

Mansfield Memories -Mansfield man guided first ship through Panama Canal

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March 9, 2021

MANSFIELD - Ralph Dearborn moved to Mansfield with his family when he was 10 years old. Arriving from Somerville, the family settled at 17 School St. on the corner of Bliss Avenue. His father John Dearborn was the superintendent of the water department and served on the Board of Selectmen.



Panama Line steamer USS Ancon enters the Panama Canal in August 1914.

In high school Ralph played baseball and was a member of the Mansfield High School Cadets. In 1911, during his junior year, he left Mansfield High to attend the Massachusetts Nautical Training School (now known as the Massachusetts Maritime



Chief Quartermaster Ralph Dearborn, a Mansfield native, was at the wheel on August 15, 1914, as the Panama Line steamer USS Ancon became the first commercial vessel to pass through the Panama Canal. *Courtesy/Mansfield Historical Society*

Academy). That led Ralph to a unique distinction just three years later, when he would be at the wheel of the first ship to officially pass through the Panama Canal. He would go on to serve during World War I and enjoy an interesting career as a captain in the Merchant Marine.

Some speculated that Ralph got his curiosity for the sea from his grandfather Captain Thomas Dearborn, who was described as “a noted commander of vessels plying the Indian Ocean engaged in English commerce.” About six months after entering training school Ralph would get a taste of the adventure his grandfather surely knew.

The USS Ranger departed in May 1912 with Cadet Ralph Dearborn on board. He wrote several letters home detailing his adventures. He described the beautiful green hills of Horta Island in the Azores. He marveled at the many landmarks and sophisticated styles he saw in Paris. He admired the bravery of the matadors while lamenting the brutality of a bullfight he witnessed in Malaga, Spain. Ralph found little appealing about a two-day stop in Tangiers, but later enjoyed seeing Lisbon and “a swell summer resort in the mountains” in Portugal.

The following year took the cadets to Rome, which included a private audience with Pope Pius X. Among the large crowd the pope seemed to point at the cadets and ask a guard who they were. After the pope finished his benediction, the cadets gave him “three hip hip hurrahs.”

“He waved his red hat three times to us and disappeared, and we can say we got what the rest didn’t, a separate wave from the pope,” Ralph said.



Panama Line steamer USS Ancon in a lock at the opening of the Panama Canal entering Gatun Lake in August 1914.