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SS NORTHERN LIGHTS

A Lesson in Commitment

INLAND PORTS

Redesigning America's
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SS Northern Lights

A LESSON IN COMMITMENT



Seafarers aboard SS Northern Lights wear protective gear as the ship survives a missile attack and many more alerts while unloading in Kuwait

The *SS Northern Lights*, a Ponce Class steamship purchased by Totem Ocean Trailer Express (TOTE), was stretched and refurbished to enter the Alaska trade in 1993. But in February 2003, she was set to task on another mission. Military Sealift Command chartered the vessel and crew to aid in Operation Enduring/Iraqi Freedom—to load military cargo in San Diego and deliver the goods to Southwest Asia in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Captain Jack Hearn was the Master on board at the time *SS Northern Lights* was summoned to action. He kept a detailed log of activities that have been published in the *Tacoma News Tribune*, *The Marine Digest* and *The American Maritime Officer*. The following excerpts vividly share the experience as the crew of 26 mariners, plus a 12-man security detachment of US Marines, faced the early days of war—far from their home base in the Pacific Northwest. On February 22, 2003, they were bound for the Port of Kuwait with a full load of military hardware and anxious of what lay ahead...

MASTER'S REPORT 3/20

The night before arrival, March 19, the ship navigated the remaining miles at slow speeds due to heavy shipping traffic. The *Northern Lights* maneuvered to avoid scores of ships departing the impending war zone of the Persian Gulf. Naval ships, "coalition war ships," intermixed in the areas and complicated radar plotting. We passed an aircraft carrier in full operation, launching jets and, later, receiving returning aircraft. A naval helo carrier, restricted in her ability to maneuver, requested the *Northern Lights* turn away. We suspected that these ships were already in full battle operation.

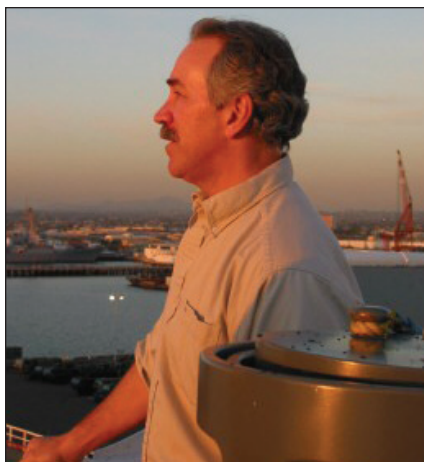
Though the moon was full and bright, visibility was reduced to less than two miles due to the regional dust storms. The radio traffic was awful. Coalition war ships repeatedly called merchant vessels to ask them to identify themselves. Additionally, the "cat-calls" of local Arab fishermen and oil field workers on the VHF channel screamed—truly screamed taunts and jokes.

The first SCUD alert occurred at 1245 while Kuwait Customs was still clearing the *Northern Lights*. The harbor siren sounded the warning. Military personnel donned gas masks as they had trained. The captain ordered ship's personnel to don gas masks and proceed to emergency stations. The ship's emergency stations were designated shelters.

1325: SCUD/gas alert—US Naval port security elevates attack preparations in the port to MOPP 2 level for CBRD (chemical, biological, and radiological defense) training. Crew dresses in CBRD protective clothing, keeps masks ready and with them at all times. The crew would remain in CBRD gear until the evening of departure on March 22. They would eat and sleep and work (in the gear). "Forget showers," I am required to tell them. "Keep your gear on, masks ready."



Photos courtesy: Seafarers International Union; Totem Ocean Trailer Express, Inc.



Captain Jack Hearn

1530: SCUD/gas alert—Ship's crew responds well to alert, mustering is in quick control. Military forces aboard ship and within running distance of ship use interior ship's spaces for shelter.

2215: SCUD/gas alert—No warning siren given to alert personnel to seek

The DTJ also salutes TOTE, the SS Northern Lights, and her crew with a reprint of the recognition letter from the United States Transportation Command (USTRANSCOM). TOTE participates in the Voluntary Intermodal Sealift Agreement (VISA) program, which provides the defense community with access to commercial tonnage to move cargoes during time of war or national emergency. The SS Northern Lights mission highlights the important national defense role served by the US merchant fleet.

shelter. The percussion blast of nearby missile explosion impacts and moves entire ship at her berth. No damage or injuries occur. Ship's crew and military personnel on the dock witnessed the missile strike and over a hundred personnel run the entire length of the pier for shelter within the ship...

MASTER'S REPORT 3/21

0001: SCUD/gas alert—Just after midnight, MSC orders the cargo ramp deployed. All hands again on deck for ramp deployment. Crew again bravely remained on deck until ship's cargo and ramp equipment were safely secured.



0113: SCUD/gas alert—Crew returns on deck to deploy ramp. Work is again interrupted by the attack.

0220: SCUD/gas alert—Once more, the crew secures tools and ship's cargo gear for the attack. They tiredly return following the attack to finally deploy the ramp. Cargo discharge commences at 0320.

0920: SCUD/gas alert—Once again, Chief Cook Rey Telmo is found in the galley during the emergency muster. He is wearing protective clothing and gas mask but continues to work preparing food. In addition to crew meals, the ship's galley provided as many meals as possible to military personnel.

1335: SCUD/gas alert—Cargo work is again interrupted. Chief Engineer Tony Vazquez guides Navy ordnance

divers checking the hull for explosives. Dive operations are suspended during the attack.

2318: SCUD/gas alert—Cargo work interrupted. The crew is mustered in the same amount of time as daytime alerts. They've been sleeping in protective clothing and report quickly with gas masks on...

MASTER'S REPORT 3/22

0940: Chemical alert—Once again, no siren alerts the port. A car drives down the dock blasting three short honks on the horn, repeatedly. The signal is recognized, the driver is wearing a gas mask. Then the port sirens sound. Personnel in all areas calmly drop their tools, don their gas masks and move to shelters.

Cargo is almost completely discharged. The ship is scheduled to depart at 1700. It is amazing that the ship's crew has adapted to wartime conditions within 48 hours. There are no complaints of fatigue though the overworked crew has not slept peacefully for days. There are no complaints of danger though the attacks have been steady. Not one man has suggested not leaving the port until the area is secured and deemed safe. As the work of US Armed Forces proceeds into Iraq, the ship's work and support continues.

Camaraderie with military personnel is extremely friendly. My crew guides military cargo handlers on the ship and they chat like neighbors. At the same time, I see crew handing out food and snacks, sharing MREs (meals ready to eat), and grabbing military issue bottles of water from the pallet loads left on the dock. The quarters are open to military visitors and rooms are left available to provide showers. Hats are traded—desert camouflage hats for ball caps. Presents are given—even items as small as a soft drink or a package of cookies. Once of the soldiers approached me saying, "Sir, are you the captain?" "Yes," I said. We shake hands. "Thank you for being here with us," he said.

I have an ordinary crew, regulars and mostly seasoned in the rugged Alaska trade. Many of my crew are foreign born; quite a few are of Arabic heritage. I know they've done well, worked hard, and given whatever they could to help this cause. This is where the crew of this ship wanted to be—right here with these men and women. As professional merchant mariners and as Americans, we feel honored to be here. **DTJ**



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26 October 2005

Mr. Robert Magee
Totem Ocean Trailer Express, Inc.
32001 32nd Ave South, Suite 200
Federal Way
Tacoma, Washington 98001

Dear Mr. Magee

As we near the end of our charter for SS NORTHERN LIGHTS, I want to recognize and thank you, your company, and the officers and crew of SS NORTHERN LIGHTS for your superior support.

Early in the Iraq deployment, the Military Sealift Command (MSC) sought commercial support and your company answered the call. Since 18 February 2003, six weeks after the start of the deployment of forces to Iraq, SS NORTHERN LIGHTS was under charter to MSC. She continuously operated in support of US forces since that time, never missing a commitment. No other ship, government-owned or commercial, has operated as long in support of these critical operations.

During the charter period SS NORTHERN LIGHTS made 25 voyages and 49 port calls. She carried 12,200 piece of military gear totaling 81,000 short tons and covering over 2 million square feet.

Those statistics clearly demonstrate the value that the US flag shipping industry brings to the Defense Transportation System. At 200,000 sq ft of cargo space, this ship has nearly the capacity of the Fast Sealift Ships, has speeds approaching those of the Navy's Large, Medium Speed RoRo Ships, and had a perfect record of reliability. Having this asset enabled us to improve readiness by keeping ships of the Ready Reserve Fleet available for other contingencies as needed.

You and your team of professionals showcased the US flag industry at its best. Again, thanks for a job well done.

Thank you!

N.A. Schwartz
NORTON A. SCHWARTZ
General, USAF
Comamander

cc: Commander, Military Sealift Command