

MARCUS F. RITGER, Jr. – PHOTOGRAPHER FOR THE QUEEN

One clear Spring evening in 1940, a bespectacled apprentice walked from his downtown boarding house in Newport News to a riverbank vantagepoint east of the shipyard. Others there that night no doubt found the reflected illumination on the dancing waters of the James romantic, but this ‘moonlighting’ young man’s companion was not a young lady, but a camera mounted on a tripod.

The sights and sounds of second shift shipbuilders hard at work were his inspiration, and – in due course – this intriguing photograph was created; one of the first of many he would take of the SS AMERICA (NNS Hull #369) over more than three decades.



Marcus F. Ritger, Jr. apparently developed a photographic interest at an early age. Perhaps being the son of a Baltimore Sun editor had some influence.

After graduating from Baltimore Polytechnic Institute, this 6’-2’ lanky lad entered the Apprentice School on the last day of March 1936; starting an apprenticeship in the Ship Carpenters.

A little over two years later, Marcus transferred to the Hull Drawing Room and subsequently graduated as a *Hull Draftsman* in the Spring of 1941.

While his days were filled with learning a trade, his evenings were devoted to three passions: photography, Apprentice School publications...and a lovely and multi-talented young lady in Norfolk...Carolyn Edney.

By the time the first-ever Apprentice School annual was published (1941), Marcus Ritger had five years of experience on the school’s newspaper staff; culminating as editor-in-chief in 1940 and 1941. He also was assistant business manager for the yearbook’s first edition, and a number of his marine photographs graced the pages of that fledgling publication.

When he was not so engaged with his contemporaries, he was making tedious trips to Norfolk to court Miss Edney. No easy task, for the only means available then to cross Hampton Roads was a ferry that ran between Newport News and Norfolk.

That complication ended in May of 1942 when Marcus and Carolyn were married. John Ritger, first of their three sons, remembers living in an apartment in East Newport News. Ever-present was his father’s equipment – located on the ‘dark’ side of a lightproof partition that divided John’s small bedroom. Many a night he would drift off to sleep to the soothing sounds of recirculating water.

In all their homes, a dark room was of paramount importance to Marcus. His talent for taking pictures was complimented by his almost magical

ability to enhance the results, using filters, chemicals and other techniques to create outstanding monochrome compositions. Never satisfied, he constantly tinkered to produce images of outstanding quality and character...often made all the more stunning in 16x20 enlargement.

For example, his famous “The Queen Salutes” prize-winning photograph of AMERICA (circa 1946) includes clouds and a soaring seagull added to the original in his darkroom laboratory. That was but one of many pictures which featured such additions. Ritger family members fondly recall that time as his ‘seagull period’.



Being a founding member of the James River Camera Club was one of his proudest accomplishments, as was the creation of an annual International Marine Exhibition at the Mariners’ Museum – where examples of his work still hang.

Marcus was extremely proud of ‘his’ camera club, and enjoyed intense competition with his hobbyist peers. Son John remembers well: “Dad’s camera was *always* at hand. It was his American Express Card; he never left home without it.”

His outstanding marine offerings – often prizewinners in James River Camera Club or International Marine Exhibition contests – regularly featured AMERICA – Queen of the American Merchant Marine for all the years he served her.

Marcus Ritger often utilized a nearby C&O railroad pier as an ideal vantagepoint. Year after year, in weather fair or foul - as she passed going to or from her birthplace – AMERICA always drew a crowd of local admirers.



In the following scene, which could very well be captioned a ‘reunion of steam sisters’, he captured AMERICA and five tugs from a waterborne vantagepoint. Four of the queen’s attendants were also built at NNS, and one of them is believed to be the last steam-powered tug built in the United States. Marcus, no doubt deliberately, included a bit of AMERICA’s sliding shipway birthplace in the extreme right side of this photo.



Allowed to take his camera into the shipyard, a favor granted few other than official photographers, he also captured her from a variety of unusual angles.



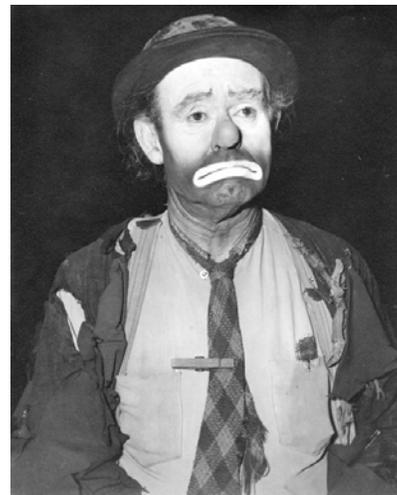
While Marcus Ritger was most certainly a photographer for the queen, another favorite subject matter of his was...the circus! Sonny Moore, a fellow apprentice graduate and NNS Hull Drawing Room supervisor vividly recalls:

“I remember that Marcus’ passion was taking pictures of circuses – every time one came into the area he would take off and take all kinds of shots. Many were published in national magazines. I believe his other superb photo work was second to his love for the circus.

“He went 90 miles an hour all the time – never seemed to have enough time to do all that he had on schedule. I can see

him now, coming back from lunch and taking the steps in Building 600 three or four at a time. Marcus was sort of a loner but very pleasant to work with and I don’t know of anyone who did not like him.”

Many of his circus creations reside at Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin and in the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida. Such treasures as this familiar photo of Emmett Kelly as Weary Willie are the result of Marcus Ritger’s creative skills.



He preferred working in stark black and white. That medium, and the technology available to Marcus in the mid-20th century, allowed him to work magic in his personal darkroom. But he also ‘shot color’ at times – most often of circus scenes – which are so amenable to being captured in the vivid colors associated with that popular form of entertainment.

It perhaps can be said that he worked for years in a Newport News Shipbuilding drawing room largely to support his habit. But his composition skills found a valued place in his work there as well. Or – just perhaps - was it vice-versa?

Marcus was often involved in the complicated time-and-motion studies required to facilitate placement of equipment in ships under construction.

This was a three dimensional puzzle that had to be uniquely solved for each vessel. Tight schedules often meant that structural and outfitting work had to proceed to the maximum extent possible while also providing means for installing very large – and sometimes very late – pieces of equipment. Nuclear-powered aircraft carriers being constructed in Graving Dock 10 at NNS provided the greatest challenge.

Shipping machinery openings (temporary holes deliberately left open in the ship's watertight envelope and internal supporting structure) often had to be augmented with temporary supports to hold the uncompleted mass together and in precise alignment.

Marcus Ritger had an eye for such work, and developed a reputation for taking the time to dig into every detail facet to get his job accomplished 'just so'.

Warren "Fuzzy" Wood, a longtime Hull Drawing Room associate of Marcus Ritger, remembers: "Marcus was a very inquisitive fella; quiet, thorough, intense. Very intense"

That helps explain why, whenever a tough problem or an obscure question arose, the solution most often recommended in that office - for years – was the flattering phrase: "Ask Mark".

Until an extremely hot August day in 1975.

Habitually late, he rushed back into an air-conditioned office building after going out into the midday heat during the lunch hour to visit his favorite photo supply store. Back in his office, this multi-talented individual suffered a heart attack and passed away at the far-too-early age of 59.



Marcus F. Ritger, Jr.

Photographer for the Queen –
and purveyor of pleasurable pictures.

The bulk of Marcus Ritger's photographic negatives and prints of maritime subject matter – over 15,000 in all - are currently being preserved by his eldest son, John. Except for several AMERICA prints, including the ones used to illustrate this essay; which were generously given to this author by John Ritger in 2002.

Bill Lee

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