propaganda that had been given to them.



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The German sailors were taken off at a fort near West Point, and I never saw them again. I don't recall anything about when they left, other than they boarded a barge. I'm sure when Eagle visited Hamburg in 1996 for the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, a number of them probably visited.

So we left New York and sailed to New London. After one or two days I was sent to Boston for discharge. I was there several days when I realized something was holding up the process. In talking to the yeoman in charge of that area, they said the Coast Guard still didn't have any money to discharge me. I had some money of my own, so they finally agreed to let me go without pay or transportation money. I received a check about two months later.

That's the end of the story.

*After his enlistment ended in July of 1946, Emil used his G.I. Bill to enroll into the Stevens Institute of Technology in Hoboken, New Jersey. He retired from a civilian position with the U.S. Army in February of 1985, where he was working to design mechanized time fuses for artillery.*

