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The Helmsmen Club

From New York, N. Y.

FROM its beginning four years ago, the growth of The Helmsmen's Club, in New York City, has been as rapid and phenomenal as the growth of Alcoholics Anonymous itself. It has done much toward sobering up the much talked about drunken sailor.

The seamen who founded this club would not at first accept A.A. We're different was their cry. A.A. is for landlubbers. We are away weeks and months at a time—all seamen drink, it's part of the job of going to sea.

Those who know the seamen and their habits realized the difficulties they faced when they set out to sell A.A. to these men. The problem of alcoholism is no small matter in the maritime field. For the majority of these individuals who take it upon themselves to live unnatural lives away from shore ties avoid the relationships ashore that bring satisfaction to the average citizen. Their easy-come, easy-go attitude towards one another is reversed to suspicion of all outside their circle. Being a sucker is part of the seaman, making him the very resentful and arrogant person he is to deal with.

Their undersocialization and anti-social attitude is well known. Being away for long periods at sea, seeking no social contacts other than the habitual haunts of seamen, they lose, after a time, any connection ashore they may have had. Many alcoholic seamen, or in the vernacular peculiar to themselves, gashounds or performers, have no other contact than that of the waterfront bottle gang and no other hangout or home than the so called snake ranches, which are merely furnished rooms where the gang congregates. This strong attachment, plus the fact that his fellow alcoholics turn on him when he does sober up makes it very hard to get the alcoholic seamen started on constructive paths. The A.A. Helmsmen's Club in the past four years has undertaken this vast job. Today one finds here at the club ex-gashounds and performers, some who are licensed officers aboard ship, who are able to go out to sea for long periods of time, secure in the type of A.A. they got here.

Shipping companies, social workers, doctors and psychiatrists have had their eyes opened as they see men return, not to bum or give future headaches, but to express thanks, to apologize for past actions, to tell of A.A. so that other alcoholics may be helped.

One thing sure has been changed among seamen and that is the idea of having to drink while going to sea. It is now well known that some seamen are smart not to drink.—T.J.F.