

ALCOHOLISM - AN OCCUPATIONAL DISEASE OF SEAMEN

**Approaches to a Solution of the Problem
in the Port Of New York**

The marine hospitals have always had the problem of the alcoholic seaman, but he was usually admitted under a diagnosis other than alcoholism, for it was not until recently that the United States Public Health Service recognized the alcoholic as a sick person. The seaman who found himself broke and sick as the result of his "bender" was dependent on shipmates to carry him until he got a ship. The public health and welfare agencies were not interested in the seaman who was sick from a spree, although it was common knowledge throughout the maritime industry that a great majority of seamen drank to excess.

In the minds of most people the seaman who drinks to excess is typical. The man who has been going to sea for a number of years and does not drink is, indeed rare. The life a man leads aboard ship builds up inner tensions that have no outlets such as are available to the person ashore. Family and social connections are missed and their influence becomes remote. Consequently, once he reaches port the seaman turns to alcohol and uses it as a first-thought safety valve.

The only outlets the seaman has aboard ship are his pride in his job, the "bull sessions" in the mess room, the "gab fests" about the so-called good times he has had, the spinning of yarns which occupy an important recreational niche, and reading. Contrary to what most people think, the seaman is an inveterate reader and may devour almost anything at hand no matter how dated it is or how little interest he has in the subject.

Ashore, part of the heritage of the sea are the visits to houses of prostitution and the saloons or places where drink flows freely. There is excitement aboard ship as it nears port; the draw list is going around; the older hands, who may have seen the port before, usually paint a glamorous picture of it for themselves as well as for the ones who have never been there.

The young fellows who may be making their first trip listen avidly and are spellbound by the oldtimers' tales. Aboard ship, during hour long bull sessions, the newcomers have been entertained with so many rose-colored pictures that they cannot wait to have similar experiences of their own to tell, if not on their present ship, then on some voyage in the future.

New men are introduced to strange local drinks - coolie-how, saki, calvados, or any other local wines, rums or whiskies. Then follow introductions to girls who would not receive a second glance from the same men when sober. With such an initiation, they accept this port routine as a normal habit and set about to build up a notorious reputation of their own. Their first objective is to outdo the oldtimers in regards to both women and liquor, until they have built up a tolerance and accustomed themselves to this life.

There are many, influenced by youthful training, religion and good habits, who will find other interests and places which provide better outlets for emotions pent-up by the weeks at sea. Unfortunately, this group is in the minority. The overwhelming majority gain all the satisfaction they need is by looking forward to each port as a place to have a good time. Most of them eventually become alcoholics, or, as the seamen put it, gas hounds, performers, bottle babies. The latter term describes a seaman who, after years at sea, now makes only an occasional trip, if any, but frequents the haunts where he will find shipmates or sailors who are like his own former self and in search of a good time. They are still seamen, while the baby bottle can only reach for the next drink.

Traditions among seamen include the "piece off," probably born during the days when shipping was at low ebb and the ones who were lucky enough to make a trip had to help those who were not so fortunate. This practice spawned the "towline." A towline is formed when a man who is "alive," that is, just paid off, takes along an assortment of hangers-on, as he goes from bar to bar, to keep him company, give him attention, and eventually drink up his money. This position is reversed when he goes broke, for then he attaches himself to a shipmate or some friend until he is sick and disgusted with drinking or runs into a streak of "bad luck" whereby he sobers up and signs aboard a ship. Some give up shipping entirely and become full-time followers of towlines. This leads logically to becoming a bottle baby and, with fellows like himself, a member of a "bottle gang." The gas hound is another name for the bottle baby. The

performer is the most lively of them all, for something, whether it be funny or serious, is always happening to him, once he is drinking, such as winding up in jail. The exact nature of the escapade makes little difference. He is usually the type of person who is funny and amusing at one time, dangerous and argumentative at another, depending on what happened to him just before he started the present bout. Besides shipmates, such individuals tap "dry" social connections and seamen's welfare agencies. The bottle gangs can be found along the waterfront in seamen's hotels and institutions and in furnished rooming houses of the lower type, referred to in the vernacular as snake ranches, where a group hibernates in a room, if luck is good, with fellow alcoholics.

An auxiliary of the bottle gangs is formed by waterfront prostitutes and loose women of the port who supply the gangs' needs of money, alcohol and sex. The gang, in turn, panders to the working sailors who hit the port.

The alcoholic seamen who form these bottle gangs and cliques tend to lose their true identities much in the same way as hoboese and tramps do. They customarily call one another by first names or nicknames such as Blackie, Whitey, Shorty, Slim, Crying Sam, etc., or names based on nationalities, as Scotty, Limey, Polack and Mickey.

With the outbreak of the war the need for seamen became so acute that all but those who were too far gone physically got jobs on ships. Most alcoholics were able and efficient seamen when sober, but their reliability was questionable once in port - missing ships being a common failing. Nevertheless, chief mates and engineers often expressed a preference for many of these men, for, once at sea, they really knew their jobs.

The Maritime Commission had started training seamen prior to the outbreak of the war and many men not able to get into the regular service, or those who chose going to sea because of certain advantages, became a new part of the maritime field. United Seaman's Service Clubs were started for the seamen, rest centers and other beneficial activities were inaugurated. But the oldtimers or prewar sailors shied clear of these facilities, just as they were suspicious of the new sailor. The wartime seamen was quick to take advantage of rest centers, but it was long before a few of the old timers investigated and then passed the word along as to the fine treatment they received.

The unions tried educating their members, encouraging an interest in political and national life ashore. Clubs were started in union halls, parties

were given, men were prompted to go up for licenses, talks were given on seamen's problems, and they were encouraged to marry and get their wives interested in union affairs by starting auxiliaries. Upgrading at delegate schools was also encouraged, and all in all this program resulted in the seaman's gaining more recognition as an individual.

During the war the Coast Guard took over the supervision of shipping. When the schools were graduating enough men to man the ships, officers began bringing men up on charges. The Coast Guard stated to the author that some 25 per cent of the charges were due to drinking; from personal observation it seems likely that this cause was responsible in more than twice that proportion. Seamen do not often miss ships, start fights and refuse to work unless they are mentally unbalanced by liquor. When the time came that every man was examined carefully before shipping, so that he had to be well mentally to get by, the alcoholic seamen frequently had his papers taken from him. His last hope thus broken, he would join a towline or a bottle gang or any companion in a similar predicament. In view of this background it is not surprising that alcoholism should be an occupational disease of seamen. What is surprising is that health and welfare agencies should have neglected the problem for as long as they did. Fortunately a change is in process of taking place.

At one of the merchant marine rest centers set up during the war by the United States Public Health Service and the United Seaman's Service, some members of the medical staff recognized that alcoholism rather than combat fatigue was responsible for the hospitalization of many of the men. A treatment program was inaugurated, including group sessions. The men were advised of the true nature of their problem. They were told without embellishment that once a person becomes an abnormal drinker he can never drink safely again. This, as may be imagined, was quite a shock to many of the seamen, whose lives were wrapped up in drinking and in the saloons which, in turn, closely tied in with their relations with prostitutes. Their life, for years, had been a vicious cycle: a trip - a spree, a trip - a spree. Only a minority felt that they had a normal life ashore; the balance of the seamen, as a body, were definitely antisocial.

When the doctor told the seamen about Alcoholics Anonymous, they were quick to build up excuses. They were all "big shots." "Seamen are different." "We have to go to sea for a living." "It's too religious." "Seamen are against 'missions.'" The latter attitude was understandable, for in depression times

many had to "get religion" at these missions for a bowl of soup and a place to sleep.

As an alternative, the seamen were encouraged to start their own group. This was done with the aid of a special advisory board. They would have nothing to do with Alcoholics Anonymous, although their only means of obtaining information was by attending meetings of that organization. It was not long, however, before some of the members realized that alcoholism does not select any particular "strata" of society; that an alcoholic seaman is not essentially different from an alcoholic schoolteacher, and that if the A.A. program could help the schoolteacher and the plumber it would work for the seaman, too. With the seamen members in concord, they became an Alcoholics Anonymous group.

The A.A. Seamen's Club soon developed an intensive program. Visits were made regularly to the several hospitals in the New York area and to all the places where seamen congregated. Meetings arranged at the Seamen's Church Institute, which has a waterfront location, proved particularly effective, so that a full time worker, paid by the Institute, was installed there. In consequence of this cooperation between the Institute and the A.A. Seaman's Club it can be stated now that there is not a man on South Street who, if he is willing to try to sober up, will not be given information and suitable guidance.

The A.A. Seaman's Club further expanded its activities by giving talks on the subject of alcoholism, with the help of the U.S.S. Educational Division, at marine hospitals, schools, union halls and Seamen's Y.M.C.A.'s. It published a pamphlet, "For SEamen Who Drink," which has been put aboard ship and into the hands of seamen, as well as a monthly newspaper, "The Ropeyarn," which is sent to members at sea and in many foreign countries as well as throughout the United States and Canada. Through the many contacts built up at the Sand's Point Rest Center men were formed into groups and introduced to A.A. and the facts about alcoholism. Men thus convinced that they were alcoholics and guided to rebuild their lives on different and sober lines have now become the respected fellows in their circles, not the ones to be treated with sneers.

Gradually the group widened its activities to welcome veterans, believing that they had a somewhat similar problem of becoming reconciled to a normal social life. This has led to further mixing with outsiders, for army nurses became interested and others came along and were accepted as part of the group. The Marine Hospital at Ellis Island has been continuously visited and the Club

was able to interest the authorities in allowing a weekly meeting as well as to assign a special ward for alcoholics. Arrangements were made also that men released from the hospital should be able to obtain credit at the Seamen's Institute until they could find work.

The problem of the alcoholic seaman has borne a stigma of hopelessness in the past, as indicated by the popularity of the expression "drunk as a sailor." Such pessimism is no longer justified. The experiences described herein demonstrate that the alcoholic seaman can be rehabilitated, and it cannot be doubted that this adds up to the prevention of alcoholism among seamen in the future. The sober seamen will not initiate his new shipmates into the old customs.

An outstanding lack, from the viewpoint of further progress, is in facilities for the care of the alcoholic seamen. At the present time a survey of such facilities in the port of New York reveals the following available resources:

Ellis Island Marine Hospital. Any seaman, within 90 days of discharge from his ship, is able to gain admission and treatment here. He will be dealcoholized, given vitamin injections, and receive general treatment aimed at physical rehabilitation. Meetings are held here by the A.A. Seaman's Club. A psychiatrist works in close cooperation with the men and private consultations are held. Ten days is the usual stay. Since February of this year alcoholics have been separated from other patients and it is at this hospital that probably the best treatment is afforded the alcoholic seaman.

Other marine hospitals in the port of New York as well as in other parts of the country are working in constantly closer harmony with local A.A. groups, with a resultant improvement in facilities.

Seamen's Church Institute. The Seamen's Church Institute has been able to put men up for a night or two after they leave hospitals and give them meal tickets. Here they may receive further guidance on the Alcoholics Anonymous program. A meeting is held each week, with A.A. members as speakers, to give the men what information they wish. Two A.A. members who work here are available at any time for consultation and they refer interested individuals to the A.A. Seamen's Club where they are encouraged to take an active part in club affairs and made to feel at home.

Seamen's Y.M.C.A. At the Seamen's Y.M.C.A. a meeting is held weekly and the

discussions on alcoholism have attracted nonalcoholics as well. The management encourages those with a problem to take advantage of the A.A. Seamen's Club. **Salvation Army.** Seamen who have no credit at any of the regular seamen's welfare organizations and who have not been to sea for some time but are able to do some work are accommodated by the Salvation Army for any length of time.

In addition to the institutions and organizations mentioned above, various forms of aid and guidance are available at the Seamen's Friends Society, the Catholic Workers Organization and the Catholic Maritime Club.

The A.A. Seamen's Club has been chiefly responsible for the work of rehabilitation and education now being done with alcoholic seamen. This is not enough, however, for the problem is a vast one, involving many underlying factors such as the maladjustment of the seamen to life ashore and his consequent antisocial attitudes. A far-reaching solution must envision research as well as treatment. Particularly needed are sociological and psychological studies of the seamen.

For too long a period the seamen has been looked upon as a weak brother of society. Closer study will enlighten the general public on the fact that seamen are a part of our society and that they are, in a sense, representatives of our country in foreign lands. Moreover, their understanding of other peoples is from direct contact and not from secondhand accounts, and for this reason, if they become better integrated within the community, they can make an important contribution to present-day society.

Essential points in the program for further progress in the rehabilitation of alcoholics seamen should include the following:

1. Educational materials, appealing specifically to seamen and the maritime profession as a whole, should be developed and made available.

2. Studies of seamen with reference to their particular problems should be made under scientific auspices.

3. Welfare associations, shipping companies and other organizations that work with seamen should be contacted and informed concerning possibilities of cooperation in the fields of rehabilitation and education. A committee should be set up consisting of leaders in the maritime field, doctors, lawyers, shipowners, etc., to act as a clearing house for such work and as a coordinating council.

4. A clinic should be established, separately or in connection with

existing marine hospital facilities. The clinic would carry out the usual diagnostic work, but should have adequate means for follow-up work and guidance.

5. A seaman's rest center or farm should be established, with training and teaching facilities, to effect social habilitation. The center should aim to keep a seaman for a period of 3 to 6 months. It would succeed best as a community project with the men taking an active part in operating it.

6. All other seaports where interest is aroused by work in New York should be covered by field workers.

7. A seaman's organization should be founded in which the seamen would take a more active part, particularly in the administration.

8. Closer labor relationships should be maintained between ship owners and unions. These might well stem from a program of the type outlined herein.

This brief review of the problem of the alcoholic seaman and the facilities available for his rehabilitation in the port of New York indicates that only a start has been made thus far in the direction of a solution. It is obvious, however, that the seeming hopelessness with which the problem was viewed in the past must be discarded. The Alcoholics Anonymous program has proved its effectiveness among alcoholic seamen. The aid and cooperation of the medical profession and of several welfare agencies have likewise been demonstrably effective. The issue now rests squarely with the maritime industry and the community, seamen and shipowners alike. Only a start has been made. The problem of the alcoholic in the maritime field is a vast one. Its solution will require years of effort by all the groups concerned. There can be no question, however, that all would benefit - and not only the individual groups but society as a whole - from the restoration of the alcoholic seamen to a place of usefulness and dignity in society.

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