
My Life at
Sea



MARCUS
JEFFERSON
GEERTS

MASTER MARINER
1920 - 1982

Compiled, Edited and Published by Paul Middleton 2013

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Dedication

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED to my grandchildren, Richard, Gerald, and Naomi who has just arrived on the 2nd April 1976, yet another of the important things which have happened to me in April. I first went to sea in April 1937, and I lost my job, for health reasons, in April 1974.

I DECIDED to have a shot at telling a yarn to the kids because I am unable to talk to them normally, and I get very frustrated by my disability which denies me the pleasure of talking to anyone in a normal fashion. These tales are only those that I would have inflicted on the poor children, and they may be of some interest to them as they grow. At least I hope that they will be able to understand that 'Grandpa Moose' has not always been such a queer old buffer and that I did at one time lead a full and interesting life.

Marcus Jefferson Geerts 1976

I DECIDED TO TRANSCRIBE this autobiography in July 2000, after finding the manuscript stored away in the Geerts family chest. In the preceding 20 years I had dipped into it at odd times, but never really taken the trouble to decipher properly the 145 odd pages of typescript. When I did so, I was utterly captivated.

MARCUS WROTE THIS IN 1976 after he had suffered a stroke, and felt the frustrations of his incapacity - he had suffered this stroke during the previous year. With his prodigious memory, he then set about the task of writing down on paper the fascinating story of his boyhood in South Africa and his life at sea. The resulting story is a fitting memorial to all those who sailed the seas in the Thirties and during the years of War.

HE WROTE THIS STORY specifically for his grandchildren who were arriving in the Seventies, so I would like to dedicate my work on this to his wife Margaret, or Bumper Moose as she is affectionately known, and John and Pippa his children.

Paul Middleton September 2000

SINCE I STARTED TO FORMAT this autobiography for the electronic market, and having re-read the text 13 years later, it became obvious to me that the book should be placed in its historical context.

MARCUS GREW UP in the 1920s in the British dominion of the Union of South Africa created in 1910, and comprising the former territories of the Cape and Natal and the republics of Orange Free State and Transvaal. By the time he joined the General Botha Training Ship at 13, the Union had been granted virtual independence from the United Kingdom.

BY THE MID THIRTIES, the South African Party and National Party had merged to form the United Party, which sort reconciliation between Afrikaners and English-speaking whites. But by 1939 the parties had again split over the entry of the Union into World War II as a British ally, a move which the National Party followers strongly opposed.

THE NATIONAL PARTY was elected to power in 1948 strengthening the racial segregation begun under Dutch and British colonial rule by classifying the population into three races and implementing rights and limitations for each. The white minority controlled the vastly larger black majority. The segregation became known as apartheid.

BY THE TIME MARCUS HAD TYPED this manuscript, the Republic had gained independence, and implemented the Mahlabatini Declaration of Faith, signed by Buthelezi and Schwarz in 1974, enshrining the principles of peaceful transition of power, and equality for all. This was to be the first of such agreements by acknowledged black and white political leaders in South Africa. As we now know, the final peaceful transition was finally negotiated between FW de Klerk and Nelson Mandela in 1993.

Paul Middleton 2013

Chronology

Marcus Jefferson Geerts

Born in Port Elizabeth, South Africa 8 December 1920

Mother Anne Myburg, Father unknown, adopted at a few months old by
Marcus and Florence Geerts, orange farmers

Marcus Geerts starts grocery business c. 1925

Father becomes Mayor of Port Alfred 1928

Visit of Prince of Wales, Opening of Bowling Green, Re-opening of
Blaauwkrantz Gorge railway bridge, mother goes flying in Tiger Moth, Electricity
Company and new School open during year as Mayor

Six months stay with Stocks family at Mentone Tea Gardens 1929

Watched building of model of Winchester Castle by Harrison 1931

Decision to send me to the **General Botha** for training 1932

Left home aged 13 to join **SSTS General Botha** under Captain Yardley 1933,
leave 1936, National Geographic Society essay prize 1936

Parents retire to Seapoint 1936

Join **SS Dromore Castle** under Captain Causton March 1937

1st voyage Cape Town - Port Elizabeth - Durban - Lourenço Marques - Beira -
Freetown - New York (BAC) - Point Breeze - Cape Town

2nd voyage Cape Town - Port Elizabeth - Durban - Lourenço Marques - Beira -
Tamatave Madagascar - Port Louis Mauritius - Beira - Cape Town - Freetown -
Baltimore - New York (World Fair) - Cape Town

3rd voyage Cape Town - Port Elizabeth - East London - Beira - London

Meet Lynn, Margaret Lindsay 1938

Join **SS Dundrum Castle** under Captain Pace 1938

Hull - New York - Beira - New York (BAC and stay with Wynn family) - Cape Town - South African ports - Freetown - convoy to Hull 1939

Join **SS Roxburgh Castle** under Captain Smythe 1940

1st voyage Southampton - Lobito Bay - Cape Town - Southampton

2nd voyage Southampton - Cape Town March 1940

Join **British Genius** and leave South Africa for ever 1940

Cape Town - Freetown - convoy to Methil - London

Navigation School and The Blitz 1940

Caledonia to Boston to collect **Gemma** November 1940

Join **Gemma** under Captain Wardell 9 November 1940

1st voyage Boston - Halifax

1st convoy Halifax - storm - Halifax for repairs

2nd convoy Halifax - storm - St Johns - sinks December 1940

3rd convoy St Johns - engine failure - abandon ship - tow to St Johns

4th voyage St Johns - lost - Hamilton Bermuda - steal train - Port-of-Spain
Trinidad April 1941

Lady Drake to Boston April 1941

Christian Holm to UK May 1941

Passed 2nd Mate exams July 1941

Engaged to Margaret Lindsay July 1941

Join **SS Empire Meteor** August 1941

1st voyage London - Clyde - convoy to Halifax - New York (BAC) - load munitions - Halifax - convoy to Loch Ewe Scotland - Reykjavik

2nd voyage Convoy PQ2 - Dvina River - Archangel 31 December 1941

Join **SS Empire Mavis** at Molotovsk and iced in January 1942

Asthma attack - execution of stores thief by Russians - A/A guns after party - trouble - tooth extraction - Molotovsk - Iceland - Hull left April 1942

Married Margaret at Abbots Kerswell July 1942

Joined **SS Norman Star** under Captain Maclean August 1942

Liverpool - convoy to Halifax - storms - convoy to Trinidad - meet **Gemma** - Rio de Janeiro - Montevideo - Buenos Aires - Tres Puntas - Punta Arenas - Straits of Magellan - Valparaiso - Antofagasta - Panama Canal - Key West - aground - collision - scrape - Norfolk and repairs - Halifax - convoy with **Illustrious** to Liverpool

Passed 1st Mate exams 1943

John Geerts born 1 May 1943

Queen Elizabeth Glasgow to New York - train to Oakland - San Francisco

Join **SS Empire Anvil** under Captain Lee 1943

1st voyage Long Beach - Panama Canal - Norfolk - convoy with Emperor to Belfast - Glasgow - Holy Loch February 1944

2nd voyage Holy Loch - Gareloch to join Task Force for training April 1944

3rd voyage Glasgow to join Force 'O' - Slapton Sands for training - Glasgow

4th voyage Glasgow - Portland to join Force 'O' 4 June 1944

Operation Neptune D-Day

Omaha Beach - Plymouth/Southampton 6 June 1944

50 Round trips up to end of November 1944

Join **Batory** under Captain Deyjakofski December 1944

1st voyage Glasgow - Red Sea - Bombay - Glasgow February 1945

2nd voyage Glasgow - Reykjavik - Glasgow April 1945

3rd voyage Glasgow - Gibraltar - Naples - Algiers - Glasgow June 1945

Join **SS Fort St Croix** under Captain Whalley July 1945

1st voyage London - Tampa - Boca Grande - Panama Canal - Melbourne - Port Pirie - Wellington 16 December 1945 - Cape Horn 3 January 1946 - Antwerp - Plymouth 11 February 1946

Pippa Geerts born 2 February 1946

2nd voyage March 1946 Tilbury - Newport - Gibraltar - Suez Canal - Red Sea
 - Basra - flight to/from Baghdad - Khoramsharr - Bahrain - Port Sudan -
 heatstroke - Avonmouth

Navigation School and passed Master Mariner exams 1946

UCL staff in London and Southampton

Join **Baltavia** under Captain Whalley 1947

Shuttle voyages London - Kiel Canal - Gydnia and back

Join **Baltraffic** under Captain Paddy 1948

Short voyages Immingham - Gydnia - Immingham and back

London - Gibraltar - Limassol - Tel-Aviv - Haifa - Izmir - London 1948

Ill with ulcer and leave the Sea for good 1948

Join Marley Tiles 1948

Lost job for health reasons April 1974

Died 15 February 1982 R.I.P

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Name of Seaman, in full.		Date of Birth.		Place of Birth and Nationality.		Certificate, if any.	
Marcus Jefferson Geerts		18.12.20		Port Elizabeth		MASTER F-G. 56804	
Height.		Colour of		Tattoo or other Distinguishing Marks.			
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My Earliest Memories

My earliest memory is of the farm at Harpers Halt near Grahamstown where my father was trying his hand at orange farming. I was born in Port Elizabeth and my real mother was named Anne Myburg, but my father was unknown, and when I was only a few months old I was adopted by Florence and Marcus Geerts recently from the UK.

They were devout Christian Scientists and I was brought up in this faith for the whole of the time until I was to leave home at the age of 12. They were good people and I spent a normal happy childhood under their loving but very strict eyes.

My only memories of the farm, are of mountains of oranges on the grading tables, and in those far off days I recall seeing my first car going along the top of the ridge opposite the farm, on its way to Port Alfred, which was where we found ourselves going when my father sold the farm and went into the grocery business. I must have been about five at the time. Port Alfred was, and doubtless still is, a lovely little township lying astride the Kowie River near its mouth. It had a white population of around 2,000 in those days, and with its beautiful beaches, lagoons, sand dunes, and surf, it was not surprising that it was a very popular holiday resort.

Our new home lay on the top of the hill on the East bank of the river, and was a large building with a galvanised iron roof, and we got our freshwater supply from this roof. There were big tanks at the corners of the house and all the water went straight into these tanks. We had no other water supply and had to use an old-fashioned tin bath for our weekly bath. It was not unknown for us to have a drought and then we really were in trouble and had to use the sea or lagoon, so we spent a great deal of time in the water.