



# What Are Your Options When You Don't Get the Basketball Scholarship?

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*President, Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America*

I have been a member of the United States merchant marine since 1978. That summer, I sailed out of Cameron and Berwick, La., as an ordinary seaman. After ordination to the priesthood, I returned to the sea, joining the Seafarers International Union and shipping out in the deck department during my vacations. This hands-on experience has allowed me to see the many valuable opportunities a young man or woman has in our merchant marine.

Today, I am a pastor of a Catholic parish in Port Arthur, Texas, and the pastor of a mission church in Sabine Pass, Texas. Since the early 1980s, my community has been crushed by high unemployment and a lack of opportunity for non-college-bound high school graduates. Since 1985, unemployment levels have exceeded 20 percent, and have averaged between 10-15 percent. Wages stagnated to the point where a \$10-an-hour job was considered good. As a result, most of our young college graduates left the community for Austin, Dallas, and the Houston area.

## **If Not Basketball, Then What?**

As a pastor, I am always looking for opportunities for my young people. Our public school system has invested little in vocational training. If my young people are not going to college, their opportunities are few and far between. Once someone discovers that their athletic skills will not get them a college scholarship, and that their parents

are not going to continue to finance their lifestyle, the tough question arises, "What am I going to do?"

Well, the military is one option. In fact, military recruiters attempt to attract our non-college-bound youth. However, if one does not see military service as a long-term career, then two years later, the young person is back living with parents at home. It's like a revolving door. If the young person stays home, then there are only a few low-skill construction jobs available. These pay between eight and 10 dollars an hour, and have few—if any—benefits. For most, though, a work career took them to the mall. There was always work at Foot Locker, the Gap, or Champs, though the pay was minimum wage.

In contrast to these paltry opportunities, there are always many opportunities in the marine industry. At the time, however, these are mostly filled by people from outside our area. For instance, among the 500 or so U.S.

merchant mariners that sail from Sabine Pass, the vast majority are from Louisiana, Mississippi, and east Texas.

This disconnect between the local community and its maritime industry shows itself in how the community's economic development corporation directs job training funds. Money for job training is simply not available for maritime training. Hundreds of thousands of dol-



Fr. Sinclair congratulates Edmund Livings for completing his upgrade to AB-unlimited. Edmund was the first candidate Fr. Sinclair sent to the Seafarers Harry Lundberg School of Seamanship in 1998. Photo courtesy of Fr. Sinclair Oubre.

lars have been invested for training in construction and refining, but no funding is available for jobs in the merchant marine sector.

Why? The Education Development Corporation requires that jobs be located in its local jurisdiction. However, with the exception of our harbor tugs, the shipping companies are in other cities, and the merchant mariner works at sea or along the intracoastal canal system. Because the jobs are not on land in our community, maritime training is excluded from available funding. For instance, a workboat can be on a long-term charter out of Sabine Pass, but because her owners are in Louisiana, and it works in the Gulf of Mexico, the jobs are not considered "local."



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#### **Sail West, Young Man**

Even with the lack of community awareness, the loss of our maritime tradition, and no local funding for maritime training, I still try to let young people know of the great opportunities available in the merchant marine. I do this in two ways.

First, I continue to sail myself. As a parish priest, I have four weeks of vacation every year. Since 1990, I have used most of these vacations to go back to sea. Sailing out of the Houston Hall of the Seafarers International Union, I usually throw in for one of the coastal tanker jobs or grab an oceangoing tug. In January of 2008, I was with Crowley Maritime on the tug *Adventurer*. I spent 17 days finishing up a ship assist off San Juan and bringing the tug back to her homeport of Jacksonville.

When I return, my parishioners ask many questions about where I was, what I was doing, and what the work was all about. This gives me an opportunity to talk about a career in the merchant marine, the income, the benefits, and the importance of the work.

Second, as director of the Port Arthur International Seafarer's Center, I often get calls from folks unfamiliar with Christian seafarers' ministry. They think that a seafarer center is like a union or hiring hall. People often call wanting to know how they can get a job "on the boats." Sometimes, they have just gotten out of the Navy and

want to continue going to sea, or they got their z-card in the 1980s and are interested in a career change.

#### **Opportunities in the Merchant Marine**

I explain to them what the seafarer center is—a ministry to mariners—and then inquire as to what type of maritime career they are interested in. For instance, are they thinking about the towboats that ply the intracoastal canal, the workboats that sail from Sabine Pass, or the deep sea vessels that call at the refineries and the public port? Sometimes they have a clear idea, but most of the time, they just want to get a job "on the boats," and don't have a clue how to get in or where to go to get information. I always find it ironic that the priest is the local expert on how to start a career in the maritime industry.

In giving them information, I send them to the U.S. Coast Guard's website for licensing and documentation ([www.uscg.mil/nmc](http://www.uscg.mil/nmc)). Here, they can find information and the forms necessary for the initial application, physical, and drug test for a merchant mariner document. I will also direct them to the Seafarers International Union website if they are interested in an unlicensed deep sea career (<http://www.seafarers.org/phc>). Here, they can find information on the apprentice program and get an application.

If they are interested in an inland career, I direct them to our local training facility, Two Rivers Marine. Here, they can receive both information and training for entry-level positions in the inland industry. Finally, if the inquirer is looking for officer training, I suggest they investigate the Texas Maritime Academy in Galveston, Texas, or the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy. I explain to them that these are four-year programs, and when completed, one will receive a deck or engine license and a bachelor's degree.

#### **I Want to Go to the Seafarers Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship**

If a young person wishes to join the Seafarers International Union (SIU) and attend its apprenticeship program, he or she must be 18 years of age (17 with parental consent), have a high school diploma or GED, and be eligible to work in the United States. Those without a diploma or GED can still be accepted, but must complete a GED program at the Seafarers Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship (SHLSS) before being allowed to graduate.

The first step for the applicant is the local Seafarer International Union Hall. Applicants receive an orienta-

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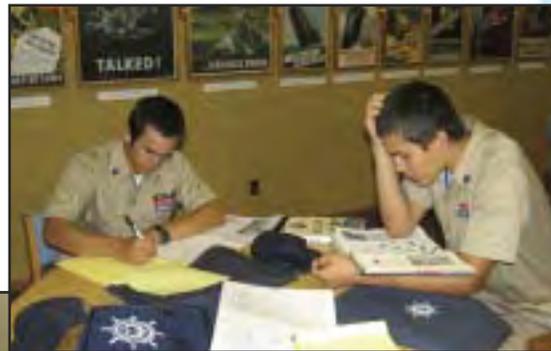


*Here I am at Piney Point.*



Phase I trainees tie up the *Osprey*, the school's active training vessel, as part of vessel operations class.

Trainees stand at attention during the daily colors ceremony at the Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training and Education. All photos by Mr. Mike Hickey, courtesy of Seafarers International Union.



Phase I trainees use time in the evening to study.



Engine department students learn how to operate a steam and diesel engine with practical training in the steam engine simulator.



Students in an engineering class.



Trainee Harold Gerber II spends some free time in the arts and crafts shop.



Trainees learn to stand watch in the full mission bridge simulator in phase III of deck department training.



Phase III trainees in the deck department participate in practical training on the line handling pier.



Upon completion of phase III, trainees graduate from the Paul Hall Center.

tion about the school and take an aptitude test to determine their educational competence. If they pass, they are then given the application to the SHLSS.

Once the application is completed, the youth returns to the SIU hall, where the application and required documentation are reviewed. The applicant must present:

- a completed and signed application form,
- acknowledgment of the SHLSS rules,
- a signed letter of acknowledgment of the candidate's responsibility to the SHLSS program,
- a completed and signed I-9 form.

In addition to the above, the candidate must submit:

- a letter from a dentist certifying good dental health,

- a valid passport,
- a birth certificate,
- an original merchant mariner document,
- any final court depositions,
- a state driving record,
- an original social security card.

If candidates had previous military, maritime, or vocational training, they should submit proof. Once everything is compiled and in order, the packet and original documents are mailed to the admissions office of the Seafarers Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship.

Because the apprentice training, as well as all subsequent training, is paid for through SIU employment contracts, there is no tuition per se. However, there are some expenses that the applicant must bear, including:

- an application fee for a merchant mariner document (approximately \$155);
- an SIU physical, benzine test, and drug test (\$350);
- clothing and supplies at the SHLSS (\$450);
- a round-trip ticket from home to SHLSS.

#### **Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training and Education**

When applicants are accepted as apprentices, they travel to the Baltimore-Washington, D.C. area, where transportation is provided by the Seafarers Harry Lundeberg School of Seamanship to the Paul Hall Center for Maritime Training and Education in Piney Point, Md. Here, a World War II Navy torpedo testing facility has been transformed into one of the leading maritime training centers in the United States. Offering courses from entry level to third mate license, the center includes housing for apprentices and upgraders, classrooms, recreational areas, bridge and engine simulators, the Joseph Sacco Fire Fighting and Safety School, and a culinary lab.

Because apprentices come from every race, ethnic, regional, and family background, they live under rather stringent rules and regulations. When apprentices violate one of these general rules, they receive a demerit. If one receives seven demerits while in the program, he or she will be dismissed from the school.

The SHLSS apprenticeship program is divided into three training phases. The first phase lasts for 12 weeks, during which apprentices learn basic seamanship, complete the required STCW basic safety training, and complete the requirement for a lifeboat endorsement. In addition, they are introduced to the marlin spike and



wire splicing. If a student has not completed his or her GED, special classes are offered during this time.

Citizenship and individual responsibility are also taught through a series of classroom discussions and visits to Washington, D.C. Apprentices also receive lessons on the nature of the shipping industry, the economics of marine transportation, and government policies and regulations that affect the vitality of the U.S. fleet.

Once phase I is completed, the apprentice is shipped out on one of the SIU-contracted vessels for phase II. Here he or she will spend the next 90 days experiencing sea life in the three different shipboard departments, working 30 days each in the engine room, the deck department, and the galley. Apprentices are paid while working aboard, receive credit for sea time in each department, and get credit toward their Seafarers International Union benefit program.

Upon completion of phase II, the apprentice returns to Piney Point for seven weeks of follow-on training. Since apprentices just experienced all three ship departments, they now choose one to focus on for their individual careers. Phase III offers department-specific, entry-level training.

Upon completion of phase III, a graduation ceremony is held and apprentices receive certificates of completion for all courses completed. In addition, new graduates are guaranteed up to 120 days of work on one of the SIU-contracted vessels. Once apprentices have completed the requisite sea time, they can return to SHLSS for upgrading to AB or qualified member of the engine department. Upon completion of upgrading, apprentices become full members of the Seafarers International Union and receive a union book and B-level seniority.

### A Few Final Thoughts

In recruiting the next generation of merchant mariners, the industry must do a much better job of reaching out to them and changing the image of who the modern merchant mariner is. Too often mariners are portrayed as those who go to sea because they can't do anything else or because they are in it for the money. These images do a disservice to the hard work mariners commit to their craft. A modern merchant mariner is one who has received unique training that allows him or her to perform irreplaceable tasks. He or she is entrusted with ships worth millions of dollars, carrying cargoes worth

hundreds of millions of dollars, and liabilities that exceed billions of dollars.

### FOR MORE INFORMATION:

U.S. Coast Guard license: [www.uscg.mil/nmc](http://www.uscg.mil/nmc)  
Seafarers International Union, Paul Hall Center:  
[www.seafarers.org/phc](http://www.seafarers.org/phc)  
Two Rivers Marine: [www.tworiversmarine.com](http://www.tworiversmarine.com)  
Texas Maritime Academy: [www.tamug.edu/corps](http://www.tamug.edu/corps)  
U.S. Merchant Marine Academy:  
[www.usmma.edu](http://www.usmma.edu)

Modern mariners must also see themselves in this light. From my experience, the worst people to sail with are those who are only out there for the money. The money is good, but it only compensates for the sacrifice and hardship mariners must endure as part of their jobs. Our quality of life is directly related to the sacrifices mariners make when they leave their families and the comforts of home, so that the basic commodities and finished products that make our modern lives possible are brought to our shores.

Today, every mariner is a professional, and good riddance to the past! On my first vessel, my orientation consisted of the captain turning to me and the other ordinary seaman, saying, "Let her go!" Now, even the newest entry-level person has some type of basic safety training. No matter how basic this training is, it already separates mariners from contemporaries ashore.

Public perception will tremendously effect future recruitment and retention. The better the public perception of the merchant mariner, the easier the recruitment will be, and the better the candidates will be. We will know that public's perception of the merchant mariner has changed when John Q. Public begins to think that the terms "flight crew" and "ship crew" express the same level of professionalism, education, skill, and training.

### About the author:

*Fr. Sinclair Oubre has been a member of the United States merchant marine since 1978. He continues to sail part-time each year as an AB-Limited on Seafarers International Union contracted vessels. Since 1996, he has been the unlicensed deck member of the USCG Merchant Marine Personnel Advisory Committee. In addition, he is a member of the Nautical Institute and the Council of American Master Mariners. He is the pastor of the St. John the Evangelist Catholic Church in Port Arthur, Texas, and the St. Paul Catholic Mission in Sabine Pass, Texas. In addition, he is the director for maritime ministry (the Apostleship of the Sea) in the Diocese of Beaumont, and the national president for the Apostleship of the Sea of the United States of America.*