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The Case of the Obstinate Lighthouse (folklore)

From: "Keith Woodard" <qwoodard@worldnet.att.net>
Date: Thu, 5 Nov 1998 12:25:15 -0800

Re: <http://www.ufomind.com/misc/1998/sep/d28-001.shtml> (last message)

> Date: Wed, 23 Sep 1998 19:46:06 -0700
> To: (Recipient list suppressed)
> From: "Keith E. Lamonica" <keith@lamonica.com>
>
> Via: Don Ecker <decker@ufomag.com>
>
> This is the transcript of an ACTUAL radio conversation of a US naval ship
> with Canadian authorities off the coast of Newfoundland in October, 1995.
> Radio conversation released by the Chief of Naval Operations 10-10-95.
>
> <snip>

It turns out life is not always this cute. From:

<http://snopes.simplenet.com/spoons/faxlore/lighthse.htm>

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The story of the self-important aircraft carrier captain getting his well-earned comeuppance at the hands of a plain-speaking lighthouse has been making the rounds on the Internet since early 1996. Most writeups purport to be transcripts of a 1995 conversation between a ship and a lighthouse as documented by Chief of Naval Operations.

It ain't true. Not only does the Navy deny it, the anecdote shows up in a 1992 collection of jokes and tall tales. Worse, it appears in Stephen Covey's 1989 *The Seven Habits Of Highly Effective People*, and he got it from a 1987 issue of *Proceedings*, a publication of the U.S. Naval Institute.

It's likely far older than that, because another reader mentioned he saw it passed around as a photocopied joke in the late 1960s while serving aboard either the USS *Dixie* or USS *Truxtun*. That certainly agrees with the opinion of Navy sources (as quoted in the news article later on this page); they place the story as thirty or forty years old.

Slightly different versions name different ships as the one which unwillingly gained a lesson in the unimportance of self importance. Having debunked this tale a few times themselves, the Navy has a web page

about this legend, one that answers what three of the commonly cited ships were doing at the time this supposedly occurred.

The Navy's take on this crazy bit of faxlore is contained in the following 1996 newspaper article:

Stop me if you've heard this one.

Two radio operators, one of them aboard a U.S. Navy ship, had the following exchange:

Radio 1: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the north to avoid a collision.

Radio 2: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees.

Radio 1: This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert your course.

Radio 2: No, I say again, divert YOUR course.

Radio 1: This is an aircraft carrier of the U.S. Navy. We are a large warship. Divert your course now!

Radio 2: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

The source of that story, which the Navy swears is untrue, is not known. It's a joke that has been floating around for at least 10 years, and maybe 30 to 40 years. Some think it originated in a humor column in Reader's Digest. Nobody knows for sure.

But for the past four months the story of the ship and the lighthouse has been passed along, as gospel, by comedy talk-show hosts, lazy newspaper columnists and clueless cyberspace jockies until it has taken on an air of the apocryphal. It clings to Navy lore like that old captain from The Rime of the Ancient Mariner. And, like Coleridge's haunted captain, the Navy is having a real tough time getting this albatross off its neck.

This week the story was repeated by The New York Times News Service, quoting a Canadian newspaper. Last week it was read to a global radio audience on Michael Feldman's popular Whad'ya Know? program on Public Radio International. Earlier, the same network's Car Talk program aired the tale.

In the story's current form, the ship is identified as the carrier Enterprise. In the past it involved a battleship. A version that arrived via e-mail in Norfolk this week from the U.S. Air Force Academy identified it as the "aircraft carrier Missouri." There is no such carrier. The Missouri is a retired battleship.

Various versions carry little embellishments. An amateur-radio buff communicating via the Internet said it happened in Puget Sound. A columnist in the Montreal Gazette said it happened last fall off the coast of Newfoundland. A columnist in North Carolina quoted a local man as saying it happened off the Carolinas.

"It's a totally bogus story, but over the last four months we've gotten at least 12, maybe 18 calls from different media sources trying to confirm that," said Cmdr. Kevin Wensing, an Atlantic Fleet spokesman in Norfolk. "Unfortunately, some of them don't check it out. They just repeat it.

"The first time I heard of it was - oh, let's see, how long - about 10 years ago or so, I think. "That story's so old," Wensing said, "it probably started out back in the galleon days, or back when there was a big lighthouse at Alexandria, Egypt."

Dutifully, when all those reports about the carrier Enterprise began to surface, the Navy had to follow procedures and check it out.

"Yes, we talked to the Enterprise," Wensing said. "It was like, "We've heard this story and we're pretty sure that it's without basis. . . . And their reaction was, 'What? You can't be serious.' "

For the record, Adm. Mike Boorda, the chief of naval operations, released no such transcript on Oct. 10. Or any other time, said Cmdr. John Carman, a spokesman for the admiral. "It's a joke," Carman said, chuckling in disbelief. "And not only that, I've been told it's a real old joke. Like 30 to 40 years ago, that old."

Of the many flaws in the recent version, the most glaring is that there

is no longer a radio crew - or any crew, for that matter - on any lighthouse on the U.S. coastline. The last one was automated 10 years ago, said Lt. j.g. Ed Westfall, the lighthouse program manager for the U.S. Coast Guard's Fifth District, based in Portsmouth.

Westfall said he, too, had heard the story for years, but he had a different understanding of its origin.

"I always thought," he said, "it was just something one of us Coasties had made up to poke fun at the Navy."

Barbara "what, the Village People didn't do a good enough job?" Mikkelson

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PO Box 30303, Las Vegas, NV 89173 Glenn Campbell, Webmaster & Moderator

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