

**LAWRENCE HOLT'S LETTER TO BLUE FUNNEL CAPTAINS**  
**BY**  
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Apprentices were not carried on Blue Funnel ships until the early part of the twentieth century when a shortage of trained deck officers prompted Lawrence Holt to propose that the Company should establish its own training facility. As a result, a Midshipmen's Department was established in 1916, and, at about that time, Lawrence Holt drafted a letter to be sent to all Blue Funnel Captains, in which he set out Company policy and philosophy on how midshipmen should be trained in the post-sailing ship era. A copy of this letter resides among as yet unlisted Holt family papers at Liverpool, together with the original version of the letter to Midshipmen on appointment, which Lawrence Holt had composed at much the same time. The latter had been sent by him to his son Julian in 1941, and the letter to Captains may have been sent at the same time.

The contents of this letter are reproduced below, and sincere thanks go to William Champion, Lawrence Holt's grandson, for bringing this material to light. According to William Champion, Lawrence Holt admitted to Julian that the contents of the letter to midshipmen were "a trifle out of date". Perhaps he may have felt the same way about the letter to Captains reproduced here. Nevertheless, many who served their apprenticeships on cadet ships after the Second World War and up until the 1970s may well agree that the training regimes that they experienced were not that far removed from the one outlined in Lawrence Holt's letter.

*Captain*

S.S.

Dear Sir,

**MIDSHIPMEN.**

The managers, having decided that the time has come when they can rely no longer on recruiting a substantial number of their ships' officers from men trained upon sailing ships, propose to train a certain number of boys upon the Company's steamers. These boys will be styled midshipmen.

It is with some reluctance that the managers have thus departed from the long established practice of the Company, for they feel some anxiety as to adequacy of the training which it may be possible to give upon the Company's steamers, but they are encouraged by the assurance that they may confide fully in the loyal and whole-hearted co-operation of the masters and officers of the fleet. The managers look upon the training of these boys as a grave responsibility and they will ever consider their own honour and reputation and that of the officers of their fleet to require that the training given upon the Company's ships shall be of the highest efficiency and repute. It is, therefore, of importance that at the initiation of the scheme a sound method should be adopted, and that the right spirit should be infused into its operation, and to this end the managers have drawn up some suggestions for the guidance of masters in training the boys placed under their charge. They

are well aware, however, that the chief educative force is personality, and that no written advice can possibly take the place of the resourcefulness and example of yourself and your officers.

The midshipmen are to be deemed of equal social position with your officers. If they do not behave as gentlemen, and are not amenable to your correction, they will be asked to leave the service. The success of the enterprise depends upon the extent to which everyone concerned will co-operate in regarding it from the strictly professional point of view of turning out a thorough sailor and officer. The managers are prepared to give the personal trouble and to sanction the necessary pecuniary sacrifices for this purpose and they are confident that officers, in all grades, of the Company's fleet will be no less ungrudging in the sacrifice of purely personal considerations. They would pressingly remind their masters and officers, the majority of whom still possess square rigged certificates, that these boys will miss much of the toughness of nerve, the resourcefulness of improvisation, the habit of self-reliance, and the general elasticity, which is the unconscious inheritance of that hard but uniquely effective training, unless a real effort is made to supply these qualities in some other way. The training hitherto given to boys on steamers seems to them to be deficient in these respects. Something more than a mere full day of work about deck or in the holds and on the bridge is required to take the place of four years' daily duty up aloft on a windjammer in all weathers and frequently under conditions of great personal hardship and peril. It is with the object of supplying this deficiency that emphasis has been laid upon encouraging to the utmost the most varied athletic and mental activity of the boys. They must often be required to do as a discipline what circumstances compel should be done on a sailing ship as a duty and very often as self preservation. That the boys should have a thorough and complete drilling in all the hardest and most monotonous work on board a steamer is of the first importance: they should indeed know their ship inside out from stem to stern; but it is no less important that by boating, swimming, boxing, and all the other forms of athletic activity, together with considerable opportunity for scientific study, both generally and in regard to the structure and equipment of modern ships, that they should keep alive and develop the qualities of personal courage, self reliance, and sound knowledge which must continue to be the possession of every good shipmaster. The managers confide in the professional pride of their staff to work out a system that will attain these ends and nourish in the boys lasting interest and pride in their life's career.

The following suggestions are made as to training: –

A lad from his first year should keep regular watch, being employed during the day in the various duties of his profession, splicing, making knots and bends, cleaning paint, and mixing and applying same, overhauling of cargo blocks and the cleaning of them, rigging work, and (if used) sails, scraping of spars, chipping of iron, the cleaning out of holds and ballast tanks, shifting coal, &c. He should be given a thorough training by the carpenter and bosun of all work within their sphere. Whilst cargo is being handled he should be in the holds watching the breaking out and stowage, dunnaging, matting, slinging, and general stevedoring; he should understand thoroughly the position and use of limbers, sounding pipes, sounding rods, bilge pumps and bilges, the steering rods and steering gear, including the hand gear, and of the cable in the chain locker, and how to keep all these clean and in good order. His nautical duties should consist of learning the compass and how to steer, and plenty of practice with the leads, especially the hand lead and log line. The commercial code of signalling, and the other methods of signalling, especially the Morse code, hand flags, the semaphore, and by flash light, should also be taught. Every encouragement is to be given to the lads to learn how to operate the wireless installation and to obtain an elementary understanding of the work of the engine room department. Your chief engineer has been requested to encourage the interest of the lads in the knowledge of machinery, and you should see that they regard this as amongst their serious duties. They should also be required at times to assist the chief steward in laying in stores, especially meat in the ice house.

When sufficiently versed in the work a midshipman should be allowed to begin to handle men where Chinese crews are carried. This is a most essential part of his education; any mistakes he may make are to be at once corrected, but never in the sight or hearing of the men. He should assist the mates in watch keeping, but never must the presence of a midshipman on the bridge be allowed to relieve the officer of the watch of his duties, or to take the place of an additional officer when double watch is being kept. His cargo duties should be greatly amplified, and he should take part in all operations involving the slinging and lifting of heavy weights, and the rigging and working of derricks and heavy weight spars. Whilst in the holds every opportunity should be allowed him to

examine the construction of the vessel, and any tendency that may be displayed towards a study of naval architecture should be encouraged. He will, of course, be schooled in tallying cargo, and should be given charge of a boat during boat drill, and employed in these if there is any boating to be done. Provide as much rowing exercise as you possibly can. On suitable occasions make the boat drill at sea as complete as the circumstances permit, and in port make a special point of providing the lads with as much pulling and sailing as possible. The dinghy is provided for this purpose; let them use it freely and be entirely responsible for its upkeep. Where a motor boat is carried they should be required to become thoroughly competent in its management.

During his third year a boy should be given increased opportunity of learning navigation; the dirty work that he has had to do during the former two years might now to some extent be curtailed, and more attention given to the scientific side of the profession. Whilst the vessel is entering or leaving port he should have experience given him of duties fore and aft, on the bridge, and in the engine room.

During his fourth year, he may be placed in the chief officer's watch, and where a fourth officer is not carried may take the place of one. He should now be required regularly to work sights, and given plenty of star work; being in the chief officer's watch will give him ample opportunities for this. He should take the azimuths in his watch, not only by the sun, but also the more important lunar and stellar ones. He should be given a good knowledge of chart work, and be invited with the officers to check off the courses you order to be laid down, and should always be present when the ship is swung to determine compass errors, or when the compass is being adjusted by the adjuster. The master must use his discretion as to the watch into which each midshipman is put, being careful to see that a fair experience of all work falls to the lot of each boy during his service as a midshipman. It is important that he should be present at all sounding operations made with the sounding machine during his watch. He should at all times be employed in checking ship's distance from the land, and must receive a thorough drilling in the use of Lecky's danger angle.

The entry of offences in the official log must only take place in the case of midshipmen after the most thorough enquiry, and you will use great consideration in the matter. This is of the utmost importance as "logging" carries with it a black mark against a boy for the whole of his professional career, and what may be very serious in a man, might occur from want of thought in a boy. Punishment should be thorough but always free from ill-feeling.

The managers particularly hope that you will do your best to insist upon the physical development of the boys. Encourage them to go aloft, to practice work upon the spars, to climb ropes, to swim, to box, to race, and generally to exercise themselves to the utmost of their bent. Risks must be taken if nerve is to be obtained. A canvas swimming bath has been provided which the midshipmen should be allowed to use freely and be required to rig up and care for themselves. You may give at your discretion small prizes to encourage these activities, charging them in your account.

The managers have had placed in the midshipmen's room a small library of books of scientific and general literature. They hope you will encourage the boys to read these books and to form a taste for scientific knowledge of the sea, and of its fauna, of meteorology and astronomy, and of good literature generally, rather than to allow them to waste their time, uncorrected, in reading trash. The boys will be expected to pass their Board of Trade Examinations at the end of their training without cramming.

The midshipmen have been instructed to keep a daily log of natural phenomena observed during the voyage. This is for educational purposes, and it is important that each boy should record his own observations only, though general guidance may appropriately be given to him. Do not let these logs become in any way a record of the ship's doings, such as is forbidden in the Company's standing orders. The managers hope that both you and the boys will use originality to develop this valuable form of training.

Uniform must be worn on shore and on bridge duty and all other proper occasions. Generally speaking, however, the managers hope the midshipmen will spend most of their time in working clothes. Do not let them neglect to keep their clothes washed and tidy and themselves clean.

The midshipmen are not to be allowed to mess alone, but with a certificated officer, presumably the third, the food served to them being the same as supplied to the officers and engineers of the vessel. It would be a good plan to invite them at times, singly or together, to your own table.

The midshipmen are to attend to their own room, and adequate time should be allowed them every morning for this purpose. Do not fail to inspect their quarters regularly and to insist upon the most scrupulous cleanliness and neatness. The midshipman senior in service (unless good reason to the contrary exists) should be held responsible for the good order of the half-deck and for the good behaviour of its inmates. You should take an early opportunity each voyage of impressing upon him his responsibility to you in this respect and see that he fulfils this duty faithfully and in the right spirit. On arrival at a home port they must not leave the ship on holiday without obtaining from the officer in charge a certificate that their room is clean and shipshape. Holidays at home will be arranged through the Marine Superintendents.

If you have any reason to suspect that a midshipman is suffering in health, do not hesitate to have him properly overhauled by a doctor of good standing. Discourage them from doctoring themselves. When a doctor is carried, encourage him to train the boys in first aid.

Bullying or the use of foul language towards these lads, by any officer, or engineer, or other person, is to be reported to us. Similar misconduct on their part should be smartly punished.

In granting leave, please regard relaxation ashore as the reward of hard and enthusiastic work aboard ship. A ready and uncomplaining disposition to help the officers in their work should be expected of every boy. The Company's principal agencies have been asked to co-operate with the masters in providing suitable places and opportunities of training and recreation for the boys, and the managers will listen with sympathy to any proposals in this direction which may contribute to the boys' welfare. Remember that the midshipmen are over and above your ship's usual complement, and that it is the managers' purpose by providing a generous training to make them thorough sailors and to fit them as officers suitable for and attached to the Company's service rather than to exact from them the utmost amount of routine work during their indentures.

The managers expect you to do your utmost to protect the lads from the temptations inseparable from a seafaring life. They wish you to exercise a wise discretion in the giving out of money and not to hesitate to insist on paying the accounts for clothes, etc., yourself, if you deem it desirable.

Please make a confidential report in writing at the end of each voyage on each boy as to his abilities, general conduct, health, and aptitude for his profession. To the boys best reported on by you for all round ability and character, the managers are ready to give from time to time valuable prizes, such as sextant or binoculars.

Please let your chief officer have access to this letter. The managers invite from you and him the freest expressions of advice and criticism. We hope you will both insist on the boys playing the game to the utmost and you may rest assured that we will loyally uphold your authority over them.

Finally, the managers remind you that these suggestions must not be allowed to interfere with the proper fulfilment of the instructions contained in the Company's standing orders to masters, mates, and engineers.

Yours faithfully,

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