[Spark, The Mighty Man]

Part V. M. Swenson [A. [?]?] [[?]?] 8/24/'39 SPARKS, THE MIGHTY MAN

[md;]

January 4, 1921 - (My 19th birthday)

Went to the recruiting station on East 23rd St. and enlisted in the United States Marine Corps, for a period of four years. Tomorrow I go aboard the SS City of Savannah — destination: Savannah, Georgia.

Sold my sending and receiving set to Bill Moran for $11. Also my books and manuals on radio communications. The transmitter is still in fine shape— had it five years. Consists of: a simple helix, small fixed spark gap, spark coil and key, complete with a pair of [?] Baldwin head phones.

Mother is not so keen on my joining the marines. Didn't tell her the Manhattan Electric Supply Co. canned me last week. What she don't know won't eat her.... It's a long time I been dreaming of the day when I'd become a commercial operator sailing ships on the high seas...! 2 [??] I'm taking with me to be a souvenir of my [?] in the [?] Marine Corps. Cheerio! Corporal James Gordon Brown! ! ! it's “Sparks, the Mighty Man”ye ?] be at last.... Sparks, a mighty man is he All he does is pound a key And listen to the ships at sea He copies weather and the press And listen listens for an SOS His rig is all shiny-bright His hook is clear When into port the ship does steer He's ready for a little fun At the finish of the run Oh, Sparks, a mighty man is he He helps to make it safe at sea!

By J. G. B.

Jan. 4, 1921

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January 20. Aboard SS City of Savannah.

We dock at 10 o'clock tonight. Trip uneventful, with fair weather all the way. This afternoon the ship nosed its way along the muddy Savannah River. This was the most interesting part of the trip. As we went last past the lighthouse, the “Waving Girl of Savannah” stepped out and waved to us with a white scarf. This “Waving Girl” is really an old lady. It seems that 3 many years ago she had a sailor sweetheart, and one day the guy went to sea on along trip. It was agreed between them that when he returned she would watch for him and wave from the lighthouse. Her sweetheart never returned, and down through the years, this girl has been waving to every passing ship, thinking her lover might be on board. (Funny no other sailor took her up on it...)

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January 21. Entrained at Savannah and late same afternoon arrived Port Royal, South Carolina, where I was taken in tow by a Marine Sergeant. Was assigned to Battalion 'B' where I'm to into training for two months. First they took me to the military barbers to have my hair cropped close, then my photograph taken, then innoculations for typhoid. After [?] that all of us recruits were marched over to quartermasters quartermaster's store rooms and issued our clothes and equipment. Drill tomorrow A. M. at 5. Ho Hum....

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January 22.

Bugle routed us out of bed this morning, and we lined up outside the barracks. One recruit failed to snap out of his bunk at the first call, and the Corporal just dumped the bunk upside down. We did some drilling, and then the non-coms snapped questions at us,

such as, What is a Captain's insignia? How many stars for a Brigade Commander , ? and so on, and so forth, etc. Then we returned to the barracks, made up bunks according to regulations, and waited for chow call to sound breakfast. After chow, there were various drills with and without the rifle, schooling in seamanship, then we were marched to the rifle range where we were expected to make a good score with the rifle and pistol. I was a little gun-shy at first. The officer jammed my arm in the sling and even kicked my elbow under me, until it was in the correct position. I've got to qualify on the range, or else I'll never see the decks of a U.S. Navy ship... Well, more target practice tomorrow.

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May 15, 1921.[?] In four month's time, I managed to make the grade as marksman and sharpshooters and finished a course in the Marine Corps Training School for Radio Telegraphers and Visual Signal Men. A week ago, was assigned to the Naval Radio Station *1 for duty as regular operator . [on the Island. *1] A sergeant is in charge of the radio shack, and four marine watch operators— good eggs all. Our sleeping quarters are adjacent to the operating room. When I'm called to take my turn at the night watch, all I have to do is pull on a pair of trousers and slippers, walk a half dozen steps to the next room, and I'm on duty.

Being on land duty is not quite what I'd bargained for. But they say I've got to make good as a land operator, before they'll ship me out to sea as a full fledged Radio Mariner.

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June 2.

Took my first distress call alone last night. I was on duty in the wee hours, while the other ops dozed. The radio traffic wave / lengths were practically clear of business, and I was napping a bit, myself, over the instrument board. I 6 snapped to attention, though, when

I heard the shrill note of a transmitter from some ship on the distress frequency '600 meters'. That SOS seemed to form a picture in my mind of three red dots, three black dashes and three red dots again. I made ready to copy the ship's position. I listened for a few moments to see if any other station would answer. No other station on the air. So I called the coast guard cutter Yamacraw, docked at Savannah. After a few calls the Yamacraw answered, and I gave them the dope. They immediately got underway and proceeded to the assistance of the SS Asche, a freighter, which had struck a reef in the Bahamas and was held fast, with practically her whole bottom sheared off.

I was pretty excited, but I rapped out those signals clean and clear. Good old Sparks....!

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June 10. Santo Domingo City.

Transferred here as result of good work connected with the SS Asche disaster. There certainly are a great gang of men at this station. The operators are both marines and gobs. When off 7 duty we either hang out at “John's Place”, a cafe owned by an ex-marine, or at the “Little Red Shanty”, which is within a stone's throw of the wreck of the old Memphis. Two of the gobs live in this shanty, which is well stocked with a summer's supply of Tiger Beer.

A Naval Leiutenant Lieutenant is officer in charge of this station. He's not exactly popular with us, nor we with him. When “Dud” Grayham blows on the scene, one of [?] the boys will [? ??] sing out “Yes, we have no bananas ' “ , which means , everyone had better quiet down and look busy. We've hung many a joke on Dud, but he's never been able to pin the trouble on any one man— consequently he's out to shanghai us one [after the other?] and all. We put rocks in the drawers of his desk, hung tin cans on his coat rack, swept up all kinds of rubbish and left it in the telephone booth— Sometimes we even carry his office

furniture out on the lawn at night. But that gag's not so good, because we have to carry it all back again the next day.

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After long practice, I find I'm able to put away my full share of [lisquor?] liquor , and I'm beginning to like [?] this brawling life a little too well. Most every evening I sit around the open - air cafes, sip a glass of wine, while I keep my eyes open for a passing fancy. Just for the hell of it, I bought an outfit of Dominican civilian clothes— white shoes and a large sombrero. After dark, I put on these glad rags and start into town, with Clotilda for company. We talk only in Spanish and walk right by American MP's who don't know but what we're just another couple of Spicks. It's lots of fun, but if I get caught it'll mean a general court martial, due to the fact that , in a foreign country on active service, it is against regulations to wear civilian clothes.

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November 6.

On November 1, I was appointed to the rank of corporal, and transferred to Santiago, known as “The City of Gentlemen”. First thing I did on arrival was resolve to leave the liquor alone, and turn over a new leaf.

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Jerry, Frenchy and myself were assigned to Headquarters Company, Fourth Regiment, and are now on detached duty at the station up on Radio Hill.

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December 26.

For Christmas day, we had a tornado. The wind that struck [?] the hill was so strong that it swept everything clean. I just had time to grab my matress, roll off the top of the hill,

and holding the matress as a shield, protect [?] myself from rocks and flying debris. The following morning the detachment had to be supplied with new outfits and equipment as practically everything had been destroyed during the storm.

Well, it's almost a year I've been in the Marines— I never figured [?] it'd take me so long to make Corporal ...

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January 3, 19, 1922.

I was honorably discharged from the Marine Corps. Same day caught a ride on the rails to New York, and am now 10 stopping off to see Mother at Nyack. I've only been back three weeks, but I feel restless and undecided. Beginning to think of joining the Coast Guard.

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February 12, [?] 1923

I enlisted in the U. S. Coast Guard as radioman 3rd class, for a period of one year, at the Barge Office, located at the Battery, N. Y. C. Have been assigned to duty aboard the cutter, Diligence, at Stapleton, Staten Island.

With the home port at Base 2, Staten Island, the Diligence has been ordered to cruise along the New York and Jersey coasts, patrolling the sea, on the lookout for rumships or derelicts reported by radio to be in our vicinity . , and with her radio become alert for the S.O.S. calls of any vessel in distress.

The radio room is both comfortable and efficient. Apparatus consists of a 1-KW Arc transmitter, a 1/2-KW quenched spark transmitter, and a regulation navy type number 1422 receiver. The Diligence call letters are NIXB.

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March 1.

Rum-row is indeed a busy place. The large ships with cargos of contraband are anchored just outside the 12-mile limit all along the Atlantic coast. Schooners of all sizes and descriptions, sails flapping in the wind, come to contact the steamers at night. After receiving a cargo, they hover near the international limit until dark, then high-powered motor boats without any [?] running lights endeavor to make contact, take on a load and make a dash for shore at such high speed, that it is more often than not impossible for the cutters , with an average speed of 12 knots[, ?] or less, to overhaul them or even make them heave - to by resorting to gunfire.

Alone in the shack, I was sitting here looking out through the port, thinking how uncanny and weird it seems out here. The water [??] underneath, the sky overhead, and the swish as the ship cuts through the domain of Neptune and Davy Jones Locker. All of a sudden, I was startled by the soft thud of a small white object on the 12 deck at my feet. It was a flying fish who had been attracted by the light in the shack.

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Sunday, May 10.

A thick pea-soup fog enveloped both sides of rum row today. Bells could be heard jangling every few minutes from ships that were anchored, and at regular intervals, long blasts of steam whistles,[?] indicated that some ships were under / way. The fog is an advantage to the 'wets'. During the day reports were received that 150 cases were landed on Long Island at the town of Easthampton. The fog is hanging on while the rum smugglers draw in near shore to make contacts. The 'dry' fleet has doubled vigilance as pilots of liners

reported eight ' wets ' off Sandy Hook, although there isn't much that can be done until the fog lifts.

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May 14.

Night after night under cover of darkness, the Diligence with darkened ship patroles the area of activity.

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The rum ships also move about without lights, and the danger of collision is imminent. On the bridge the officers listen for the purr of the high powered motor on the rum boat. Once this sound has been detected, the gun crew jumps to their stations, a whistle is sounded through the communication tube in the shack, the order from the bridge comes: “Man the searchlight!” The second operator dashes out of the shack, up a ladder to the hurricane bridge, and turns on the huge beam, directing it towards the sound of the motor. In a moment the enemy is brought into the glare of the rays from the light, and under full speed, is making a gallant dash for shore with his cargo. Likewise under forced draft, the Diligence follows in pursuit. The enemy boat leads us in a zig-zag course, making it difficult to keep the boat in the radius of the light. All that can be seen is the wake from the propeller. Shells from the 3-inch gun in flashing bursts explode ahead, astern , and on either side. The men aboard the rum ship certainly have courage to run that guantlet of fire. Each time the gun is fired, the ship 14 quivers , and there is too much vibration from the excessive speed. The wind screams by the operator manning the light, but the chase goes on and on, with the rum ship getting closer to shore all the time. Perhaps we will lose him, but no, his motor is now shut off, the red and green running lights are turned on, [?] a sign that he is hove-to, ready to be boarded. The captain signals the engine room and the Diligence is slowed down, while the captain hails the rum ship and orders the master to come alongside, only to find that during the chase the outlaws have thrown all of

their cargo overboard. With all the evidence gone, they could only be held for violations of navigation.

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August 12.

Our skipper is afflicted with a mania for bad weather. When a storm warning is copied , indicating bad weather along the coast, he reads it and [?] exclaims : “That's fine. We'll head right out to sea.”

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While all the other ships of the squadron [?] are seeking shelter, the Diligence is tossing and pitching in the teeth of the gale, riding it out. When walls of green water sweep over the ship, old man Dunne will jump up and down in the pilot house in childish glee. # One night after I had turned in my bunk, a wave struck the ship broadside, followed by two more in rapid succession. The ship keeled over and [?] seemed as though it would capsize. I jumped from my bunk to the deck below and made a dash up the ladder for the port. By this time the Diligence had regained an even keel again. # In the pilot house , supposedly made fast to the bulkhead , is a weather-worn [?] cuspidor, containing a quantity of liquids and solids, deposited there by the skipper, mates and bos'n. Day or night, at frequent intervals, the silence is shattered by the a ker-plunk as a stream of tobacco juice makes a bulls-eye in the ever filling receptacle. One afternoon while on patrol, I stood braced in the doorway of the shack, for the ship was wallowing in a heavy sea. The vessel had reached the limit of its territory and was due 16 to be turned about. As the wheel was put over, the ship slipped into the trough of the sea and keeled over on one side. Every loose object rolled or slid across the deck. The cuspidor, however, [????] shot up from the deck and hit Captain Dunne square in the face. As it fell to the deck, rolling along at crazy angles towards the bulkhead, the captain's face was a sight to behold. [?] he He gasped for breath, while a long streaky brown mass slowly dripped to the deck.

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October 28.

On the night of October 25, [?] 1923 , I was standing the four - to - midnight trick, while outside the wind howled, and I felt grateful for the warmth and comfort of the radio shack with the / ship alongside the dock. At 10:30 I copied the weather, which reported storm warnings being displayed from Eastport Maine to Cape Hatteras, attended by winds of gale force. Carefully tuning the receiver on the distress frequency, I listened closely during the silent periods for any 17 weak signals. At 11:05 the air became tense as the SS Commonwealth sent out a “CQ”, stating the ship was disabled 40 miles off Point Judith. [?] One of the side propellers has had broken. Anchors had been put out, but with a high wind and heavy seas, the ship was in a percarious precarious position with 150 passengers aboard, and [?] immediate assistance was requested. I answered the operator on the Commonwealth and told him to stand by while this information was passed on to the captain. Within the hour the Diligence was underway , standing out to sea under forced draft. The coast stations had cleared the air, and I resumed communication with the Commonwealth.

I asked the operator how the passengers were taking it. He replied, “They are all huddled in the lounge cabin forward, nervous but quiet.” Through the remaining hours of the night we kept the transmitters going, exchanging words of cheer and instructions.

At the break of dawn, the [?] Diligence drew up near the Commonwealth. She was rising and falling in a heavy sea. With instructions from the captain, I radioed the Commonwealth 18 asking if they cared to lower a boat. The master replied, “No, not in this sea.” Our [vessal?] vessel then attempted to shoot a line to the distressed ship, by means of an air gun.

The Diligence was maneouvered as close as possible, and as she steamed by, the gun was fired. But the wind was too strong and the missile and twine was carried far beyond the length of the ship. Each succeeding attempt met with the same fate, while every man aboard held his breath in suspense. All the while the Diligence was being swept by heavy seas, and , compared to the size of the other vessel, looked like a bobbing cork. Finally the cord from the gun caught on a piece of the Commonwealth's superstructure. Members of the crew rushed along the slippery deck to make it fast. Next a small hawser was connected to the end of the twine. And when this had been hauled aboard, a larger hawser was paid out. The ends were now made fast in readiness to tow the Commonwealth to New Port, but we were still held up. As the power was shut down on the [Comminwealth?] [Commonwealth ?] the anchors could not be hoised hoisted in the ordinary way. The crew had to hoist them 19 by hand. The job was long and tedious, so that it was late in the afternoon before the Diligence received the signal to go ahead. The Diligence had to proceed at a low rate of speed due to the heavy seas and the danger of the tow line breaking from the strain.. But the following morning, the Commonwealth was turned loose in the harbor of New Port, safe and sound with all passengers.

The wind has died down a bit and the sky is clear. The moon and stars are very bright, but the air is very cold. I can see the lighthouse beam flashing from West Chop on one side, and other flashing lights along the coast. Sparks, a mighty man is he... All he does is pound a key He copies weather and the press And listens for an SOS.... Sparks, a mighty man is he He helps to make it safe at sea .... December 9, [?] 1923 .

At sundown tonight,a gray haze envelopes the two peaks astern. [?] The sky was a shade of light blue, the horizon 20 a deep orange , and the sea dark blue , as the shadows began to creep over it. The ship [?] rolls from side to side in a gentle swell. The floodlights are turned on, making the foredeck bright as day. The crew stand at their posts. At the bow the captain stands, [?] at times shouting orders to the bridge, such as: “Hard aport”, “A half starboard”, “Now steady.” The electrician in the testing room patiently studies

the wheatstone bridge. The second cook sits outside the galley on an upturned bucket, peeling potatoes for the morrow. The automatic clock on the bridge chimes out six bells. The quartermaster strikes six bells on the ship's bell, and it is repeated once again in the engine room, where a piece of iron is used to strike the bells. Then the watch is relieved, and life goes on and on in this little world all by itself out on the deep blue sea.

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February 1, [?] 1924 . Today my enlistment expired and I received an horrorable discharge for one year's service.

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Bidding the radio gang goodbye, I stepped down the gang-plank and patted the steel hull of the ship that now seems to have become a part of me. Now that I am leaving the old girl, I realize I sorta feel quite some affection for her.

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