This year’s annual Military Sealift Command (MSC) labor-management forum took place at the Norfolk (Virginia) Naval Base in the historic Philadelphia House. The gathering was much smaller in size than previous meetings, allowing for a wide-ranging, dynamic exchange of ideas.

This was the first labor-management forum conducted since Rear Adm. Dee Mewbourne became the commanding officer of MSC. Forum council members attending the meeting included Admiral Mewbourne, several MSC SES representatives, and executive officials of the Seafarers International Union (SIU); Masters, Mates and Pilots (MM&P); and the Marine Engineers’ Beneficial Association (MEBA).

SIU President Michael Sacco outlined the union’s agenda for unlicensed CIVMARS. He noted, “The SIU’s highest priorities involve overall shipboard safety and training. These two areas are closely linked. Without highly skilled CIVMARS working in safe environments, MSC cannot effectively carry out its mission. Training is always important and in our view, it’s especially important right now. MSC’s fleet is expanding as a growing number of experienced CIVMARS are reaching retirement age. Younger, enthusiastic employees with less sea-going experience are coming aboard. These employees require training to ensure they remain safe in their current roles. We want to make sure that everyone in the fleet gets the training and support they need to fulfill their duties, advance their careers and contribute to the mission safely and effectively.”

President Sacco went on to urge that MSC ensure there is a robust training system in place along with enough funding available to provide training to as many CIVMARS as possible. He encouraged Admiral Mewbourne to stress the importance of training to all of MSC’s shore-side staff, especially the marine placement specialists and the training department representatives. He also advocated that CIVMARS be allowed every opportunity to get appropriate training to remain safe in the fleet as well as to advance their careers.

Other topics discussed during the meeting concerned liberty and relief issues. Specific problems were outlined and discussed to provide Admiral Mewbourne with real-time, descriptive examples about how the problems in these areas are adversely impacting CIVMARS. SIU representatives explained how these liberty and leave issues negatively impact quality of life for MSC CIVMARS and are prompting CIVMARS to consider leaving their sailing career with MSC. The SIU also requested that the union and the agency work together to develop ways to address several issues which arise when a CIVMAR is disciplined. First, there appears to be a lack of clarity in some cases when MSC is communicating with CIVMARS about the nature of a disciplinary action. Also discussed was the lengthy time it is taking MSC to process some disciplinary actions. The union’s goal is to form a joint labor-management work group to address these issues. As SIU representatives explained during the meeting, when a CIVMAR waits lengthy periods of time for disciplinary issues to be resolved, this situation not only impacts the mariner’s ability to earn a better wage, but also affects the ship’s force and delays relief for others throughout the fleet.

In addition to the issues formerly noted, other topics discussed were the establishment of an MSC Suicide Prevention Council, and ideas to advance licensed officers’ leadership skills, including the development of a cross-functional leadership team.
President’s Column

Proud to Promote SIU Members

This quarter has been very active for me and the SIU representatives working on behalf of federal mariners who work with MARA, the Army Corps, the SUISUN Bay Reserve Fleet and the U.S. Military Sea-Lift Command. We’ve attended meetings and events at different agencies. The SIU also represented you at the annual maritime congressional “Sail-In” on Capitol Hill. It traveled to Virginia, for the annual MSC-Labor Forum. This quarter my travels started in Texas at the winter meetings of the AFT-JCO Maritime Trades Department.

Dee Mewbourne. The story on the front page of this edition gives great detail about the meeting and how it unfolded. Admiral Mewbourne’s presentation about sailing in more threatening maritime environments and what is needed to make sure CIVMARs are prepared for these times was both interesting and thought provoking.

I also had the honor of presenting remarks for an event at the Department of Transportation (DOT). Mariners who keep watch over the vessels at the SU- ISUN Bay Reserve Fleet in California work for the Maritime Administration, an agency within the DOT. This dual-purpose event saluted the parent organization on its 70th anniversary and also, more importantly, served as a “welcome home” to DOT Secretary Elaine Chao, a longtime friend of our organization. Secretary Chao is a great advocate of the U.S. Merchant Marine, and we’re already working together to help ensure the survival and revitalization of our industry.

As many unlicensed federal mariners are already aware, you are represented by the Seafarers International Union and its affiliated entities. This puts you in a large family of workers and it also means you are protected by organizational alliances which look out for your interests.

One of these organizations is the Maritime Trades Department, mentioned above. The MTD is a constitutionally mandated department of the AFL-CIO, and I also serve as its president. We are one of the MTD’s 22 affiliates, which collectively represent more than five million members. When the SIU has a key issue that affects the livelihoods of Seafarers, we can count on the MTD to stand up for us. And I learned from experience, when you knock on a door as a representative of an organization with more than five million members, the door opens.

Additionally, grassroots activism remains vitally important for us, and on that note, be sure to read about the Sail-In. While the SIU works every day to make sure your legislative interests are protected on Capitol Hill, we use the annual Sail-In to show our solidarity throughout the industry, to educate and advocate by meeting with as many senators and congressmen as possible during this day-long event.

One time, we met with people who were responsible for making the laws which impact you, we stressed the importance role you play in delivering material and fuel and whatever else is needed to our war fighters, supporting the scientists who work to safeguard our environment, protecting our reserve fleet and keeping our waters safe and navigable. Your role in the federal government maritime industry and your workplace contributions are vital to our country’s security and success. Your union understands the importance of this work and appreciates what you do each day.

Union, Industry Reps Team Up to Boost U.S. Mariners, American Maritime Industry

Whether meeting with freshman legislators or longtime friends of the industry, participants in the eighth annual Maritime Congressional Sail-In brought a wealth of knowledge and enthusiasm to Capitol Hill on March 1. The purpose of the event is to advocate for federal mariners and private-sector seafarers and the maritime industry in general. The SIU turned out in force for the critical grassroots activity, which features teams of maritime industry representatives gathing throughout the day with House and Senate members and their respective staffs. One of the primary goals of these meetings was to make congressional representatives aware of the contribution of both the federal and private-sector maritime industry fleets to our nation’s economic and national security. The teams provided a solid rationale for supporting U.S. crews, the Jones Act, the U.S. Maritime Security Program (MSP), cargo preference laws, and American shipbuilding. SIU participants included executive Vice President Augie Tellez; Vice President Government Services Kermett Mangram; Vice President Lakes and Inland Waters Tom Orzechowski; Vice President West Coast Nick Mar- cosee, Vice President Atlantic Coast Joseph Sorens; Legislative Director Brian Schoeneman; and Port Agents Joe Baslee, Elizabeth Brown, Mark von Siegel and Pat Vandergriff. Altogether, there were 92 Sail-In participants, including representatives from every major seafaring union; every USA Maritime member company and association; a number of Jones Act companies and organizations; three state maritime academies; the Navy League of the United States; the AFT-JCO Maritime Trades Department; and the AFT-JCO Transportation Trades Department. Those individuals were divided into 23 groups that took part in 131 meetings in the nation’s capital. There were 102 meetings in the House and 29 in the Senate. Significantly, 24 of the meetings were with House freshmen, while three of the Senate gatherings also were with newly elected legislators.

As usual, much of the effort was directed to members of key committees that affect the maritime industry. These representatives are responsible for introducing and voting on legislation which impacts U.S. crews and the maritime industry. For instance, meetings took place with seven of the 11 members of the House Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee or their staffs, and with nine of the 17 members on the Senate Transportation Appropriations Subcommittee or with staff.

Similarly, meetings took place with a majority of legislators or staff from the House Seapower and Projection Forces Subcommittee, the Senate Seapower Subcommittee, the Senate Coast Guard and Maritime Transportation Subcommittee, and the Senate Surface Transportation and Merchant Marine Subcommittee.
For at least one of the crew members of the Ronald H. Brown, which completed a nearly three-year voyage on March 27, 2017, the trip was more than a historic voyage. For Bosun Bruce Cowden, the unprecedented journey marked his final trip in the high seas as an active member of the SIU. He will retire effective June 23 following 25 years of dedicated service.

A native of N.C. Mountains, Cowden donned the SIU colors in 1989. “I was 18 years old,” he said. “My dad was a seaman, so I suppose, “he continued. “I started working for NOAA for quite a few years. I was 17. I later joined the Navy and served there for about 12 years and then returned to the sea in 1996 when I was 30. My first transatlantic voyage was back in 1966 when I was 12 years old,” he said. “My dad took us across the Atlantic aboard the old Queen Elizabeth. I think that trip was what really got me started with my love for the sea.”

“I have always been drawn to the sea, I suppose,” he continued. “I started working for NOAA straight off the coast of South Carolina when I was 17. I later joined the Navy and spent six years there. I also spent a couple of years working at shipyards.”

“I then joined NOAA, got my AB (ticket) and the rest is history. That’s all I’ve done since,” Cowden said. “My family is of Norwegian ancestry who hail from New York and New Jersey,” he continued. “I have a number of uncles and other relatives who were sea captains … so I guess you could say that the sea is in our blood. We simply love it.”

Reflecting on the industry currently as opposed to how it was during his early days as a marinier, Cowden said a great deal has changed. “The industry now is tremendously different from what it was when I first started sailing,” he said. “Mariners now have so much more technology available to them in all aspects of their jobs than we did. Suffice it to just say that we had the sextant, they now have GPS. That’s how much it’s changed.”

“Besides technology, the other thing that really comes to mind is credentialing,” he said. “There are so many different things involved in getting a document now … it is so much harder. My original (document) was not that hard to get and there was no expiration date on it.

“And that’s one reason I am retiring,” Cowden continued. “I don’t want to have to deal with the Coast-Guard anymore. The credentialing process is now way too difficult and far too expensive.”

However, “Despite all of these changes, I’d do it again (choosing to be a marinier) in a heartbeat,” he said. “I lived a richer life because of the sea and I have traveled all over the world. There are not too many places I have not been. Sure, there are hardships involved, but I learned to deal with them over the years. The thing I’ll miss most is the adventure of travel and experiencing other cultures.”

“Managers and crew members, he advised them that it’s not a life for everybody. “A lot of people had not even thought doing it,” he said, “but for those who are adventure-minded and want to see the world, it’s probably the best way to travel. Why pay to go to

those places when you can get someone to pay you to take them there?”

Reflecting on the SIU and the role it has played in his life over the years, Cowden said: “I never had to use the union very much. I never had any issues with jobs, pay or so on during my career.

Still it was always reassuring just knowing I belonged to the SIU and that they (union officials, reps, rank-and-file brothers and sisters) were there to help me in case I needed them,” he said. “I know that they work hard looking out for the membership, negotiating good contracts and landing good jobs for us.

And that’s what I pass on to the people I work with who are not SIU members,” he continued. “I always tell them that what they would pay in dues for being members puts in comparison to what they’d receive in terms of support they ever had any problems concern-
ing jobs, wages, grievances and so on.”

The bosun said that currently, he had no

firm future plans. “I might do a little contact work for science since the majority of my career was spent in the scientific arena and most of my skills entail the deployment and recovery of scientific equipment,” he said. “Or I may do nothing at all.”

Most likely though, I may start remodel-
ing houses or something along that line. “I’ve got to find something to keep me busy but I can’t simply sit and watch TV all day,” he said.

SIU President Michael Sacco marked this milestone with the following statement: “The SIU appreciates and appreci-

ates Bosun Cowden’s extraordinary government-vessel seagoing career and his support of the SIU. Mr. Cowden’s experience and dedication to NOAA and the crew members he has served with have helped the agency and his shipmates meet their mission goals safely and suc-

cessfully. All of the SIU wishes Bosun Cowden fair winds and following seas as he leaves his seagoing life for new adventures.”

Longtime NOAA Mariner Caps Career with Unprecedented Voyage

Bosun Bruce Cowden is pictured aboard the Brown in the frigid waters of the artica. Note the iceberg in the background.
Federal mariners working in the SIU’s Government Services Divi-
sion were aboard a National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) ship that recently made history by becoming the longest-
ever deployed NOAA vessel.

The NOAA ship Ronald H. Brown returned to its home port in Charleston, South Carolina, March 27 following 1,347 days. During this period, the 275-
foot vessel—which departed Charleston July 18, 2013—traveled nearly 130,000 miles while conducting scientific re-
search and servicing buoys that collect a wide variety of environmental data. At various points in its record voyage, ac-
cording to several sources, the Brown’s crew and as many as 30 research sci-
entists, among other tasks:

- Studied ocean acidification, intense moisture-bearing winter storms known as “atmospheric rivers” off the U.S.
-West Coast, and took part in an unprece-
dented multi-agency rapid response mis-
sion to observe the 2015-2016 El Niño;
- Took more than 1,600 water measure-
ments in the Atlantic Ocean, from Iceland to Antarctica, and in the Pacific Ocean, from Alaska to Antarctica, to
-better understand the ocean’s physical properties and long-term changes in those properties;
- Surveyed 353,975 square miles of sea floor, including a project near Kingman Reef and Palmera Atoll in the
-Pacific, to map the U.S. Extended Conti-
nental Shelf; and
- Conducted ecological assessments of bays on the north slope of Alaska, and fisheries and oceanographic studies off the
-Arctic coast of Alaska.

“My congratulations and thanks to the officers and crew of NOAA Ship Ronald H. Brown for their hard work, dedication and service during this ex-
tended and unprecedented deployment,” said Rear Adm. David Score, director of
-NOAA’s Office of Marine and Aviation Operations, upon the vessel’s return to its
hometest. “Working from ocean to ocean and from pole to pole, the ship and her
crew have expanded our understanding of some of nature’s most powerful forces.”

Seafarers aboard the vessel during its unparalleled voyage included: Bosun Bruce Cowden, Alb Reginald Wil-
liams, Michael Lastinger, Daniel Hau-
erland, Nickolas Baker and Tracey
Davis, 2nd Cook, Emir Porter and GVA
Richard Jackson.

“It’s really good to be home,” said Bosun Cowden, the highest-rated SIU
mariner in the Brown’s unclensed crew
during the unequalled voyage. “That was a
long time at sea.

“We did go into various ports during the voyage,” he continued. “Our legs at
sea averaged from 35 to 40 days before
making port, but we did not return to our
home port for the entire time.” Prior to
this trip, Cowden said the longest period
that he’d spent at sea was 150 days.

“That happened back in the 70s while I was in the Navy,” he recalled.

“Spent time in a lot of very good
ports including Iceland, Maderia, Natal
Brazil, Antarctica, Straits of Megellan,
Tahiti, and Easter Island to name a few,” he said. “We were stuck in Barbados
for two weeks because of a government shutdown.”

Overall, the entire experience was a positive one for all involved,” Cowden
concluded. “They (officers and research scientists) really took care of us and we
did the same for them. It was a totally successful team effort.”

Editor’s Note: Longtime Ronald H.
Brown Chief Bosun Bruce Cowden
called an end to his career following
the vessel’s historic voyage. See story on
Page 3.