

Aging Sailors Find Sanctuary at Snug Harbor

Blackbeard sailed here. In 1718, the king of the pirates and his scurvy dogs beached their stolen merchant ship, the *QUEEN ANNE'S REVENGE*, on Topsail Inlet in Beaufort, North Carolina. It was off the waters of Carolina's crystal coast, just months later, that Blackbeard waged his final sea battle against the Navy before falling down dead on the deck with twenty sword wounds and five musket balls in him. His severed head was paraded from the bowsprit of a Navy sloop. Legend has it that his headless body, pitched into the Atlantic, swam around the ship several times before plummeting into the deep.

The towns on the crystal coast prospered and played pivotal roles throughout America's colonial seafaring maritime history. As a seaport, Morehead City, has figured into numerous early skirmishes of days gone by. Presently, the "Summer Capital by the Sea," is the heart of Carolina's fishing industry. The Old Burial Ground in Beaufort, across the way from the "Captain's Quarters Bed & Biscuit" on Ann Street, houses many ghosts of maritime past. Captain Otway Burns, who built one of the first steamboats lies here, his grave adorned with a cannon from his ship, the *SNAP DRAGON*. A hero during the War of 1812, the privateer intercepted numerous British ships and relieved them of their cargoes. A seaman's little girl buried in a keg of rum is here too. Legend has it that she died of the "fever" on the voyage back from England. The mariner, who'd told his wife that he'd return with their daughter, preserved her in a rum cask to deliver on

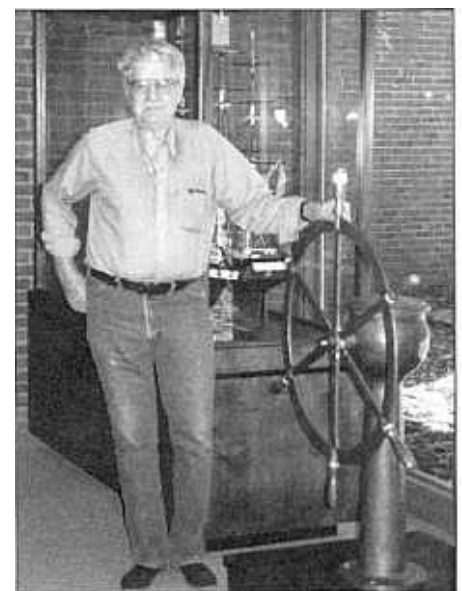


his promise. A British Naval officer who gave up his ghost at sea rests in this ground as well. He was buried here – standing up.

The nautical flavor of this historic backdrop extends throughout Carteret County past the seemingly town of Beaufort and the North River, along the outer banks to where the Atlantic flows into Nelson Bay. Here sits Snug Harbor – a refuge for aged and worn-out sailors. A retirement community for well-traveled mariners, Snug Harbor is often a final port call for merchant seamen with at least ten years of deep-sea service.

Sailor's Snug Harbor was spawned through an extremely generous endowment by the trust of Robert Richard Randall and established in 1833 in New York. The noted statesman Alexander

Hamilton helped craft Randall's will which stipulates that Snug Harbor must "operate in perpetuity." Encompassing more than 60 buildings, over 1,000 ancient mariners settled in on a sprawling 120-acre expanse overlooking Staten Island's Kill van Kull. The nearby graveyard on Monkey Hill reputedly holds the bones of over 7,000 seamen. Harper's Weekly in



David Weathers was on the Navy ship MEDUSA in Pearl Harbor as the Japanese planes attacked on Dec. 7, 1941.



Looking out on North Carolina's Nelson Bay which feeds into the Atlantic Ocean.

1882 reported on a sailor whose career at sea had ended with a horrible accident that crushed his leg. This sea captain had been relegated to begging for loose change on street corners and was considering suicide until the day a stranger walked up to him and recommended that the captain "try the Snug 'Arbor." The sailor recalled, "I went down an' they took me in because I was crippled, an' washed me an' shaved me an' give me a room as clean as the cap'n's cabin of a man-o-war, an' put me inside a new suit of clothes, stuck a pipe in my mouth, an' sez, 'There, you're safe an' sound forever, an' God bless your soul!'"

The New York facility persevered for almost 150 years. But with the shift in the landscape of the U.S. maritime industry and the advent of social security, pensions and medicare, the population of Snug Harbor began to wane and the time worn facility displayed its age. With its future clouded and its buildings rapidly decaying, maritime artist John A. Noble spearheaded a movement to rescue the facility, expressing that "it should be kept groomed if only one seaman, rich or poor, or none, remained." His efforts led to the creation of Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island, which today continues as a thriving tribute to the seagoing life.

Meanwhile, the trustees of Snug Harbor engineered a move of the retirement community to Sea Level, NC on the banks of Nelson Bay in 1976. Hundreds of artifacts were transported from the original New York complex to the new 100,000 square foot building that stretches out on over 4,000 resplendent acres of land on the Carolina coast. A modern and vibrant retirement community, the extremely well-maintained facility is stocked with nautical memorabilia, the walls layered with schooners and steamships as well as flags and emblems of seafaring life.

Many of the residents are World War II veterans. MEBA member David Weathers



The dining hall at Snug Harbor. All the rooms are enhanced with art, flags and nautical memorabilia, including many ship models. The painting at right is of Alexander Hamilton who drew up Robert Richard Randall's will creating Snug Harbor.

served in the Navy for six years and was aboard the resupply vessel *MEDUSA* (AR-1) in Pearl Harbor when the Japanese planes began tearing apart the U.S. Pacific naval fleet. His ship managed to shoot down two planes and blew a midjet submarine out of the water. He exhibits his war medal in the glass display case in Snug's lobby. Four years ago, Weathers came to Snug Harbor to die. A 35-year veteran of the seas, the Sea Level facility rehabilitated and revitalized him. He usually takes advantage of the well-stocked library that also carries the latest magazines and maritime publications.

It's easy to stay marooned at Snug Harbor because the center takes care of all needs. It has excellent healthcare facilities, a post office, barber shop, chapel with interfaith services, kitchen and a dozen other amenities including a greenhouse, game room and woodworking shop. They

also stage frequent parties and dinners. A bus system allows residents to amble into town to take advantage of the local scene.

David doesn't think of his seafaring days too much anymore. Sometimes he dreams about them but despite four decades of skimming the waves he lets others tell the sea stories – and everyone has a tale to tell. Biff Bowker is a mesmerizing storyteller and crack sea historian though some Snug residents think he has an overly vivid imagination. "If he did everything he says he did then he's 176 years old," one resident joked. Still, Biff spins his yarns expertly to the delight of many on his frequent trips to the North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort. The "Snugs" have all heard each other's tales before many times, and the stories get more colorful with each retelling. Harrison Maycroft swears his story about the parrot is true... One seafarer couldn't



Peter Bonna was a Chief Engineer who sailed for over 35 years.



Harrison Maycroft will tell you one sea story after another.



Russ Locascio was a third engineer who helped deliver troops to Normandy Beach during World War II.



Horace Twiford has had a colorful life. Moments after this photo he jumped up and went into town to catch a local production of "Singin' in the Rain."



97-year old Jay Ottinger wants you to buy his book, "The Steam Yacht Delphine and Other Stories."

get employed because he was a narcoleptic and couldn't stay awake on the job. "You couldn't put Bernie on watch because he'd fall asleep...He'd fall asleep while he was eating!" recounted Harry. Somehow, the sailor wangled a deck job aboard the oil tanker *NATIONAL DEFENDER*. Before he climbed aboard he bought a parrot in Yokohama which sat on his shoulder. He walked on deck with bird droppings running down his back. "We called him Long John Silver," says Harry. The ship was taking on a load of oil and Bernie was the mate on watch who had to sound the alarm when the cargo tanks filled up. As the oil streamed through the cargo lines from the loading manifold into the ship's tanks Bernie once again retreated into dreamland. He was fast asleep when the oil hit the deck beams, which is the preferred moment to call for the valve shut-off before the oil shoots right back up through the ullage cap and makes a mess. But Harry was there and yelled for the shut-off just as the bird started squawking and making a racket. It turns out – the oil made a sound when it hit the beams that disturbed the parrot. When they opened up another tank to continue loading oil, the parrot was now the mate on watch. It squawked right on cue, every time, when the tanks filled up. They let Bernie snooze away.

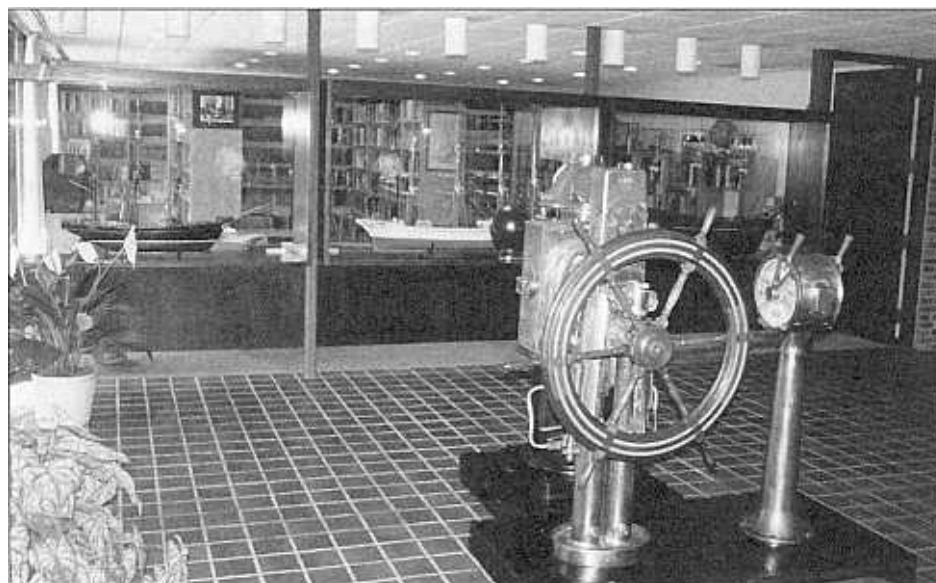
Once Harry spits out one tale, the drawers in his mind open and one story begets another. He reminisces about his long gone wife, the beautiful Indian actress Bhudi Singh and the famous Kapur acting family. Snug Harbor seems an unlikely setting to hear about Indian actors, but these are world travelers, and they all have a story.

Charles Krause was a radio officer and enjoyed setting sail on trampships. During World War II he served on various vessels in support of the armed forces in both Pacific and European theaters of war. He sailed on T-2's and Liberty ships and carried ammo to the allied forces on the bru-

tal Murmansk Run, hunted by German U-boats. The anti-torpedo wire nets on one of Krause's ships saved the crew during a mission when it absorbed two shots from a U-boat. He remembers back when his ship waged an epic battle with a German pilot who was strafing the vessel. "We shot at everything in the sky but him," he recalls. "He actually flew low and thumbed his nose at us."

Snug Harbor charges 40% of a merchant seaman's total income. With medical treatment included, as well as housecleaning, three meals a day and use of the entire facility, there's not a great need for leftover dollars. Residents are accountable

years sailing for various ship companies including U.S. Lines. During World War II his ship was part of a convoy that transported 110,000 marines to Iwo Jima where they saw some of the fiercest action of the war. Rosario (Russ) Locascio is in the assisted care section. The health care professionals ensure that he keeps up with his medication. Russ was a lifelong 3rd engineer aboard various vessels. He found his niche and was happy with it. When they put a new Chief Engineer on board, he said, "I took him around and showed him where the valves were." He clocked many hours on one of the fastest cargo ships of the time, the *PIONEER MINX*. He



In the lobby of Snug Harbor. You can see the library behind the ship models.

for their telephone and cable bills as well as medication costs. Foreign seamen are allowed in too, but they will have had to serve on a U.S.-flag ship for at least 5 years. In part, because of the regression of U.S.-flag shipping, Snug Harbor has seen its population slip. In January 2001, it altered its stringent admissions policy and began allowing in spouses and other non-seafaring retirees. The new policy raised some eyebrows at first but the Snugs became used to it and were enthused by an influx of female residents.

The employees outnumber the residents. Professionals are available throughout the 120-room spread for medical care and physical therapy. Residents are provided private rooms with a personal patio and bath. The Snug populace is divided into three levels: independent living, assisted care, and the nursing ward. Peter Bonna falls into the third category. The MEBA Chief Engineer plied the seas for 35

had a good time on the various stops the ship made on its New York to Southeast Asia run. "There was a "wife" in every port," Russ reflected. Some people actually got married during their brief stops overseas. "Most of us never got past the first bar," Weathers added. During World War II, Russ helped transport troops into the battle at Normandy. "We sure caught hell," he remembers. He could hear the hail of gunfire screaming above deck and the blast of the ship's guns returning fire. The engine room was the safest place on the ship that day, he points out.

Years ago, A.P. Day hopped aboard the *ALCOA ROAMER* as a fire and water tender and came off the ship as a Chief Engineer. During Vietnam his ship was hit by a rocket on the number 2 hatch killing several stevedores. Horace Twiford, a native of North Carolina, was born on Roanoke Island, part of the Northern



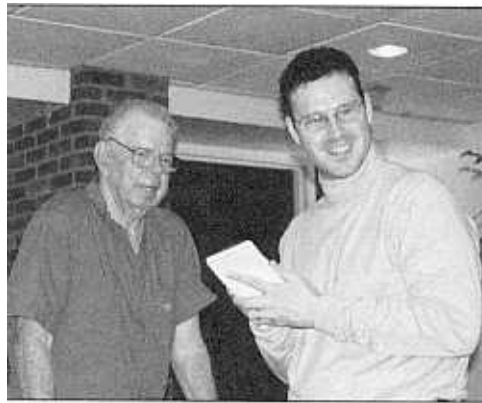
Charles Krause (left) was a radio officer. During World War II an anti-torpedo net saved his life. David Weathers is at right.

Snug Harbor *continued*

Outer Banks. He got his seaman's papers as an 18-year old and shipped out a year and a half later in 1943 as a Green Ticket Able Bodied seaman. After a lively career at sea that brought him all over the world on an assortment of vessels, he retired to Stumpy Point, NC in 1969 where he fished and harvested oysters for a living. He's lived in Snug Harbor for the last four years.

97-year old Jay Ottinger, who doesn't take any medication, has spent the last 18 years at Snug Harbor. Years ago he wrote the book "The Steam Yacht Delphine and Other Stories." It's displayed in a glass case in one of the lounge areas for sale along with a handful of other books and Snug memorabilia. A deck officer for the Masters, Mates & Pilots, he sailed for various American President Lines and Matson ships and included the San Francisco to Sydney run as one of his favorites. He loves to show folks the photo of himself when he was 19 years old. When told that a message could be passed on to his union hall for him, he retorted, "You better not tell them I'm here or they'll say, 'so that's where that son-of-a-bitch is!'"

Snug Harbor's motto is "Portum Petimus Fessi," which translated from the Latin means, "We weary ones seek port." The oldest charitable trust in the country, Snug Harbor has also changed lives with its mariner outreach assistance program. The program affords monthly stipends for



A.P. Day was strolling off to lunch when Marine Officer Editor Marco Cannistraro caught up with the retired MEBA engineer to get the lowdown.



Portum Petimus Fessi— "We weary ones seek port." Snug Harbor is truly a safe haven for aging mariners.

qualified candidates, paid out of the Snug trust fund. The outreach program has aided over 150 needy individuals since its inception in 1992.

The property is well manicured and the grounds crew is out today to counteract the increasing amount of algae that has cropped up in the pond outside. Across a small wooden bridge leading over a channel that feeds into the Nelson Bay, David Weathers points out the huge area that makes up Snug Harbor. The Bay has been a great place to fish for hundreds of years. Once, a couple of Snug retirees decided to go fishing out on the Bay but they forgot to watch the tide tables. When they tried to walk back to the complex, they found they were

trapped by the rising tide. They had to wait until morning for rescue. The trustees are considering a plan to build a marina out on the Bay, but with the logistical problems involved, the project is still years away.

The facility is dedicated toward preserving a sense of independence and community. Great care is taken in ensuring that residents are content with their accommodations. David Weathers likes it here but wishes that more mariners would make Snug Harbor their home-port. For these sailors, the sea is now calm. This is a port call where old conquerors of the sea have found their ship at anchor, their safe haven.



In the courtyard at the facility, a retiree is enjoying a beautiful day.

You may want to chart your own course to Snug Harbor!
 Snug Harbor on Nelson Bay
 Sea Level, NC
<http://www.snugharborhome.com/>
 PHONE: (252) 225- 4411

Visit Snug Harbor
 Cultural Center
 Staten Island, New York
<http://www.snug-harbor.org/>
 Phone: (718) 448-2500 ext. 210