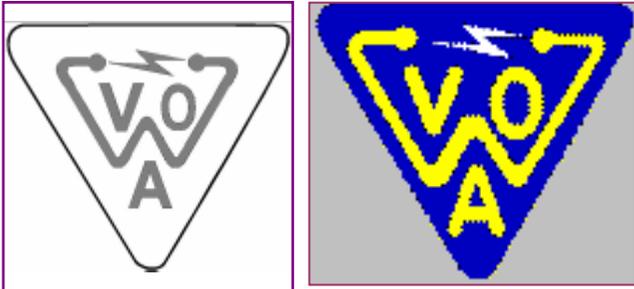


# VWOA NEWSLETTER

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2006



came back for a visit. He was in a uniform with red sparks on his sleeve and was at Gallups Island Radio School. The scenario which he outlined and which he had gone through was as follows:

## Memories of the Merchant Marine from Raymond A. Sutcliffe SK



Ray Sutcliffe “Hard at work” in the Radio Room of the OMI Hudson

## SHEEPSHEAD BAY by Ray Sutcliffe

After all these years, the memories of “boot camp” at Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn, New York in the USMS (United States Maritime Service), tend to get somewhat vague. I do remember what started it all. I was working in a machine shop when a previous employee

1. Join the USMS and go to boot camp at Sheepshead Bay.
2. While at boot camp, take the examination for radio school and if accepted, go to basic radio school at Huntington Long Island.
3. After 8 weeks at Huntington, L.I., if you didn't flunk out, off you went to advanced radio school at Gallups Island in Boston harbor. After 8 months you went to the FCC and got your 2<sup>nd</sup> Class Radiotelegraph License.
4. You could then go to sea, either through the WSA (War Shipping Administration) or join one of the two unions at that time, ROU (AFL) or ACA (CIO).
5. The last option, if you desired, was to spend two weeks on the USMS training ship, the SS American Seaman, KEVF.

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Boot camp at Sheepshead Bay was like the USCG boot camp next door. We were given a quick physical at 2 AM, standing naked, including my first “short arm” inspection. Finally getting to bed for a few hours; up with bugle calls; more processing; shots in both arms simultaneously as you walked through a door; recall some guys who passed out when the needles went in their arms.

As time went on there was marching, marching and marching. The MA’s (Master at Arms) ran things with a vengeance and there was Lieutenant in charge of the barracks.

I learned a variation on a word at boot camp. If you became disenchanted with the boot camp routine you could leave, or dis-enroll. Of course you would then be subject to the draft. The other phrase that echoed through the place when a new group came in was “You’ll be sorry!”

We learned to tie knots, row a whale boat, how to swim if you couldn’t, how to hold the top of your life jacket when you jumped into the water, so it wouldn’t come up and knock you silly, etc.

I still remember jumping into the swimming pool from the high tower wearing the rubber immersion suit which was a very awkward thing. I swore I would never use one, till I got out in the North Atlantic in the winter time, that is. Never had to really use it, fortunately.

One night we had a new group come in our section of the barracks and after things has settled down, one of the “veterans” (been there 5 weeks) turned on the lights, mustered them out of the sack and gave them all a short arm inspection. The MA’s heard the commotion, came in and caught us and we spent a couple of hours outside standing at attention at 2 AM and were restricted to the base that weekend.

### *THE SS AMERICAN SEAMAN*

Everyone who graduated from Gallups Island had the option of spending two weeks on the training ship, the SS American Seaman, KEVF. I decided it was probably worth the time, standing watches getting accustomed to shipboard routine, etc.

The training ship was primarily for the training or ordinary seamen, oilers, wipers and firemen and of course Radio Operators. The Radio Operators were excluded from the ship details, like KP, Captain of the Head, etc., though it didn’t always work out that way.

The training ship did its sailing in Long Island Sound safely away from submarine. My memories of the routine on the ship are not very good except for the first time we went to sea.

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We got out in the Sound, where there was a very small swell and the ship was rolling maybe 2 degrees. For all the trainees from the Midwest, it was their first experience on the ocean and that small amount of ship movement made them all sick. Anyone who sailed on the training ship will remember the long rows of sinks in the head to accommodate the large number of people who would be using them normally. They were now being used to throw up in and the drains got plugged. We all had a hearty breakfast.

Anyone aboard, and that included Radio Operators like myself, that weren't sick got drafted to clean up the mess and I will say trying to unblock sinks plugged with "vomit" was more than enough to try anyone's stomach.

I didn't learn much on the training ship, but it was an experience and the first endorsement on my nice new 2<sup>nd</sup> Class License.

## *SOUTHERN ROUTE TO RUSSIA*

In March, 1944, we sailed from Norfolk, VA in a large convoy. Indeed, it stretched off into the distance to the extent that you not see all the columns of ships. My ship was the SS WAIGSTILL AVERY, KNAV, a Liberty Ship.

We were well escorted with plenty of DD's on the flanks and up ahead running their criss-

cross patterns in front of the convoy. A designated rescue ship was located at the rear of the convoy and of course, more escorts.

Our destination was Khorramshahr in the Persian Gulf, the southern route for lend-lease cargo to Russia.

It is necessary to realize where the war stood at this time. Allied troops were fighting their way up Italy, the liberation of Rome was three months away. The Germans still occupied Greece and particularly the Island of Crete where planes and U-Boats were based. British troops did not return to Greece till October, 1944 and Athens was liberated in December, 1944.

The trip across the Atlantic was uneventful except for an accident on board ship where one of the cooks had his leg sliced open to the bone. We pulled out of our column and came to a full stop while a Canadian corvette came alongside. The sea was relatively calm and we transferred the cook to the corvette, which had a Doctor aboard. That was kind of a nervous period, sitting dead in the water. I am sure that the engineers cranked on a few extra revolutions so we could catch the convoy as soon as possible and get back into our column position.

The escorts dropped occasional depth charges and when you were on watch at 5AM and not

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too alert, a couple of depth charges going off always seemed to stimulate the adrenalin flow.

Before arriving at the Straits of Gibraltar, BAMS NSS traffic diverted parts of the convoy North to the UK, others South to North Africa, etc. Our convoy, after transit of the Straits of Gibraltar, consisted of 20 ships in five columns of four ships bound for the Suez Canal and Port Said in Egypt.

The US Navy gun crew went to GQ at sunrise and sunset every day, all guns manned. The SS WAIGSTILL AVERY was armed with a 3 inch on the bow, a 5 inch 38 on the stern and eight Oerlikon 20MM anti-aircraft guns.

I was on the 4 to 8 watch and standing in the radio shack looking out the porthole at the ship in our corresponding position in the next column. The weather was beautiful, the blue Mediterranean cool breeze and the sun at the horizon at sunset. Suddenly a spout of white water went over a hundred feet in the air just in front of the bridge. The ship had been torpedoed in the #3 hold. Before the column of water collapsed, the ship had gone past the point of impact. Within seconds of the torpedo hit, flames rose hundreds of feet about #3 hold. The ship had been carrying tanks of flame thrower gas in #3 hold and they were burning. Shortly after, the next ship in the same column was torpedoed. The torpedo hit being back aft, near the fantail. On the burning ship, men were jumping over the side

to get away from the heat. They probably also thought the ship was going to explode.

I could hear the Captain of our ship up on the flying bridge screaming that if the U-Boat had fired three torpedoes that we would get the next one. The first two, having crossed our bow, before hitting their targets. Fortunately, there was no third torpedo!

After the first torpedo hit, the convoy had commenced zig-zagging and the burning ship came on 500Kc and sent a short message to the convoy Commodore. Convoy radio procedure when torpedoed was to give your column and number in the column and the text was simply "torpedoed port" or "torpedoed starboard" as appropriate. This gave quick information the rest of the convoy as to where the submarine was located.

Our ship was carrying about 20 oil workers as passengers on their way to work on Bahrein Island in the Persian Gulf. They were all clustered atop #3 hold hatch covers watching the "show". The Captain screamed at them to get off the hatch covers. If we were torpedoed in #3 hold, the hatch covers would go up in splinters and the oil workers likewise.

At this time someone on some ship thought he saw a periscope on our port side and all the ships in the area started shooting with their 3 inch and 5 inch guns. The trajectory was so flat, however, that few of the shells exploded.

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Most of them skipped. The convoy was indeed lucky that no ship caught a wayward shell.

The next evening at sunset, the submarine was waiting for us in front of the convoy. We had air cover at this time however and the plane was diving down to indicate the position of the submarine. The airplane, however was not carrying any bombs or depth charges. The convoy made a 90 degree emergency turn to port, returning to base course when clear of the danger area. Our air cover departed, followed by a flag hoist from the convoy Commodore. "Prepare for immediate enemy air attack." The attack never came, for which we were thankful.

That night, aircraft were detected overhead. We were guarding, in a listening mode only, an R/T frequency with our Scott receiver. The convoy Commodore announced that the aircraft overhead were friendly. In was, things never to the way they should, however and every ship in the convoy, with the exception of ours, opened up. It was an impressive fireworks display. A British freighter on our port side had a rocket launcher on the stern instead of a 5 inch gun. The rocket display was very impressive, but finally all the fireworks subsided.

That same night, I had a visitor in the alleyway from my room to the radio shack. One of the oil workers had taken up nightly residence. Sleeping on a blanket, on the deck outside my

room. The accommodations for the 20 oil workers for Bahrein Island were in the tween decks area of #3 hold and I think he figured that was not a healthy place to be. Who could disagree?

The rest of the trip to Port Said was uneventful. Peace and quiet, it's wonderful!

TRIP NOTE 1 – The amount of punishment a ship can take and survive has always been amazing. In this case the ship torpedoed in #3 hold, that burned, did not sink.

On my next trip on the SS WAIGSTILL AVERY, we unloaded cargo at Augusta, Sicily, Livorno, (Leghorn) Italy and Alexandria, Egypt. Lo and behold, there at anchor in Alexandria, was the ship that burned with a hole in the starboard side you could drive a truck through. The second ship, torpedoed in the fantail and steering engine room area, sank. The engine room flooded through the shaft alley and down she went. The first ship had been towed to Alexandria harbor, unloaded and now sat there forlornly with most of the torpedo hole above the water line.

TRIP NOTE 2 – On our way back home from the Persian Gulf, we waited at Port Said for a west bound convoy and two of the oil workers that we had dropped at Bahrain Island, came back aboard. In the sail back to Port Said, the two oil workers had decided that working at Bahrain Island was not for them and managed

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to get back as far as Port Said. They then begged the Captain to take them back to the United States and he agreed.

## *ESCORT CARRIER*

I sailed in one North Atlantic convoy (we left Halifax one week before Christmas, 1944). In the middle of the convoy there was an escort carrier, a British ship. They flew Swordfish biplanes with open cockpits from this unstable platform. Watching them was like watching WWI. We should remember, however, that airplanes of this type put a torpedo into the rudder area of the Bismarck, the German battleship and slowed her down till the British fleet could catch and sink her.

This escort carrier would put two airplanes in the air, twice a day, to supply air cover for the convoy and quite often in very bad weather. The North Atlantic in winter time is not the best area to carry on air operation from a small escort carrier and there was considerable pitching and rolling in the heavy seas.

I watched the two air planes return from the afternoon patrol and attempt to land on the carrier. The first airplane made many attempts to get on the deck. He finally got his wheels on the deck but apparently did not catch any of the arrestor cables and the airplane went off the bow into the ocean.

The convoy had a rescue ship and it dropped back to attempt to rescue the air crew. We never hear if they were successful or not. Life expectancy in the cold waters of the North Atlantic in the winter months is only minutes and it is doubtful that they survived.

The second airplane was still in the air and I lost track of the many attempts he made to land on the carrier. He was finally successful however and I'm sure everyone in the convoy watching gave a big sigh of relief.

## *THE SECOND BATTLE OF CHERBOURG*

In June of 1944, the invasion of Europe started and eventually the French city of Cherbourg became one of the main supply ports for the troops ashore. It was liberated on June 26, 1944.

Few people realize there was a second battle of Cherbourg which started at midnight on the last day of December, 1944 and continued into the first day of 1945. There aren't too many "veterans" of this affair and indeed, some of the participants didn't even realize they were involved in this great battle. Those of us who were there and involved remember it well.

My ship, the SS Fred Bouchard, ANAD, had crossed the channel from Southampton in a small convoy of ten ships, in two columns, a

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few days after Christmas. We were carrying about 7000 tons of ammunition of all categories. We crossed in the middle of the night under peculiar circumstances. We wondered why all the caution this late in the war. The U-Boats were supposedly under control in the English Channel, but that little cross channel convoy is the subject of another story which I will relate to point out the subtle differences between living, dying, foul-ups and how did we ever win the war anyway.

The next day we went to a dock and an Army port company started to unload our cargo. We were not allowed any shore leave as the Germans still occupied the Channel Islands and occasionally pulled hit and run raids at night using fast patrol boats. Indeed these Channel Islands were occupied by the Germans from June, 1940 until May, 1945 when the war in Europe ended.

I was leaning on the rail at the rear of the boat deck watching the unloading in the #4 hold and saw a familiar figure walking down the dock. It was my brother, a Lieutenant in the Army. He had gone ashore on Omaha Beach at DDay+2, been wounded during the hedgerow fighting on Normandy. He had been found unfit for furthered combat and after getting out of the hospital in England, sent to Cherbourg to join a port company.

He was surprised to see me, needless to say and then I found out why small convoys for

Cherbourg from Southampton were crossing at night. U-Boats were attempting to disrupt the supply line, in spite of their losses. They had sunk a ship right outside the harbor a couple of days before we arrived. It sank in shallow water and the main deck was clear at low water mark. Unfortunately, after the first torpedo hit, when the crew was abandoning ship, a second torpedo hit just below one of the descending lifeboats. My brother went out to the ship to see what the salvage capabilities might be and when he stepped on deck saw things best not described here.

My brother was responsible for the unloading of my ship and spent a good deal of time aboard. He ate most of his meals aboard after I talked to the Captain and Chief Steward. The food on shipboard being much better than the food ashore.

On New Year's Eve, he came aboard with a bag of "alcoholic beverages" and as midnight approached we were up on the flying bridge watching Army personnel hauling ammunition out of the #3 lower hold just in front of the bridge. We were feeling no pain whatsoever.

At midnight, the "Second Battle of Cherbourg" began. Everyone aboard and ashore with a side arm, rifle or whatever, started shooting holes in the sky, including one character who thought parachute flare were the way to go. One of these came down in #3 hold amidst the ammunition being unloaded producing a

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panic exodus of the personnel there who were last seen heading down the dock at Olympic 100 yard dash rates of speed.

My brother and I watched from the flying bridge as the Chief Mate who had been blasting away from the main deck with a .45 pistol and also feeling no pain, carefully went down the two ladders to the lower hold, picked up the burning flare by its parachute, climbed up the ladders and threw it over the side.

We gave him a rousing cheer and had another drink and never gave it a second thought as to what could have happened if our cargo had gone up. The ship ahead of us at the dock was also unloading ammunition.

Oh to be so young and foolish again!

NOTE – There was an unusual preface to the Second Battle of Cherbourg. It involved getting from Southampton, across the English Channel to Cherbourg.

We were given a package of communication orders prior to convoy departure, which stated we would be given a series of blind orders during the crossing on a radiotelephone frequency which we could monitor on our Scott receiver. These orders would consist of course and speed changes as we crossed the English Channel. The orders would consist of a course or speed change followed in an

appropriate time later by the command “EXECUTE”. All very self explanatory.

The convoy left at midnight and shortly after departure we were given a speed change on the R/T frequency. I whistled up the flying bridge and told the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mate we were starting to get the changes outlined in the Operation and Communications Plan. His comment was “We know all about that, don’t bother me with all that junk.”

For the rest of the trip across, all I heard was the Telegraph on the lower bridge going through violent variations from FULL AHEAD to FULL ASTERN to STOP, etc. We finally arrived in Cherbourg and the Captain stopped in the radio shack, looking very haggard, commenting that he had never seen such a mess of confusion; almost ramming the ship ahead, almost getting the ship behind us in the fantail, near collision with the ship in the next column, etc.

I told the Captain we had been getting speed and course changes during the crossing but the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mate said he didn’t need them. The Captain was very upset and went charging back up on the bridge to have a “talk” with the 2<sup>nd</sup> Mate.

I think the Captain was disturbed by all the near misses and the fact we were carrying the 7000 tons of ammunition of all types had some bearing on his being disturbed. The

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reason for all the course and speed changes was not explained; Avoid mine fields? Confuse the enemy? Confuse us?

We sure could have generated some lovely fireworks in the English Channel.

## *THE LIBERTY AS A TRANSPORT*

Most people who sailed on Liberty Ships did not think of them as appropriate for transporting large number of people, but the SS CHARLES H HERTY, KUIG served this purpose once in its career. It carried 1500 people on a several thousand mile trip.

Our lengthy voyage (8 months), started in New York, took us to Italy with general cargo, then to North Africa to pick up a load of military trucks including a full deck cargo of same in “ready to go” condition when unloaded. From there it was the long beat to the Panama Canal (last fling in Cristobal) before sailing alone, heading for Manila in the Philippines. It seemed likely we would be staged there for the invasion of Japan.

Two weeks out into the Pacific, the war with Japan ended. I stood diligent radio watches hoping for a message turning us around. Unfortunately none came and we wound up some weeks later in Manila. Manila harbor was a mess and getting to an anchorage

required a circuitous path around sunken ships, etc.

The military finally unloaded our cargo of trucks and sent us to the Lingayen Gulf area where we swung on the hook for a week. Finally we were sent to Davao on the Island of Mindanao.

There, latrine facilities were built outboard of the ship on both sides. Fore and aft. Sort of a multi, multi outhouse with many holes and no surrounding structure. No privacy. This was at the main deck level.

Our passengers were then brought aboard, 1500 Japanese, mostly civilians who had been sent to the Philippines to work on the plantations. Bunks were not supplied for these people. They slept on Tatami mats on the main deck, tween decks and lower hold areas. Many were in poor health and several each day were buried off the fantail, with appropriate Shinto ceremonies.

While in the Okinawa area, we passed through the aftermath of a typhoon. The large swells were coming in on the starboard box, resulting in that sickening corkscrew motion of the ship and with most of the passengers seasick, the odor was something to live with.

We finally arrived in the Yokohama area and as we approached, there it was, looming over the

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low clouds like something out of a travelogue movie, the snow covered peak of Mt. Fujiyama.

We went to a dock in Yokohama to unload the passengers, but were not given shore leave. The Army was not sure there weren't fanatics who refused to accept the Japanese surrender. Most of the crew, including myself did run down the gangway, so we could at least say we had been ashore in Japan in 1945.

We left Yokohama and went back to the States via the Panama Canal, arriving in Galveston, Texas a few days before Christmas.

I have come to the conclusion that the SS CHARLES H HERTY did not know how to make a short trip, I said, sayonara to it and went home for awhile.

*RANDOM THOUGHTS, - - - MOSTLY UNIMPORTANT, - - ABOUT ALMOST ANYTHING - - - - -*

Watching the other ships in a North Atlantic convoy in the middle of a winter storm, corkscrewing through the turbulent seas and realizing your ship was going through the same seemingly impossible gyrations. Looking up, at oncoming waves, from the flying bridge. The engineers below on throttle watch when the screw came out of the water.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Mate coming off watch at midnight and stopping in the radio shack to shake ice all over me from himself and his clothes. North Atlantic winter convoy routine. Glad I was a "sparks" and not a Mate.

Being in the engine room, rag chewing, when the escorts started dropping depth charges and my abrupt departure from the area. Sounded like someone beating on the side of the ship. I did not envy the engineers in their job.

Ships blowing up on the far side of a coastal convoy in St. George's Channel between Wales and Ireland and it was as if nothing had happened. Torpedo? Mines? No radio traffic. The ship was empty, seemed anticlimactic to sink an empty bottom, but it had fulfilled its mission in life if it made one trip.

Sitting in Milford Haven anchorage waiting for a west bound convoy. A desolate location with steep cliffs 100 knot gales, both hooks out and engine running FULL AHEAD to stay in position. What am I doing here?

Halifax, Nova Scotia, the week before Christmas. Everyone on the ship got a kit made up by the Ladies Group of Halifax. It included needle and thread and other goodies including a knitted North Atlantic stocking hat which pulled way over the head with only a slot for the eyes to look out of. I kept that hat for years.

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Going into Taranto harbor in the heel of the Italian boot, with a very devious approach, hoping the pilot really knew where all the mine fields were.

Cruising around in the harbor at Augusta, Sicily in the motor life boat and swapping cigarettes for Marsala wine. Running over sunken ships with only the masts showing above the water. After a few bottles of vino, who cared about underwater obstacles?

Picking up SOS's from B-17's ditching in the English Channel on their way back from bombing raids on the continent.

The white marble monument visible when in transit of the Suez Canal, at Ismailia ? (I think), dedicated to British soldiers who died there in WW I.

The claustrophobic feeling of being in the shaft alley, between the engine room and the steering engine room, of a Liberty Ship, under way.

The nutty "sparks" who had the irresistible and stupid urge to hit the key for just one dit when testing his main and emergency generators and how loud it sounded in a convoy.

The Persian Gulf and Khorramshahr, 115 degrees in the shade, and oasis on each side

of the river, but the wind coming in from the desert felt like it came out of a blast furnace.

Sleeping on a cot on the boat deck in the Red Sea. The motion of the ship and millions of stars to put you to sleep.

Sitting alongside the stone quay in Alexandria, Egypt when a German reconnaissance plane came overhead, probably from Crete. He was pinned on a dozen searchlight beams like a fly. Heavy anti-aircraft guns on the buildings alongside the quay all opened up and it was a fascinating show. However, all that goes up, must come down and when the shrapnel from the exploding shells started ricocheting off the deck and superstructure, I decided it time to get under cover. The plane went serenely on its way, no hits!

Being approached by the New York Police in Grand Central Station. They were looking for a Norwegian seaman who had jumped ship. I was in uniform and had light hair and fit the description.

The shore leave at Manila in 1945 where in one of the "finer recreational establishments", (bar), the sailor was thrown through the door without benefit of it being opened first. Good healthy fun!

Being at sea for both VE and VJ days, seemed unfair.

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Going up the Seine River to Rouen, the port for Paris (peace time, the war was over). The river winds through grassy meadows and at one point I could watch a Liberty Ship apparently moving through a field, no water visible, with a herd of milk cows in front of and behind the ship----and no camera !!!!

Two transits of the Panama Canal and what a spectacle it was. Also consider the small percentage of the people of the world who ever have the chance to experience it.

The crazy routing of the ships when the war ended. On the Liberty SS John Fiske KGCB, we sailed empty from Boston to Long Beach, California via the Panama Canal. We loaded soft coal which was brought in by train from Utah. We then sailed back through the Panama Canal to Swansea, Wales which is noted for coal. Also the coal in #3 hold was smoldering and twice a day the Chief Mate was out there checking on how hot the deck was getting. When we docked in Swansea, Wales and they got ready to unload, they were prepared for a fire when they cracked the hatch covers on #3 hold.

*THE END*

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## WENDELL'S NEWS CORNER

I spent a great deal of effort at the request of the Editor in trying to find Next of Kin (NOK) for Ray Sutcliffe using the NOK information on his VWOA Information Card, but met a dead end at each and every lead.

If you know of any Ray Sutcliffe family members, we would like to be advised of the contact and thus would have VWOA send them this Email Newsletter.

We at the VWOA Newsletter would like to hear from you and try to pass along to the rest of the VWOA stories of events that you have experienced and that you feel the rest of the membership would enjoy hearing about. Send us a picture or two and we will try to include it in one of our Email Newsletters.

We would prefer to hear from you by Email at:

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Or

[wenben@nyc.rr.com](mailto:wenben@nyc.rr.com)

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