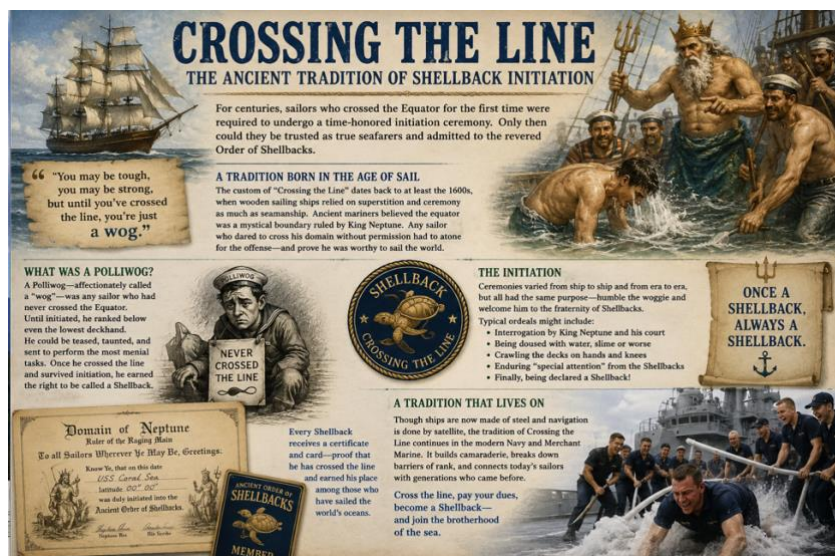




Here Woggie, Woggie, Woggie!

How a Navy Lieutenant Commander Became a Shellback

After nearly 20 years in the U.S. Navy, I had risen to the rank of lieutenant commander, managed the administrative life of a 5,000-man aircraft carrier, and answered directly to the captain. Then one morning I found myself hiding under my desk, hoping a gang of rowdy enlisted sailors wouldn't find me. They did.

Within the hour I was crawling on my hands and knees through the passageways of *USS Coral Sea*, being prodded with homemade paddles, ordered to dunk my head into a toilet full of mysterious brown sludge, kiss a greasy sailor's belly, and crawl through a dumpster filled with foam and floating garbage.

My crime? I had never crossed the Equator. I was the lowest of the low—a polliwog.

A Lieutenant Commander...and a Lowly Polliwog

The episode took place during my final active-duty deployment aboard *USS Coral Sea*, a veteran post-World War II aircraft carrier. We departed Alameda, California, steamed beneath the Golden Gate Bridge, crossed the Pacific to Alaska, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Singapore, then sailed across the Indian Ocean, through the Red Sea and Suez Canal to Alexandria, Egypt. After visiting three Mediterranean ports, we finished the six-month voyage at our new home port of Norfolk, Virginia.

At the time I was the ship's Administrative Officer—a position not unlike the city manager of a small town. With nearly 5,000 sailors aboard, the personnel office, post office, legal office, print shop, career counselors, and the Masters-at-Arms all worked for me. Yet none of that mattered when we crossed the Equator.

Despite almost two decades of naval service, I was still a miserable Polliwog—a sailor who had never crossed the Equator by sea and therefore had never been initiated into the ancient fraternity of Shellbacks. To be fair, I had spent virtually all of my career in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Even our ship's captain suffered the same embarrassing distinction. He, too, was a lowly "woggie" and willingly submitted himself to the ceremony.

Among Polliwogs there is only one rank, and that is no rank at all.

The Summons from King Neptune

The day before the ceremony I received my official summons. I was ordered to appear before the mighty King Neptune to answer for my many alleged crimes and transgressions against the exalted Order of Shellbacks. Naturally, every one of the charges was fabricated.

My instructions also required me to wear my khaki working uniform inside out—a visible reminder that Polliwogs deserved neither dignity nor military bearing. It was a clever way of stripping away rank before the festivities even began.

Hiding Under My Desk

The next morning I awoke to a deafening racket echoing through the passageways. Shellbacks roamed the ship pounding on bulkheads and bellowing, "Here woggie...woggie...woggie!" As an officer I had the luxury of a tiny private stateroom, and I quietly slipped out before they reached my compartment.

I made my way to the Administrative Office where, demonstrating all the courage expected of a seasoned lieutenant commander, I crawled beneath my desk and convinced myself it was the perfect hiding place.

It wasn't.

Suddenly the office door burst open and a band of scruffy-looking Shellbacks stormed inside. One quick look around the room was all it took to discover my supposedly ingenious hiding place. To this day I remain convinced that one of my chief petty officers betrayed my location. He denied it afterward, of course, but I've never completely believed him.

Cornered, I surrendered and joined the growing line of miserable Polliwogs waiting outside my office.

Justice, Shellback Style

Armed with "wog paddles"—four-foot lengths of canvas fire hose duct-taped to wooden handles—the Shellbacks herded us aft toward the mess decks and onto our hands and knees. From there we crawled up ladders to the hangar deck, where hundreds of equally miserable Polliwogs formed a seemingly endless line.

We probably could have overwhelmed the Shellbacks by sheer force of numbers, but something rather remarkable happened instead. A kind of Stockholm syndrome took hold, and somewhere between the paddles, the chanting, and the endless crawling, we began laughing right along with the people making our lives miserable. The absurdity of it all gradually became part of the fun.

Being one of the very few officers in the procession made me irresistible prey. One group of engineers—whom we affectionately called "snipes"—pulled me out of line for some special attention.

The Toilet Test

In the middle of the pipe shop sat a detached toilet whose bowl brimmed with thick brown liquid containing several suspicious-looking chocolate-colored "logs." I was ordered to plunge my head into it.

Obedience being second nature after twenty years in the Navy, I did exactly as ordered. To my enormous relief—and considerable amusement—the brown liquid turned out to be cola, while the floating "logs" were Baby Ruth candy bars. The whole thing was disgusting only until I realized it was one elaborate practical joke.

Kiss the Baby

After rejoining the line, we eventually reached the forward aircraft elevator, which carried us to the flight deck. Above us stood cheering Shellbacks stomping their boots, pounding sticks against the deck, and chanting, "Wog! Wog! Wog!" By then we knew the ordeal was almost over.

Naturally, I was selected to "kiss the baby." Neptune's "baby" happened to be a rather portly sailor lying on his back with grease generously smeared across his ample stomach. I was ordered to plant a kiss on his belly. With all the fake enthusiasm I could muster, I complied.

One final obstacle remained. We crawled through a large dumpster filled with firefighting foam and floating garbage before emerging on the other side, dripping, filthy, and thoroughly initiated.

A Shellback at Last

A booming voice demanded, "What are you now?"

Even the slowest Polliwog knew the correct answer.

"I'm a Shellback!"

More than forty years later, I still have my official Shellback certificate and membership card. They're among my favorite Navy souvenirs—not because of the paper they're printed on, but because they remind me of a day when rank disappeared, dignity temporarily vanished, and

officers and enlisted sailors alike became willing participants in one of the Navy's oldest, funniest, and most enduring traditions.

If I should ever again have the good fortune to cross the Equator by sea, I'll finally be entitled to stand with the old Shellbacks, grin at the next generation of miserable Polliwogs, and gleefully shout:

"Here woggie...woggie...woggie!"