



Watercraft Philately



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Sailors celebrate Christmas at sea

By Dan Rodlie



On October 2, 1969, only 15 years old, I signed my seaman's book in Bergen Norway, and flew out to join my first ship, STAR ATLANTIC, not knowing that it would be four years before I would return.

My first Christmas 'at sea' was celebrated alongside a dock in Vancouver, Canada, and I soon learned what Christmas was like for a sailor on a cargo ship – lonely. We had a few decorations that we put up, but the main item was the Christmas tree up in the mast, and I am sure there may be a few private yards close to docks that may be missing a tree or two.

As we were tied up alongside a dock, the various sailor-service clubs were able to come onboard such as Norwegian Welfare Office and the Blue Angel Mission. On some of our trips, we also got used to having visits from one of the 30 Norwegian Seaman's Churches around the world. They all provided a valuable service for us with arranging tours, playing soccer with other ships, reading newspapers, and around Christmas, delivering small packages made by someone back home just for sailors. Usually this would-be candy, knitted socks, scarfs or a toque.

The seaman's priest was also very helpful guiding us along the winding path to the 'safest' bars in town.

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STAR ATLANTIC'S 'Sparky' handing out gifts for those who couldn't make it home for Christmas.

The radio-telegraphist or 'Sparky' would hide any Christmas mail that arrived for us, including letters. Then on Christmas Eve, after a huge Christmas buffet that included every Norwegian Christmas specialty, we would all gather up in the Officers lounge and Sparky and the Captain would play Santa and hand out our gifts that had arrived from home. If you had not received any, the Captain would make sure that he had something for everyone. We all received gifts and cards from the sailor's widowers organization back home.

I celebrated many Christmases at sea over the years and all were special in its own way. But it was also a difficult time for many sailors and we had several 'incidents' as sailors had a bit too much Christmas 'cheer' and felt the loneliness take over.

When you consider how many traditions and superstitions mariners have about almost everything, it's surprising how few Christmas traditions there are at sea. At least one in seven people

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