

The Voyage to Tedium

Why in the hell would you want to go to Tedium? After all it's 2,000 nautical miles from Ennui. The only reason is --- you have to. Them's orders sailor. This is not my personal war story, but a tale of immense success and heart breaking failure. The ship on this voyage is the **USS Reluctant**, which a few of you will remember and perhaps even her theater of operations. She was an AKA, in Navy speak, an attack cargo vessel. For those of you still confused, it becomes clearer when I name the Executive Officer --- Mr. Roberts. The **Reluctant** is probably the Navy's most famous but fictitious vessel that sailed the backwaters of the Pacific avoiding confrontation like the plague. As many of this class of ships, it had a regular run. Those ports slowly changing and advancing to the West as the Marines and Army slogged their way across the bloody Pacific, She delivered, supplied, and made a point to only hear an air or Naval bombardment in the distance. For the **Reluctant**, those ports included Tedium, Apathy, Monotony, and once an excruciatingly slow sail to Tedium two thousand nautical miles from Ennui^{1,2}.

The **Reluctant** and her crew sailed into history in 1946, when Thomas Heggen³ breathed life and immortality into a mish mash of heroes and humans. For some of us, it seems like only yesterday that we met Captain Morton, Mr. Roberts, Ensign Pulver, Doc, and the rest of that, shall we say, "happy go lucky" crew as they fought for freedom in the heat and boredom of the rear echelon delivering toothpaste, toilet paper, baloney, oranges, underwear, and an occasional vehicle, and like any bunch of sailors of that era getting hammered whenever they could.

Houghton Mifflin⁴ published this small 196-page volume to rave reviews. Newspapers around the country quickly praised it as a "little classic" with a few negative reviews due to bawdy language. In retrospect, Heggan's timing couldn't have been more perfect. Veterans were

still pouring home from the Far East and Europe on Operation Magic Carpet, and thousands would remain in the boredom of the Occupational forces. The men and women of these groups could all identify with the **Reluctant**'s crew. They had, or were experiencing much the same; and, of course, the combat survivors were wishing they had. What marketing demographic to have in the pre-television era! And that success continued to steam roll into the '50's with a play⁵, movie^{6,7}, and later a forgettable TV sitcom⁸ and television movie⁹. Hundreds of young, would be Hemingway's, returning from Europe or the Pacific, were devastated believing that Heggen had one upped them while they were still in the planning stages of their great "war novel," but there is a deeper and much darker story here.

Orlo Thomas Heggen was born on 23 December 1919 in Ft. Dodge, Iowa to Mina and T.O. Heggen. They were Norwegian and his Grandfather was Ole Heggen. The parents Americanized that to Orlo, which Tom abandoned early in high school as one of the first of many efforts to cut links to his past. During the Depression, his father was forced to move the family to Oklahoma City where Tom entered Oklahoma City University, a Methodist religious school. Tom's cousin was Wallace Stegner, a few years older than he, but old enough to be a mentor. Wallace was intensely interested in literature and they spent many hours discussing writers and writing. Wallace encouraged Tom's early attempts at fiction in high school and at OCU¹⁰.

This was the first of many fortuitous events in Heggen's life. Stegner became a teacher and a writer. He was a professor at Wisconsin, Harvard, and finally Stanford where he founded the Creative Writing Program. His students included Sandra Day O'Connor, Edward Abbey, Robert Stone, Ken Kelsey, and Larry McMurtry among other famous writers. He had 30 books to his credit including *Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943), *Angle of Repose* (Pulitzer Prize 1972),

The Spectacular Bird (National Book Award 1977) but perhaps his greatest contribution was The Wilderness Letter and his incredible conservation and environmental work for the Western United States. Quite a mentor indeed^{11,12}.

In retrospect, it is at Oklahoma City University that we first see an early hint of trouble. As a freshman, Heggen published “Dry like a Twig” in the college literary magazine and joined The Campus, the college weekly newspaper. Tom was bright with a savage wit that he used to full effect on frequent so-called “pranks”, which could become cruel practical jokes, especially for women. He read voraciously and had an impressive command of contemporary literature, but was also described as moody and diffident. Despite this, his wit and humor carried him far, and he was popular with most of the students especially the coeds.

He took a job at the University Press, run by a retired Methodist preacher, setting type for 40 cents an hour. Preacher Brill was the watchdog of student morals and would scan the student newspaper for unchaste thought and language. Tom’s sophomoric sense of decorum forced him to set the type for the name of the big man on campus’ date, for the Delta Psi pledge dance, to that of Oklahoma City’s most famous hooker. That plus another idiotic episode a few months later resulted in Tom’s departure for Oklahoma A & M in the fall of 1938, and there he met Carol Lynn Gilmer, who became the second critical event in his life. Carol Lynn struck him as a dynamic, All-American girl; but though intrigued she did not like the loud, boozy crowd he hung out with. Carol Lynn had career plans of her own that included Northwestern School of Journalism and eventually a newspaper job. Despite his ardor, she was not interested in romance¹⁰.

Tom’s parents solved the problem by moving to Minneapolis, and he transferred to the University of Minnesota joining the staff of the Daily Minnesotan, at the time the largest college

newspaper in the world with a circulation of 2100 a day. Here he discovered a group who shared his contempt for conformity and the hypocrisy of authority, and several of who could match or exceed his wit and writing prowess. The editor, Chuck Roberts¹³, with some previous city newspaper experience and a bottle of scotch in his desk, had similar interests in literature and writing and they became close friends. Max Shulman^{14,15,16}, who also ran the college humor magazine, had a razor sharp wit and usually bested Tom with his sense of humor. These two were event number three and assumed tremendous importance in Tom's future. Shulman and Heggen would team up for many practical jokes. Tom's seemed to become more misogynistic and cruel, while Shulman's were just funny.

At the start of his senior year in 1940, he met Frances "Frenchy" Solem, a journalism classmate who hung around the Daily's offices. She was plain, pure Norwegian, but with an effervescent personality who genuinely cared about people. Tom tolerated her, but becoming more comfortable, they became a pair and he was spending time with her family. He was also becoming more professional in his writing with several papers published by the Literary Review. As the year progressed, Frenchy frequently brought up the subject of marriage and the future, and encouraged him in a career of writing no matter what his parents' thought of that choice. Unbeknownst to Frenchy, Tom was still thinking of Carol Lynn, now at Northwestern, and occasionally corresponding with her. She had no intention of leaving Evanston, and eventually he realized that they had gone their separate ways.

The spring of 1941 saw more and more college boozing. While visiting his parents for a few weeks, he awakened in an alcoholic haze almost every morning, and if they were concerned they did not approach him. His anxiety about his future with Frenchy and his writing seemed to be getting the best of him. Then the angel of good fortune intervened for a fourth time. Reader's

Digest of Pleasantville, New York, founded by Dewitt and Lila Wallace in 1922, decided that they needed to expand to a larger audience. They were being type cast as a publishing enterprise dedicated to an elite Eastern United States audience. They needed to involve more writers from the Midwest and west coast, so they sent roving editors to select journalism schools at Midwestern and Western universities. One arrived at Tom's Professor's office looking for recommendations. The professor was hesitant to recommend Tom remarking that Heggen was shy, not much of a scholar, and not always dependable. Tom, of course, made an extremely favorable impression during his interview, and seemed very interested in the editorial position they were looking to fill. Three weeks later in early June, he was offered the job and accepted immediately¹⁰. He was due in Pleasantville on July 1st. Disregarding Frenchy's pleas to go with him, Heggen practically ran out of town, telling Frenchy that he would send a ring and send for her as soon as things settled down in Pleasantville.

Disingenuous sounds so much nicer than the pathology behind it, and Tom fit the bill. He was smart and funny, but he wanted to be different in a perverse kind of way. Reader's Digest was like another elite college campus. A new palatial building in a small town with manicured lawns and flowerbeds, and carefully designed rooms with antiques and beautiful paintings, and a quiet educated group of individuals seriously working at their craft. Tom seemed to recoil from the words unison and congeniality, and it wasn't long before half of the staff loved him and his hilarious wit and the other half, often the butt of his jokes, despised him. Frequently, his foul language would ring down the halls in an effort to shock the young ladies, but for the most part he did his job very well. He never mentioned his alleged fiancée in Minnesota while dating other pretty staffers, but did mail off a ring to Frenchy after a bout of alcoholic guilt.

His idyllic life in Pleasantville was coming to a close. The German invasion of Poland, the battle of Britain, and the Draft were signals only the most optimistic could dismiss. With several of his Minnesota classmates already in the service, good friends Doug Whipple to the Marines and Chuck Roberts to the Navy, Tom entertained romanticized visions of himself in uniform. Mid-November brought Heggen's notice from his Draft Board. It was almost a relief. He resigned from the Digest and headed back to Minneapolis. Frenchy naturally thought they would marry immediately, and was devastated when he put off any commitment until after his induction. At the end of a bitter argument he thoughtlessly told her she didn't inspire him¹⁰.

Again an event intervened to change his course --- Pearl Harbor. On 15 December 1941, he followed Chuck Roberts into the Navy by enlisting and leaving Frenchy behind. Assigned to the Battleship South Dakota, fitting out at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, as a yeoman¹⁷, he spent months typing forms and requisitions in a fog of boredom and frustration, but Chuck Roberts had discovered a loop hole in the V-7 program for officer recruits, allowing the two of them to transfer to that program at Notre Dame University. While on a brief leave at home before reporting, his jealousy and self doubt were kindled anew when he discovered that his college classmate Harry Reasoner, now at CBS, had published an article in Liberty Magazine, and Max Shulman had a book contract with Double Day. His writing life was going nowhere.

South Bend was a 2-hour train ride from Chicago, so Chuck and Tom could take an occasional weekend leave. Carol Lynn was surprised and confused to get a call from Heggen asking for a date. She had 6 weeks left before graduation, and used studying for finals and an important paper as an excuse to avoid a meeting. He was funny and persistent, and finally she agreed to see him the following week not giving her real conflict --- she was engaged.

Following 6 weeks of ardent attention by this charming young man he finally won her, and she returned the fraternity pin to her shocked fiancée. She was amazed at their luck of meeting again. Following the completion of the V-7 Program, Tom and Chuck were transferred to Northwestern for the Mid-shipman's course. Tom seemed more settled and mature. He promised she was the only one for him, about as close as he could get to commitment. With her talents, Heggen thought that she would be ideal for Reader's Digest, and arranged an interview. A few weeks later Lila Wallace called to offer her a job.

Tom completed his midshipman's course and was assigned to the USS Salinas, AO 19, a tanker working the East coast. In Pleasantville, Carol Lynn immediately started planning for the wedding. Unfortunately, Heggen could not imagine himself a husband. He arrived in Pleasantville the evening before the wedding with a severe case of buyers' remorse. The ceremony was at 4 PM the following day, but his best man and another friend tried to calm his concerns and anxiety with alcohol. He arrived at the church in his choker white uniform so drunk that he had to be escorted in. On the honeymoon trip back to New York City, he kept the party going in the club car, leaving his bride to mingle with the revelers. He told two women guests "I don't know what I got married for..." and "what a god damn stupid thing for me to do"¹⁰.

This inability to commit to an intimate relationship was strengthened by his peripatetic life in the Navy. What better means of escape than moving from ship to ship, serving his country in a great patriotic endeavor? With another transfer to a tanker in the Caribbean, he wrote Carol Lynn a "Dear John" letter telling her that he loved her too much to keep on hurting her. His writing, of which he had done none, was more important than she was. In June of 1944, he was transferred to the USS Virgo AKA-20, an attack cargo and troop transport, and joined her at Eniwetok Atoll^{18,19,20}.

In retrospect, the *Virgo* was the ship where Tom gathered all the events that appear in the book **Mr. Roberts**. However, she was far from a backwater-forgotten vessel. *Virgo* won 7 Battle Stars by the end of World War II and was already a veteran of Tarawa and Kwajalein when Heggen joined her. When he reported aboard, she was boarding the 3rd Marine Division for the landings at Guam. Lt. Heggen was the Assistant Communications Officer and his roommate was Lt. Alfred Jones. Both of these “college boys” loathed the Captain, LCDR Herbert Erya Randall. Randall was a short bull headed merchant seaman with a sparse education and a clear dislike of his college graduate staff. James Cagney was a stroke of casting genius for him in the subsequent movie. As Assistant Communications Officer, Tom could complete his meager work load in about 2 hours each day, with the rest spent playing acey-deucey with Jones or reading recent fiction like Steinbeck’s **Cannery Row**. He would occasionally critique Jones’ anatomically correct watercolor nudes which Jones sold to the crew.

The war dragged on with the *Virgo* delivering the Marine Assault Force to Peleliu, and then she began preparations for the invasion of the Philippine Islands requiring a trip to Pearl Harbor and San Francisco. By now Heggen had finally begun writing with stories of college and home. Asking Jones to read them, he was surprised when his roommate dismissed them as out of touch and suggested he had much better material around him every day on the *Virgo*, especially the event at Pearl when a signalman discovered that he could see through the uncurtained windows of the nurses’ quarters, reminding him that Heggen himself had taken advantage of the discovery using the telescope on the 5 inch gun^{10,13}.

San Francisco became the Elysium of the book, play, and the movie. Captain Randall did not permit liberty for the first few days, but working parties brought back whisky. Tom got hold of enough to have a colossal drunk in his stateroom. So bad that he staggered down the

passageway to take a hot shower and fell in the stall under scalding water. Fortunately, two officers pulled him out before he received serious burns. Finally getting off the ship, he and Ensign Mascharka, the eventual model for Ensign Frank Thurgood Pulver drank their way around Nob Hill and the Barbary Coast insulting women and generally acting like idiots. The movie has the drunken but playful crew returning to the ship with a light hearted Shore Patrol escort. In the real life of WW II, the Shore Patrol would be dealing with a bunch of drunk, belligerent sailors eager for a fight who more than likely would be given hickory shampoos and awaken with stitches or a broken arm. Some reviewers complained that the crew was too wholesome and happy go lucky for World War II sailors^{21,22}.

They left San Francisco for the Philippines in early January of 1945, and Heggen had plenty of time to develop his characters and flesh out new stories of the **Reluctant**. Although he later claimed that **Mr. Roberts** was fiction, an amalgam of people, he gave him the name Doug Roberts after Doug Whipple, his Marine college friend, and Chuck Roberts, his running mate on the Daily, Notre Dame, and Northwestern. Those of you who may have read the book, or seen the movie or play will be happy to know that the palm tree and the Order of the Palm medal were true stories. In mid-April while embarking surviving Marines from the bloody battle of Leyte for the up coming battles of Okinawa and Iwo Jima, Captain Randall sighted a sister ship, the USS Bellatrix AKA 19, nearby which was also captained by a former merchant mariner. He went calling, discovering that his friend had a coop of chickens on the signal bridge. Returning to the Virgo, he apparently decided on his own emblem of individuality, and the following morning sent the Chief Boson to the beach to retrieve a small palm tree in a 5-gallon paint can.

That night, Jones had the 8 to midnight watch, and when Tom came by for coffee pointed the palm out to him on the starboard Captain's bridge. While Heggen loved his own

individuality, he despised it in authority figures and on the way to bed he snuck down to the bridge and hurled the palm into Leyte Gulf. In the morning, Captain Randall blew a gasket, sent the boson back to the beach for two palms, and put one at each end of the bridge. To insure their safety, he posted two armed, battle hardened Marines beside each one. That night was movie night, and Jones again had the 8 to midnight watch on the flying bridge. Al and Tom could see the screen on the fantail, and knew the Captain was at the movies. They suspected that the young Marines would move back to the railing behind the Captain's cabin to watch the movie. They were right, quietly climbing down the ladder to the lower deck, they each grabbed a palm and pitched them into the night.

Okinawa was hell for the anchored ships²³. The Virgo had 32 Kamikaze alerts during the short time she was there and the Captain stayed in his cabin most of the time. The fictional Mr. Roberts was killed by a kamikaze on a destroyer off Kyushu in the Okinawa prefecture^{1,23, 24}. One night, with no incoming enemy aircraft reported, the anchorage was suddenly lit up with exploding rockets and flares. The news of Germany's surrender had reached the front line. The war was winding down, and Heggen's output was increasing. **Mr. Roberts** began as a series of short stories not a novel. Tom decided to send the story "Night Watch" to Wallace Stegner at Harvard, and ever the passive-aggressive with women, send "The Nurses Story" to Carol Lynn. Other than an APO address, he had no idea where she was, but knew she was a Red Cross volunteer somewhere in the Pacific. His excuse was he wanted a woman's viewpoint.

Obviously still in love with him despite the emotional and psychological roller coaster of their relationship, Carol Lynn, then in Pearl Harbor, found it hilariously funny and charming. Replying, she told him how she felt close to him again and mentioned that she sent it to her former boss at Reader's Digest, who replied that when she read it aloud to her staff, they howled.

Stegner loved the conflicts and emotional portrayal of Lt. Roberts, and replied “keep them coming, and we’ll see what we can do with them”¹⁰. Al Jones continued to be his muse, and between them the characters and the events kept piling up. Further stories to Stegner received high praise with the promise to show them to his friend Ted Weeks, editor of the Atlantic, and to Dorothy Hillyer at Houghton Mifflin. Stegner also told him he was leaving Harvard for Stanford.

The Hiroshima bomb on 6 August 1945 quickly lead to Heggen’s detachment from the Navy on 18 December 1945 and he caught a tanker back to San Francisco. Good fortune had again smiled on him. Stegner, now at Stanford, had accepted the position of West Coast Editor for Houghton Mifflin and they wanted an option on the book. Ted Weeks at The Atlantic wanted to publish at least 3 of the stories. Now Steger and Heggen began the labor of turning a series of short stories into a book. Wallace tried to convince him to pitch his title of **The Iron Bound Bucket**, the crew’s name for the Virgo, and substitute **Mr. Roberts**, the character who held the whole thing together, a superb figure. On his way back to Minneapolis, he struggled with the ending and decided not to make it a joyous departure from the ship, but Roberts getting his wish of combat and then being killed. A closure too often seen during the war. The comedy suddenly turning into a tragedy, and surprising the reader.

Tom’s preference for jealousy and fear of not getting credit for his craft became more of a problem. Al Jones, his roommate, collaborator, muse, and best friend on the Virgo came through Minneapolis on his way to mustering out at Great Lakes Naval Station in Chicago. He was changing trains in Minneapolis with plenty of time for a visit during the layover. Leaving the ship, they had enthusiastically promised to keep in touch. Al called from the station, asking when and where they could meet. Tom’s conflicted pathology found him creating excuses for why they couldn’t get together and after a brief conversation about the book with Al effusively

congratulating him, he begged off and hung up. He had withdrawn from the Navy compartment of his life and decided to visit it only in memory¹⁰.

Things soon began falling into place. Dewitt Wallace, who loved his stories, invited him back to Reader Digest and Houghton Mifflin sent him a \$200 dollar option check. The Atlantic wanted an option as well. Tom, momentarily overcoming his usual pessimism, felt renewed love for Carol Lynn, and she soon arrived from Pearl to begin house hunting in Pleasantville. However, Heggen continued to compartmentalize his life and some of the old tensions and lack of emotional intimacy began to rise again. Today, this behavior might be considered Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome, but these characteristics had been Heggen's since childhood. Despite all of this, the book, still titled **The Iron Bound Bucket**, was finished and mailed off to Houghton Mifflin in Boston.

Back at the Digest, the old offensive behavior returned. The staff was too stodgy and hidebound. He was too good for them. As for Carol Lynn, she was trying to make a go of the marriage, but Tom was becoming more distant. His editor at Houghton Mifflin also suggested changing the name to **Mr. Roberts**, clearly the lead character, and rearranging several chapters in the book to give "The Nurses Story" more prominence. There would definitely be an undercurrent of sex in this novel. The tension of waiting for publication and the potential for financial stability was finally more than Heggen could handle. In a vicious quarrel he told Carol Lynn that their so-called future meant nothing to him. His writing was the only thing that mattered. Then switching tone like switching personalities, he tenderly told her that it was because he loved her that he wanted her to leave him so he couldn't hurt her anymore. She returned to Oklahoma, but some months later when he returned the corrected page proofs, he asked the editor to please make the dedication "For Carol Lynn".

The drinking continued accompanied by new women friends, but money was finally coming in. The Atlantic articles were being published with many letters to the Editor. Tom most enjoyed the one from Yachting Magazine's columnist who took the effort to take the description of the heavens and the ship's course from "Night Watch" to discover that Heggen had placed the **Reluctant** in the Antarctic¹⁰. **Mr. Roberts** was published on 20 August 1946, and the checks began to overflow. Newspaper reviews were largely effusive including The New York Times, The Herald Tribune, and the Chicago Tribune. His classmate and rival Max Shulman who called it the best World War II novel so far wrote the Chicago Tribune article. The Chicago Sun review was written by his other classmate and fellow Naval officer Chuck Roberts. Despite loaning his name to the principal character, it was not as effusive as others.

Heggen had always imagined **Mr. Roberts** as a play. Calling Max Shulman, he proposed they work together, and Max's agent drew up a fateful collaboration agreement where they would equally share any proceeds. In 15 days they finished a draft, but a producer friend of Shulman's was unimpressed and dropped his option. Since finishing **Mr. Roberts**, Heggen's literary field was fallow. He did write a story for Collier's and a later one for Cosmopolitan, but he could not come up with an idea or theme for a new novel. Several attempts went nowhere. Then Leland Hayward called, the well know theatrical producer, feared by many, had read the Atlantic articles and the book and felt there was a play there, so Tom sent him the draft he and Schulman had produced. Hayward replied that they had eviscerated the heart of the book and asked him to start over. Heggen's solo second attempt was somewhat better, but Hayward suggested help from Joshua Logan, director, writer, and sometime actor. At the time Logan had two hits on Broadway --- **Annie Get Your Gun** and **Happy Birthday**. A few weeks later Logan called and invited him to come to his home in Connecticut for the weekend to discuss it. That

weekend ended being a three-month stay with many late nights of discussion, frustration, and uproarious laughter, and by the end of it Josh Logan was his collaborator. Tom tried to cancel his collaboration agreement with Schulman, but Max would hear none of it. Because of the work he did, he wanted a piece of the rewrite.

Even 66 years later, reading about the crafting of the book, the writing of the play, and the production of the movie often bring you to tears of laughter. For example, Logan and Heggen had to figure a way to get Roberts a transfer without the Captains agreement and signature. They came up with the “Captain’s name-signing contest” with homemade booze as the prize. In the movie, Doc, played by William Powell revealed the crew’s affection for Roberts with the line “this crew got you your transfer, Buster.” “How do you know?” retorted Roberts. “We had a contest to see who could sign the best. I was a contestant---and I was also a judge^{5,7,22}.”

They finished the play in mid-November. Then Logan took over like the genius he was, getting the show on the road --- set design, casting, lighting, and logistics, anything to make it a hit. Tom found himself sitting in the back of the rehearsal theater, despite Logan’s attempts to involve him, sulking and drinking. In the midst of this he and his lawyers had come to a very disappointing settlement with Schulman. Max would get 12.5% of the dramatic rights for a limited time, and Heggen got only anger and bitterness. They initially thought that casting might be a problem, but when Henry Fonda and David Wayne were read the play they practically begged for the roles --- Fonda as Roberts and Wayne as Ensign Pulver. Around this time, Tom finally realized he needed real help and began seeing a psychiatrist, who unfortunately, kept supplying barbiturates that he had been taking off and on for sleeplessness and anxiety, but the drinking and affinity for the low life intensified.

The play premiered on Broadway 18 February 1948 at the Alvin Theater and ran for 1,157 performances⁵. Opening night went almost 30 minutes over because the audience laughed so much. Later, Fonda would win the Tony Award for Best Actor and Tom and Logan would win the Tony for best author^{5,25}. The morning reviews were extremely favorable, but to Tom's disgust they focused on Joshua Logan and his talents, giving Heggen only passing references. At the end of one of the reviews there was a story about Logan's next adventure. He had proposed to Rogers and Hammerstein that they write the score, book, and lyrics for a musical version of James Michener's **Tales of the South Pacific**. Hayward would produce and Logan would direct. Tom was mortified. He knew nothing about it and Logan had promised him continued collaboration.

Tom's life continued to spiral downward in a haze of alcohol and drugs. He was unable to productively write anything despite some very interesting offers, but he was still making a lot of money --- \$10, 000 dollars a week at one point. Money doesn't help this kind of depression. In the fall of 1948, he convinced two friends to introduce him to Budd Schulberg^{10,26,27} who wrote **What Make's Sammy Run (1941)**. He was convinced that Schulberg could help him overcome his inability to start another novel. After all, Schulberg had followed that book with **The Harder They Fall (1947)**. Schulberg must have been a kind man who recognized Tom's issues and anxiety, and spent a long night trying to convince Tom to get away from New York and its temptations, and start writing. His point was that successful writing was not like a staircase to the stars, but more like the shadow of a mountain range at dusk with ups and downs, sometimes cliffs and deep valleys, but eventually another peak. Tom, of course, did not leave New York¹⁰.

At the end of April 1949, Tom's mood suddenly brightened. Old friends thought he might be recovering. He even made amends with Josh Logan, and made a short visit home to

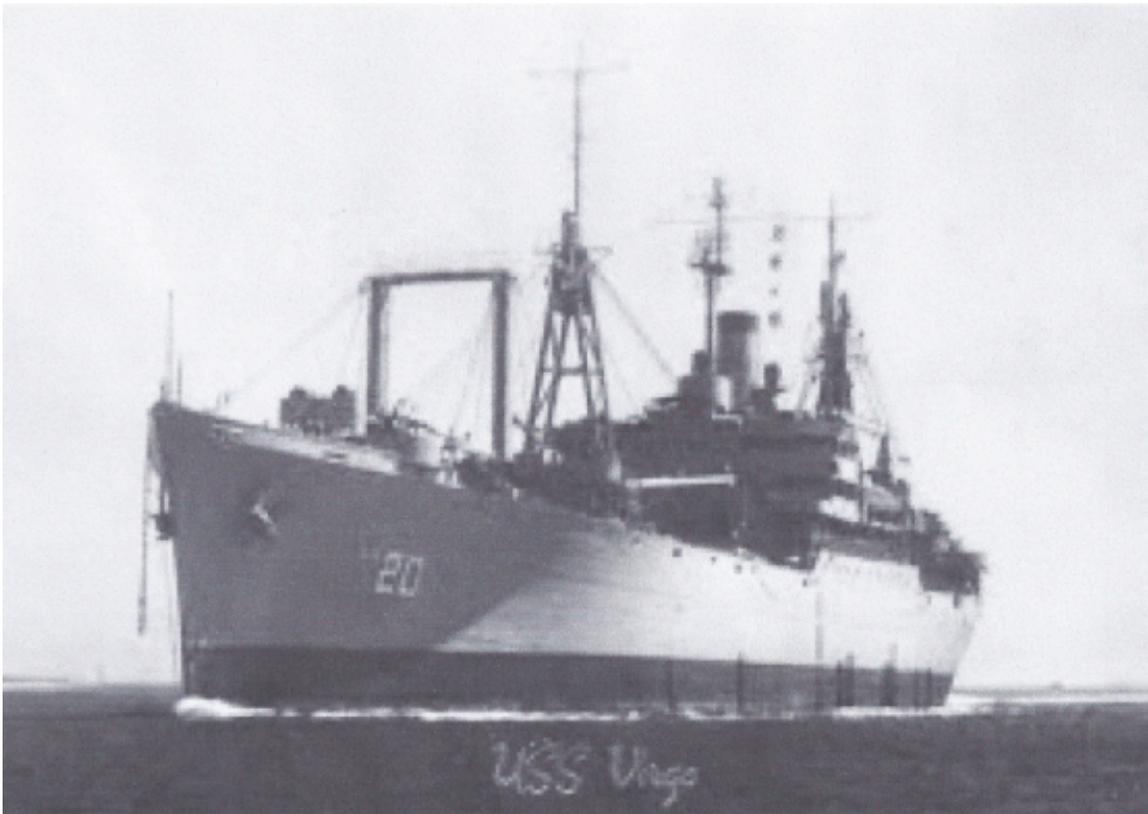
Minneapolis. On the morning of 19 May 1949, his house keeper found him dead, submerged in a bathtub filled with water. He was 29 years old. Police found multiple empty bottles of barbiturates, Seconal and Amytal, scattered throughout the apartment. On the washstand was a bottle dated 16 May 1949 that had held 50 Seconal, that now held 6. On the edge of the tub was an open gold penknife engraved **THOMAS HEGGEN** and underneath that **Thanks, J.L.** --- a gift from Logan on the one year anniversary of **Mr. Roberts**. Removing the body they discovered a Blue Star razor beneath his left shoulder. The Medical Examiner ruled the death a suicide, and Tom went home to Minnesota²⁸.

The movie, **Mr. Roberts**, which I hope you will see sometime, premiered on 30 July 1955 with Henry Fonda as Roberts, James Cagney as Captain Morton, William Powell as Doc, and Jack Lemmon as Ensign Pulver. Lemmon won the Oscar for Best Supporting Actor that year. The ship used in the movie, AK 601, was the USS Hewell²⁹ which was one quarter the length and displacement of the *Virgo*, a much more appropriate vessel for the **Reluctant**.

What were Heggen's demons? Was he a male borderline personality? Was he bipolar --- topping either one of these with a slurry of alcohol and drugs? We'll probably never know, but the psychiatrists would have a field day trying to figure that one out. The one thing we do know is that as a developing writer Heggen was exposed to some of the best in the business --- Wallace Stegner, Max Shulman (5 novels, a play **The Tender Trap**, and of course the adventures of Dobie Gillis), Budd Shulberg (novelist, film, and sports writer), Joshua Logan, the crew at Reader's Digest, and Chuck Roberts. An investigative reporter in Chicago and later Newsweek's Washington correspondent famous for his on the spot reporting of the Kennedy assassination and its aftermath.

Despite his tragic death, Heggen and **Mr. Roberts** still live in print. The book is one of the Classics of Naval Literature published by the US Naval Institute, and is on just about all recommended reading lists for books of the sea. It is considered a brilliant study in leadership and the awesome duties of rank --- the most fundamental aspect of being an officer. The USS Virgo went to the scrap yard in 1973. That is a place the **USS Reluctant** will never be destined to go.

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