

Message in a Bottle

A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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Panama Canal with the Bridge to the Americas on the left

Captain Millard Scott – Mariner and Rancher

Millard Alston Scott holds an unlimited master's license, also called a master mariner's certificate, which allows him to operate any ship of any tonnage anywhere in the world.

Scott has been a mariner since he was 17 years old, when he joined the U.S. Navy. He travelled to Houston on a Greyhound bus with five others. After basic training in San Diego, California, all six of them first served on the USS *Rio Grande* for two years, a 311-foot gasoline tanker serving the Pacific Fleet. They became longtime friends.

During his eight years in the Navy, Scott taught himself celestial navigation, which is the art and science of finding your way by the sun, moon, stars, and the planets. He fondly reflects about the advent of computers and how much easier it is to find information today. It was harder then.

While in Japan, he saw a fuel tanker blow up, and he reflected, "You gain a lot of respect for tankers when you see something like that." Empty tankers are more dangerous too, for the vapor is like dynamite, whereas full tankers will only burn.

Texaco hired him and he quickly rose in rank, getting his master's license at 27, and at 28 he became the youngest captain in the history of Texaco's fleet.



In May of 1964, Scott went to Panama to become a ship pilot, guiding ships through the Panama Canal until July 1, 1973, during most of the Vietnam War. It takes about eight hours to guide a ship through the forty-eight miles of waterway and the canal's three locks, though Scott recollected one time getting a ship through in four hours and forty-five minutes. That beats the 8,000-mile tour around South America.

Scott guided a lot of ammunition and military ships, bulk carriers, and fuel tankers through the canal. Several WWII Victory Ships were overhauled and refitted for the Vietnam War and passed through canal under Scott's watch, many serving as 460-foot ammunition ships.

A bit of irony existed in that there was more anxiety over smaller dynamite laden ships than there was over the much larger ammunition ships and fuel tankers. This came from older fears and memories of the ships carrying explosives during the "cut" and expansion of the canal, known as the Gaillard Cut or Culebra Cut, a valley and canal cut through the Panamanian continental divide. During his time in Panama, the width the "cut" was about 300 feet, and today it is about 760 feet, blasted from solid rock, as expansion of the canal continues.

Scott liked to fish in one of the abandoned French-built canal portions, great for catching snook, a usually a drab colored fish with a black lateral line, sometimes with bright yellow pelvic fins. And *good* eating.

In 1973, Scott became a ship pilot for the Sabine Bar on the southeast Texas coast, joining a tightly knit group that is today a cooperative known as the "Guardians of the Sabine Neches Waterway" (see SabinePilots.com).

Scott has spent thirty-one years guiding ships through the waters of the Sabine Bar, mainly crude oil and gas tankers and container ships. Sometimes it was a tight fit, squeezing ships through a waterway about 400 feet wide and 40 feet deep. Like several, one crude oil tanker he guided through was 964 feet long and 176.5 feet wide with 164,000 tons of crude oil in her hold.

Yes, the ship pilot has to know to the inch how wide the ship and how much water she "draws," that is, how deep in the water the bottom of the ship goes. The ships move up the Sabine Bar on their own power, using tugs only to dock and undock and – catch this – to *slow down*. The ship pilot advises the ship captain on many things, and they both had better be right on target on how long it takes a 100,000-plus-ton vessel to stop.

The Texas Governor requires all foreign ships to have a ship pilot on board as they enter and leave Texas shores. American ships are not required, but, today, no significant ship enters or leaves U.S. ports without a ship pilot.

Captain Scott retired in May of 2004, after having been on, captained, and piloted about 20,000 ships through the waters of the world.

He still maintains contact with several fellow seamen, and with a watchful eye he surveys the shipping news. Pirates – "we have always had them," he says. They are bad. One solution in Somalia would be to convoy the ships with Navy escorts and helicopters. The pirates usually go for the ships with "low sides" throwing grappling hooks up and climbing on board. Pirates have bribed port officials to find out when the ship has money put on board, though many ships have stopped taking large sums. And ransoming the captain and crew has been a big business – cheaper for the company to pay a ransom than get a new captain, crew, ship, and cargo.

A couple of years ago, Scott reconnected with his long lost Aunt Jinny after 65 years. She had helped take care of him while his father was gone for six months of his childhood. He visited her about five or six times, and he found out that her father had died in Woodville after pursuit with a sheriff's posse going after a man who had stolen a pig. When the posse got close, the fugitive shot and killed her father.

Just a week ago, Scott went to the funeral of one of the five friends that he served with on the USS *Rio Grande* at the beginning of his career.

Captain Scott has valued every good relationship in his life and rarely forgets any. While he has not been home as much as he would have liked – being a seaman was his job – his family and home have never left his heart. The seaman plies the ocean waves while his heart is anchored at home.

He joined the Woodville Lions Club, and in a few years became its president and led it through several fund raisers.

A couple of years ago, his cousin who runs a rock plant in the Cayman Islands asked if Captain Scott would go with him through the canal on a business trip. Scott and his family have taken several vacations aboard cruise ships that passed through the canal. Other than those few voyages, Scott has not been back to Panama for a lengthy stay.

The Panama Canal was finally transferred to the Panama Canal Authority on January 1, 2000, the result of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties, two treaties signed by President Jimmy Carter and Omar Torrijos on September 7, 1977. The first treaty insured the right of the U.S. to defend the canal, and the second allowed for the ultimate transfer of operation to Panamanians. There were many initial fears that the Panamanians could not handle it, but, as Scott reflected, “They seem to be doing okay.”

While piloting ships through the Sabine Bar for thirty one years, and travelling back and forth to Tyler County, he has built the Scott Angus Ranch located off Hwy. 256 northwest of Woodville on over 430 acres on what has been known as the Parsons Bottom. He has about 200 head of prime Angus beef and has mostly turned over the ranch’s daily operation to his son.

He has not driven his Caterpillar bulldozer yet, but it has “paid for itself several times over,” he said, as his son and daughter drive it to maintain and make improvements on the ranch.

Just the other day, while getting a haircut, he fell ill for no apparent reason. It was a surprise. After three days in the hospital, the doctor determined that his blood pressure medicine needed adjusted. Scott did not like that hospital stay, but, at 77, he was rather proud to say that it was the first time in his life that he had spent the night in the hospital. He was not even born in a hospital! All in all, with a full head of hair and all of his teeth, he smiles as he recollects that he has enjoyed good health all of his days.

Millard Scott has been married to Barbara for over fifty years now. They have three sons and two daughters. They lost one son to a motorcycle accident. Reflecting on his wife, “It is hard on a woman being married to a seaman,” he said, because he had to be gone so much. She had to be both mother and father, and his children share a bond with their mother that he does not have, though he has been catching up. Until he retired in 2004, he prohibited any kind of nautical decorations in his home: “I did not want my kids going to sea!” The youngest son tried to go to sea, but he was color blind, and that prevented him getting his master’s license.

Nowadays, several mementoes and ship models decorate their home, which has become a veritable thoroughfare of family and adopted family members and children. From his living room windows, he views both his ranch and his swimming pool in which his numerous grandchildren and great-grandchildren often play. He loves every minute.

Sail on Captain Scott.