

Ode to the Radio Officer.

The call of the sea, the lure of the key,
Are stronger by far than mere fashion;
They'll turn a young head, they'll stop a chap dead,
And inspire in his heart a real passion.

Lads leave their mums, their girlfriends and wives,
Their loved ones and even test cricket,
Then study and starve and sweat and cram
All for a PMG ticket.

Hours every day of dit-dit-dit-dah
Of Regs and of Radio Theory;
Dozens of Q codes to learn off by heart
Will make one unutterably weary.

Pi circuits, tank circuits, tuned circuits too,
The embryo Sparks learns the lot;
Inductive reactance, Henrys and ohms,
His life is now just one long swat.

Anodes and cathodes, triodes and grids,
Valves of all colours and sizes;
Negative feedback must be applied
Or rogue oscillation arises.

Collectors, emitters, electrons and holes,
Capacitors, chokes and resistors;
Resonant frequency, lead acid cells,
And hundreds of other tongue-twisters.

Two years and more of blood, sweat and tears
And then the exams must be passed.
The diligent few will cheer with the news –
"Finished with college at last!"

It's off to the tailor for one wavy stripe,
Join Marconi or IMRC,
Or CP Ships freelance with Redifon gear,
As long as it gets you to sea.

First day on board, time to sign on,
But what's this you hear the Mate saying?
"Address shipping agent as 'Worshipful Sir',
And tell him you hope to be staying."

Everyone's chuckling, your leg has been pulled,
You're filled with despair and with gloom
As you're told to move into your cabin,
Down below - in the engine room.

What a relief – they were winding you up,
A privilege afforded to Newbies;
No prizes for falling for this, youthful Sparks,
Except those awarded to boobies!

Up to the bridge deck, your cabin's right there,
Off the wing bridge and next to the Chart Room.
Drop your bags, fix your tie, square your shoulders old chap,
Dispel all those feelings of gloom.

Go find your chief, report in to base,
Look in the radio room first.
There he is, straighten up, pull in your chin,
And prepare yourself now for the worst.

The Chief R/O's a curmudgeonly sort,
But cheers up when you buy him a beer.
Then regales you with tales of the hardships to come
Pursuing your chosen career.

The pilot's aboard, the agent's ashore,
It's time that we put out to sea.
So single up now, fore and aft, on the deck
Let's get away from the quay.

Here come the tugs - sound the horn, toss a line;
Ding-ding-ding "Slow Ahead Both!"
Engine vibrations and creaking bulkheads,
Creep ahead like a maritime sloth.

We're clear of the heads, the pilot's away,
The ship's beginning to roll.
"Full ahead both!" the telegraph sings,
As you sit there, your head in a bowl.

Mal-de-mar and dizziness, the first-timer's lot;
Nothing's where it's always been,
They call the floor the deck round here,
And the deck is beginning to lean!

The walls are called bulkheads, the windows are ports,
Say deckhead for ceiling these days;
Left for port, right for starboard, confusing indeed!
And yet you will learn every phrase.

Soon feeling better, now take your first watch,
Repair to the radio room.
Your first QSO scares you halfway to death
You're nervous with visions of doom.

But two years of training now pay off in spades,
You're pounding the key with a smile.
GNF's signals are easy to read,
Your TR goes off in grand style.

This first trip soon settles into rhythm with ease,
MSG's, OBS and TR's;
Silence periods, log books, the officer's mess,
Time ashore in those shady-type bars.

Your first furlough's here in double-quick time,
You home town seems to have shrunk.
How boring the old haunts and pals that you knew,
Nothing to do but get drunk.

Back to sea is the obvious choice,
Travel, adventure, new chums;
Key-bashing is fun as well you will find,
Better than twiddling your thumbs!

And so the years roll quickly by,
With trips to far countries and near,
With all kinds of crews, on different ships
With all sorts of radio gear.

Panama, Rio, Malta, New York,
Rotterdam, Capetown, Shanghai;
Sydney, Hong Kong, Hamburg, Quebec,
Durban, Auckland, Dubai.

And all those coast stations worked on the key!
PCH, DAN, ZSC,
VIA, VCS, KPH, GLD,
VPS, GPK, ZLB.

EJM, GNI, ZSB, GNF,
J2A, VIS, OST,
GKA, GKZ, VIM, FFB,
VID, EJK, ZSD.*

But they don't need you now, you're yesterday's news,
A satellite's taken your place.
The Radio Officer's day is all done,
He simply takes up too much space!

A hundred years of service gone,
We are the last ones left;
All put out to pasture now,
The world of Sparks bereft.

A dwindling band of brothers we,
Less each passing year;
No junior sparks are coming in,
It is the end, I fear.

But be proud to have been in the ranks of the few,
The Sparks were such marvellous men;
They earned their own place in the lore of the sea,
You'll not see their like e'er again.

Our club is exclusive, the membership's closed;
We alone carry the flame.
Hold your heads high, my fellow Sparks,
Your name's in the sea's Hall of Fame.

My story's done, the tale's been told,
The word's spread near and far.
Of men at sea in green and gold -
So dit-dit-dit-dah-dit-dah! **

Dave Ellis,

April 2010.

*** Maritime Radio Stations:**

PCH Scheveningen Radio
DAN Nordeich Radio
ZSC Capetown Radio
VIA Adelaide Radio
VCS Halifax Radio
KPH San Francisco Radio
GLD Lands End Radio
VPS Hong Kong Radio
ZLB Awarua Radio
EJM Malin Head Radio
GNI Niton radio
SAG Gothenburg Radio
GNF North Foreland Radio
J2A Djibouti Radio
VIS Sidney Radio
OST Ostend Radio
GKA Portishead Radio
GKZ Portishead Radio
VIM Melbourne Radio
FFB Boulogne Radio
VID Darwin Radio
EJK Valentia Radio
ZSD Durban Radio

** VA (morse for "end of transmission").