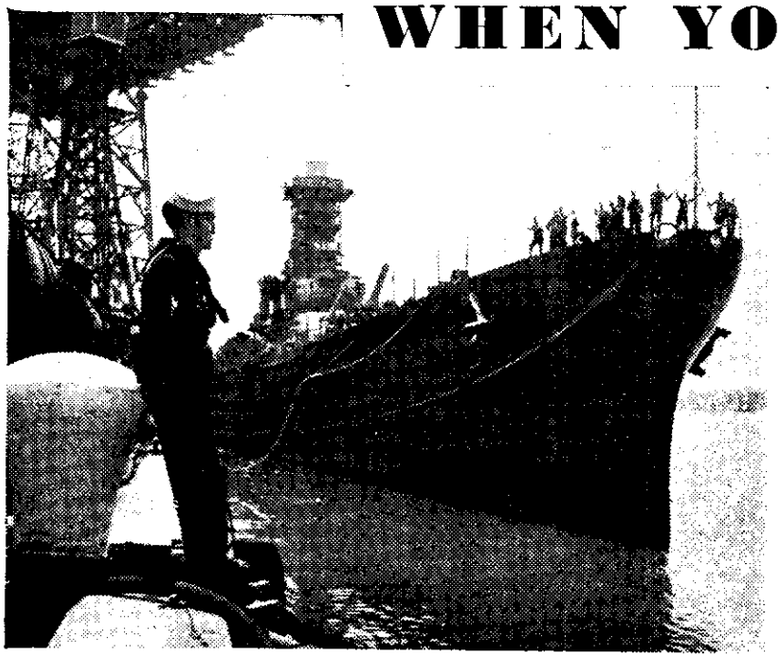
WHEN YOU MEET A MARINE

You May Find It Hard To Understand What He Says

Written for "The Listener" by A.M.R.



IF you meet a marine, or indeed any sailor from some American naval craft (as I suppose I am allowed to say you are likely to do any of these days in—well, a certain South Pacific port), you are pretty sure to find yourself asking "Was that your ship came in this morning?" And he will look reel glad to hear the friendly question and will reply that it sure is good to be in a country agen whur folks are homely: whur they talk to you in stores or on the street-car and invite you to visit with them; and whose homes — except, oh boy! the way they dig thur toenails in the hillsides! — are reel Noo England too; and whose trees, though not the same as those over home, *look* somehow the same. . . . It's all so different, indeed, from whur they lately bin.

And by then you may have forgotten that he has not answered your question: or you have dropped to it that he won't—except maybe by accident, as "the snow was good and homelike to see on thim mountains of yours this morning." And he certainly won't tell you anything about those "places we bin." Nor will you ask him, anyhow.

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THE United States Navy's precautions to prevent *unintentional* information leaking out as to where their ships are, were, or will be, is as thorough as their sailors' intention not to give it. Sailors may not even write home. They may only "strike out what does not apply" on cards available before every mail leaves ship:—"I am sick/well. . . . I was glad/sorry (not) to receive news of father/mother/baby . . . etc. . . . Love/Best wishes. . . ." And if anyone crosses out "well" and "sick" (say) and writes instead "fat" or "bored," his card will never get even as far as the Mail Distributing Station back in the U.S., where a strictly non-committal postmark is stamped on. Parents in this war and the last who knew their sons were "Somewhere in France" were deluged with non-essential information by comparison. A letter home from Junior in the Navy simply conveys that he continued to be, when he wrote it, Somewhere in the World. Still that is what his folk mainly want to be assured of.

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YOU may have heard of even further precautions and ask your gob if it really is true that when they get back to America next they are to be allowed to carry ashore not one matchstick, nor one whiff of a souvenir or foreign purchase, since such things can indicate convoy routes as clearly as maps. "Yeah, I hear tell," he may reply, "But it's scuttlebutt to me—like our going to Little America to take off Byrd, or maybe birds." "Scuttlebutt?" you exclaim. And he explains that the scuttlebutt (butt=barrel) was the masculine, days-of-sail equivalent of the village pump. When sailors went to fill their mugs they drank in the latest gossip as well. Hence, in navy language scuttlebutt equals gossip, rumour, or anything covered by the phrase "it is credibly reported." If you talk long enough, there will be plenty of other words you will need to have similarly translated, first into standard American, then into English.

The Things You Eat . . .

But it is when you two sit down to eat that you will get your bibful of ship's slang. Your pick-up at first glance will likely connect the City Council's notice about "Dogs Not Admitted" with the menu and will bemoan the apparent ban on "hot dogs." To him "dead pig" is liver. "Criers" you may guess are onions, "grease" is butter, and "wheat" is bread. "Spuds" are good inter-Allied argot, though what you call "chips" he reserves for your "flakes." "Hen" will be more inntelligible to you than the standard American "chicken," and less financially frightening. (Less misleading, too, since usually she is no chicken and lays down her life only when she can lay nothing else.) But you will never interpret "deck scrapings" as hash unless you have at some time seen the reddish deck shavings themselves. Which out of "sand" and "gravel" is salt and which is sugar you can discover only by trial and error. "Mush" he will probably think necessary to explain is "wet cereal," not realising that you have some translating to do to make that porridge.

Similarly his explanation that the Navy's "collision mats" are only "flapjacks" won't help you any until you recognise them in the concrete for pancakes. "Red lead" will puzzle you some, even after he has said it means "ketchup," unless you happen to know that that is the way to pronounce tomAto sauce as the Americans spell it—catsup. (A case of Tomato Sauce bottles is officially stamped "One Gross Tom. Cats.") "Doughnuts" you ought to know. But you will never guess that to him "brown bread" means a loaf made with corn (i.e., maize), plums (i.e., raisins), and molasses (i.e., treacle). And if he explains that "sinkers" in the navy are the same as "hot biscuits" ashore it is no use suggesting to him that he really means scones. He has never heard of them.

. . . And What You Drink

"You will of course give him tea to drink. He won't like it. But he will dislike it less than any coffee you are likely to be able to turn on—"chickory in hot water carried past the galley door," he may comment. Better still, if you can, give him the jopot in your kitchen and let him make real 100 per cent. American gemalk or java (so called because that sort doesn't grow there) for you. When, however, he tells you that at sea they call it "mud" do not let on how appropriate it looks. Anyhow, to offset your loathsome chickory he will be able to use Council Supply milk for once, instead of shipboard "canned cow," "evaporated cow," or even maybe, "cowdust."

All this slang is good, straightforward sea stuff — not self-conscious wisecracking like that of the American gas-and-eats roadhouses where the prop. taking orders from the autos parked round in the evening cool, slings to the wiseguy out back: "Adam and Eve on a raft—reck 'em" (scrambled eggs on toast), or "Apple in a snowstorm" (apple pie and ice cream), or "two pigs in a blanket" (sausage rolls).

The Tale of a Cat

Authentically salt too will be your guest's tales of shipboard life. For example, one gob I had come visit with me (or, in English, visit me) turned out to be head of his ship's police force of five Whites and five Negroes. When he is not swinging his hickory bough or throwing his '45 ("our orders is to kill, not maim: 'self defence' protects you: but you're cooled yourself if you let 'em beat you up"), and when he is not working his daily routine rounds so as to arrive at each call at coffee time, he finds other amusements. "Every man has his Pass, with his photo on it, and his Liberty Card. We made out a Pass for the engine-room cat. Unfortunately the official photographer at the third try could still only get him in reverse, going fast. And his fingerprints were blobs. But his Liberty Card, that didn't have no photo on it, looked swell. Then one time when the Commander was round he goes to the rack and flicks over the Liberty Cards — the only time I ever known him to do it. He straight away picks up the cat's card—it was yellow, for liberty every night—and he looks hard at it. 'Thomas P. Cat,' he says, 'a most unusual name.' 'Yes sir,' says I, 'but there are others with it aboard.' 'Rating R.C., First Class,' he says. But I weren't squealing that R.C. was Rat-Catcher. However, he turns that card around so long that at last I thinks it best to tell him it is the cat's. Boy, was he mad; First he is going to make us tear it up. Then he gets us write ANIMAL over it, big, in red ink, and

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