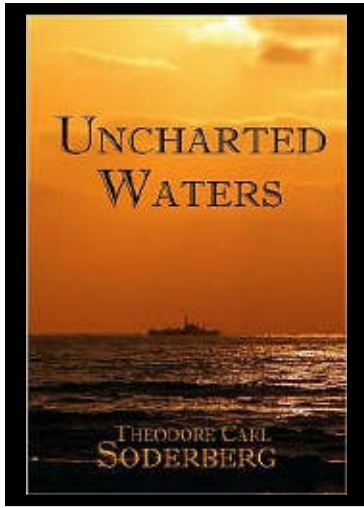


[Uncharted Waters](#) Book Excerpt – by [Theodore Carl Soderberg](#)



My last assignment was a cable ship in the North Atlantic, in the winter, and I was ready for something in warmer climes. Being an able-bodied seaman in the United States Merchant Marine almost always ensures uncertainty. When a sailor throws in his shipping card for a job all he will know for certain is the name of the ship, and where to board it. He is considered lucky if he knows her destination. The company I worked for supported the United States Navy and its mission. The ships on the West Coast were dispatched out of Oakland, California. It was an unusually damp, gray morning, and I was sitting in the dispatcher's office at 0800 on a Friday. I was having difficulty sitting upright in a chair, as I had a god-awful, skullcrushing hangover, and I would have taken any ship, anywhere.

The dispatcher, Francine, was on the phone. "He beat up the cook, and who else? Look, one guy can't just take over a ship! Oh, I see, and he threatened the captain. I have got someone in mind, and I'll have him meet the ship in Saint Johns on arrival. Okay, bye."

Looking straight at me, Francine said, "And what do you want, you look like hell?"

"A ship, and if I wanted to get insulted I would have stayed married, thank you! What's going on, Francine, you going to get me a ship to Japan, or do I have to stay in the pool for another two weeks and watch those stupid training films?"

"Are we having a tough morning, Ted?"

"Look, I'm good to go, if I have to take one more class I'm going to vapor lock. It sounds like you've got a guy out there out of control, and you need someone to coax him off."

"That's right, we've been through this before with him, and it's never pretty. Johnny Morgan, the ship's carpenter on the Bellflower, has been drunk for a week, and has already beat the crap out of the cook, and an AB. I've already got someone else to replace him, so don't worry, I'm not going to send you out there to drag Johnny off the Bellflower. The Bellflower is up in Saint Johns, Newfoundland...you know, you been up there. It's way the hell out by Cape Race, and the temperature is well below zero, but you're going to Japan."

"Great! Let's have the details?"

"You're up-to-date on your qualifications, right?"

“Yeah, yeah, I was born up-to-date on my quals.”

“Okay, but I want to look at that training book; I don’t need any last-minute headaches from you!” I forked over my training book to Francine; she looked it over, and said, “Alright, you look all up-to date, okay, this is the way it’s gonna go. You’re going to be sailing as a watch stander AB. Monday, you and eighteen others are flying out of San Francisco, to Narita in Tokyo, and then you’ll be provided ground transportation to the New Nippon Hotel in Yokosuka. You’ll be given the rest of the details on arrival, and the ship is the A. J. Higgins.”

“Eighteen people? That’s quite a crowd.”

“Sure it is. It’s a complete crew-up, and more will be coming.”

I thanked Francine, even though she owed me a favor, because of some help thrown my way on my last assignment.

“By the way, what’s a vapor lock?”

“It’s a car thing, Francine, and it would take to long to explain.”

I was a happy camper, I was going to Japan, and the Higgins was a new ship, with an anticipated good run, in warm waters. My next step was to get as much info about the ship as I could, and to be done the usual way, by word of mouth, but more importantly, I had to get my shit in one sock. The first order of business was to get to Oakland and put some money on a couple of bar tabs, and then I had to drive to San Francisco and get some work clothes in storage. Second on my to-do list was my first love, that only let me down at gas stations. I had to find a place to store my girl, my 1979, 6.6-liter Pontiac Trans Am. My other girl had already given me the heave-ho, so I was free as a bird, like the phoenix bird on the hood of my car. I parked my girl underneath a freeway in Oakland, threw a cover over her, and left the rest to the fifteen junkyard dogs, and an eight foot fence with barbed wire. I could have taken it to another level, setting the car up with trip wires and booby-traps, but I did not have time to play games.
