

1930, Rum Runners on the Spanish Main

by Frank Start - VE3AJ

Some years ago when working out of Montreal, I received a call from the top brass to proceed to Halifax and make a quick installation of a marine direction finder on a vessel there. The lack of further information was unusual but in any case I was on the Ocean Limited that night heading east.

This was about the time that the U. S. A. was trying to enforce the Volstead Act which was passed in 1919. Here it was 1930 and they were still trying. Alcoholic beverages were very popular south of the border.

Imagine my surprise when I found myself on a rum runner the next morning. This was one of a fleet of small but high powered and seaworthy boats which carried the booze down the U. S. east coast, to a point of rendezvous with a high-powered, fast ship which would run into the harbour dodging the U. S. Coast Guard. They were evidently going to use the DF to locate their position more accurately off the coast and thus speed up the delivery. (They made no enquiries re the frequency range of the receiver).

The equipment was on deck and they were waiting for me. The owners (bootleggers) were represented by a man named Jackson from Hoboken, well loaded with greenbacks. He said the big boss was back in the Lord Nelson Hotel pacing the floor, and wanting the job to be done yesterday.

The boat was about 40 feet long and 8 foot beam with a steel hull, built for power and speed with two twelve cylinder diesels. Two small rooms aft of the pilot house were for the Master and Mates quarters. A carpenter was soon on hand and removed the bulkhead between the rooms so that the loop antenna could be mounted directly over the keel. Anything needed for the job, carpenters, welders or materials were all rounded up by a fast taxi service, assisted by Jackson and his greenbacks. By daylight the next morning the installation was complete and we were ready for the next operation. Calibration is the adjustment of the Direction Finder for accurate bearings. This required a run out to Chebucto Head, the entrance to Halifax Harbour. Even the "Big Boss" came out for this little boat ride. There was a fresh breeze off the Atlantic and a bit of "chop" on the ocean. The Big Boss and another visitor soon disappeared from the open deck.

However, our plans were foiled. Fog patches and then dense fog entered the scene preventing our being able to take the visual bearings from the lighthouse where the radio beacon is located. We headed to Halifax and the Big Boss began to tear his hair. This was awkward and added to his misery of travelling by rail when he was just out for a boat ride. But a sudden stroke of luck. There was a ship in the harbour in which I had installed a DF the previous week. If the operator was on board we could use his emergency transmitter and finish the job.

We altered course and headed for the Columbiadate. Jackson and I went on board, found the operator which was very fortunate for us. No operator stays on board when his ship is in port unless he is short of funds and that was the case here. He was full of cooperation when I outlined my plans for him, especially when Jackson handed him a fifty dollar contribution towards his

short funds. We returned to the "Ashuia" and immediately got under way. Crossing the harbour we took up a position about a mile from the Columbiante. We now had her sending signals. With the boat heading directly on the tanker, I adjusted the loop for zero degrees. At this point I find that there is no pelorus on board to check the visual bearings. Under normal circumstances this would end the operation for that day. But this was a job that had to be finished yesterday. I got the helmsman to work the boat to a position such that a bearing of the other ship was 45 degrees on the bow. I could see the compass card myself and adjusted the loop to read 45 1/2 degrees. I then called the Captain and said, "We now have the Columbiante at 45 1/2 degrees on the starboard bow, and will you check the bearing?" He held his hand over the binnacle, looked out the window of the wheel house to the Columbiante, glanced down at the compass and said, "That's right." I said, "OK Captain, we can return to the dock, the job is finished." If one tried to use this method on an upper laker the Captain would throw him overboard. It was passable in this case because of the location of the loop, which was clear of any large objects or rigging close by.

So we returned to the dock cleaned up the paper work, packed up the screw driver and pliers and prepared to depart. I made it a point to see Jackson and wish him well.