



# We Crossed The Line

Lee Melton, Destroyer Sailor  
Western Pacific  
1959-1960

In 1960 I had the privilege of serving aboard the U.S.S. Gurke DD783, a Gearing class Destroyer attached to the U.S. Seventh Fleet in Southeast Asian waters. While on my first Western Pacific cruise we participated in Operation Sea Lion, a training exercise involving ships from various SEATO Alliance Nations. Upon completion of this operation we were in port in Singapore, moored alongside the British Cruiser Belfast, when we received orders to proceed to Viet Nam. After considering our close proximity to the Equator, the Captain decided to wing

South and cross the line the same day that we put to sea. In preparation for the initiation ceremonies, one of the oldest and most Revered traditions of the sea, the Shellbacks held a meeting on the mess deck to plan and coordinate the event. The Pollywogs, sensing a golden opportunity to frustrate their efforts, and spread a little hate and discontent, decided to lock them in. By the time they found a way out through a 5" gun turret they were quite upset, and not overly impressed with our ingenious ideas. This immediately resulted in a minor riot involving everyone not on watch at that time. The British Sailors watching this must have had some serious questions about discipline in the U.S. Navy.

Setting the sea and anchor detail, and putting out to finally restored order sea. After we cleared port, the Captain relinquished command to the senior Shellback, the American Flag was lowered, and the "Jolly Roger" raised. The initiation was officially underway. The first order of business was to order all Pollywogs to the mess deck where they would take us out in small, easily controlled

groups. Being rebellious to the bitter end we locked ourselves in. This really got them in a fine mood. The resulting stalemate soon became boring, so after some serious negotiations we

finally agreed to cooperate with them and participate in the initiation ceremonies. The ceremony consisted of appearing before the Royal Court where King Neptune, the Queen, and Davey Jones would review the charges levied against us, find us guilty of such terrible crimes as attempting to bang ears with Shellbacks, acting like a Shellback, or -heaven forbid, trying to impersonate a Shellback. Needless to say such serious and felonious charges demanded immediate action. After careful consideration the court decided that a trip through the whipping line would show us the error of our ways, and allow them the opportunity to beat the unworthiness out of us with sections of old fire hose applied liberally to an area of the body that we wont talk about. he first stop on the whipping line was to kiss the Royal Baby who just happened to be the fattest Shellback aboard, with his belly greased up for the occasion. After kissing his greasy belly we proceeded to the Royal Barber who first butchered our hair, then dumped us into a tank of salt water to get our dungarees saturated, and then the whipping started with a vengeance. After being whipped by over 100 sailors we came to the slop chute, which was a canvas tube filled with rotten garbage that you had to crawl through to complete the initiation and end the whipping. I have never smelled anything sweeter than that garbage. Forty-four years after the fact I look back with pride on my experience. This separated the men from the boys, this was something that only seagoing fleet sailors could participate in, and although I was only a Seaman Apprentice on my first cruise I was now an "Old Salt" and damn well proud of it. I believe that if I could do it all over again I think that I would be first in line. Not everyone can be a Shellback.