

---

## SCENE

# 14

---

### COAST GUARD ACADEMY—1938-1939 (FIRST CLASS YEAR)

#### Cruise to South America, Gunnery & Small Arms, Hurricane

**T**he new uniform insignias showed our new status. Fourth Classmen had only the Coast Guard shield on their sleeves and shoulder boards. Third Classmen had a single narrow gold diagonal stripe. First Classmen had one narrow horizontal stripe with extra stripes for Battalion Officer status. I was a Company Adjutant with two stripes. The Company Commander rated three and the Battalion Commander four.

We were feeling pretty important now, sporting the class ring and feeling we were sure to make it to graduation and its rewards.

Yes, I was sailing the sloops quite often now and enjoying the privilege of taking dates along. On one occasion, a funny thing happened. Two of my classmates were very good friends, but they complained about everything. We called that “bitching.” Their term of endearment each for the other was shortened to simply “bitch.” One day, they were sailing in a brisk breeze with their dates when they accidentally jibed, which meant the boom changed sides violently. The cadet on the tiller saw it coming and the other one didn’t, so he yelled, “Duck, bitch!”—and both girls “hit the deck”!

It is time now to start our First Class cruise aboard the **Coast Guard cutter *Bibb***, one of our six largest cutters known as the Secretary Class, length 327 feet. Beautiful lines. White hull with buff colored stack and trim. A long teak quarter deck was designed to carry a single float aircraft on board. (There were no helicopters in those days.) Our courses will take us to the east coast of South America. The *Bibb* is moored at the Academy now. The First Class and Third Class cadets are aboard.

We First Classmen will fill officers' billets under the eyes of the skeleton crew of regular ship's officers, such as Officer-of-the-Day, Officer-of-the-Deck, Navigator, Engineer, Quartermaster, First Lieutenant, and Chief Boatswains' Mate.

Listen in on the bridge and this is what you might hear as the Captain takes the conn. The Executive Officer is reporting to him: "Sir, the chronometer has been wound. The siren and whistle have been tested. The crew has been mustered and all hands are accounted for. The anchor detail has been posted (safety precaution) and a Quartermaster is on the helm. Second Class cadets are on the dock to handle mooring lines. The Chief Engineer reports steam up and ready to answer bells."

Captain: "Very well, single-up all mooring lines and take in the gangway."

"Sir, the gangway is on board."

"Very well, take in all lines. Shift the ensign to the gaff for cruising. Quartermaster, sound one long blast (on the whistle to announce to other ships we are leaving the dock). All engines astern one-third. Quartermaster, sound three short blasts (to announce our engines are in reverse)."

*(Bibb clears the dock and enters the channel.)*

"All engines stop. Left full rudder. All engines ahead two-thirds. Rudder amidships. Steady as you go. Mr. Sinclair, take the conn. We are leaving port, so keep the green channel buoys to starboard."

"Aye, aye, Captain. I relieve you, sir."

Our ports of call will be:   St. Thomas, Virgin Islands  
                                   Port-of-Spain, Trinidad  
                                   (Crossing the Equator)  
                                   Rio de Janeiro, Brazil  
                                   Buenos Aires, Argentina  
                                   Bahia, Brazil  
                                   Norfolk, Virginia  
                                   New London, Connecticut

Let us see what I can remember of each?

**St. Thomas.** We anchored in St. Thomas Harbor, and the anchor was hardly wet when we were surrounded by bum boats. This was my first experience with this type of trade that takes place in little foreign ports.

Native fruits are the favorite offering along with native crafts. The natives like money best but will settle for clothing or candy or food or pens and will practically give you their boat for American cigarettes.

Diving for coins tossed into the water is fun to watch. The coin flutters like a falling leaf as it descends, giving the diver a chance to intercept it.

A popular song was “Rum and Coca Cola” and so was the drink. We saw old sugar plantations, and men harvesting sugar cane with their machetes. We learned about rum punch at Blue Beard’s Castle.

The United States purchased the Virgin Islands from Denmark in 1917. Although we have always driven to the right side of the road, here they did not make the change from the European system. They still drive on the left. The explanation is: we could train the stubborn Danes, but we could never train the burros!



In St. Thomas harbor, we experienced bum boat commerce

**Port-of-Spain.** It was a short cruise but a busy one. We held a field day. The first order was to “air all bedding.” That meant to bring your bedding to the main deck and trice it up to the lifelines. One big chore was to rig the awning which sheltered the whole quarterdeck. Another detail was assigned to look for rust spots and to chip away the rust and paint. (The saying was, “If it don’t move, paint it!”) Holy-stoning that huge teak deck was reserved for another day.

It was hot and sweaty work. The Trade Winds were light and following. The heat was getting to us as we came to anchor. Suddenly, and I don’t know from whence it came, but *ice cold grapefruit* appeared with a half for each of us. It is my fondest memory of Trinidad.

On liberty, we visited the ANGOSTURA aromatic bitters plant where the world’s supply is made. I use it to this day for making a good manhattan into an excellent manhattan.

**Crossing the Equator.** The age of exploration of oceans began when Christopher Columbus demonstrated by his journeys to the New World that sailing uncharted waters need not be become voyages of no return. Astronomers and navigators working together plotted on charts the newly acquired knowledge of the earth and sun movements. It became a challenge and honor to cross those lines. The Equator was known to the ancients, but now there were several new lines, like the Arctic Circle, Antarctic Circle, Tropic of Cancer, Prime Meridian, and Date Line. Several of them have ceremonies and recognition for crossing.

The planners of our cruise knew, of course, that we would cross "the line" between Port-of-Spain and Rio de Janeiro, and we came prepared for the traditional high jinks with costumes and other contraptions.

King Neptune holds court to pass judgment on the pollywogs, those who have not crossed the equator. He initiates them into the *Ancient Order of Shellbacks*. The Queen, Davy Jones, and the Royal Babies help carry out his orders. Traditional antics include lathering with goop and shaving with a rusty piece of barrel stave, wearing a wig of unbraided rope, kissing a Royal Baby's belly, dunkings, etc.

Many buckets of water were dumped on the unexpected. It felt good since we were in the tropics. A portable pool was rigged on deck. A special chair was mounted on the edge of the pool, backside to. It was reserved for special candidates, namely the Captain and Commodore and other pollywog officers. At King Neptune's command, the chair was tilted backwards and the victim slid head first and face up into the pool. The Captain and Commodore were good sports, and everyone had a good time. We were all awarded certificates for our transformation from Pollywogs to Shellbacks!!



**King Neptune and his court. Crossing the equator on our cadet cruise, 1936, we advanced from "Pollywogs" to "Shellbacks"**

**Rio de Janeiro**, the "Gem of Brazil," was our next port of call. Brazil is the fifth largest country in the world, larger than all of Europe. But how come they speak Portuguese when most of the other South American countries speak Spanish? Here is how come:

Following the discovery of America by Columbus there was a rush by ships claiming new territories under the Spanish flag. While they were doing this the Portuguese were working their way around Africa and to the east seeking the Spice Islands and a route to

the Orient. When the Portuguese woke up to what the Spanish were claiming, they cried, "Foul," and appealed to the Pope saying the new found islands should be theirs as they already had islands nearby (nearby? some four thousand miles away!). Since both Spain and Portugal were Catholic, Pope Alexander VI would rule. It led to the 1494 Treaty of Tordesillas, where a north-south line was established 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde Islands. This turned out to be the 46-degree-west meridian. The Portuguese would claim lands east of that line and the Spanish west. Most of Brazil was east of the line. That is how come the Brazilians speak Portuguese.

That imaginary line became known as the “Line of Demarcation” and was to have far reaching effect. Unlike the other lines mentioned, this was unrelated to the antics of the sun, moon, or stars. When the longitude line is followed down to the South Pole and up the other side, it puts the Pacific Ocean and its islands in the Spanish sector. It reached to the Philippine Islands. Magellan complied with this ruling although he was a Portuguese navigator sailing on a Spanish mission. When he reached the Spice Islands, he found the Portuguese were already there. He was killed there in a local war.

RIO DE JANEIRO at last. The famous Sugar Loaf Mountain at the entrance to the bay rises to 1,299 feet. As the bay opens to full view, the statue of Christ the Redeemer is seen standing on top of Corcovado (Hunchback Mountain) rising to 2,300 feet above the city. The *Bibb* was assigned a berth alongside the landscaped park at Avenida Rio Branco, one of the city’s main thoroughfares.

We cadets were invited to a reception at the Brazilian Naval Academy. As soon as we were settled in, Brazilian cadets appeared with trays of rum punch. We were dumbfounded and didn’t know what to do, as our Academy regulations forbid drinking alcohol. With the speed of lightning, the word was passed that the Flotilla Commander said one or two drinks would be okay. (We mustn’t offend our hosts.)

I’m foggy about what that night’s activities were all about, but clear on what went on. We assembled at the bottom of a trail leading up an undeveloped hill. We were joined by a group of college age Brazilian youth. The girls carried bamboo poles with little paper lanterns dangling from the end with a lighted candle inside. The boys carried roman candle fireworks, which they shot off unannounced with reckless abandon. We threaded our way like a torchlight parade to the top without causing a firestorm or incinerating anyone and groped our way back down and out of harm’s way! (I’ll never know what we were celebrating.)

It was customary in Brazil, as in most tropical countries, to have the major meal midday. A special meal had been arranged for us in a very nice restaurant, elegantly served. After a small salad came a little fried fillet of fish. (We thought that was it! They call this “dinner?”) We were insulted. Just as we were about to storm out, lo’, the main course appeared. It was a big chunk of beef, and there was a delicious big dessert to follow! (A culinary lesson learned.)

Three of us cadets were sightseeing (yes, girl watching) along Copacabana Beach when a middle-aged woman approached us. She was an American lady whose husband was with IBM and stationed in Rio. She said her home was across the bay, and if we would bring our bathing suits, we could change in her house and walk to a much nicer beach than here. She gave us her address and bus directions. We took her up on the invitation. Her home was middle-class U.S. except that in the bathroom where we changed there was a strange porcelain plumbing fixture we couldn’t make out. Was it a drinking fountain for a pet? Was it for a foot bath? What use could it possibly have? (It was my first look at a bidet.)

**Buenos Aires** at last, the southernmost port of our cruise. We were out of the tropics, which was a relief. Buenos Aires is at about the same latitude south of the Equator as San Diego is north of the Equator. It felt very much like Southern California.

We were treated to a wonderful “asado” or Argentina barbecue. I have never seen so many beef steaks in my life. It was delicious and we gorged ourselves. Then, the gauchos put on demonstrations of their special skills. One was walking on hot coals from the barbecue pit. Another riding horses at breakneck speed while bringing down calves with their bolas. They demonstrated use of the bullwhip to control herded cattle. And, of course, there was some native music and dance. A great day!

That night, three of us went ashore for a night on the town. At a night club, which seemed to be closing for the night, we met the director of a little combo who said he was an American and would show us around. Well, after a couple of rum punch drinks, he did steer us to another night club which was open but almost empty. LO and BEHOLD, there across the room sat our Commodore with a sexy looking babe! We had ordered another drink, but one look at the clock reminded us that liberty was almost up. We gulped the drinks and got out of there.

I don't remember any trouble getting back to the ship and hitting the sack, but come morning, that was another thing. I am told my classmates tried but couldn't stir me. I missed first muster, was allowed to sleep it off, and was awarded fifty (50 that is!) demerits. (I had failed to apply the knowledge I had learned back at UCLA when the basketball coach served us martinis, about how rum can act slowly and sneak up on you in contrast to how gin right away tells you if you are getting a buzz on.)

**Bahia**, over halfway up the coast from Buenos Aires, was our last foreign port. It was an anti-climax. About all I remember (and, yes I was sober) was the big spread of souvenirs, fruits, and native crafts laid on the dock around our gangway. The harbor scene was tropical beauty—lush foliage and a little fishing harbor of gaff-rigged sailing craft with masts made of crooked tree trunks. Off now for good old U.S.A.

**Norfolk** for live gunnery drill. (I will probably do a poor job describing the required teamwork.) Arrangements had been made with the Navy for a towed target at which we would fire our five-inch gun. There was a fire control team that calculated entries for the gun sights. An ammo team to bring the projectiles and powder charges from the magazine in the bilges to the ready boxes on deck. Spotters to report the hits and misses. The gun crew consisted of the gun captain, the pointer, the trainer, the sight setter, the loader, and the swabber.

The gun captain opens the breach. The swabber looks through the bore to make sure there is no residue from a previous firing and swabs it out if in doubt. An ammo man inserts a projectile through the open breach (breach-loading gun). Another ammo man inserts a package of explosive powder. The gun captain closes and locks the breach and inserts a fuse. The trainer and pointer get on target. The gun captain reports ready for firing. Fire control gives permission to fire at will.



**This picture was taken on the Thames River in New London, Connecticut, in the aftermath of the hurricane of 1938**

Schooner *Dobin* was sunk at her dock. A small colony of houseboats up the Thames River was wrecked. As a member of a search party, I discovered an old woman, dead and curled up in a corner of her little houseboat home.

My First Class year was a long and eventful year finally culminating in graduation and the beginning of a lifetime career as a Commissioned Officer in the United States Coast Guard.

An announcement alerts all hands. Those on deck cover their ears and open their mouth to ease pressure of the gun blast, the loudest you have ever heard. The gun recoils about two feet. Fire control tries to fire a little long and next a little short, thus bracketing the target. The third round is expected to hit the target. I have conveniently forgotten our results!

**New London**, at last, ended our cruise unceremoniously as we had to shift gears for the Marine Corps Firing Range at Cape May and instruction in the Springfield 30-caliber bolt-action rifle and the Colt 45 pistol. I did pretty well there, earning the Expert Rifleman Medal and the Expert Pistol Medal. (Not surprising, as I was on the Rifle Team at the Academy.)

With the cruise and the small arms instruction behind us, we were granted summer leave. On our return we had to face one more academic year, now as First Classmen, and we had just settled in when the infamous hurricane of 1938 hit New England. The Academy buildings were not hurt, but the training