

# ARMAGEDDON IN THE ARCTIC OCEAN

*Up the Hawse Pipe from Galley Boy to  
Third Mate on a Legendary Liberty Ship  
in the Biggest Convoy Battle of World War II*

PAUL G. GILL

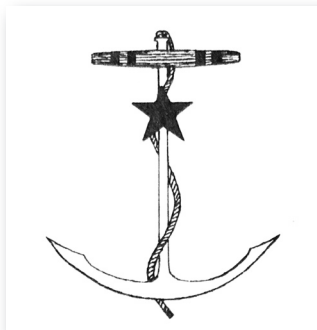
*EDITED BY PAUL G. GILL, JR.*



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*To my mother, Sarah Welsh Gill,  
and my father, Capt. William F. Gill,  
my anchors and the stars I steer by.*



# INTRODUCTION

**M**Y EARLIEST MEMORY OF THE SS *Nathanael Greene* is of the time in 1957 when my father loaded the family into our station wagon and drove us to the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point, just outside New York City. He said there was something he wanted to see there, a plaque honoring the Liberty Ship he served on in World War II. I remember being led into a room and looking at a bronze plaque describing the heroic actions of my dad's ship during her voyages to Russia and the Mediterranean, where she was destroyed by a German U-boat.

The plaque read:

*During a long voyage to North Russia, SS Nathanael Greene was under incessant and violent attack by enemy planes and submarines. In most gallant fashion, and in spite of many crew casualties, she consistently out-manuevered and out-fought the enemy, finally discharging her vital cargo at the designated port. After effecting temporary repairs to her battered hull and rigging, she took part in the North African Campaign. Bound for her last port, with limited cargo, she was torpedoed, and in a sinking condition was successfully beached.*

*The stark courage of her heroic crew in battle against overpowering odds caused her name to be perpetuated as a Gallant Ship.*



Unit Citation plaque for the SS *Nathaniel Greene*. Reproduced with permission of the American Merchant Marine Museum.

We read the words on the plaque in awe, scanned the other eight plaques in the Gallant Ships collection, and left. We were very proud to see our father's ship enshrined in a place of honor at Kings Point.

Dad was quiet on the drive home. It was as though we had paid our respects at the grave of a departed family member. My sisters and I wanted to learn more about the Nathanael Greene and Dad's role in the story, but his somber mood discouraged conversation, and the topic did not come up again until years later.

In 1960, when I was twelve years old, my parents purchased an old farmhouse in Southold, on Long Island's north fork. The house had been vacant for many years and had fallen into disrepair. As the only son, I was conscripted to help Dad renovate the structure and turn it into a habitable vacation home. Almost every Saturday that spring and summer, Dad and I made the long trek out to Southold to work

on the house. We were driving through farm country one morning when a haunting melody came over the airwaves, sung in German by a woman with a lovely voice. I didn't know a word of German, but the singer repeated what sounded to me like "seaman." We listened to the song, and then Dad, who knew German, told me the song was titled "*Seeman, deine Heimat ist das Meer*," "Sailor, the Sea is Your Home" in English.

*Sailor, Sailor  
Your home is the deep blue sea  
Your ship is your love  
And the stars are your best friends*

*And though you find your thrills  
In the places far away from me  
Just remember I'm always waiting  
When your journey ends*

The poignant lament seemed to touch Dad's heart and unleash a flood of memories. He started to tell me about his voyages to Germany as a seventeen-year-old merchant seaman in 1937. He made eight passages that year, first on SS *Manhattan*, the ship that had brought the American Olympic team to Germany for the Berlin Olympic Games, and then on the SS *President Roosevelt*. He spoke of the fun he had dancing, singing and drinking beer with young Germans in Hamburg beer halls, of his beautiful German girlfriend, Heidi, and learning German from her and his German shipmates.

On the ride home from Southold that afternoon, he spoke about the *Nathanael Greene* and her voyage to Archangel as

part of Convoy PQ18 in 1942. He grew excited as he described the ferocious barrage of antiaircraft gunfire the *Nathanael Greene* threw up against the waves of Heinkel 111 and Ju 88 bombers that swept down the columns of merchant ships at masthead height. He described the cataclysmic explosion of the ammunition ship, SS *Mary Luckenbach*; the Nathanael Greene being singled out for praise by the convoy commodore for shooting down nine German aircraft; leading shipmates down into the ship's magazine to load rounds into ammunition belts in the heat of battle; a powerful gale in the White Sea; the horrible conditions in Archangel; getting lost far north of the Arctic Circle on the return voyage; and *Nathanael Greene* going down with all guns blazing after being attacked by U-boats and Heinkel 111s in the Mediterranean Sea.

I never enjoyed laboring on that old farmhouse, but I was riveted by Dad's storytelling, which became a regular feature of our long drives back and forth to Southold. I learned about Dad's tough childhood growing up in Depression-era Boston; leaving home to join the Civilian Conservation Corps at age fifteen; going to sea at age sixteen; his pre-war years in the Merchant Marine; manning picket lines on the New York waterfront; working as a steeplejack on Manhattan skyscrapers; riding the rails across the country with his brother, Steve; port calls in Honolulu, Rio de Janeiro, Buenos Aires, and Le Havre; attending officer training school and earning his Third Mate's ticket; his fourteen war-zone runs on the *Nathanael Greene*; joining the Navy; and attending college and graduate school after the war.

Dad rarely spoke of these matters with other family members, and never to anyone outside the family. On the rare occasion when someone brought up the topic of the Nathanael Greene, you could almost see a mask descend over his coun-

tenance. He would become quiet and withdrawn. He was not fun to be around at these times, and the rest of the family learned to give him a wide berth until the dark mood dissipated. But when he and I were alone together he seemed to enjoy opening up to me about his youthful adventures and misadventures, his brushes with death, and his determination to overcome the many obstacles placed in his path as a young man and survive poverty, battles with violent men, and combat, to finally acquire a family, an education, and a secure place in society.

I sensed that Dad needed to share these stories with someone, and that I was the only person he felt he could confide in. He always said that he was going to write a book someday, to be titled *Red Waters*, based on the diary he kept on the voyage to Archangel.

In 1982, Dad retired after a long career in the shipbuilding industry and started to write *Red Waters*. He worked slavishly on the book for many years, and acquired a great deal of research material from the National Archives, the U.S. Navy, the Coast Guard, and the Imperial War Museum in England.

The book project got a huge boost in 1990, when Dad tracked down his best friend on the *Nathanael Greene*, radioman John McNally, who lived in Swanton, Vermont. Dad and John had many wonderful reunions, usually at our home in nearby Middlebury. The two old shipmates would sit for hours on our front porch and exchange stories about the good and the bad times they experienced on the SS *Nathanael Greene*. Whenever I could, I would sit quietly and listen to their enthralling stories about their escapades in Glasgow and Edinburgh, Scotland; Sunderland and Middlesbrough, England; the convoy battle in the Arctic Ocean; the long overlay in Archangel; their return to Scotland; and the last

days of the *Nathanael Greene* in Mostaganem, Algeria, before she steamed out into the Mediterranean on her last voyage.

At first, Dad seemed to make good progress on the manuscript. However, deteriorating vision and other health challenges prevented him from finishing the book. Shortly before he died in 2000, he asked me to edit the manuscript and find a publisher for the book. I promised him I would, but when I first looked at the manuscript and delved through the five boxes of notes and research material he left behind, I was overwhelmed. Many of the chapters were still in outline form, and I realized that finishing the project would require an enormous expenditure of time and energy, which at that time I could not commit to. I decided to put off editing the manuscript until I retired from medical practice. By the time I hung up my stethoscope in 2013, I had just started an ambitious boat-building project, and so I kept the book project on the proverbial back burner.

It stayed on the back burner until April, 2020, when I received a letter from Hugh Sebag-Montefiore, a British author who was writing a book on the Arctic convoys of World War II. He said that he had come across the name Paul George Gill in the National Archives, and asked if by any chance this was my relative. I immediately contacted Mr. Sebag-Montefiore and told him about Dad's unfinished manuscript, his diary, and the research material he had amassed. I agreed to go through this material and share any relevant documents. To my great surprise and delight, I found copious notes describing Dad's childhood, his experiences in the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Merchant Marine, as well as the voyages of the SS *Nathanael Greene*. I also found several old floppy disks containing more notes. As I sifted through this fascinating material, I realized that I could not put off

the editing of *Red Waters* any longer. I had to share Dad's incredible story with the world. And when I came across this sentence in the manuscript, "This was Armageddon, the decisive battle of good versus evil prophesied in the Book of Revelation," I decided to change the title of the book to *Armageddon in the Arctic Ocean*.

Every challenge Dad faced as a boy and young man had prepared him for what would be the sternest test he would ever face in mortal combat against a ferocious and determined enemy in one of the most formidable environments on the planet. This is my father's story.

—Paul G. Gill, Jr., M.D.  
Middlebury, Vermont  
February, 2022



# ONE

## LAYING THE KEEL TIMBERS

### Beachcombing for Driftwood

LIVING BY THE SEA, MY twin brother, Phil, and I had always been beachcombers, roaming up and down the beaches near our South Boston home with our eyes peeled for pretty seashells, sea glass, or sea gull feathers. But now, in the winter of 1931, the second winter of the Great Depression, we were no longer *recreational* beachcombers, but ten-year-old *subsistence* beachcombers. Our quarry was driftwood. Driftwood of any size or shape. No matter if it was painted, coated with tar, or full of nails, bolts or screws, if it would burn in our mother's kitchen stove, we grabbed it and tossed it in the rickety pull cart we dragged up and down Carson Beach.

The pickings were slim this winter of 1931. Other boys were out scavenging firewood as well. Earlier that year, the driftwood harvest had been plentiful, and we had usually been able to load our cart with firewood in less than an hour. But it had been a long, cold winter, with heavy snowfall, and the beach had been nearly scoured of combustibles. What driftwood remained was locked in icy tangles of frozen



Paul (*left*) and Philip Gill

seaweed, rope, cardboard, and other flotsam. Now we had to get down on our hands and knees and claw furiously at the buried treasure, slowly detaching the log or plank from the concrete-hard sand it was embedded in. Sometimes, the reward for our stubborn efforts was hardly worth the cuts on our hands or the throbbing pain in our frost-nipped fingertips. We wore gloves to protect our hands from the sharp barnacles that encrusted the driftwood, but digging and clawing in the frozen sand soon wore holes in them. As a

result, the flesh on our palms and fingers became hardened with callus and tough as the leather in our dad's sail palm.

When we couldn't find enough driftwood to fill our cart on Carson Beach, we would drag it over to M Street beach and continue our search there. This cart, with two iron automobile wheels and no pneumatic tires, was not the envy of the other beachcombers scavenging for driftwood. It was ugly, but it served its purpose. Rolling over the granite cobblestone streets, the screech of the iron wheels grinding over the pavement stones could be heard blocks away. Every evening, as we hauled the full cartload of driftwood home under the gaslights, we were mortified to think that our neighbors were laughing at us as we passed by, peering from behind drawn curtains, thinking, "There, but for the grace of God, go our children."

Frigid arctic winds and subfreezing temperatures in the late winter of 1931 brought an end to that year's beachcombing when the driftwood became frozen solid in the debris that covered the beach. Try as we might, we could not dislodge the driftwood from the sand, stones, shells, and seaweed with which it was encased in the ice. Periods of intense cold alternated with warm, rainy periods, followed by a cold snap that would last for days. When this happened, the beaches along the southern shore of the South Boston peninsula became solid ice, and we had to give up our hunt for driftwood.

In normal times, most of the homes in our Irish-American enclave of South Boston burned coal, not driftwood, in their furnaces and kitchen stoves. But these were not normal times, and coal cost money. Economic calamity had struck the United States in late 1929 and now families across America found themselves in a desperate struggle to survive.

Only a year earlier, Phil and I, and most of the other boys now trudging stoop-backed across the bleak, snow- and ice-encrusted beach, would have spent the after-school hours playing ball, sledding, or fishing, according to the season. But the word “play” had vanished from our vocabulary.

### **The Coke Fields**

Demoralizing as it was to lose our main source of firewood for our mother’s kitchen stove, we now faced the additional problem of a nearly-depleted coal bin. Fortunately, we had collected enough driftwood to burn in the kitchen stove for several weeks, but driftwood was not a suitable replacement fuel for coal in the furnace that heated our house. Coal burned slower than wood, and was a far more efficient heat source than wood. We had to find a cheap or free source of coal.

Fortunately for us, the local electric power plant loaded the ashes from its coal-fired power generating plant into trucks and hauled them to the dump near the docks and shipyards on the north side of the peninsula. Deep ravines cut into the land at various places in the dump, and the utility company trucks backfilled these ravines with ashes. The trucks would back up to the rim of a ravine and discharge their loads of hot ashes, cinders and clinkers through their tailgates.

We discovered this coke-picking gold mine just as we were burning the last few chunks of coal in our bin. We hurried down to the coke fields after school every afternoon and waded ankle-deep into the ashes and probed for unburned chunks of coke, which we collected in a tin box. As word of this free source of coke spread, coke pickers started to swarm like flies around the ravines after each load of ash

was dumped, and we gradually came to understand that coke picking was not without its dangers, for the pickers and truck drivers alike.

The ground under the trucks' wheels consisted largely of poorly-compacted ashes, and was unstable and susceptible to collapsing under the weight of the loaded truck. If that were to happen with the giant rear wheels close to the rim of the ravine, the truck, its load of oven-hot ashes, and the pickers who had swarmed around it could all go tumbling down the steep wall of the ravine to their destruction. We knew we were in danger of being caught and crushed beneath the truck's rear wheels, but we suppressed our fears in order to gather as much life-sustaining coke as we could. We fought to be "Kings of the coke hill," and for our family's survival. It was a desperate struggle on the best of days. On bitter cold winter days, with a cold north wind blasting the coke fields, we were often driven to our knees, shivering and shrinking from nature's fury. Wiping tears from our eyes, with our faces blackened and smudged, we groped through the ashes with gloved fingers for fragments of precious coke. Periodically, we would have to remove our gloves to pick off the razor-sharp clinker edges which had been burned into the fabric. Our hands were chronically cut, bleeding and blackened.

Coke picking was a nasty business. Soot saturated every piece of our clothing and infiltrated every pore and every wrinkle on our skin. Mom subjected us to endless hot tub baths with vigorous scalp-to-toes brush scrubbing, but we were still plagued by staph infections on our hands and arms. Despite the soot and the staph infections, Phil and I continued mining the ash fields through the frigid winter, and the wet and stormy fall and spring. Picking coke after

school each day, and on weekends, holidays and vacations, Phil and I together were usually able to fill a 100-pound potato sack with coal after digging through the ashes for an hour or two. We would rather have been playing ball or fishing with our neighborhood pals, but we took pride in the fact that we were able to keep the home fires burning all winter, and were doing our part to keep our family together.

During slack periods, when we had collected a large reserve of coke, Phil and I drifted from the coke fields over to the waterfront docks in search of discarded dunnage to replace our family's dwindling supply of firewood. The dunnage consisted of rough planking used to protect freight carried in ships' cargo holds. Stevedores discarded damaged dunnage, which we collected and brought home to burn in the kitchen stove. Some of the dunnage consisted of mahogany and other exotic tropical hardwoods, which Dad used in his model-making.

We liked to watch the dock workers load and unload cargoes. We were mesmerized by the ocean liners, freighters, and oil tankers, steel-hulled, steam-powered 10,000-ton Leviathans being pushed by squat, smoke-belching, whistle-blowing tugs in and out of berths in Charlestown or East Boston. Smaller vessels, colliers, pilot boats and ferries, plowed up and down the harbor. Smelly, storm-battered fishing schooners crowded T-Wharf, or sailed into or out of the harbor. Along the wharves, shrilling steam winches hoisted cargo from unbattened holds, and brawny long-shoremen moved ant-like up and down the gangplanks. Looking across the channel, we could see excursion boats and coastwise steamers tied up at Atlantic Avenue piers.

The South Boston waterfront was almost exclusively devoted to maritime affairs. It was a discharge center for West Coast lumber, and berthed many deep-draft passenger

liners and ocean-going freighters. Railroad cars nosed in and out of the piers, loading or unloading cargo of all kinds from all over the world.

One day Phil and I went down to the waterfront to watch as the British battlecruiser HMS *Hood* steamed into the harbor and tied up at Commonwealth Pier. The “Mighty *Hood*” was the largest warship in the world, the pride of the Royal Navy. There was a large crowd in attendance, including most of our friends. We looked on in awe as tugboats nudged the massive ship up to the pier and Limey sailors scurried over her decks securing mooring lines. We were proud that this magnificent symbol of the might of our mother’s native country was visiting our city. But Phil and I were probably the only people in the crowd who harbored anything other than contempt for the 860-foot long dreadnaught. South Boston was an Irish American enclave, and most of its residents viewed Britain as the ancestral enemy. At first, the crowd looked on in silence, as though overawed by the sheer size of the vessel. But then something, perhaps the sight of the four, massive fifteen-inch gun turrets, triggered an



HMS *Hood*, circa 1924

explosive outpouring of taunts and jeers. Phil and I were proud of our Irish heritage, and had an instinctive understanding of the crowd's hostility toward the Hood, but our mother was English, and we were equally proud of her native land and its people. We got into a brief scuffle with boys who were tossing rocks at the *Hood*, but we were greatly outnumbered. We decided that discretion was the better part of valor, and walked away before blood was spilled.

On another occasion, Phil and I went over to the South Boston Dry Dock to see the North Atlantic passenger liner SS *Leviathan*, then the largest ship to ever fly the American flag. We thought *Leviathan* looked huge when we saw her steaming up the main shipping channel the day before, but now, resting on chocks and cradled in scaffolding in the dry dock, she was an awesome sight. It boggled the mind to see a 59,956 ton, 950-foot-long ship suspended high and dry, as if in mid-air.

*Leviathan* had been launched as *Vaterland* in Hamburg, Germany, in 1913, but was seized by the U.S. government in New York in 1914 with the outbreak of war in Europe. When the United States entered the war in 1917, she was converted to a troop ship and renamed *Leviathan*. After the war, she was acquired by the United States Lines and put into service once again as a North Atlantic passenger liner.

Among the vessels that docked at the Army base and Commonwealth piers were Black Diamond Line freighters that Phil would someday sail to northern European ports, and Luckenbach Line freighters which I would sail to Portland, Seattle and San Francisco. We could not imagine what the future held in store for us as we gazed out over the harbor on those afternoons long ago.



*SS Leviathan in South Boston Dry Dock, 1930*

### **Scavenging for Food**

Fuel was not the only commodity in short supply during those dark Depression days. Food was no longer taken for granted in the Gill household either. Starting in the summer of 1933, Phil and I would go over to the South Boston freight yards every day or two and scavenge for fruit, ice and vegetables in the reefer (refrigerated) cars.

As in every other facet of life, we had plenty of competition in our search for food in the railyard. There was a hobo jungle on the fringe of the yard where drifters lived in makeshift cardboard and wood crate shelters. The denizens of this encampment were constantly prowling through reefers and boxcars in search of produce and damaged containers of canned food, and sometimes tempers flared and fights broke out over contested food items.

At first, Phil and I just stumbled through the boxcars hoping to find a bunch of bananas, a crate of oranges, or a carton of canned sardines. Over time, we developed a system. First, we ascertained where the railroad crews were in the process of unloading vegetables and fruits from the reefers. We would trail the crews at a safe distance, waiting for them to finish unloading a car, and then move on to the next one. Then, we moved in to salvage damaged and leftover produce. We usually worked as a team of four: Phil, me, and a couple of other streetwise kids who knew the drill. After lookouts were set, the hauling cart was positioned, and our tools were gathered, we pushed open the doors and entered the car. We quickly surveyed what the railroad crew had left behind and stuffed everything that looked edible into burlap bags before moving quickly on to the next car.

When the sacks were nearly full, we climbed the ladder to the roof of the reefer, opened the hatch cover to the ice compartment, and crawled down inside with ice picks and tongs to collect ice to keep our salvaged fruits and vegetables fresh. After filling a bag with chopped ice, we climbed out of the ice compartment and back onto the roof of the car, lowered the bag to the ground, divided the ice among the bags of produce, and returned home with our treasure.

We didn't always go right home. Railroad bulls (guards) continually patrolled the yards checking the empty cars for trespassers, and inspecting the seals on the reefer doors. The bulls had their hands full chasing drifters out of the boxcars and flushing hobos out of the hobo jungles near the tracks. Some would look the other way when they saw that the trespassers were only young boys trying to salvage a little produce for their families. However, there were other bulls, real pricks, who were not inclined to show mercy.

They would rather give chase to the student scavengers, beat them severely with their fists, and then lock them in the reefer cars or the ice compartments to “cool off” before taking them to the police station to be charged with trespassing and theft of railroad property.

To escape such brutal treatment, if we were sighted by the bulls, we ran off in different directions to confuse our pursuers. Sometimes the only avenue of escape was also the most dangerous one. We would race up the reefer ladder to the roof and then run as fast as we could down the full length of the train in opposite directions to confuse the bulls. Leaping from car to car as we ran, jumping down into the gondolas, then onto flatcars, and finally down to the ground. Fearful of the brutal beatings we knew we would receive from the bulls if they caught us, we would stash the bags in the bushes, flee the freight yards, and return to retrieve our contraband later in the day when the coast was clear.

If the pickings were slim in the freight yard, we would go over to the docks and offer to clean the holds of fishing trawlers in exchange for a few pounds of freshly-caught flounder, cod, or haddock. If the haul was good that day, we’d get enough fish for Mom to prepare one of her wonderful seafood dishes, such as baked stuffed flounder, broiled haddock or fish chowder.

### **Going to the Dump for Fun and Profit**

One of the unexpected consequences of the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, which prohibited the sale of alcoholic beverages, was an explosion in alcohol consumption. Bootleg whiskey was easy to find, speakeasies proliferated in cities and small

towns throughout America, and many families became familiar with the formula for “bathtub gin.” As a result, there was a great demand for recycled glass jars and bottles. Phil and I spent many afternoons at the town dump, collecting any glass vessel which could conceivably hold alcohol. When we had collected a couple of bags of bottles, we would take them to a redemption center and collect a penny a jar or bottle.

Sometimes we would get bored raking through the refuse for bottles and we would amuse ourselves, and practice our marksmanship, tossing empty whiskey bottles at the myriad gray-brown rats that darted in and out of the stinking piles of decaying refuse. I believe the marksmanship skills I cultivated in the South Boston dump as a boy contributed to my success in shooting down a Heinkel 111 torpedo-bomber in the Barents Sea a few years later. Southie rats helped America win the war!

On hot summer days, the stench from the nearby glue factory, where they slaughtered horses, drove us away from the dump and over to the swimming hole at Stetson’s Coal Pier. We’d slip into our shoulder-to-knee, moth-eaten, wool swimsuits and jump in. Sometimes we would watch with morbid fascination as Boston police officers dragged the waters around the pier for the body of a drowned drunk. Typically, the corpse would break the surface of the water festooned with hundreds of feeding crabs. There were a lot of drunks in those dark days, and not a few of them ended up, accidentally or otherwise, falling off a wharf and drowning.

### **Dad, the Captain of Our Family**

For our father, William Francis (Bill) Gill, the hard times we were experiencing were a painful recapitulation of family history. As the eldest of eight children, he was introduced to



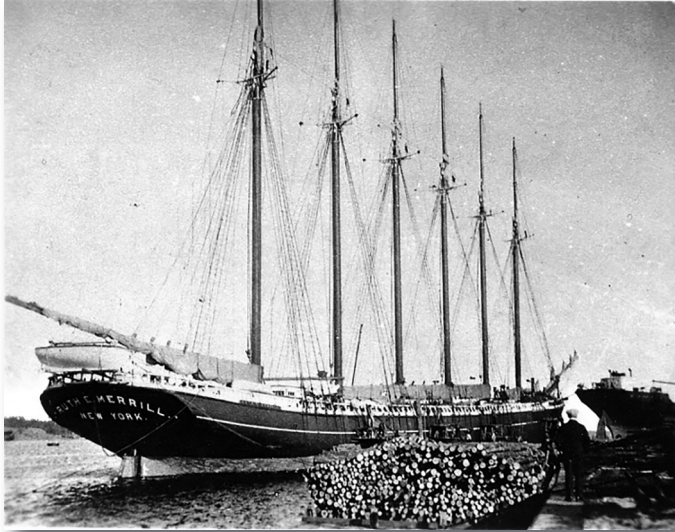
Captain William Francis Gill

hard work at a young age. The Gills had been fishermen for untold generations on the Aran Islands off the west coast of Ireland. Dad's father, Roger Gill, had emigrated to America with his family in 1864 at the age of eleven, and went fishing and clamming in local waters with his father, Steven, before he was old enough to shave. As a young boy, Dad, in his turn, accompanied Roger when he went out at night fishing for flounder, fluke and other groundfish in Boston Harbor. On those nights, Dad would bait hooks and clean the catch for his father until, overcome by fatigue, he would fall asleep in the grimy, wet bottom of their Swampscott dory.

Those were the easy years for Dad. Fishing became a full-time job for him before his thirteenth birthday, when his father died and he became the main support for his mother, Sarah Foley Gill, and his seven younger siblings. He dropped out of school and signed on the *Lydia A. Harvey*, a two-masted fishing schooner captained by his cousin, also named William Gill. Dad spent the next three years fishing on shares on the Georges Bank and Grand Banks. Then, seeking steadier wages, he shipped on a series of coastal schooners, rising “up the hawse pipe” from Ordinary Seaman to Able Seaman, and finally to Second Mate and Bosun on many of the great four- and five-masted schooners, and the six-masted coal schooner, *Ruth E. Merrill*.

As Second Mate, Dad was third in command of the ship. He was responsible for managing the crew, supervising sail operations, servicing the standing and running rigging, making and mending of sails, maintaining the hull, topsides, deck, cabins and other superstructure, oiling or varnishing the steering wheels, spars and rails, and keeping the binnacle, portholes and other brass objects polished. The owners of these great schooners expected their vessels to not only make swift passages between the Chesapeake Bay coal terminals and Boston and Portland, but also to arrive in port in pristine condition.

Dad had survived hurricanes, shark attacks, yellow fever, typhoid fever, and near collisions at sea, but his luck ran out in May, 1909. He was Second Mate on the five-masted coal schooner *Dorothy Palmer* when the vessel docked in South Boston. After the vessel secured alongside to discharge a load of coal, Dad started to disembark by means of a long, wooden ladder. The ladder broke, and he fell more than twenty feet, landing hard on the concrete dock. He sustained



The *Ruth E. Merrill*

a concussion, fractures to his spine, and a fracture of his left thigh bone. He was hospitalized and his leg placed in traction. When he was discharged from the hospital several months later, his left leg was more than an inch shorter than his right, and he had to walk with a cane for the rest of his life.

Dad realized that his game leg would keep him off the quarterdeck of the great blue-water schooners. But, with the skills he had learned working in shipyards and rigging shops between voyages, he had no trouble finding work at the renowned George Lawley & Son boatyard in South Boston and at various other rigging and sail-making shops around Boston. In addition to his rigging and sail-making business, Dad was a professional captain on *Corinthia*, *Earthly Dawn*, *Northern Light*, *Carline*, *My Epiphany* and many other yachts and schooners.