

# 37 Years of Good Luck at Sea Go Up in Smoke for Radio Man

By WERNER BAMBERGER

After 37 years at sea Marlin L. Rittman's luck finally ran out, and he had to abandon ship for the first time in his seagoing career as a radio operator.

Mr. Rittman, who is 58, was one of the 37 crew members of the bulk carrier *Globe Explorer*, which caught fire in the North Atlantic on Sept. 11 on a voyage from Hampton Roads, Va., to Antwerp.

"It's a strange thing what will go through your mind when you are in a tight spot," he said in an interview last week in the offices of the American Radio Association, 270 Madison Avenue.

## Morro Castle Recalled

"Sitting there in my smoke-filled radio shack with a wet towel in front of my face and waiting for word from the Old Man to send out a distress message, I suddenly recalled another September day 30 years ago.

"I was sailing on the *Excambion* to the Mediterranean, and on my watch I heard a lot of distress traffic between ships, one of which was the *Morro Castle*."

The *Morro Castle* burned off Asbury Park, N. J., with the loss of 124 lives. It was one of the major losses by fire for any American merchant ship, and the tragedy led to far-reaching reforms in shipboard fire protection for United States flagships.

"Thirty years ago," Mr. Rittman went on, "I felt sorry for those poor souls on the *Morro Castle* and a little helpless, since we were a thousand miles away."

"Earlier this month, I was literally in the same boat—on a ship on fire. I had to wait 15 minutes, part of which I groped up to the bridge, to find out what was going on before

I got the O.K. from the first mate to send out the SOS.

"It's not the easiest thing to switch on the emergency transmitter in near darkness, when you can hardly breathe, and pound out a short and accurate message on which the life of your shipmates and your own may depend.

"There was always that nagging doubt in the back of my mind that maybe in my haste and in the darkness I didn't have the set tuned exactly on 500 kilocycles—the international distress message frequency—but when, four hours later, the first Coast Guard planes flew over our lifeboat, I knew I had gotten through all right."

## Two Lessons Emerge

In going over those 15 minutes between the time he first smelled smoke and the sending of the SOS, Mr. Rittman said two lessons emerged:

"You got to have a radio operator around in a tight spot like this. The mates in any emergency situation are just too busy looking after the crew and the ship to be bothered with working a radio telephone."

This was a reference to proposals made by the maritime industry to replace radio operators with deck officers trained in radio telephony rather than in radio telegraphy.

"The second lesson," Mr. Rittman continued, "is that they have to find a better spot aboard ship than the radio shack for the emergency lifeboat transmitter. I tried my darndest to wrestle that thing—it weighs about 50 pounds—up to the deck through smoke and dark, and couldn't make it."

Mr. Rittman suggested that the emergency transmitter be placed in a weatherproof container in an accessible spot on deck.