

# The Mariner as Agent

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## SECRET

*The seaman as observer, courier, or recruiter in his own denied-area country.*

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In surveying the possibilities for access to a denied country, the intelligence officer's eye naturally falls upon the fleets of merchant ships which steam in and out of its ports, shuttling back and forth to the outside world, each vessel potentially a carrier of the paraphernalia of espionage, each seaman a potential agent. It is common knowledge that intelligence services use seamen of their own or friendly countries' merchant fleets to make clandestine port observations in denied areas. The potential for clandestine activities broadens considerably, however, when we consider for use as carriers and agents the merchant ships and seamen of the target country itself.

For the native mariner there are no such obstacles at home as language barriers, area unfamiliarity, and the routine security restrictions applied to foreigners. He makes a voyage and returns to mingle freely with family and associates, travels unrestrictedly, and enjoys an access to people and places which the foreigner cannot hope to duplicate. Most importantly, the seaman comes out regularly to free ports where he can be reached. This periodic access to his native country alternating with our access to him outside prompts us to examine his suitability for clandestine missions under cover of his trade.

# Homo Marinarius

First let us consider the man himself. In some countries seafaring is a traditional, honorable, and respected profession. In others it is not, and the merchant marine may be a sink for the dregs of a country's humanity. Either way, the job is hard and dangerous and the men are not overpaid. Most of them are alert for ways to profit from the advantages their profession offers in frequent travel to various countries. The crewman, as opposed to his officers, is often a practiced smuggler; he procures goods cheaply in one country and sells them illegally in another where the demand is great and prices high. The officers' chicanery is on a somewhat more sophisticated level, with rank seldom missing an opportunity to exercise its privilege. It is the rare captain or chief engineer who does not accept kickbacks from ship chandlers or fuel salesmen for channeling his business their way.

Mariners are unusual in that the enforced intimacy of shipboard life, matched in no other calling, gets them to know one another especially well. This may be true throughout an entire fleet. The men sail together; this means working together, eating together, relaxing together, talking together endlessly, all within the narrow confines of their vessel. Then in port in foreign lands they carouse and let off steam together. They enjoy a degree of camaraderie rarely found elsewhere. It would not be an exaggeration to call a ship or small merchant fleet a floating fraternity, with strong bonds of loyalty tying the "brothers" together. At the same time seamen remain intense individualists, strongly self-centered and self-reliant, and it is difficult to enlist them in any enterprise that offers them no element of personal gain.

## Potential Missions: Reporting and Recruiting

The easiest mission for seamen agents is the collection of positive intelligence, and the simplest of all collection tasks is the observations a mariner can make concerning his own vessel and its cargo or the others in his fleet. These observations may be significant if detailed information on the country's foreign trade is needed. The agent, having natural access, need not go out of his way or make any special effort to collect

such information. He need only observe and report accurately. The shipboard agent can also make the traditional port call observations in the ports of his own or other denied countries. Both are usually worth while, and the seaman's access to these targets is unique.

Far more difficult, yet of correspondingly greater potential value, is using the mariner to recruit a primary source of intelligence in the denied area which is his home country. The difficulty of the task should not be underestimated, but this is the real opportunity to utilize to the full the right man's access and talents. The mariner acts as go-between for the case officer operating at one end and the primary source at the other. Most recruitments-at-a-distance have no human intermediary to bring the in-place source the boon of personal contact with the employing service. Here encouragement and counsel can be delivered by word of mouth, personally, from case officer to intermediary to agent with minimum risk because all accesses are natural; intermediary and source will have plausible reasons for consorting with each other. Officer seamen are invariably best suited for this type of mission because their education, intelligence, and social level will more nearly match those of a well-placed primary source.

Perhaps the most critical single determinant of success or failure in such a mission is the selection of the potential source, the inside lead to be approached through the mariner. An in-depth target study of the seaman's probable circle of contacts is indispensable. He himself seldom has any real idea of the stuff of which espionage is made and will often neglect to pass on perfectly good leads. In the course of debriefings he should be asked whether he knows such-and-such target individuals. Eventually it may come out that someone in whom we are keenly interested used to date the man's sister; the two men, although they have not seen one another for some years, were always good friends. Such leads are not likely to occur to the agent until brought to his attention, hence the great importance of a target study.

One of the best circles to look into is the navy, a service closely related to the merchant marine, especially in small countries. There may be opportunities to penetrate the defense ministry if the mariner can recruit a naval officer friend. The key criteria in selecting the target inside are good primary access to information, native intelligence, ability to work independently, and (as nearly as can be determined) susceptibility to recruitment. Often, if all the homework has been done well, the candidate will prove to have greater wit, motivation, and

resourcefulness than the mariner himself. He may have been just waiting for a secure contact to be offered from outside.

Experience has shown that of all methods which may be used to activate an inside lead, personal contact with a mariner friend is one of the most satisfactory to the man himself. While he would shy away from approaches by mail or from one-shot travelers, he is glad to talk things over with a trusted friend who enjoys authorized access to the outside world. The mariner then need only follow simple instructions in order to establish secure clandestine communications between the source and the intelligence headquarters; and once these are functioning, he may step out of the operation entirely and thus enhance its security. It is difficult, however, to resist the temptation to continue using him to service the source with such materials as secret writing supplies, communications equipment, money, or technical devices, whatever he requires for his mission.

## **Smuggling -- Packages or Persons**

The idea of having the mariner service his inside recruit immediately suggests another potential use of seamen -- as couriers in support of other operations. The courier need not even make personal contact with the independent agent he services if the two are taught to communicate via dead drops. In this way shipboard agents can provide a veritable supply line to compartmented nets inside the country. Money, propaganda materials, communications equipment, training manuals, all kinds of devices, etc., can be sent in by exploiting a universally acknowledged skill of seamen the world over -- smuggling.

This is one mission for which the crewman is perhaps better qualified than his officers. Crewmen often boast that they can smuggle in anything they can conceal on their persons. Occasionally one will go further than that: he has cultivated a special relationship with a venal customs official or guard, who, in return for a consideration, will look the other way while the sailor brings in bulky contraband. Little training is required to transform a seaman into a valuable asset for courier support.

There is no difficulty getting a package on board in a Western country; mariners return to the ship laden with purchases almost daily. The first

problem will be to conceal it on board for the duration of the voyage. The case officer can help out here by providing one of a variety of concealment devices. Possibly the best for this kind of operation is the magnetic clam, which the agent can clamp onto any of the numberless steel surfaces on a ship. His most difficult job will be to get it off the ship in the target country, and how he does this is best left to his own judgment.

An allied use of the mariner and his ship is for exfiltration. Traffic in stowaways is an old money-making business among merchant services. The right people with the right connections in waterfront circles can get anyone out of a country if it is made worth their while to run the risk. It is a difficult job, though, usually requiring the cooperation of some watchman or customs official on shore and of one or two seamen aboard ship, and the penalties for helping exfiltrate compatriots from a denied area are heavy. Yet it is done surprisingly often. So many refugees have fled one particular unhappy country stowed away in its merchant ships that the cargo fleet is jokingly referred to as a "passenger line."

The cunning that seamen exhibit in getting stowaways on board and out of the country shows a real talent for clandestine operations. In one ingenious scheme of which we became aware, an officer made friends with the harbor pilot and would borrow his official launch to take pleasure cruises around the harbor. In this port the draft limits were such that the ship could load only half full at quayside and then had to be moved to deeper waters in the middle of the bay and finish loading from barges. Instead of the usual dockside fences, checkpoints, and guards, the authorities relied on the physical barrier of the stretch of water and a customs official keeping watch aboard ship. On the night chosen for the exfiltration, then, our officer would enlist the aid of a confederate aboard to ply the customs man with food and wine. He himself would take the pilot's launch and after cruising around the bay until the appointed time would pick up the stowaway from a prearranged pier, take him to the ship, and get him on board while the watchman was otherwise pleasurably occupied. He would hide him in his own cabin for the voyage.

## **Mounting the Operation**

The first requisite in setting up such a maritime program is to get a maritime principal agent for recruiting the mariners. One member of the seamen's "floating fraternity" can provide entree to all the others. The first step, therefore, is to employ a defected mariner and play him back into the ranks of his former colleagues. The ideal maritime principal agent should:

- have served recently as an officer in the target merchant marine and consequently be on close personal terms with many of the seamen;

- have defected to the West for political reasons and be motivated by a desire to help his countrymen resist a detested regime; be of forceful personality, able to handle men well;

- have a good knowledge of English in order to serve as interpreter when required;

- have served as a shipboard agent himself, if possible, before defecting.

A principal agent with this background will be able to read crew lists like menus, picking out those of his old shipmates he can talk to and knowing which he had best avoid. Being well acquainted with their routine and habits both aboard and ashore, he can choose an approach well suited to the recruitment objective. It is usually a good idea to follow the principal agent's instincts in these early phases.

To be sure, you can make recruiting contacts without a principal agent. You can strike up conversations in waterfront bars. You can get intermediaries who have natural access to the ships, like ship chandlers, to bring candidates off. This way, however, you always have the initial problem inherent in any cold recruitment, the establishment of bonafides. The advantage of the principal agent is that bona fides is established instantly. The two mariners, usually old friends, greet one another warmly, retire to a nearby café, talk over old times, get to discussing the current situation in the homeland, and swing around to politics; in a short time your man knows what kind of agent prospect the other is. To get such an assessment by yourself may take months of cultivation.

A pitfall in this early phase is the peril to compartmentalization that

results from the seaman's ignorance of what the principal agent wants to see him about. Upon receiving word that his old buddy is in town the shipboard prospect is likely to invite a crowd to come along with him to the meeting, and such group reunions are no place for operational explorations. Each candidate must be approached and run singly; no matter how many agents are picked up in the fleet or on a single vessel, they must be kept unwitting of one another's activities. The case officer should not hesitate to terminate a contact if he finds him tied in with other recruited agents.

Experience has been that the average mariner is not disposed to be particularly good agent material; it is the unusual one we are looking for. Much depends, therefore, on the selection and testing process. Often when the principal agent approaches, perhaps one or two will develop into secure, reliable agents. Development of the case must be slow and deliberate enough that the prospect has time to gain confidence and overcome his initial apprehensions about what he is getting into. A trial period of three voyages, that is three sets of meetings, is suggested for testing his potential thoroughly. The patience this demands will be amply rewarded in the long run.

*First time out.* A solid recruitment, with the aid of the principal agent, should be the sole business of the first go-around. Along with the usual effort to establish rapport, emphasize security, and explain the contribution the recruit can make, he should be given clear and unequivocal instructions to take the initiative in setting up a personal meeting on the next trip out. His adherence to these instructions will constitute his first hurdle in the testing process. If he fails to initiate contact the next time out, it is a good sign that he lacks interest and motivation and will not develop further. Besides this primary job of maintaining contact, he should be assigned an innocuous mission such as preparing a report on his ship's itinerary and cargo or on port observations at home. The main purpose of this exercise is to provide an excuse to reward him on his next trip.

*Second time out.* His meeting arrangements should be critiqued to show whether they were completely satisfactory. Praise is due his positive report, no matter how mediocre it is, if it shows effort. Unless he objects most strenuously to accepting money, he should be paid for this report and told it is just the sort of thing that is worth good money to the service. He is a rare exception among mariners if he is not interested in getting some money for his efforts. The sooner he is put on a regular

salary, the smoother the operation will run.

This second series of meetings should also begin his training. If he is to be a courier, he needs training in dead drop selection and description. This is best accomplished by practical exercises around the city, in which he unloads practice drops and finds and writes up some of his own. Provided the training goes satisfactorily, his mission on this trip in will consist of finding and describing several dead drop sites inside the country. If, on the other hand, he is to go on a recruitment mission, he will need exhaustive briefing on the purpose and technique of his approach to the selected target.

*Third time out.* The third go-around is a good time for his polygraph examination, the main questions being who knows about his contact with the case officer and whether he did what he says he did on his last trip home. By this time the operation will have progressed to the point where it is moving forward under its own steam and its future direction will be self-evident. The recruit will have gained enough self-confidence and awareness of what is involved to merit the appellation "agent." When the agent has thus proved himself, he can be run using the same basic tradecraft techniques as any other agent who travels into and out of a denied area.

It is emphasized that the primary criteria in testing the agent are, first, that he initiate a secure contact when he comes out, and second, that he remain compartmented from others. To continue working with a recruit who cannot pass both these tests is to invite trouble.

## **Place and Time Problems**

Two interrelated difficulties inherent in mariner operations will arise to plague the operating service. There is little that can be done to forestall these problems; one must learn to live with them. They are, first, the difficulty of arranging secure personal meetings when ship and agent are on an irregular schedule, and second, the necessity for multi-station handling, i.e., the need to send a case officer to meet the agent from whatever field station has jurisdiction in the area he happens to sail into.

In a perfect operational world the agent would remain assigned to one

ship, and that ship would return to the same port every few months, so that he could use a pre-arranged plan to contact the same case officer every time. In practice this almost never happens. Personnel may be shifted and ships rerouted so swiftly and unpredictably that simply keeping track of the agents' whereabouts becomes a major problem. The difficulty is compounded if the program has grown to a considerable size, embracing a number of agents on several ships. The disadvantages are not limited to having to shift case officers.

For example, the agent may write to his accommodation address from his first port of call, Lisbon, to request a meeting in Algiers, his next stop, but a case officer is unable to get to the right place in time. The contact is missed through no fault of the agent's; he has followed instructions exactly. The case officer is then forced to initiate the contact. Despite its undesirability, there are several methods of doing this which blend into normal patterns of action. In order of desirability and security they are the following:

1. If the ship has ship-to-shore telephone, this is the easiest and safest way to get hold of anyone.
2. If not, telephone the ship's agent or the dockside porter and ask him to get the agent to the phone. It should be noted that the captain, chief mate, and chief engineer are easiest to reach naturally by telephone; they receive several such summons daily in the performance of their jobs. A phone call to a lowly crew member is unusual and may arouse suspicion.
3. Write to the agent in care of the ship's agent. Letters to the three top officers can be disguised as advertising literature, business correspondence, sales promotion, etc.
4. Use an unwitting messenger, such as a dock worker, to deliver a note on board to the agent but personally to him.
5. A thing that seems to work no matter how tight shipboard security is is to send a young lady to the pier asking for her seagoing boy friend. No one gives this a second thought. The lady need not even be pretty; those long weeks at sea dull critical faculties.
6. If a local intelligence or security service is assisting in the program, police officers or other officials can make contact with the agent on board and arrange meetings in town.

7. Recruit someone in the port who has natural access to the ships -- ship chandlers, laundrymen, salesmen, etc.

Under no circumstances should another seaman be used to haul the agent off the ship. Such an expedient could spell the beginning of the end of the operation, or indeed of the entire program.

Running an agent is difficult enough when the same case officer, having good personal rapport with him, well versed in the background and objectives of the program as a whole, and thoroughly familiar with this case, meets a given agent regularly. But in the maritime program, where multi-station handling will prove a necessary evil, different case officers, subject to the cruel accidents of time and geography, will shuttle in and out of the handling of each case. Veteran operators, aware of the dislocations that may be caused by even infrequent case-officer turnover, will appreciate the effect on the poor agent when he meets up with a new face almost every time. Even with top-notch guidance and centralized control from headquarters and with excellent coordination and cooperation among field stations, there are still bound to be some stitches dropped.

Headquarters and field elements must work hard together to ensure that these unavoidable losses are kept to a minimum. High standards of handling skill must be maintained if the agent is to respond properly to multi-station handling. Record keeping and operational reporting must also be of a high order, for the case officer at any meeting cannot be sure it will be he who will hold the next. Each report of an operational meeting must be so prompt, complete, and clear that a stranger stepping in can pick up the operation from the written record alone. Usually each field station involved in a going maritime program assigns one officer part-time to it. Frequent personal conferences of all these officers to talk over and work out mutual problems are highly desirable.

## **Opposition Measures**

With the passage of time and the growth of such a maritime program, some strains are bound to show. The exposed principal agent, for one, is sure to become known. If the program is quite extensive so the

merchant marine is thoroughly riddled, percentages will catch up with it and some indication of what is going on will undoubtedly reach the opposition. Inside the target area, of course, counterintelligence can bring its full apparatus to bear on suspect mariners. Surveillance and investigations can be mounted. Censorship may be concentrated on their mail. There is little the case officer can do about this except to warn the agent and keep him alerted about indications that he is under suspicion.

During voyages and calls at Western ports, however, counterintelligence can make only limited efforts to neutralize the program. Some of the measures it is likely to take are these:

Informants will be placed among the crew to observe their patterns of action. One pair of seamen was arrested because they stayed ashore overnight and crossed a national border without sufficient visible funds.

Surveillance of suspect mariners may be mounted in Western ports. This measure is usually severely limited by practical considerations such as the number of men available.

Searches of the ship, cabins, and suspected hiding places on board will be conducted. This may be done as a matter of routine, but it will be intensified if it is suspected that something is afoot. Contraband and stowaways are the usual objects of such a search, but if espionage is suspected all notebooks, address books, clothing, etc., will be searched.

All officers and men may be warned against contact with foreigners and exiles in town.

A simple if drastic countermeasure, one which is quite effective, has been used by nations with a tradition of xenophobia and spy-consciousness -- prohibiting individual seamen from going into town alone. Seamen going ashore must travel in groups. In a still more extreme instance, the Czechs set up a pleasure barge -- sort of a floating USO -- in an isolated section of the port of Hamburg and forbade the Czech sailors manning a barge fleet on the Elbe to go into town at all. With most nationalities, however, such iron discipline proves unenforceable. The seaman's life is hard, his long stretches at sea confining and tiring. His free time ashore, his chance to expand and paint the town, is precious to him. Indeed, those who must enforce the discipline are themselves susceptible to the lure of pleasures ashore. So no matter how strict the rules,

there is usually some room left in which to operate.

We have emphasized the difficulties and hazards in mounting maritime operations in the hope of being helpful to others who attempt them, not in order to discourage them nor because we do not think them worth the effort. On the contrary, we are convinced that if his case is given the thoughtful planning and careful execution it deserves, the seaman agent can become a valuable clandestine asset.

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