

Hello Sailor! Canada: Gay, Lesbian and Transgendered Seafarers



An Oral History Project for the
Maritime Museum of the Atlantic
by **Emily Burton and Bob Harding**

EXHIBIT RESEARCH REPORT

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1 Literature Review

This brief essay reviews the literatures pertaining to the experiences of gay seafarers in the Canadian historical context. It focuses on three particular bodies of historical literature. First, it reviews treatments of gay seafarers and homosexuality within the broader historiography of North Atlantic seafaring. Second, it reveals the lack of scholarly attention to gay seafarers within Canadian gay and lesbian studies. Third, it examines how gay seafarers and homosexual culture at sea have been addressed within the American historiographical context. This essay also highlights how oral research enables scholars to more fully illuminate the experiences of gay sailors and the nature homosexual culture at sea. The essay demonstrates that while homosexuality has been addressed within the general historiography on North Atlantic seafaring, it remains a largely unexplored topic within the Canadian historiographical tradition. However, pioneering studies in the American context offer useful conceptual and methodological models for incorporating the history of gay seafaring culture into the Canadian narratives of seafaring as well as gay and lesbian history.

Male sexual identity and homosexuality have received treatment in several historical studies of North Atlantic seafaring. Arthur Gilbert first addressed the subject in his 1976 article, "Buggery in the British Navy, 1700-1861."¹ Through his examination of courts martial and surgeons' reports, Gilbert reveals that instances of homosexual activity at sea were hardly isolated or rare. In fact, 'buggery' occurred with enough frequency that the Navy imposed severe punishment on those found guilty of it. Gilbert effectively demonstrates how and why 'buggery' became identified as a criminal act at sea, while offering another unique window onto the workings of naval discipline during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.² However the article offers little insight onto the actual experiences of gay sailors or the existence of a gay seafaring subculture, depicting homosexuality primarily as a threat to shipboard discipline and efficiency.

N.A.M. Rodger considered homosexuality in his large-scale 1986 study of the British Royal Navy during the eighteenth century, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*. He noted the unusual severity of sodomy regulations which was about the only crime in which the death penalty was often awarded. He found eleven court marshals for sodomy during the Seven Years War but he concluded that homosexuality was an "insignificant issue" based on the fact that over a hundred thousand individuals served in the navy during this time and homosexuality rarely appears in correspondence. Rodger speculated that given the tendency of eighteenth century warships to spend long periods of time in port where women were readily available, combined with the extreme lack of privacy in wooden warships, resulted in very few homosexual men served in the navy, although he did note that the reluctance to charge officers and the privacy of their quarters may indicate some unrecorded cases.³

¹ Arthur N. Gilbert, "Buggery in the British Navy," *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Autumn 1976), pp. 72-98.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 72; 75; 77-78; 83.

³ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Wooden World: An Anatomy of the Georgian Navy*, (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), pp.80-81.

Other scholars subsequently indicated how gender and the homosocial nature of seafaring could inform the development of distinct shipboard subcultures. In *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, Marcus Rediker argues that the nature of seafaring subculture was informed by sex and class. Ships were predominantly manned by men who developed a complex and interrelated set of rituals that expressed their feelings of detachment from land, oppression by their commanding officers, and comradeship with their fellow shipmates. Rediker believes that sailors forged bonds of fellowship through the development of a distinct seafaring vocabulary, as well as rituals of sociability including singing, dancing, tale-telling, and drinking.⁴ Rediker contends that such efforts provided a “source of community among men in the wooden world.”⁵ While Rediker offers no discussion of homosexuality at sea, it is interesting to note that several of the characteristics he identifies during an earlier period became defining features of the gay subculture that manifested itself on British passenger liners during the middle of the twentieth century.⁶

Homoeroticism and homosexuality receive fuller attention in Christopher McKee’s *Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-1945*. Predicated on the notion that sailors, “deserve a more sensitive and nuanced portrait than the traditional caricature,” *Sober Men and True* explores the day-to-day experiences of sailors themselves.⁷ Homosexuality is just one topic that McKee attempts to more fully illuminate in his study. He notes that the navy maintained a firm and severe stance against seemingly coercive homosexuality (often in the form of ‘birching’). However, McKee also suggests that consensual gay activities were commonly acknowledged, and generally tolerated, by most sailors. He asserts that in most instances, gay activities were consensual and that the administrative hierarchy preferred to overlook such incidents. Most significantly, McKee concludes that most of the sailors who engaged in gay activities tended to be “situational homosexuals” whose behaviour stemmed from living within a predominantly male environment devoid of female companionship. According to McKee, few of the sailors who engaged in homosexual activity at sea could be identified as having truly been gay.⁸

Paul Baker and Joe Stanley’s important 2003 study, *Hello Sailor! The Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea* presented a much more detailed examination of gay men on British merchant ships from the 1950s to the 1970s, many of whom lived openly gay lives and formed unique gay subcultures working as stewards on British ocean liners.⁹ Their research, based on extensive oral history interviews, formed the basis of the exhibit *Hello Sailor! Gay Life on the Ocean Wave* at the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool, England in 2006.

⁴ Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 154-156; 162; 189-192.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

⁶ Paul Baker, Jo Stanley, *Hello Sailor! The Hidden History of Gay Life at Sea* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2003), passim.

⁷ Christopher McKee, *Sober Men and True: Sailor Lives in the Royal Navy, 1900-1945* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), p. 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 41; 192-193; 195-199; 201-204.

⁹ Baker & Stanley, pp. 225-226.

Gay activity and subcultures have received limited attention in studies of Canadian seafaring. Eric Sager makes passing references to gay seafarers in *Seafaring Labour: the Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* and *Ships and Memories: Merchant Seafarers in Canada's Age of Steam*.¹⁰ Like Rediker, Sager observes that sexual language and imagery were central to the sailors' seafaring identity. However, he notes that these sexualized components of sailor culture were predominantly rooted in heterosexuality. Sager concludes that while men did develop close relationships with other men while at sea, "rarely did the relationship between men become sexual itself, although homosexuality may have been more common when young apprentices were commonly employed."¹¹ Sager makes similar observations in his discussion of sailors' masculinity in *Ships and Memories*. He notes that while most of the ex-sailors he interviewed insisted that gay activity never occurred at sea, many could often recall hearing of an instance when it did. On the basis of that evidence, Sager reasserts his view that homosexuality at sea was highly exceptional, rarely encountered, and not condoned.¹² Sager's views on homosexuality at sea reflect two prevailing features of the literature. First, it suggests the limitations of the textual records with regards to homosexuality at sea. Second, it takes an assumptive tone suggesting that if homosexuality manifested itself at sea that it was not consensual in nature.

The relationship between gender identities and seafaring received more focused treatment during the mid-1990s. In a 1993 review essay for *Acadiensis*, Steven Maynard notes that the lack of attention to gender and sexual identity constitutes a significant gap in the history of seafaring. Maynard insists that historians need to examine women as more than idealized sexual objects left ashore, and that male comradery and identity formation at sea was not solely governed by the strictures of class or heterosexuality. In particular, Maynard contends that homosexuality at sea merits study as something more than a byproduct of the exceptional homosocial circumstances created by life on the waves. Maynard also challenges maritime historians to ask deeper questions of the archival sources and to consider homosexuality as being more than simply a legal transgression or topic for medical study. He concludes that homosexuality needs to be examined as a legitimate aspect of maritime culture that could reveal further ways in which 'the wooden world' constituted a microcosm of landward society.¹³

A study of gender and sexuality at sea appeared just three years later that grappled with many of the issues highlighted by Maynard. *Iron Men, Wooden Women* is a collection of essays that examines gender identities at sea from a variety of perspectives. It argues that gender was a critical component of seafaring culture, and that the absence of studies on sexuality at sea constitutes a glaring

¹⁰ Eric Sager, *Seafaring Labour: the Merchant Marine of Atlantic Canada, 1820-1914* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1989; Sager, *Ships and Memories: Merchant Seafarers in Canada's Age of Steam* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1993).

¹¹ Sager, *Seafaring Labour*, p. 239.

¹² Sager, *Ships and Memories*, pp. 115-116.

¹³ Steven Maynard, "Making Waves: Gender and Sex in the History of Seafaring," *Acadiensis*. Vol. 22, No. 2 (Spring 1993), pp. 144-154.

omission from the historiography.¹⁴ Margaret Creighton contends that the homosocial nature of shipboard life, coupled with men's disassociation from women while at sea, created conditions in which homosexual activities and a gay subculture could emerge. However, Creighton rightly observes that the legal and medical nature of sources discussing gay activity at sea reveals little concerning the actual experiences of those who participated. In other words, the limits of existing archival records make it difficult to shed more light on homosexuality at sea.¹⁵ Laura Tabili's contribution to the collection reaffirms Creighton's view. In her article on British seafarers during the early twentieth century, Tabili notes that the catering and housekeeping departments of ships were alleged to have been havens for gays and transvestites. However, she notes that such observations are based upon hearsay rather than actual sources.¹⁶

Canadian studies of gay and lesbian experiences have not examined gay seafarers or gay subcultures at sea. These studies, including *The Regulation of Desire* by Gary Kinsman, *In a Queer Country* edited by Terry Goldie, and *Never Going Back* by Tom Warner, focus on three subjects in particular. First, they examine the construction of the category homosexual in opposition to heterosexual and subsequent efforts to regulate it as a perceived threat to the heterosexual norm. Second, they explore the lived experiences of gay and lesbian individuals in a variety of contexts (unfortunately this does not include within a seafaring context). Third, they emphasize the emergence of gay and lesbian political movements in reaction to societal stereotypes and restrictive public policies.¹⁷ Rather than indicating a form of scholarly indifference to gay seafarers, the existing literature seems to reflect the status of gay and lesbian studies in Canada as a fairly recent field with much opportunity for further growth and investigation.

Studies of the Canadian armed forces seem to be at one of two poles. Recent centenary treatments of the Canadian Navy by Marc Milner and Richard Gimblett provide extensive treatments of the administrative development of the naval hierarchy, the evolution of the fleet, and its service record during various conflicts. However, these studies offer little insight onto the nature of sailors' lived experiences, and pass no comment on gay sailors or the existence of gay subcultures within the navy itself.¹⁸

¹⁴ Margaret S. Creighton, Lisa Norling, "Introduction," in *Iron Men, Wooden Women: Gender and Seafaring in the North Atlantic World, 1700-1920*. Margaret S. Creighton, Lisa Norling, eds. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), pp. vii; xiii.

¹⁵ Creighton, "Davy Jones' Locker Room: Gender and the American Whaleman, 1830-1870," *Iron Men*, p. 128.

¹⁶ Laura Tabili, "'A Maritime Race': Masculinity and the Racial Division of Labor in British Merchant Ships, 1900-1939," *Iron Men*, p. 184.

¹⁷ Gary Kinsman, *The Regulation of Desire: Homo and Hetero Sexualities* (Montreal: Black Rose Books, 1996); *In a Queer Country: Gay and Lesbian Studies in the Canadian Context*, Terry Goldie, ed. (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2001); Tom Warner, *Never Going Back: a History of Queer Activism in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

¹⁸ Marc Milner, *Canada's Navy: the First Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); *The Naval Service of Canada, 1910-2010: the Centennial Story*. Richard Gimblett, ed. (Toronto: Dundurn Press, 2009).

Homosexuality in the Canadian armed forces is beginning to receive scholarly attention. In *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military during World War II*, Paul Jackson illustrates that homosexuality was a reality of military life at both the social and administrative levels. While Jackson notes that anti-homosexual policies existed in all three branches of the Canadian armed forces, his study focuses primarily upon the experiences of gay men serving with the army. As such, *One of the Boys* does not engage with the issue of gay sailors in the navy. However, Jackson's assertion that homosexuality became increasingly accepted at the ground level in the face of increasingly restrictive policies reaffirms Baker and Stanley's findings concerning gay subcultures on board British passenger vessels.¹⁹

The recently published *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation*, by Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile, is also a study of homosexuality in the Canadian Armed Forces (as well as the civil service). Kinsman and Gentile examine the national security surveillance regime that cast gay, lesbian and bisexual people as being of unstable character and questionable reliability, and therefore susceptible to targeting by "hostile intelligence agencies."²⁰ The authors interviewed forty six people (gay or bisexual men and lesbians) about their entanglements with security campaigns. Unlike the McCarthy hearings and State Department purges in the United States, the Canadian national security campaigns were secretive, and this was true in particular for the campaigns targeting homosexuals. Kinsman and Gentile argue that the secrecy of the campaigns rendered them only partially visible to the people being targeted. *The Canadian War on Queers* seeks to make the social organization of security and surveillance practices more visible.²¹ Although the book focuses on the 1950s and 1960s, it does extend into the present. The latter chapters examine national security campaigns from the 1970s to the present (and the "War on Terror."). Chapter 11, for instance, provides an overview of legal changes associated with the 1982 Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the discrepancies between legal rights and continued opposition to gay rights within the Canadian Armed Forces.²² The early 1990s was a decisive turning point in terms of legal challenges to discrimination based on sexual orientation within the Armed Forces.²³ *The Canadian War on Queers* is a key text for an examination of GLBT people in the Canadian Navy. It provides both a general context and a 'change over time' dimension to the study of individual experiences of homophobia in the Canadian Navy. On the other hand, 'Hello Sailor: The Canadian Edition' will broaden the narrative outlined by Kinsman and Gentile by examining aspects of GLBT life at sea other than homophobia.

¹⁹ Paul Jackson, *One of the Boys: Homosexuality in the Military during World War II* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2004), pp. 3-4; 6-10; 14-17; 265; 268; Bakery, Stanley, *Hello Sailor!*, passim.

²⁰ Gary Kinsman & Patricia Gentile, *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2010), pp. 2, 7.

²¹ Kinsman & Gentile, p. 11

²² Kinsman & Gentile, pp. 391, 398, 401, 406.

²³ The case of Michelle Douglas, in particular, was significant. In 1992, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the discrimination experienced by Douglas could not be justified by Section 15 of the Charter of Rights and Freedom, Kinsman & Gentile, *The Canadian War*, pp. 412-3.

Recent Canadian texts are able to draw from an established body of American literature concerning gay identity and subcultures. George Chauncey's *Gay New York: Urban Culture and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* illustrates how gay men in New York City formed a distinct subculture before World War Two that was both expansive and highly communal.²⁴ Chauncey's study is of particular interest for its observations concerning sailors. The image of the sailor was held in high regard within the iconography of the city's gay subculture, as they were idealized for being young, manly, unattached, and free from the conventional moralities of landward society. Chauncey also notes that sailors regularly frequented many of the gay establishments near the city's docks, and that sailors often accepted the company of gay men because they approved of, and did not question, the 'manliness' of the sailors themselves.²⁵ Chauncey's study is relevant for both its identification of the imagined and real place of sailors within New York's gay subculture, and for its illustration of the evolution and expansion of a gay subculture within a port town.

A subsequent study of gay life in San Francisco identifies similar trends. In *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965*, Nan Amilla Boyd reveals that gay men openly courted sailors for many of the same reasons as their counterparts in New York City. Sailors were idealized for their perceived masculinity and more liberal moral codes. Boyd also suggests that the combination of sailors' experiences of homosocial work and leisure at sea, freedom from societal norms, and detachment from landward society often left them more open to gay companionship and visiting gay bars near San Francisco's waterfront. Like *Gay New York*, *Wide Open Town* concludes that many sailors actively participated in a vibrant gay subculture, and that many gay individuals were pleased by their doing so.²⁶

The groundwork for both of these studies was laid by Allan Berube's *Coming Out Under Fire: the History of Gay Men and Women in World War II*. Berube argues that the war itself was a major event in the history of sexuality, providing the means by which many men and women 'came out.' Like Jackson's *One of the Boys*, Berube's *Coming Out Under Fire* illustrates how homosexual activities and identities gained acceptance at the ground level while official military policies sought to eliminate them. Of more importance, however, is Berube's agreement with Chauncey and Boyd's arguments concerning the place of sailors within gay culture. Berube notes that within the gay community sailors had a reputation for being the most available and open to a wider range of sexual activities and experiences.²⁷ Like Chauncey and Boyd, Berube also notes that sailors were held in high esteem for being young, virile, carefree, and adorned in revealing uniforms. Taken together, these three American studies reveal that sailors occupied a privileged place within the gay imagination and often assumed

²⁴ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Urban Culture and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994). pp. 1-4; 6-10; 13; 16; 23; 25-26.

²⁵ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, p. 54; 64-65; 76-80; 83; 85; 1113; 145.

²⁶ Nan Amilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), pp. ix; 1-2; 8; 44; 90; 110; 114; 118.

²⁷ Allan Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire: the History of Gay Men and Women in World War II* (2nd ed; Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), pp. x; xviii; 12; 62; 110.

an active role within gay subcultures, thus lending further credence to the objective of the *Hello Sailor!* project.

The methodology of recent studies of homosexual subcultures and gay identities is worth discussion. Oral research figures prominently in the studies produced by Jackson, Chauncey, Boyd, and Berube. Much like Baker and Stanley's study, each of these works benefited tremendously from interviews with numerous individuals. For example, both Chauncey and Berube stated having interviewed more than 70 different individuals each.²⁸ This recent penchant for utilizing oral research to illuminate the history of gay and lesbian people reveals two related themes: the limits of traditional archival sources in illuminating the history of gay subcultures, and the ability of oral research to enable witnesses to recall their undocumented lived experiences for the sake of posterity. The studies reviewed in the latter half of this essay (in conjunction with Baker and Stanley's *Hello Sailor!*) illustrate the importance of oral research in bringing social, emotional, and material depth to the experience of being gay, participating in a gay subculture, and challenging the boundaries of the dominant heterosexual norm. While traditional records treat homosexuality as something to be analyzed, judged, and remedied, oral research reveals it to be something that was experienced and lived by many people in a variety of ways.

The literature reviewed in this essay points to both omissions and opportunities. While general seafaring historiography has viewed homosexuality from a primarily legal / disciplinary perspective, Canadian gay and lesbian studies have not considered the life of homosexuality on the water. Until very recently, homosexuality was not a topic covered in studies of Canadian military history. But pioneering studies of gay identity and subcultures in the United States have, largely through their reliance on oral research, revealed new avenues for examination. Thus, American studies point to the validity of examining homosexuality within a maritime context, while revealing oral research to be a highly effective means of illuminating the gay seafaring experience.

²⁸ Chauncey, *Gay New York*, p. x; Berube, *Coming Out Under Fire*, p. xviii; Jackson, *One of the Boys*, p. 24; Boyd, *Wide Open Town*, p. ix.

2 Methodology

Hello Sailor! The Canadian Edition sought to interview gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgendered/transsexual (GLBT) people about their seafaring experiences. Unlike *Hello Sailor! Gay Life on the Ocean Wave*, the Merseyside Maritime Museum exhibit (Liverpool, U.K.), the Canadian edition did not focus on ocean-liners, not did it focus primarily on the 1950s and 1960s. The chronological framework for the Canadian research has been the period from the 1950s to the present. It was anticipated that the interviewees would be primarily from the Canadian Navy, and possibly also the Canadian Coast Guard, research vessels (for instance, from the Bedford Institute of Oceanography), ferries and tugs.

The researchers sought interviewees using the initial contact information provided by the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic (MMA). The list provided by Dr. Gary Brooks was particularly helpful. Contacts were made with various people on the list, some of which led to further dissemination of project information. Members of the Nova Scotia Rainbow Action Project (NSRAP) agreed to share information about the research through various e-mail distribution lists, such as the one for the senior's project (Elderberries Group). Robin Metcalfe also agreed to contact people who might be willing to be interviewed for the project. We found people to be very helpful and to be well-connected to social networks in the GLBT community, both of which helped facilitate the difficult task (given both the tight project timelines and the potentially sensitive nature of the topic) of approaching interviewees.

Five people were interviewed in total. The researchers made contact with three of the five interviewees through the networks mentioned above. An advertisement was also placed in the *Coast* through the MMA, and the fourth interviewee contacted one of the researchers through the advertisement. A fifth interviewee offered to share their experiences after hearing a radio segment concerning the project. It is likely that additional interviewees would have been identified if the project timelines had been longer. There were a few possible interviewees for which there was incomplete follow-through.

One of the interviews was conducted via Skype-phone following a series of e-mail exchanges because the interviewee was not in the country at the time. For three other interviews, a pre-interview meeting was held. All three meetings took place at the Second Cup on Spring Garden Road, which was identified by the first interviewee as a 'gay-friendly' coffee shop. During the pre-interview meetings the researchers discussed the *Hello Sailor* exhibits (both the existing U.K. and forthcoming Halifax ones) and the interview process itself. The potential interviewees talked about themselves, their reasons for wanting to participate in the project and their experiences at sea. These initial exchanges were important in terms of exchanging information and developing a comfort level between interviewers and interviewees. Specific information shared during these initial meetings was also subsequently raised in some cases in the interviews.

The interviews themselves (except for the Skype interview) took place in different locations in Halifax. Two occurred in the person's workplace (Menz Bar on Gottingen Street and David Lawrence Salon on Birmingham Street) and two took place in the person's home. Each interview began with a general introduction regarding the project:

The information gathered from this interview will be used by the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic for the upcoming exhibit 'Hello Sailor' which explores GLBT life at sea. It is based on an exhibit from the Merseyside Maritime Museum in Liverpool, U.K.. Your experiences of life at sea will help provide Canadian content to the U.K. exhibit. The Halifax exhibit will educate the public on a topic – gay life at sea – that many people probably know little about. The exhibit helps fill in the gaps of our understanding about LGBT culture and history and will be of enduring importance for Halifax as well as nationally and internationally. It can also help young LGBT people today. Thank-you for participating in this important project. I /we will ask you some preliminary questions, a series of questions about your time at sea, and some questions about your return home after being at sea as well as your life today. (I /we also have a few questions about transgendered identity.) Feel free to add recollections, anecdotes or stories as we go along – and to pass on any questions you prefer not to answer.

Each interviewee signed a release form transferring copyright and giving the museum permission to use the contents of the interviews. The interviews ranged in length from approximately one hour to approximately two-and-a-half hours. The interviews all used the same template of questions, although the exact order and specific questions varied from interview to interview. The researchers realized as the interviews progressed that the categories being used reflected the U.K. exhibit a bit too closely and the interviews were modified to closer approximate the Canadian context. Initially, the following categories were used: Preliminaries, Going to Sea, Gay Life at Sea: Playing While You Worked, Gay Life at Sea: Accepting Diversity on Board, Gay Life at Sea: Off-Duty Leisure and Recreation. Gay Life at Sea: Polari, Gay Life at Sea: Joining the Gang, Learning and Playing in Port, Coming Home, Today and (if applicable) TG People (see VI (i) for a full list of questions included in the interview template). These categories have been modified and condensed in the discussion of findings below (section III).

The interviewers also asked the interviewees to consider drawing memory maps and sharing photos and other artifacts from their life at sea with the MMA for the exhibit.

All five interviewees permitted their names to be used within the exhibit and other related works. The following people were interviewed for *Hello Sailor!*

The Canadian Edition:

Frank Letourneau
Helen McFadyen
Chris Cochrane
William ('Billy') Andrews
Bryson Syliboy

3 Discussion of Findings

(i) Preliminaries and Going to Sea

The five individuals who agreed to participate in the oral history project were interviewed between 27 January and 13 March, 2011. Three were or are currently members of the Canadian Navy, one sailed onboard merchant vessels, and one was a tall ship sailor. Three self-identified as gay men. One self-identified as a lesbian, and another was trans-gendered. She self-identified as a gay man while serving in the Canadian Navy and currently self-identifies as a straight woman, although her transitioning process is not yet complete. The five range in age from approximately mid-twenties to approximately 70 years old. The oldest was an officer in the Canadian Navy in the 1960s and early 1970s. Another interviewee sailed on Lakers and Deep Sea vessels from the mid-1970s to early 1980s. Another is currently serving in the navy as a Junior Officer. The other two were both seafarers in the first decade of the current century – one in the Canadian Navy and the other with various tall ships, including *Bluenose II*. Four initially went to sea as young men, and the time at sea overlapped with the experiences of coming out. The fifth interviewee knew she was a lesbian before working on the ships.

Frank is francophone and was born in Montreal in 1941. He entered the Navy through the University Naval Training Division (UNTD). He held various posts, including Aid to the Admiral in Halifax, and rose through the ranks in the 1960s. He resigned from the navy in 1970 after he was told the Military Police had gathered enough material against him to investigate him for homosexuality. He didn't know he was gay when he joined the navy, but realized this gradually. By his mid-twenties, he knew he was "more attracted to men than women." His coming-out process was gradual with his family, but almost instantaneous with other people after he left the navy. Frank noted that, after leaving the navy, he enjoyed a level of personal freedom he "didn't know was possible" and he "quickly recognized" that he "didn't have to look over... [his] shoulder."

Helen was also born in Montreal, in 1955. Her father was a Great Lakes seafarer, and she recalled being exposed to sea life as a child and spending time on ships and loving it. Her French-speaking mother also did one stint on a Laker in the early 1930s when she was a young woman. Helen first worked on a ship, *SS Helen Evans* (built in 1896) in 1974. She was a college student looking for summer employment, and Highman Corp., the ship's owner, paid well. Helen was eighteen when she shipped out for the first time and she was out to family and friends at that time. She "always knew" that she was a lesbian and it was never an issue among family and friends, although she was not out when she first went to sea. Lesbianism was a "non-issue" in some ways because the few women onboard ships tended to be heterosexual.²⁹ She also knew that being out could spell trouble. She also had no trouble sleeping with men, in part as a way to exercise her own power. Also, she was young and wanted to be part of a group of peers. She was also worried about her father's reputation. He had a long career and was a Master

²⁹ Helen McFadyen Interview, 13 March, 2011, 38:21.

Mariner. In 1979, in Tampa, Florida, Helen boarded *MV Coastal Transport* and was asked “right away” about being a lesbian. It surprised her and was a “lesson about coming out.”³⁰ Helen worked on fourteen vessels between 1974 and 1981, mostly coastal Lakers carrying iron ore and other commodities. She also worked on a deep sea vessel that was a chemical tanker. The work varied from relief work, replacing people on vacation or leave, to longer contracts. She usually worked in the galley, as a porter or cook. She was a member of the SIU (Seafarer’s International Union).

Chris lived with her mother, three sisters and step-father in Glace Bay, Cape Breton, until she joined the navy. She described her family as middle class. She was in Sea Cadets for six years, and this experience led to her joining the navy in 2003. She recalls “battling” being gay growing up; wondering if it was a phase. She knew other gay people who had a difficult time. She identified as male at the time, but had a girlfriend. She had her first boyfriend and realized she was gay while at the HMCS *Acadia* Cadet Training Centre in Cornwallis. She came out to her family in 2005 after returning from basic naval training and her mother is very supportive. She sailed on the HMCS *Athabaskan* after basic training, which she described as being known as a “gay ship.” In 2005, Chris also started performing as *Elle Noir* in drag. She was nineteen at the time. Chris describes herself as being of mixed ethnicity, including African-Nova Scotian.

Billy grew up in Stewiacke, Nova Scotia and comes from a family with a long military background. He was a Sea Cadet and joined the Regular Officer Training Program (ROTP) after graduating from high school. After completing his degree in civil engineering he was posted to HMCS *Montreal* and is currently a Junior Officer. He describes being gay as “just something that wasn’t quite accepted” in the small town where he grew up in the 1990s. Coming out is a battle that is still ongoing there, as being gay is “still not accepted” by his parents. Billy started coming out in university, although he battled with it for quite some time. He started accepting himself as a gay man in his third or fourth year of university, and when he went to sea on *Montreal*, “everyone knew” who he was.

Bryson was born in 1981 and grew up in Boston and then moved to the Indian Brook Reservation in Shubenacadie with his parents and four siblings when he was six. He describes his family as “lower-middle class.” He talked about the racism he experienced as a Mi’kmaw child and youth, for instance in Millford Hants East Rural High, and feels that this has had a significant impact on his life and identity: “the main thing I got from my youth was racism.” Sexuality issues, on the other hand, “were never really brought up.” He “didn’t really do anything with guys or girls in high school” and it wasn’t until after high school that he began to think of himself as gay. Bryson was in Sea Cadets for six years as a teenager and raced small boats such as lasers. He wanted to “move up into bigger ships” and first sailed from New York to Halifax on a tall ship, *Picton Castle*, in 2000 after responding to a newspaper ad.. He subsequently (until 2008) also sailed on *Silva*, *Highlander Sea*, *Eye of the Wind*, *True North* and *Bluenose II*, as well as some non-Canadian tall ships.

³⁰ McFadyen, 40:21.

(ii) Work, Leisure and Language

Each individual said much concerning the experiences of work and leisure at sea. They suggested that the focus, discipline, and cooperation required in performing shipboard tasks left little room for fun while on-duty. However, they indicated that opportunities for off-duty leisure were plentiful. Explicitly gay social circles and activities did not exist onboard the ships with which our interviewees served. Each individual also stressed that, in general, their sexual orientation did not negatively affect the on-duty and off-duty cohesion of the crew itself.

Frank noted that homosexuality was virtually invisible aboard the vessels on which he served during the 1960s and 1970s. He remained mute about his sexual orientation knowing that the navy maintained a firm policy against homosexuality and that it was actively working to remove them from the service.³¹ However, institutionalized discrimination did not reflect the views of those whom he worked next to onboard. Frank recalled how during a night off-duty in a Caribbean port:

I was with my group, and they still had some beer and they [said], 'oh, Sir, why don't you come down in the mess with us and help us finish the beer.' Well this was a little unusual. You did not, you know, as an officer there was a line between: you had to sort of stay clear of that level of socializing, especially in the men's mess. Anyway, with a little bit of reluctance I went down below with them and had a beer with them. We were just talking generally about this, that, and the other thing. And they started saying things about me. And they said nice things about me: they liked how I stood up for them when they were in trouble and helped them out, and so on. And one of them said, 'and you know what? We know you're gay!' And I, I was at that point totally tongue-tied and he went on and said, 'but it really doesn't matter to us because you do a good job for us.' So, I don't know what I said exactly, but . . . that was the rapport I had with my men. . . . The group of men that I supervised was probably the 'cream of the crop' you know? They had the most advanced education, the most advanced training, and they weren't 'deck apes'³²

In a social setting, Frank's crewmates revealed a personal and professional respect that was not affected by his sexuality. Frank also emphasized that fun was reserved for off-duty hours, as he recalled constantly being preoccupied while on duty with various navigational and administrative tasks.³³

Like Frank, Helen also noted that homosexuality was not explicitly evident aboard the ships on which she served during the 1970s and early 1980s. While she

³¹ Frank Letourneau Interview, 16 February 2011, 18:34 – 18:49; 19:15 – 19:41.

³² Letourneau, 36:00 – 36:58; 37:38.

³³ Letourneau, 19:42 – 20:01; 26:16 – 29:37.

met crewmates whom she and others suspected were gay it was never openly discussed. Helen noted that such crewmembers tended to keep:

very, very close to themselves. I think they would have [come out], if they wanted to. I don't think there were many relationships going on on ships. I think guys on the lakes, what they were doing was going ashore, because we were porting a lot, so they would go ashore and do 'cruising' wherever, right? Way easier to deal with that if, you know, you're going to be in Chicago or Detroit or Toledo or wherever for twelve hours and you're going, you know, way easier to go ashore and find somebody then to try and get into some kind of fracas onboard, because there's no privacy."³⁴

Helen also noted that recreation was generally reserved for off-duty hours, and that drinking tended to be the pastime of choice. She recalled that:

there was certainly a lot of drinking going on, despite the fact that on the lakes, I mean, there was no drinking allowed, theoretically. . . . But everybody drank! I mean it was, and that's one of the things that kind of discouraged me. It was, there were times it got to be, you know, just a pain in the butt. You know, a lot of drinking and drugs too, because of the times, right?³⁵

Helen noted that off-duty crewmen, and galley workers like her with downtime between preparing and cleaning up after meals, frequently stole away from the ship while in port to get a few hours of drinking in before returning to their shipboard duties. She noted that taxi drivers in port towns all along the Great Lakes catered directly to sailors, taking them to liquor stores or bootleggers for booze which they subsequently snuck back onboard their ships. Helen noted that despite the rules against drinking aboard ship, virtually every crewmember kept alcohol in their cabins.³⁶ She recalls never "being off" while aboard, but constantly busy cooking meals, cleaning up, or loading cargo. Helen stressed that this type of focus while on duty was critical because, "they [the crew] are your teammates. I mean, you're well-being depends on them. I mean, the ship is a collaborative effort. It takes everyone, everyone must do their part, otherwise things fall apart."³⁷

Chris also noted that socializing was reserved for after crewmembers "went to rack." She recalled constantly being preoccupied with monitoring an assortment of navigational, radar, and sonar systems. For her and her crewmates, on-duty 'fun' consisted of testing one another on their job tasks and experimenting with new tasks they were learning.³⁸ Chris recalls that sailors had plenty of options for leisure once they were off-duty. Her ship maintained extensive DVD and book collections for crewmembers to borrow from. Crewmembers commonly played cards, had casual off-duty conversations, or "bitch and gossip sessions," and twice

³⁴ McFadyen, 40:39 – 42:33.

³⁵ McFadyen, 19:21 – 20:10.

³⁶ McFadyen, 25:39 – 26:15.

³⁷ McFadyen, 30:31 – 30:46.

³⁸ Chris Cochrane Interview, 1 February 2011, 15:17 – 15:51; 19:10 – 19:33; 33:00 – 33:45.

a year the entire ship was opened up and made accessible to all crewmembers. This enabled crew to intermingle and enter messes and parts of the ship that were normally off limits due to the restrictions of rank.³⁹ Chris did not believe that a gay subculture existed onboard. Schedules and rank tended to govern who fraternized with whom.⁴⁰ While she developed solid friendships with many of her crewmates, Chris did not become close friends with most of her gay crewmate, befriending primarily straight female crewmates because she felt they had more in common. However, Chris recounted one episode in which a female crewmate mistook her friendliness for sexual flirtation until Chris informed this crewmate that “I could not be gayer if I was Elton John.”⁴¹ The only specifically ‘gay’ activity on-ship that Chris could recall was serving as a port liaison for her gay crewmates. Chris prepared a scouting report of the ‘gay-friendly’ establishments in whichever port they were visiting.⁴² Chris did not recall any instances of her sexual orientation hindering on-duty crew cohesion. On the contrary, she stressed that it was the crew’s sense of duty to one another and responsibility for their tasks that mattered more than anything else. According to Chris, each individual onboard was a sailor first and foremost before anything else.⁴³ Chris had not heard of ‘polari’ prior to being informed about the *Hello Sailor!* project, and never encountered anything that resembled a gay code language while at sea or in a foreign port.⁴⁴

Billy also noted that sailors are generally too busy to engage in fun while they are on duty. As a navigations officer, Billy is constantly monitoring navigations systems, travel coordinates, and the speed and direction of his vessel. He takes particular enjoyment from “being up there and taking this multi-million dollar warship and just driving it.”⁴⁵ Billy explained that fun did not really factor into watches because:

I’m too busy in general. Which is every day is just constantly going on and on. And I mean for me it’s just, like, a job. As opposed to when we’re on watch, I mean usually for myself we’ve had, I’ve had, a lot of busy watches to the point where there’s no need to try and do something to make it fun. I mean we’re constantly doing either a gun shoot or any form of an exercise, like a submarine exercise or a replenishment at sea where we take fuel or materials from some other vessel, so there’s always constantly something going on.⁴⁶

During less hectic shifts, he and his fellow officers often quiz one another on various aspects of their duties to ensure that they have a firm grasp on their responsibilities. Like Chris, Billy also noted that he and his crewmates have many options for off duty leisure. Movie and poker nights are common onboard, while he also noted that the ship has often held talent shows to raise funds for charities

³⁹ Cochrane, 19:34 – 20:24; 58:12 – 62:14.

⁴⁰ Cochrane, 38:20 – 40:03; 46:31 – 47:04; 80:35 – 81:55.

⁴¹ Cochrane, 25:15 – 27:29; 40:19 – 45:15.

⁴² Cochrane, 62:40 – 64:25.

⁴³ Cochrane, 21:55 – 23:04.

⁴⁴ Cochrane, 78:05 – 80:34.

⁴⁵ William Andrews Interview, 15 February 2011, 9:03 – 11:10;

⁴⁶ Andrews, 15:16 – 15:53.

supported by the navy. A crew favourite is open-air barbeques on the flight deck, which Billy notes are held a couple of times a year.⁴⁷ Like Chris, Billy also noted having developed close friendships with a number of his crewmates. Sexuality is not a factor in this. He noted that very few gay people have ever served on his ship, and that he tends not to share common interests with his gay crewmates.⁴⁸ Billy has not experienced discrimination or homophobia while on duty, and has never felt like his sexual orientation or other people's attitudes concerning it have ever hampered crew performance and cohesion. Like Chris, Billy emphasized that it is an individual's role and responsibility as a sailor that governs their attitudes toward fellow crewmates while onboard.⁴⁹ However, he did recall a couple of occasions when:

I've had guys come up to me and say 'listen: I don't agree with it, I don't agree with your lifestyle, I don't understand it, but I respect you, and I respect you as a person,' and I've had both senior and junior people come up to me and tell me stuff like that. . . . it's not about their personal opinion, because I mean everybody has their personal opinion, and I have to respect that as much as they respect me for who I am. . . . but when it comes to working, on watch, or off-watch on board ship, there's a certain level of respect and common professional courtesy. And I find that I don't have a problem getting that from pretty much anybody.⁵⁰

The existence and function of 'polari' was unfamiliar to Billy, who recalled never encountering a gay code language while opining that such a system is no longer necessary.⁵¹

Bryson echoed the sentiments of the other four interviewees, noting that work and play are largely kept separate aboard tall ships. He recalls being consistently preoccupied with tending to rigging, sails, charting, and cleaning.⁵² Bryson indicated that leisure was reserved for off duty hours. Again, card playing was a preferred past time, as were reading, listening to music, and general off duty conversation with friends amongst the crew.⁵³ Bryson notes that sexual orientation is largely a non-factor onboard the tall ships. He estimates that thirty percent of his crewmates were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.⁵⁴ Bryson described feeling more comfortable at sea, as did many of his gay and lesbian crewmates: "you were just accepted, you know. It didn't matter if you were Black, White, Jewish, Hindu, gay, straight, you know? It all had to come down to what you were doing and the task that you had."⁵⁵ In other words, shipboard cooperation and teamwork mattered far more than the ethnicity, sexuality, or culture of the people whom you worked with.

⁴⁷ Andrews, 15:54 – 16:43.

⁴⁸ Andrews, 16:55 – 18:34; 20:32 – 20:59; 22:30 – 24:22.

⁴⁹ Andrews, 26:50 – 28:48; 29:49 – 30:42.

⁵⁰ Andrews, 32:53 – 33:39.

⁵¹ Andrews, 40:52 – 43:59

⁵² Bryson Syliboy, 28 February 2011, 27:30 – 30:49.

⁵³ Syliboy, 50:31 – 53:19.

⁵⁴ Syliboy, 46:00 – 47:24; 49:00 – 49:34.

⁵⁵ Syliboy, 49:56 – 50:12.

(iii) Diversity Aboard

The five interviewees did not, generally-speaking feel that they experienced (or experience) homophobia at sea. Four of the five could recall at least one specific incident with one specific individual, but no wide-spread discrimination based on sexual orientation or identity among seafarers at sea. Of the five, the oldest did experience institutional discrimination as a gay man that lead to his departure from the navy. None of the interviewees identified specific gay cultures or communities on board; nor did they base their friendships on sexual orientation. All five talked about the need for unity on board ship, and the impact this had in terms of differences of any sort not being emphasized. All five avoided relationships while at sea.

During the 1960s, Canadian Forces regulations stated that a person could not be gay and serve in the military. Frank actively avoided relationships, sex, and even flirting with men while at sea because of this. He resigned from the navy after he was told by his Commanding Officer that the Military Police had been investigating him for “homosexuality.” His Commanding Officer was very supportive of Frank during this time:

“Well, I feel awkward telling you this, but they feel they have enough material to investigate you for homosexuality. And I was a little startled, obviously, and he said ‘you don’t have to say anything to me Frank, all I can tell you know is that you have my full support; I’ll be there with you if you want me and... I’ll do whatever I can to help you through this,’ which was a very very fine statement to be making. This particular person was not the greatest manager in the world, but certainly had a human touch that I had not really expected.”⁵⁶

Frank met with members of the Military Police, who presented him with a file “about three inches thick” that included pictures of his car on Citadel Hill, stories of his travels and other information. Frank didn’t think he “had any ground to fight this,” and resigned immediately from the navy.⁵⁷ After resigning, he was given a formal dinner in the Officer’s Mess and was treated well by the Captain and Second in Command. Many people did not know why Frank left the military, only that he resigned. Frank was not out during his time in the navy, but tells the story of an exchange with his crew, in which they told him they knew he was gay and were fine with that (see previous section). Frank talks about his interactions with crew, fellow officers and senior officers as being positive and based on mutual respect. This day-to-day experience working in the Canadian Navy stands in sharp contrast to the institutional discrimination he faced. When asked if the latter was part of a broader, systematic campaign (as outlined by Gary Kinsman and Patrizia Gentile in *The Canadian War on Queers: National Security as Sexual Regulation*),

⁵⁶ Letourneau, 10:45-11:25.

⁵⁷ Letourneau, 11:50-12:35.

Frank's response was: "Without a doubt. In fact, when I read Gary's book, I was shocked to find out that I had gotten away with being gay as long as I did."⁵⁸

Helen described her interactions with another woman onboard the same ship who was a lesbian. Helen did not know her, and felt the person was unduly familiar. Helen did not say anything, because she felt it was important to get along with people while on ship.⁵⁹ Helen also described the ambiguities faced by heterosexual women on board. On the one hand, the need to be accepted could make it "hard to say no," while on the other hand women wanted to maintain their dignity. Sometimes sex was just about "being horny," but it could also be about being lonely. Helen feels people often-times confused sex with intimacy and making a social connection. People didn't have the language or skills to say "I just want to sit and talk with you." A "false front" was created that said: "Well, we have to have sex because that's what sailors do."⁶⁰ Often, Helen was the only woman onboard ship. On occasion, women on ship were officers-in-training, but women generally worked in the galley. Sometimes, the entire galley was comprised of women. As either the only woman, or one of few women, onboard, most of Helen's interactions were with men. She experienced a wide range of relationships with men. Generally speaking individual men tended to be respectful, even sweet, towards her, but collective male behaviour was much more varied. Men could be protective (behaving like an "entourage" when going to a bar in a foreign port). They also looked to the women in the galley (the part of the ship that most resembled a home environment) for nurturing. Helen fulfilled multiple roles as nurse, sister, chaplain, and so on.⁶¹ Collectively, men could also exhibit a male bravado that Helen described as irritating, patriarchal and misogynist.⁶² She noted that men seemed to want to show the bravado to each other: "Who would fuck the cook or the porter first?" "As a collective, it was not good."⁶³ Helen described one specific instance which demonstrates the way in which sexism and homophobia could intertwined in gendered relations onboard. While serving on MV Coastal Transport, she became close to one of the officers. They got drunk and slept together. He immediately confessed that he had had sex with her to win a bet: who would get the lesbian into bed first? Helen felt both angry and hurt, but "got over it."

She recalled meeting gay men, although they were not out. The 1970s was not a time to be out in that industry, and people kept quiet. She noted that the industry "didn't draw gay men" and the work involved "tough labour" that required "burly guys." She suspected that gay men cruised while in port, but not so onboard ship, where there was no privacy.⁶⁴ Helen also talked about becoming a member of the union, and being active with a group that was seeking to change and improve the union. She felt that the SIU didn't like her, and so she made sure she kept her "nose clean," paying her dues on time and so on.⁶⁵

⁵⁸ Letourneau, 8:30-9:00.

⁵⁹ McFadyen, 60:00.

⁶⁰ McFadyen, 35:45-36:00.

⁶¹ McFadyen, 60:04

⁶² McFadyen, 30:09

⁶³ McFadyen, 33:11

⁶⁴ McFadyen, 40:20.

⁶⁵ McFadyen, 46:30.

Chris described HMCS *Athabaskan* as a vessel reflecting an unofficial naval attitude towards gays and lesbians, as they “put gay people on the ship.”⁶⁶ She recalls there being other gay men on board, as well as one lesbian. Chris had drag clothing in her locker, and this was not considered a problem. There were limits, however, to the outward expression of gayness. A talent show being organized aboard the ship was cancelled; in Chris’ view because of its connection to drag (Chris was going to host the show). Chris befriended both men and women, and would often do people’s hair when getting ready to disembark in a foreign port. There was not, however, a specific gay community onboard. Chris also describes the emotional difficulties associated with life on board ship. In her case (as noted above) it coincided with a difficult time in her life in terms of coming out as a gay man. Chris’ experiences with alcohol abuse led her to an addiction-recovery program on board the ship, and it was here that, in discussions with a counselor, he began to think seriously about gender re-assignment.

Billy did not identify a gay community onboard ship. He noted the presence of other gays and lesbians onboard ship, but did not “want to make any assumptions on numbers.”⁶⁷ He has not had any relationships or romantic rendezvous with people on ship: “I personally don’t agree with it.”⁶⁸ This was because two people in a relationship onboard the same ship would have to be separated. He does have close friends onboard who he spends time with while off duty, on the ship and in foreign ports. Most of his friends on ship are straight, and his friendships (both on sea and on land) are determined by who he gets along with, rather than sexual orientation. At sea, friendships are also often determined by rank and job/schedule. While at sea, Billy feels it is important to maintain your professionalism. As a Junior Officer, he has a certain level of leadership and responsibility to uphold.⁶⁹ Billy has been concerned about living in a mess with other people in terms of how they might “react to being with a gay guy.”⁷⁰ He recalls, though, only one specific incident of homophobia, with someone who was joking around and “went a little too far.” This was when he was first posted onboard, and he felt he “didn’t know how to handle the situation.”⁷¹ Billy also recounted awkward conversations with guys, especially when drunk, who wanted to show their comfort level with Billy as a gay man: “Oh, I love you man, I love who you are.”⁷² In general, Billy feels the people he has worked with in the navy have always shown him professional courtesy.

Bryson described the tall ship environment as one with a significant number of gays and lesbians. Sexual orientation, however, was not a significant issue. He noted that gender was more of an issue than sexual orientation, with the “girl” sailors having to battle the stereotype that women should not be sailors. Without much privacy on board, people did not tend to have sexual or romantic relationships, and this was true for Bryson. The opposite, however, was the case

⁶⁶ Cochrane, 4:30

⁶⁷ Andrews, 21:15 – 21:24

⁶⁸ Andrews, 19:05

⁶⁹ Andrews, 22:50

⁷⁰ Andrews, 27:14-27:36

⁷¹ Andrews, 30:04-30:32

⁷² Andrews, 32:40 – 32:54

while in port. Port stays usually coincided with other tall ships in port. Socializing, drinking and sex often went hand in hand. Bryson recalls one celebratory evening in particular, after which approximately twenty women sought-out medical personnel for a morning after pill, indicating a low awareness of, or concern, with STDs. Unlike naval personnel, tall ship sailors did / do sometimes interact with passengers. Bryson recalls working on the tall ship *Silva* during Pride Week in Halifax in 2006. During a gay pride sail, involving a night party with drinking, Bryson recalls receiving cat calls while hauling up the sails, as well as unsolicited physical contact with passengers: “my ass was slapped so many times I honestly felt like a piece of meat.” Bryson conveyed ambivalence about the incident, noting that it was “fun” and made him “feel like a model,” but that he also felt uncomfortable about it.⁷³ Bryson also talked about a specific homophobic incident involving an officer on *Bluenose II*, but felt he was able to handle the situation. He thought that his previous experiences dealing with racism in Shubenacadie gave him the resources to deal with homophobia later on, and that the incident on ship would have otherwise been more difficult to deal with.

(iv) Seafarers in Port

Our five interviewees shared a diverse range of recollections about the experience of visiting foreign ports. Save for one, they commonly identified visiting foreign ports as a particularly enjoyable aspect of seafaring. Each of them engaged in some similar social activities while in port. However, they also did things that distinguish their experiences in foreign ports from one another.

Frank did a variety of things while in foreign ports. He recalled often doing “reasonably cultured” things like visiting museums and operas, or taking road trips with a fellow officer to explore the surrounding areas. He also liked buying things unique to the place as gifts for friends and family back home.⁷⁴ Frequenting bars with his crewmates was a common activity, but he never felt obliged to seek out explicitly gay bars. Frank noted that he “went ashore with my fellow officers. We went to the strip shows in Amsterdam. . . . I did all the things everybody else did, except that I didn’t sleep with women.”⁷⁵ However, Frank also suggested that institutional regulation often discouraged him to reveal any traces of his sexual orientation when visiting foreign ports. Frank recalls that naval liaisons and security officers provided port information booklets to crewmembers that identified the acceptable and ‘out-of-bounds’ establishments (which tended to be gay-friendly clubs).⁷⁶

Helen visited a variety of ports throughout the Great Lakes and the greater Atlantic seaboard. While serving on Great Lakes freighters during the 1970s, she frequently ported in Chicago, Detroit, Toledo, Montreal, Hamilton, and numerous ports located along the Welland Canal lock system. During her time on the chemical tanker *MV Coastal Transport* between 1979 and 1981 she travelled

⁷³ Syliboy, 16:50 – 17:55.

⁷⁴ Letourneau, 43:38 – 44:22; 46:10 – 46:46.

⁷⁵ Letourneau, 18:54 – 19:01.

⁷⁶ Letourneau, 47:19 – 49:42.

widely outside of North America. She recalled porting in Venezuela, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, and travelling through the Panama Canal. She also visited ports in Western European countries including Germany, Holland, the United Kingdom, Spain, Greece (which she recalled with particular fondness), and the Cape Verde Islands.⁷⁷ However, Helen stressed that:

the thing I hated, or liked the least, was that it seemed we were always in port. I liked actual movement, I liked the ship moving! I liked to be on the water, I like the, just the feeling of that. There's a very sensual thing about being on a ship. . . . There's something very sensual about feeling the vibration of the ship and the sound of, you know, the diesel engines moving. . . . I thought it was exciting. . .⁷⁸

While noting that she would frequent gay / lesbian bars while away from the ship, or simply “hanging out where, I don't know, women tended to hang out,” Helen did not do this while in port with fellow crewmates. According to her, the general tendency was to visit a local pub and drink as a group.⁷⁹

Chris occasionally used the opportunity to visit foreign ports to indulge her interests as a gay man and drag performer. In addition to serving as a port liaison for her gay crewmates, Chris also helped to organize, and participate in, tours that catered to *Athabaskan's* gay crewmembers. Her recollection of the “Sex in the City” tour of New York City stands out as the best example of this.⁸⁰ Chris also described her excitement for scouring clothing stores to find unique items that she could incorporate into her drag queen wardrobe.⁸¹ However, Chris's time in port was not solely influenced by her sexual orientation. She also recalled simply wanting to visit establishments with her straight friends just because she wanted to spend the evening with them. Chris and her shipboard friends also liked finding restaurants where they could try new foods.⁸²

Finding gay social establishments is not a priority for Billy whenever he visits a foreign port. While noting that he does sometimes seek out gay bars “to just go out and relax with people that aren't military,” Billy emphasized simply finding places where he and his friends can have a good time ashore. He noted that drinking alcohol is a major component of their onshore leisure. As such, he and his friends simply try and find bars where everybody can have some drinks and a good time. When he does seek out explicitly gay bars, it is because he wants a break from his straight friends and to be in an environment with people of a like sexual orientation.⁸³ Billy also likes exploring each foreign port he visits on foot so that he can get a feel for the place and the actual people who live there. He enjoys doing this because, “By meeting locals they'll show you around, they'll tell you about the area instead of just constantly hanging around your military buddies and doing the

⁷⁷ McFadyen, 42:10 – 42:16; 70:03 – 71:33.

⁷⁸ McFadyen, 20:12 – 20:40.

⁷⁹ McFadyen, 7:33 – 7:51; 25:39 – 26:15; 31:23 – 32:21.

⁸⁰ Cochrane, 62:53 – 64:25.

⁸¹ Cochrane, 105:20 – 106:19.

⁸² Cochrane, 101:15 – 105:19; 106:20 – 113:39.

⁸³ Andrews, 57:40 – 59:45.

same thing: you know, wake up, get drunk, go to the bars, go to sleep, wake up, get drunk, go to the bars, go to sleep, kind of deal.”⁸⁴ Billy described receiving more flack in foreign ports for being a military serviceman than being gay. He notes that many people, especially in bars, associate military personnel with negative sexual stereotypes and think that:

they’re [servicemen] all after picking up. And it’s, some women see this everyday and they’re sick of it. And so just by saying that you’re military, that’s what they’re seeing. They see military, they see a guy that’s gonna sit there and try to pick them up. And so that’s, that’s what ruins it. Like, I mean any time I go to a foreign port or anything where the military isn’t necessarily accepted it’s nine times out of ten because it’s girls knowing that these military guys come in and they want to pick up.⁸⁵

Like Frank, Billy noted that he likes to purchase gifts for friends and family unique to the places that he visits. Billy has also developed a habit of acquiring a piece of artwork for himself in each foreign port that he visits.⁸⁶

Like our other four interviewees, Bryson also clearly expressed his enjoyment of visiting different ports as a sailor.⁸⁷ He particularly pointed out Provincetown, Massachusetts as an exceptionally gay-friendly town home to an extraordinary amount of gay-friendly bars.⁸⁸ Bryson emphatically emphasized him and his crewmates’ tendency to go ashore and act like, “typical sailors, you know: drink a bar dry.”⁸⁹ He and his crewmates did a lot of drinking while in port, while noting that casual sex with people they met ashore was also very common. Bryson notes that he and other crewmates commonly invoked their being sailors as a means of attracting prospective sexual partners while in a foreign port. He also noted that this courting strategy was widely employed by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and straight sailors alike.⁹⁰ While he did not explicitly state as much during his interview, Bryson appears to have been a bit more consciously interested in frequenting gay-friendly establishments than any of our other three interviewees.

(v) Coming Home

One of the four interviewees is still serving in the Canadian Navy. The other two interviewees who had served in the navy left under unfavourable circumstances. One was given release papers and the other resigned without giving the navy the opportunity to release him. A fourth interviewee has been on a hiatus from tall ship sailing following a traumatic incident at sea, but plans to return to tall ship sailing in the near future. All four interviewees are supportive of activities relating to GLBT communities, although they have (or have had) varying degrees

⁸⁴ Andrews, 54: 21 – 55:45; 57:00 – 57:26.

⁸⁵ Andrews, 102:13 – 102:47.

⁸⁶ Andrews, 102:56 – 103: 15.

⁸⁷ Syliboy, 54:50 – 58:04.

⁸⁸ Syliboy, 58:05 – 60:29; 61:39 – 62:59.

⁸⁹ Syliboy, 71:12 – 71:20.

⁹⁰ Syliboy, 67:30 – 70:04.

of involvement in gay politics, activism or community activities. Being gay was not always the most important identity consideration in terms of community involvement.

Frank entered civilian life after leaving the Canadian Navy, working for a provincial Crown corporation in Nova Scotia for twenty-five years and then in a bank for ten years after working with the provincial government. He feels his professional experiences in the navy helped him in his civilian career. His position as Aid to the Admiral, for instance, helped secure his position with the provincial government. Frank participated in gay rights meetings and early versions of the Pride March in Halifax, but didn't consider himself to be an activist. "At a slightly lesser level, sure... but not politically engaged."⁹¹ Initially, after leaving the navy, he was interested in having a good time, and then had a long-term (17-year) relationship beginning in his mid-30s. His partner was very active in gay politics (for instance in 'Act-up') and Frank was supportive of this activity and contributed to various causes. Frank feels that he has had a happier life than he would have had if he had stayed in the navy, since the Military regulations regarding homosexuality did not change until 1993, and he would have had to conceal his identity during all those years (1960s to 1993).

Helen left her life on the water about a year after experiencing a terrible storm. It was in 1980 and they sailed through a hurricane and came close to sinking. The ship was badly damaged and radio communication was lost. It was noisy and impossible to sleep, with fridges and filing cabinets being ripped away. Some men onboard ship, who had been sailing for thirty years, were very frightened – beefy guys praying to their mother or God because they thought they were going to die. "It was a strange time."⁹² After the storm, Helen had time to reflect. She loved the sea, including the power of the sea, but also decided that she didn't want the kind of lifestyle offered onboard ship. She wanted something different, although she wasn't sure at the time what that would be. She continued to sail on the ship until it was sold in 1981. She then worked as a freelance writer. She also tried to transfer her cooking skills onshore. She did restaurant-management training and ran a pizza restaurant, which was "awful." It "didn't translate well."⁹³ She has been also involved in volunteer and advocacy work. She is involved with various feminist and women's groups. For a long time, she was not a "flag-waving lesbian." She works for social justice issues year-round, and didn't understand pride in terms of having a parade once a year: "What are you celebrating?" "I kinda get it now." Last year she organized her church's annual Pride Parade entry: the Love Float.⁹⁴ She participates in the inter-faith service on Pride Day also. Helen is a member of the Unitarian-Universalist Church and is currently studying at the Atlantic School of Theology.

Chris left the navy in 2007 after being served with her (then his) release papers. The years in the navy coincided with difficult years in terms of grappling with identity issues and alcohol abuse. She initially fought the release, but then

⁹¹ Letourneau, 50:00 - 50:55.

⁹² McFadyen, 61:00 - 64:45.

⁹³ McFadyen, 82:00.

⁹⁴ McFadyen, 85:30.

changed her mind. “I can’t do this anymore.”⁹⁵ She feels that the problems with alcohol were associated with her identity issues, but that being in the navy made these issues more difficult to deal because it would have been very difficult to be a trans-gendered person in the navy. She feels she might have still been in the closet if she had stayed in the navy. The same might have been true if she had stayed in Glace Bay. After leaving the navy, Chris moved to Toronto only had three drinks during the nine years she lived there. She started to realize she felt more comfortable in drag, as Elle Noire, and then decided to begin the gender re-assignment process. She has been living as a woman since 2009. Chris currently has four jobs. She works for an Inventory Company. She also works as a bar tender, Drag Queen performer and Talent Show Hostess in Menz bar and Reflections in Halifax. She also does shows in Moncton and Toronto as well as bar-tending for private shows. She also works with a local charity in the GLBT community that is part of a world-wide organization. She also works with the Gay Youth Project on Brunswick Street, and often speaks on panels about her identity (gay, trans-gendered woman and ‘black’)

Billy is currently a Junior Officer in the Canadian Navy. He is committed to being in the navy for another five years, and after that he may leave and pursue a civilian career as an engineer, or he may stay in the navy. He describes coming home as “a great relief” because “nothing is better than coming home” and being in your own bed.⁹⁶ The lack of communication associated with being at sea can, according to Billy, make personal relationships difficult, so having a family or partner that understands is “huge.” He has many friends in the GLBT community and is very supportive of community groups, but does not generally get directly involved because of his work schedule. He has done some charity work, such as supporting Youth House. He only came out to his family four months ago, and felt that he had been living a double life. He doesn’t feel that being in the navy has had any impact on his sexual identity.

Bryson was on *Bluenose II*, sailing off the coast of Virginia, in 2007 when they hit a white squall. He was on deck with other crewmates at 3:00am tightening up the rigging, and they were thrown into the water. “It changed my sailing career for a while.”⁹⁷ Bryson has not been to sea since, except for local sails, but would like to build a tall ship to train Mi’kmaw youth as sailors. He would also like to sail around the province in a small 15-16-foot boat to raise money for diabetes in Mi’kmaw communities. His sister had diabetes and passed away in 2008. He would like to document the journey and sees it as inner travel as well, noting that you have a lot of time to think when you are on a ship. He is currently working as a receptionist at David Lawrence Salon in Halifax. He finds the experience in the salon a departure from the more masculine environment he experienced on tall ships. He feels more comfortable with a “diesel engine” than “dressing up and looking good.”⁹⁸ He misses being at sea and thinks about it constantly. His ‘land-lubber life’ has been up and down, and he has been focusing on issues such as his experience in the storm on *Bluenose*. “I made a lot of mistakes... I thought I would be the fight person and I was the flight...” He feels he now has that under control

⁹⁵ Cochrane, 121 – 123.

⁹⁶ Andrews, 65:35 – 65:50

⁹⁷ Syliboy, 21:15.

⁹⁸ Syliboy, 81:00-82:00.

and is ready to go back. He is not generally involved in gay politics (he tried to form a local gay rugby team but was unsuccessful) and feels that his Mi'kmaw identity is more front and center in terms of his projects. He feels racism has played a bigger role in his life than homophobia.

(vi) Transgendered Identity

The gender transitioning process factored into only one of our interviews. Chris decided to undergo the process after leaving the navy in 2007. Chris was born male and determined that she was attracted to other men in 2005, shortly after completing basic training. However, in addition to struggling with whether or not she was gay growing up, Chris also described grappling with the fact that she felt more feminine than masculine. Chris began performing as a drag queen in 2005 after attending a Rupaul show and deciding to take up her friends' dare to perform in drag herself. Chris describes how the reception she received as 'Elle Noir' encouraged her to invest more time and effort in her drag performances. She quickly became a regular and successful drag performer in Halifax, and noted that her crewmates knew of and even came out to see her drag performances.⁹⁹ Chris suggested the acceptance and positive reception she received from her crewmates partially influenced her decision to undergo the gender transitioning process. Through performing in drag Chris discovered that she truly felt more comfortable appearing as a woman. Perhaps just as importantly, it was the acceptance of her sexual orientation and interest in drag that helped her to determine that it would be acceptable to truly become a woman. Chris began the gender transitioning process in early 2009, and revealed that the process is enabling her to feel more like herself than ever before.¹⁰⁰ Where previously she had lived as a gay man who performed as a woman, she now considers herself to be a straight woman:

I've always had an attraction to men, and I don't have an attraction to, which is very, people think this is rude of me, but I have no, I'm not attracted to gay men. Like, you know, the typical flaming, you know . . . Somebody who would be a fan of me would not be somebody who I would date. I want somebody who, funny enough, who is the one who watches the football games, the hockey games, you know. Again, I don't want the gayness to be the thing that defines him. I want somebody who is himself, and who is gay second, you know?¹⁰¹

The issues of cross-dressing, drag performances, and gender transitioning did not factor heavily into the other three interviews. Frank recalled encountering drag queens shortly after leaving the navy, coming out, and moving to Toronto during the early 1970s:

I thought: 'this is not what I'm looking for. These are not the kinds of people I want to, expected to, associate with.' Now, over the

⁹⁹ Cochrane, 2:05 – 3:09; 4:45 – 8:49; 47:05 – 48:14

¹⁰⁰ Cochrane, 131:20 – 133:14.

¹⁰¹ Cochrane, 147:33 - 148:08.

years I've tempered my views on that But my initial reaction was: 'No! I'm not looking for guys who dress like women or want to be women.' I was looking for masculine guys, you know, who were like me!¹⁰²

Billy could not recall any instances of cross-dressing or people performing in drag. Nor has he ever known of there being any transgendered individuals among the crew.¹⁰³ Bryson recalled one episode of cross-dressing during a theme-based party with crewmates. Each partygoer was required to wear a certain costume, and Bryson received instruction to wear a woman's dress and shoes. He stressed that he and others did so as sailors simply looking to have fun and a laugh, rather than seeking to fulfill other aspects of their sexual orientation and interests.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² Letourneau, 56:51 – 57:16.

¹⁰³ Andrews, 29:01 – 29:37.

¹⁰⁴ Syliboy, 53:20 – 54:49.

4 Recommendations for Potential Themes

(i) Departure from ‘Heaven and Hell’

The information we gained from our interviewees revealed a significant divergence from one of the major themes illuminated by the original *Hello Sailor!* project. Baker and Stanley concluded that British ocean liners offered gay crewmembers a ‘haven’ from the homophobia and legislation that hindered them while on land. They demonstrate that within the British maritime context, going to sea enabled gay men to more openly express their sexuality and actively construct a gay subculture onboard the vessels involved in the transoceanic passenger trade. The recollections of our five interviewees do not reveal a similar ‘gay haven’ or subculture having emerged on Canadian naval vessels, merchant freighters, or tall ships. Neither interviewee described having encountered, participated in, or even heard of an explicitly gay subculture existing on the decks of these ships. Some ambivalence came through in the interviews about the idea of going to sea as a means of escaping homophobia on land. Two interviewees recalled knowing several gay crewmates who did go to sea specifically to get away from homophobia they experience on shore.

This thematic divergence probably stems from two factors. First, the vessels on which our interviewees served were significantly smaller and manned by smaller crews than those of the British ocean liners of the 1950s and 1960s. This meant that the vessels more often than not simply did not have sufficient numbers of gay or lesbian crewmembers on board to either constitute or actively establish a gay subculture. Second, the context in which our interviewees were at sea also partially explains this lack of a gay subculture. With the exceptions of Frank and Helen, the interviewees all sailed during the past decade. Thus, they went to sea under circumstances in which homosexuality has become more widely accepted, acknowledged, and tolerated than the conditions under which the sailors interviewed by Stanley and Baker had hit the open sea. In other words, being able to sail within a context where blatant discrimination and homophobia had been dramatically eroded also lessened the necessity of a gay subculture.

(ii) The Good, the Bad, and the Boring

There were no gay communities or a secret gay world onboard any of the ships on which our interviewees served. Specific activities like drag / camp crew shows did not happen. There were isolated incidents of homophobia (‘the bad’) and gay relationships (‘the good’). However, each of our interviewees consistently emphasized the extent to which day-to-day life onboard was primarily characterized by routine (‘the boring’).

(iii) Sailor First

Another striking theme that emerged from the interviews was a consistent de-emphasis by each interviewee on the notion that their sexuality was the most significant factor in their own personal sense of identity. Not one interviewee emphasized that being a gay person informed their personal identity above anything else. Frank, Billy, and Bryson each stressed that they perceived themselves as men first who just happened to be attracted to other men. They also revealed very ‘masculine identities: Billy’s favourite activity was “just driving this big ship”; Bryson felt more comfortable working in an engine room than a hair salon; and Frank explicitly expressed an earlier discomfort with drag queens and effeminate gay men. Helen also described liking the physicality and toughness demanded by seafaring labour.¹⁰⁵ Chris (since beginning the gender transition process) now sees herself as being a straight woman. Bryson sees being Mi’kmaq as being more essential to his identity than being gay. While gradually become more involved in gay and lesbian activism, Helen sees it as just one part of her broader, and longer-standing, concern for women’s rights and social justice issues.¹⁰⁶ Each interviewee emphasized the multitude of ways in which they behaved and possessed similar values to other people who were not necessarily gay, lesbian, or transgendered. Rather than seeking to use their sexuality as a vehicle for distinguishing themselves from other people, our interviewees argued for the traits and beliefs that they shared with others regardless of their sexual orientation.

This tendency to not make their sexuality the defining feature of their identities also manifested itself at sea. Aside from Frank and Helen (whose sexual orientations were unbeknownst to their crewmates until the latter stages of their seafaring careers), neither Chris, Billy, or Bryson made concerted efforts to hide their sexual orientation from their fellow crewmates. But this did not mean that their sexuality defined their seafaring identities. In each case (though least forcefully in the case of Chris), each interviewee stressed that they always considered themselves to be a sailor while at sea or in a foreign port. On board a ship they viewed themselves, and strove to be viewed by others, as a seafarer above and beyond everything else. They did not strive to be viewed as gay seafarers, but just seafarers whose rank and responsibilities on board a vessel defined them before anything else. In short, each of our interviewees considered themselves to be sailors first while serving on a ship.

This tendency points to another significant divergence from the original *Hello Sailor!* project. Where Baker and Stanley found that going to sea enabled gay men to more fully develop and express their sense of homosexual identity, our interviewees suggest that this was not a critical part of their own motivations. While prevailing institutional homophobia within navy convinced Frank to mute his own sexual orientation (having worked as a sailor more than thirty years before Chris, Billy, or Bryson), the other interviewees never described feeling like they had to openly justify their own sexuality to their crewmates. According to Helen, it

¹⁰⁵ Andrews, 10:09 – 10:19; Syliboy, 81:06 – 81:45; Letourneau, 56:51 – 57:16; McFadyen, 16:38 – 17:06.

¹⁰⁶ Cochrane, 147:11 – 150:28; Syliboy, 80:28 – 80:38; McFadyen, 83:25 – 88:49.

was for the most part, simply a non-issue. For her, the greater challenge was gaining acceptance and respect as a female crewmember in an overwhelmingly masculine and patriarchal environment.¹⁰⁷ Perhaps more importantly, while Chris, Billy, and Bryson frequently (and often to their surprise) found that the great majority of their crewmates accepted their being gay, it never drove them to assert their sexual orientation to a greater extent. In each instance, they consistently worked to reaffirm their identity as a sailor first while onboard a vessel without necessarily having to downplay their sexual orientation. While they never felt that they had to hide their sexuality they never actively sought to incorporate it as a paramount feature within their identities as individuals and sailors. For them, being gay was simply one small part of who they were. While being at sea or in foreign port as members of a ship's crew, it was being a sailor which they believed defined them much more than anything else.

(iv) Homophobia

Despite the general the prevalence of the sailor first identity, each interviewee did relate experiences of homophobia. Generally, speaking these instances fell into one of three categories. The first category is incidents or experiences that were awkward or uncomfortable. For instance, Billy described his friends expressing their acceptance of him while drinking. The second category of homophobic incidents was constituted by interactions with specific individuals. Billy described a fellow officer openly revealing his disapproval of homosexuality and concluding that he only tolerated Billy because of his responsibilities. Third, homophobia manifested itself in the form of institutional discrimination. Frank's experiencing of this brand of discrimination directly led to his resignation from the navy around 1970. This indicates the existence of a significant 'change over time' dimension to the gay seafaring experience within the Canadian Navy. Frank was an officer in the navy during the 'War on Queers' that commenced during the 1960s and ended in the early 1990s (see literature review). In Helen's case, homophobia intersected with gender discrimination in terms of being viewed as a sexual conquest.

(v) Recommendations for Further Research

The period from the early 1980s to the early 2000s is not represented in the five interviews. No straight people were interviewed regarding their attitudes towards GLBT seafarers. One non-gay, retired, sailor did respond to the *Coast* ad (he was unsure what LGBT meant) and recalled that he never witnessed or heard of instances in which gay crewmates were ostracized on the basis of their sexual orientation, echoing the sentiment noted above that unity aboard ship was more important than individual differences. The exhibit could benefit from two or three more interviews to address these periods and perspectives.

¹⁰⁷ McFadyen, 88:50 – 90:45.

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