

**Comprehensive Study**  
**Comedy in American World War II Fiction**  
***Mister Roberts***  
**By**  
**Thomas Heggen**

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**Abstract.** The following article on the subject of war and comedy is a comprehensive study of the distinctive and of the identifiable themes of Thomas Heggen (1918-1949), the American novelist who was actively involved in World War II. The writer, whose exposure to some of the events of the war influenced his writing, related caustic observations about the Second World War, receiving the admiration and the approval of the public and the support of the contemporary literary critics who described him as a realist, using clever humour to attack politics and social mores and employing fantasy to criticize the horrors of armed compact. The novel comprises all the composites of the ugliness of armed fighting, like the decadence of the soldiers and the officers and the atrocities that were committed all over the world, shocking the international community, while retaining serious undertones about the glory of war. *Mister Roberts* (1946) concentrates mainly on the adaptation of the individual to military life through humorous situations, but its defining feature, comedy, in the form of political and social satire, fully examined here, justifies not only the popularity of the novel but also the influence it exerted on modern war fiction. The various war themes included in *Mister Roberts*, like the glory of the war (duty, comradeship, patriotism and sacrifice) and the horrors of the war (death, futility and loss), are carefully examined here in order to aid the reader in discovering more about the novelist's implications and his indirect suggestions and mild criticism concerning warfare as it became increasingly technological. (Words: 257)

**Key words:** compliance, boredom, ennui, tedium, disappointment, disobedience, loss of life.

### Author Biography

Thomas Heggen was an editor for the American consumer's magazine *Readers' Digest*. Upon the attack of the Japanese Air Force on Pearl Harbor, on 7 December 1941, Heggen joined the US Navy and was commissioned a lieutenant. For the duration of the war, he served as assistant communications officer on supply vessels like the USS *Virgo*. During the fourteen months that



he spent on *The Virgo*, he wrote short stories based on his experiences, like the daily routine aboard the ship, the boring Pacific Ocean islands that the crew visited, and his disappointment at and bitterness of having been left out of the war and what was happening in it. He repeatedly requested to be transferred to a destroyer but he had to face his Captain's denial. Heggen endured the monotonous life on *The Virgo* until the end of the war in December 1945 after which he returned to New York City, rewrote the pieces, changing them into a novel, and gave them to his publishers. The book sold over one million copies and made him the centre of the New York City literary scene. He had

transformed his personal wartime experiences into a comical, realistic and understanding portrait of life aboard a cargo ship sailing in the back areas of the Pacific Ocean during World War II, emphasizing that while the soldiers were fighting on the front, being physically and emotionally traumatized by the horrors of the armed combat, he, and men like him, experienced the war only through the news.

### Plot

The story, an entertaining account of routine life aboard USS *Reluctant* in the Pacific, involves a strict captain, some unconventional characters, like the ship's doctor, a noisy and disorderly crew, and a beloved officer by the name of Mister Roberts. When the reader is introduced to *The Reluctant*, the ship is anchored in a bay of one of the back islands of the Pacific Ocean. It is 1945 and the day is nearing when the Allies will declare peace. *The Reluctant*, however, is far from the theatre of operations.

*Now, in the waning days of the Second World War, this ship lies at anchor in the glassy bay of one of the back islands of the Pacific. It is a Navy cargo ship. You know it is a cargo ship by the five yawning hatches, by the house amidships, by the booms that bristle from the masts like mechanical arms. You know it is a navy ship by the color (dark, dull blue), by the white numbers painted on the bow, and unfailingly by the thin ribbon of the commission pennant flying from the mainmast. In the Navy Register, this ship is listed as the Reluctant. Its crew never refers to it by name: to them it is always "this bucket". (p. vii.)*

In the early morning of April 1945, the ship's deck is deserted and the officer-of-the-deck is not yet awake. On the dock, the natives are moving about, but on *The Reluctant* the crew is sleeping. In the West, it is seven o' clock at night and the Allies are working their way, slowly but steadily, toward Berlin. In the East, on the island of Okinawa in Japan, the US Army is

about to finish Operation Iceberg, the largest amphibious assault in the Pacific Theatre of War. The Battle of Okinawa (April 1945-June 1945) is still going on with kamikaze attacks from the Japanese defenders and the fierce fighting on the part of the Allies.

As a naval auxiliary, *The Reluctant* is not involved in ferocious fighting. It is six-thirty but not a man is stirring on the deck. Reveille is at six-thirty but the chief master-at-arms, Johnson, who makes reveille, is drinking coffee. In the armory six men are discussing a poker game while the rest of the crew is dreaming not of battles fought or imminent, but of girls scantily clad.

One would say that this is an unconventional naval conduct. However, since *The Reluctant* operates in the back areas of the Pacific, carrying food, toothpaste, dungarees and trucks, staying “on its regular run, from Tedium to Apathy and Monotony and back” for months on end (p. x), having shot no enemy planes, having fired no enemy ships and having sunk no enemy submarines, the crew’s indifference to the war is not surprising.

And yet there is an officer, a young man of sensitivity, perceptiveness and idealism - attributes worthless and even harmful to the Captain of the ship - who is capable, efficient and committed. He has geared himself to the needs of the ship and he has made the adjustment with patience, courage and fortitude. He shows up at six-thirty sharp only to find a deserted deck. No wonder he is the crew’s favourite officer although he has not been given his chance to be a hero - for physical heroism, Heggen writes, is very much a matter of opportunity or a matter of a reflex.

*Apply the rubber hammer to the patella tendon and, commonly, you produce the knee jerk. Apply the situation permitting bravery to one hundred young males with actively functioning adrenal glands and, reasonably, you would produce seventy-five instances of clear-cut heroism. (p. xi.)*

Lieutenant Robert knows that the person responsible for his hard luck is Captain Morton, a Lieutenant Commander that is vigorously disliked by the crew. He is difficult, hard to please and to convince, and more interested in having his men clean the deck than in having the cargo discharged. There is a rift between the Old Man and the crew and in this rift the Captain stands alone opposite one hundred and seventy-eight officers and men. His authority is unquestionable although the crew knows that the Captain is vulnerable. He is not terrifying despite the fact that he is detestable. Affronts appear in chalk from time to time on gun mounts and cigarette butts, an obsession of the captain’s, are secretly inserted in his cabin.

Captain Morton ignores the men’s mischief. He is a stout, middle-aged man, who is considered stupid and incompetent. He is unable to understand the simplest message and carry out the simplest order from his superior officers. His persecution of the disobedient men haunts the crew and his prohibition of gum-chewing angers them, although they have forgotten whether the captain created this situation or whether it is the result of their need for a pastime.

Chief Johnson looks at his watch and picks up his whistle: “Hit the decks,” he shouts, but no one stirs. He stumbles back to his bunk: the men know what to do, he thinks; everyone will be up by eight o’ clock to eat breakfast. Nonetheless, Mister Roberts, the First Lieutenant of the ship, responsible for the ship’s maintenance, is present to supervise the work of the men. The crew worships, obeys and respects this twenty-six year-old, slender, blond man who is a born leader.

*He was the sort of leader who is followed blindly because he does not look back to see if he is being followed. For him the crew would turn out ten times the work that any other officer on the ship would command. He could not pass*

*the galley without being offered a steak sandwich, or the bakery without a pie. At one time or another perhaps ninety per cent of the crew had asked him for advice. If it had been said of him once in the compartment, it had been said a hundred times: "The best son-of-a-bitch in the goddamn Navy".* (p. 3.)

Roberts is friends with every man on the ship. His special friends, however, are Ed Pauley, a sociable fellow, Doc, the doctor of the ship, and Ensign Pulver, the hero's admirer. The First Lieutenant's only enemy is Captain Morton. The Old Man is jealous of his officer's skills and afraid of his competence and efficiency. Although Roberts has repeatedly saved the ship from imminent collisions (caused by the captain's incompetence), the Old Man has repaid him by calling him names.

Roberts had been aboard *The Reluctant* for two and a half years, longing to be transferred to the front. He has repeatedly asked the Captain for transfer, but he has refused him on the grounds that he is indispensable to the ship and the crew alike. One movie night, Roberts, out of spite, shoots a ball at Morton. The Old Man is so shocked that he sounds the alarm, sending the crew to the battle stations. Nothing happens and forty-five minutes later the crew hears the Captain shout at the top of his voice on the P.A. (Public Announcement) system: "All right, now by God, we'll just stay right here at General Quarters until the smart son-of-a-bitch who did that comes up here and owns up! We'll stay right here, by God!" (p. 12.) The crew fails to understand the message and the men go about their business. Roberts pretends that he is ignorant of the incident (he is even heard asking the men what happened) before he joins Ensign Pulver for a beer on such a special occasion as this.

As the story progresses, the reader is introduced to some of the other members of the crew. Ensign Keith is described as a lonely man with formal manners. Life aboard *The Reluctant* contradicts what he was taught at midshipmen school and he feels confused. "Almost everything he saw and heard, contradicted, refuted, ignored or scorned one of the impregnable Truths he had learned so well." (p. 18.) Keith's roommate, Ed Pauley, does not get up at seven o'clock, when an officer should, but sleeps until noon; he does not shave as an officer should; he is growing a beard. What is more, his fellow officers lounge all day in the wardroom, their hats on their heads and their feet on the tables. None of the men seems to do any work and none of them uses the title "sir" when addressing a superior officer. Extramarital exploits are discussed openly at the dinner table and most of the officers, like the ship's doctor, drink alcohol - all violations of naval etiquette.

In addition, Keith hears the men speak in a seditious way about the ship, the captain and the US Navy. One day, when a crew member, Dowdy, the boatswain's mate, brings beer aboard the ship, Keith loses his mind. He punishes the whole crew, making the young men emotionally distressed. Roberts attempts to rescue the men from Keith's wrath, but the stern Ensign, concerned with details and minor errors, refuses to change his mind and rescind the order. He does not believe in familiarity, he tells Roberts, because it breeds contempt. No wonder Keith becomes the object of hatred, spoiling the comfortable atmosphere that exists between the men and the officers. Usually the officers on *The Reluctant* let the men alone and the men let the officers alone so that they could all focus on the Captain. When one night Ensign Keith finds the men gambling and drinking on the bridge, he feels insulted. Nonetheless, he finally joins them in a glass of "fruit juice". It is ten o'clock when he leaves the bridge and eleven when he fails to report for duty to his superior officer. The men find him in the armory, arms flung about his mates, singing an obscene song. As a result of his disorderly conduct, he never gives the boys trouble again, turning into a good-natured young man. (p. 30.)

The doctor aboard *The Reluctant* is unpredictable. He usually has very little to do, but when there is an outbreak of an epidemic, he gets really busy.

*The contradictions were the face and the man – the satanic little mustache, the wide, unblinking eyes that were simultaneously cruel and compassionate, and the shockingly soft voice that never quite concealed the steel beneath. Among the crew he seemed to inspire two antagonistic feelings in equal degree: fear, and a rather boundless admiration. Anyone who had ever drawn the wrath of his sharp little tongue had good cause to hold the Doc in respect, but on the other hand there were many whose relations with him had been of the friendliest sort imaginable. (p. 32.)*

The day Lindstrom, a farm boy from South Dakota, visits the doctor to confess that he has the clap, the doctor is surprised. How can a man on one of the remotest islands of the Pacific and on a womanless island manage to get the clap? (p. 35.) It makes no sense, he says, and refuses to treat Lindstrom on the grounds that the young sailor is a distinctive case in an area as vast as the Pacific Ocean in which there are millions of men but very few women. He is the only fellow in this god-forsaken place with the clap, the doctor argues. So, why cure the clap? Lindstrom should consider himself lucky. The sailor, amazed but insistent, manages to get the doctor to treat his disease. When Lindstrom leaves the doctor's office, he is confused and baffled, believing the medical man to be wrong and himself to be right.

A funny scene takes place when Mister Roberts stands watch with Dolan, the twenty-one-year-old Second-Class Quartermaster. The two men have stood watches together before, since their first day on the ship, and they often confide in each other. This time Roberts learns that one of the men, Dowdy, told the Captain once, when he called him about something that had to do with the boats, that the crew thought he was a prick.

Dolan, an incorrigible gossip, supplies Roberts with information about his life by recalling his conquests in San Francisco. He confesses that he likes women and goes after them whenever he can. Roberts, who does not seem to believe that women are everything in life, recalls how he enlisted after Pearl Harbour, having left Medical School and hoping for some action. Upon the end of the watch, the Lieutenant returns to his cabin, feeling that he is missing something. He enlisted taking for granted that he would be sent to the front, but instead he ended up on a cargo ship in the Pacific. He keeps asking himself: "What have I lost?" and "What am I looking for?" until he finally falls asleep.

Ensign Pulver's tendency to mischief is known to the crew. He is amicable although he is vain. He likes liquor and he is lazy. True, a metallurgical engineer like him has little to do on a cargo ship like *The Reluctant* - so on an average day Pulver spends eighteen hours in bed.

*His bunk became to him a sort of shrine, and but for his meals and other undeniable functions, he was seldom out of it. It was an unusually well-equipped bunk. At the foot Pulver had rigged a small fan which wafted cool breezes over him on the hottest nights. At the side was attached a coffee-can ash tray, a container for cigarettes and another for a lighter. Pulver liked to smoke in bed while he was reading. Books were stowed in the space between the springs and the bulkhead. Beer was kept there, too, and it was possible to open a bottle on the reading light on the bulkhead. (p. 61.)*

Pulver reads the books that Lieutenant Roberts reads. He admires Roberts and thinks that he is the greatest guy he has ever known. He wants to avenge his friend and he is up to a plan to



make the Old Man suffer. One day he lights a firecracker, causing the crew to think that a torpedo has hit *The Reluctant*. Nothing happens, except that Pulver burns his eyebrows, hair and part of his face. Unfortunately for the Ensign, the Old Man is not aboard the ship to scream “Prepare to abandon ship,” although when he returns, Pulver becomes his object of ridicule and contempt.

The next quarrel between Lieutenant Billings, the communicator, and Lieutenant Carney, the first division officer, ends in rupture. The two men, friends and roommates for fifteen months, have a serious fight over a can of coke. Their usual, everyday quarrel focuses on the process of Billings arising at noon and Carney getting up at eight one day out of four. Billings is usually dangling an arm or leg over the side of his bunk and Carney is ordering him to get it where it belonged. Then, they usually invite each other to a fight which usually ends in the wardroom over a game of cards.

A new quarrel begins in the morning of the day the ship is unloading at a remote, green island, swarming with flies, mosquitoes and long sharks that patrol the area, preventing the men from swimming. The hot, humid weather and the message Billings reads, ordering the Old Man to remain at the God-forsaken island for a week, depriving the men of their leave, cause Carney, sitting with Billings in the wardroom, to offer Pulver a Coke. Billings objects to such treatment. He is Carney’s roommate – why does Carney want to buy Pulver a Coke? When the quarrel starts, Pulver is quick to rise to the occasion and stop it. The two men are friends again and the rain, which falls all night, enlivens them. They feel happy, especially when they find out that a new Rita Hayworth movie is scheduled for the evening.

Several days later, *The Reluctant* anchors at another back island and Becker, a signalman, examining it from the deck with the ship’s binoculars, spots two blonde nurses that look like real movie stars.

*One of the many anomalies of our ponderous navy is its ability to move fast, to strike the swift, telling blow at the precise moment it is needed. There were accessible in the wheelhouse and charthouse seven pairs of binoculars; on the flying bridge were two spyglasses and two long-glasses, and the ship’s telescope; and on the platform above was the range-finder, an instrument of powerful magnification. Within a commendably brief time after Sam had sounded the alarm, somewhere between fifteen and twenty seconds, there were manned six pairs of binoculars, two spyglasses, two long-glasses, of course the ship’s telescope, and the range-finder. (p. 83.)*

The men’s spyglasses and long-glasses verify Becker’s discovery and very soon the crew discovers that the nurses work at the base hospital and take a bath every evening after their shift. Awe-struck, some of them having last seen a woman fully-clothed fourteen months ago, the men spy on the nurses every day, feasting their eyes on their naked bodies. Every day the girls’ bath is witnessed by Sam, three quartermasters, the officer-on-deck and several other seamen. A couple of days later, during “watch,” Sam spots a birthmark “down there,” observing at the same time that the feast “is too good to last”.

Sam’s omen comes true when Lieutenant Longston, the gunnery officer, goes to hospital to have his eyes examined and returns accompanied by the two beautiful women. The officers admire them at the mess hall, and the men greet them as Langston gives them a tour round the main deck, the offices, the galley and the sick bay. The crew is happy, the nurses too, until Sam’s shrill voice is heard revealing to everyone on the main deck that one of the nurses is the

woman with the birthmark on her bottom. The girls realize that the men have been spying on them and the following day they keep their bathroom curtains shut.

The funny scene is followed by a serious one which takes place when Captain Morton refuses to sign Roberts' transfer papers, causing a fierce reaction from the Lieutenant. The young man verbally attacks his superior officer and then asks for his punishment. The Captain, acting wisely, avoids the issue as Roberts would have asked for a transfer which he would not have avoided.

The brawl between Big Gerhart, the gun captain, and Red Stevens, a sailor, is a rather serious one. Gerhart's taking off his shirt on a very hot day and easing his burden on the ship's dog right below the Captain's eyes, results in his severe punishment by the Old Man. Exasperated, Gerhart picks on young Red, standing watch near him, calling him a cuckold. During the ensuing fight, Gerhart is hit on the head with a fork spanner losing his senses. The culprit, Red, is punished (the sum of \$ 25 is to be deducted from his monthly pay check) and Gerhart, alone now, realizes that his watches go slower than ever up on the ship's three-inch gun.

*The Reluctant* sails to Elysium in the Limbo Islands, a British colonial town of a 30,000 population near the Equator. The men buy prophylactics at the local canteen and ask the natives for the local brothel only to find out that there no such thing on the island. Overwhelmed by the news, they break into the French Consul's house and tear it down. Then, they spot a girl and hide her in their cabins, letting her ashore three days later. Upon departure, they invent love stories about their ventures to compensate for some really miserable days ahead of them.

The voyages of *The Reluctant* are almost over as the war in Germany has ended. The Germans have surrendered and the people in London, Paris, Rome and New York are rejoicing. There are snake dances through the streets of Rome and in London pubs are jammed. Flags and bunting have appeared in every building, ticker-tape has rained from Wall Street windows and parades celebrate the joyous occasion in New York. Roberts feels depressed. He wanted to be part of the celebrations and he feels "left out". He knows that the casualties are great, he tells the doctor, but he would rather he had taken part in the war and be celebrating now.

*"I wanted in that war, Doc. I wanted in it like hell. Does it sound stupid?"*

*"No," said the Doc, "but it is rare." He lighted a cigarette. "You never did satisfactorily explain to me how come you're all -fired anxious to fight this war."*

*"I don't know that I could," said Roberts. "I don't know how you go about explaining a compulsion. That's what it is, of course."*

*Roberts had a crooked smile. "Did I ever tell you," he went on, "what a long and consistent record I have as a frustrated anti-fascist?"*

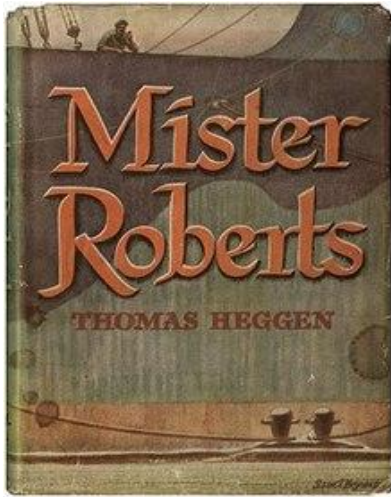
*The doctor shook his head and exhaled smoke. "I think you omitted that." (pp. 137-138.)*

Roberts recalls how he quit Medical School to join the RAF in Canada; how he was thrown out on malocclusion; and how in 1941 his application to join the Air Corps was rejected for the same reason. He then admits that the Navy was the only corps that accepted him, but he is interrupted by Doc who attempts to rationalize with him by saying that he gives "this war a lot". War is a necessity, Doc says. Any ideology attached to it is incidental or even accidental. Roberts replies with terms like "war against fascism," "holy war," "crusade," "the forces of good and evil," and so on. When he is finally over, Doc reprimands him for dropping out of

Medical School. In his cabin, however, Roberts can still think of the shouting and the laughing and the drinking and the lovemaking in the big cities of Europe.

At the same time he can recall an article in *Life*; his knowledge of the war comes from a magazine, he realizes, and a photograph of a field in France with a farmer harrowing his field beside the mounded grave of a British soldier. “Our honoured dead,” is his next thought, “... poor dead bastards ... [who] gave their lives” though not necessarily voluntarily, he thinks.

The war demanded the lives of two million men. These men were chosen and piled high at Austerlitz and Waterloo and Ypres and Verdun and Aachen and Dunkirk and Anzio. The soldiers who participated in the fields of battle were “good enough to fight the war”. Soldiers consigned to ships like *The Reluctant* were the ones who were not good enough to fight the wars because they were inadequate. Take the Old Man and Pauley and Keith and himself and Carney and Billings and the others, the hero reasons. As sleep is out of the question, Roberts walks to the captain’s wing and throws one of his potted palm trees over the side making a lot of noise on his way to his cabin. The next morning the crew is delighted to hear the news when the Old Man threatens to send to court martial the man responsible. No one actually knows who the culprit is, except Dolan, who tells the men. The crew is reasonable enough not to be afraid of the Captain and present Roberts with a handmade medal of honour.



ORDER OF THE PALM  
TO LIEUT. D. A. ROBERTS, FOR ACTION AGAINST  
THE ENEMY, ABOVE AND BEYOND THE CALL OF  
DUTY,  
ON THE NIGHT OF 8 MAY 1945 (p. 153.)

The ceremony over, the men side with Thompson, the radioman, and his serious, urgent problem: his son has drowned in the ocean. His presence is required at the unfortunate man’s funeral. It is Wednesday and the funeral is on Saturday. Thompson asks the captain for emergency leave but Morton replies that he gives no emergency leaves on his ship. Thompson thinks of deserting his post but he finally accepts his fate and goes into the mess hall to play Monopoly with the men.

A message comes through ordering Roberts to return to the United States for reassignment. A gourmet dinner is organized and Roberts and his friends gather in Doc’s cabin to drink and talk about the mores and morals of American womanhood. “Regional differences in the sexual habits and aptitudes of women were carefully probed” in Pennsylvania, the Middle West in general, and Chicago in particular, depending on the men’s exposure to events and people in their region. (p. 169.) Doc is the last one to speak and notes that the world is embarking on a new era in the history of sex as women have discovered sex during the war and have passed from passivity to aggressiveness. Nothing much is added after this but the men invite Roberts to a party in which they toast their departing comrade. As the lieutenant leaves the party, he removes the captain’s palm trees from their pots.

The next morning Roberts departs having no feelings for the ship, although he spent two and a half years on it. His friend and admirer, Pulver, misses him. Captain Morton easily understands that Roberts is responsible for destroying his plants. He knows that the Lieutenant was the man who held the ship together. Roberts was friendly, worked hard, had humour,



tolerance and humility. The crew trusted him, obeyed him and turned to him for advice and counsel.

The hero's departure causes Pulver to change. He becomes disagreeable and edgy. When he receives his friend's second letter, he has already heard of his death. A friend of his, who is on the same ship with Roberts, Pulver tells Doc, wrote to him that Roberts was killed when his ship was attacked by kamikaze airplanes. All he hears from Doc, however, is "that's what he wanted". Feeling the pain, Pulver throws the Old Man's four remaining palm trees over the side. Then he goes to Captain Morton's cabin and tells him about it.

### Commentary

Roberts' untimely death catches the reader by surprise. He expects the hero to get his share of action in the Pacific, go home after the end of the bitter fighting, and relate his heroic exploits to his friends and family. An adventurous officer, Roberts is willing to undertake some risky mission and complete it successfully. But adventure implies risk and in risk there is always the chance of something going wrong. Risk, as the reader knows, involves the possibility of harm, which is exactly what Roberts gets as soon as he is transferred to the destroyer.

It is rather difficult to believe that the hero is looking forward to his own death. What he wants is the excitement of the engagement and the satisfaction of victory. He was enlisted right after Pearl Harbor, having quit his studies at Medical School, looking for revenge, consumed by the desire for retaliation. His ill-fated end is the result of his personal vanity, the vanity of human achievements.

Roberts is competent, skilful, appreciated by the crew. He seems to be certain of having the ability and judgement needed to succeed in his new bold undertaking but he overestimates himself while, at the same time, he underestimates the Japanese. He has been with the *Reluctant* for two long, boring years and lacks the necessary experience for combat. Although he was trained to fight, he has had no direct involvement in or exposure to the war. So, when the kamikaze pilots strike, over confident Roberts loses his life.

The hero dies, the reader realizes that even though most of the action takes place on a backwater cargo ship that sails "from apathy to tedium with occasional side trips to monotony and ennui," the last part of the story deliberately moves very fast to take him by surprise.

### Review

Most of the fun in the story is provided by the contrasting scenes which take place between the insubordinate crew and the strict captain. Since *The Reluctant* is a naval auxiliary, the sailors feel like relaxing and indulging in fantasies of the imagination.

*We find our way now to the crew's compartment. You are surprised to see so many men sleeping, and so soundly? Perhaps it would be revelatory to peer into their dreams. No doubt, as you say, we will find them haunted by battles fought and battles imminent. This man who snores so noisily is Stefanowski, machinist's mate second class. His dream? ... well ... there is a girl ... she is inadequately clothed ... she is smiling at Stefanowski ... let us not intrude.*  
(p. ix.)

The fourteen officers (reserves all of them) are no more sensitive than the men, because they also spend their time slumbering and resting: Ensign Pulver usually dreams that he is lying on a leather couch and that there are several cases of Schlitz beer stacked all about him (p. ix); the doctor has a lot of time on his hands to engage in his favourite past time which is reading;

Lieutenant Billings and his bunkmate Lieutenant Carney never stop teasing each other every morning before going into the wardroom for a game of cards.

*They lived in a little idyll in stateroom number nine. Billings who stood no watches, slept every day until noon, but one day out of four Carney had to get up at eight. The process of arising at noon and greeting the not-very-new- day was always the same: Billings, who occupied the top bunk, would dangle an arm or a leg over the side; Carney would command fiercely, "Get back in there where you belong"; Billings would comply and say meekly: "I'm sorry"; and Carney would finish off, "And stay there!" This happened three days out of four, and every day – sometimes two and three times a day – another little ritual would be acted out. One would say to the other: "Feel like getting your ass whipped?"; to which the reply was: "Think you're man enough?"; and the reply to that was: "Yes, I think so." Then the two would march to the wardroom, for this was the invitation to acey-deucey combat."* (p. 63.)

Obviously the crew has been spared the atrocities and hazards of the war. The men have enjoyed a peaceful though boring service in place of the brutality and carnage of combat. And yet, there is this one time during which *The Reluctant* fired its guns.

*This periscope, the lookout sighted it way off on the port beam, and the Captain, who was scared almost out of his mind, gave the order: "Commence firing!" The five-inch and the two port three-inch guns fired for perhaps ten minutes, and the showing was rather embarrassing. The closest shell was three hundred yards off, and all the time the unimpressed periscope stayed right there. At one thousand yards it was identified as the protruding branch of a floating tree. The branch had a big bend in it and didn't even look much like a periscope.* (p. x.)

A clumsy mistake like this, can stir up the crew's hostile feelings. The men believe that the Old Man is incompetent and inefficient. The Captain of a commercial ship, a merchant marine officer like the Old Man used to be before the war, cannot be forgiven for making such a silly, foolish mistake. So the men invent names, calling the Captain "prick," writing affronts on the deck guns, and inserting cigarette butts in his cabin, inducing the reader's amusement.

If one adds to this the fact that the Captain is rather apathetic to his mission while more interested in imposing petty regulations on the crew, one can easily justify the men's feelings. The Old Man is inconsiderate of the conditions under which the crew work, insisting that they wear shirts on hot, humid days, and that hard soled shoes are not to be worn on deck at all times, causing the crew's reaction much to the amusement of the reader.

The Captain's interest is restricted to the ship's cargo and his potted palm trees. His explosions, on the subject of failure or insubordination regarding his obsessions, produce boisterous comedy. He makes the crew wait on deck for forty-five minutes, hoping for the rebellious man, who threw a ball at him during movie night, to own up to the incident, attaining no results but the crew's impatience and weariness. Unable to prevent the men's insubordination, he sees his plants thrown overboard, as the crew (at least Roberts and Pulver) respond violently to his stubbornness and obstinacy, generating the reader's sardonic, mocking smile.

The buffer between the hysterical Captain and the crew is Mister Roberts. He is a born leader, worshipped by his men who call him “the best son-of-a-bitching officer in the goddamn Navy”. (p. 3.) Roberts cares about the crew and organizes the ship’s work, never neglecting his duty. He acts as the mediator between the men and the officers, listens to the men’s problems and offers his advice and help. Serving an end, he is the story’s protagonist standing for integrity and supplying the balance of the story. He is for dramatic developments in the plot and his usual serious, composed behaviour pleasantly contrasts with the boisterous behaviour of the crew.

And yet this disciplined, efficient, competent naval officer is the Captain’s object of contempt. Not because he repeatedly damages the Old Man’s favourite palm trees, awarded the ship for outstanding achievements in cargo delivery, but because he is the exact opposite of Captain Morton, standing for and symbolizing the noble qualities (perseverance, patience and compassion) that the Old Man lacks.

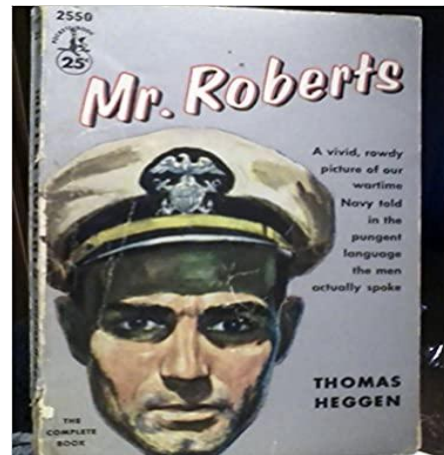
One could argue that the reason the Captain refuses to sign Lieutenant Roberts’ transfer papers is simply because he wants to protect the young man from exposure to and active involvement in the bloodshed. A middle aged merchant marine officer like Captain Morton certainly has the essential knowledge and crucial experience to realize that Roberts’ enthusiasm and eagerness to join the war are not enough to see him through the anguish of the war. The Lieutenant lacks the experience required (his essential training took place a long time ago) and the later he joins the war the better, as death is “out there” waiting for him.

Roberts confesses to Doc that he regrets not being part of the war celebrations, envisaging combat in the light of glory while failing to reflect on the hazards of large-scale fighting involving warships and Japanese kamikaze attacks. Doc is quick to underline the dangers of war and rebuke Roberts for leaving Medical School. The young man disregards his friend’s admonition, replying with theories about the ideals of the crusades, holy wars and fighting *pro patria*, firmly standing his ground. He enlisted hoping to contribute, but the war is almost over and he is not actively involved in any post-war festivities.

Whatever the reasons for Captain Morton’s cold-hearted behaviour, one thing is certain: the Old Man’s hysterical anger and fury can effortlessly originate satire in the form of irony, sarcasm and ridicule used in order to criticize his weaknesses. Morton is unsympathetic to the men’s suffering because he lacks the interest a leader should possess. The crew’s natural reaction to his despotism cannot but engender delight in the reader.

Roberts’ insubordination is left unpunished simply because the Captain understands that such an act would get the young officer the transfer he has been hoping for. Morton’s evasive behaviour does not escape the reader’s attention: the Captain is crafty and cunning, lacking straightforwardness, generating humour based on his actions of the opposite of what he actually wants his men to believe. Roberts is honest (except for the incident on movie night when he lies), kind and caring, and stands for compassion – all positive traits of a successful, popular leader.

Helping Roberts to keep his sanity is Ensign Frank Pulver, whose prime objective is keeping out of the Captain’s sight while avenging his friend. Whether singing a popular song, planning or preparing a new attack on the Captain’s palm trees, Pulver is fun: “His chest contained three



cases of beer, six quarts of bourbon, three of rum, one of gin and two of Vermouth”. (p. 60.) On an average day, Pulver spends eighteen hours in bed, as his cabin is equipped with a fan, a coffee-can ash tray, a container for cigarettes and another for a lighter, several books and lots of beer.

The easy life the Ensign enjoys provides the story with its comic elements. When he is not drinking or talking with his “hero,” Pulver is scheming to avenge himself against the Captain even though he has spent fourteen months on *The Reluctant* without ever meeting his nemesis.

*He watched the careless, easy dignity with which Roberts met the crew, and studied the way that Roberts got the crew to work for him; and then he tried to apply this dignity and this control to his own small authority. ... Because Roberts hated the Captain, Pulver felt duty-bound to do the same; and scarcely a day went by that he didn't present to Roberts the completed planning for a new offensive. (p. 62.)*

Once Pulver figured out a way to plug the Captain’s sanitary system, so that the Old Man would one day be deluged. He figured out a device that would punch the Captain in the face with a gloved fist when he entered his cabin. After that he thought of putting marbles in the Captain’s bedroom so that the stones would roll around at night and make an awful lot of noise – always refraining, however, from putting his ideas into practice.

Pulver did, one day, while the Captain was ashore, insert razor blades from an electric razor into his bed, believing that they would cause an itch, but the Captain “never appeared better-rested, and indeed, better-natured, than in the succeeding days”. (p. 63.) He did one day attempt to cause the Captain to scream “Prepare to abandon ship” when he ignited some fireworks on deck, but he burnt his face and hair, triggering the Old Man’s contempt.

As for Doc, he prescribes pills and wisdom with profound knowledge and understanding coupled with foresight and good judgment. This officer is a cynical man “described as a crazy little bastard, a son-of-a-bitch, a good son-of-a-bitch, a hell of a good medico ... and a nice guy”. (p. 31.) Doc’s case is humorous when he is related as “the man with the satanic little moustache, the wide, unblinking eyes that were simultaneously cruel and compassionate, and the shockingly soft voice that never quite concealed the steel beneath”. (p. 32.)

Knowledgeable Doc is a funny compliment to naive and childish Pulver. Whether he is a wisecrack at sick bay or making illegal scotch with his shipmates, Doc’s wit, a symbol of his experience and learning, provides amusement. Lindstrom’s “only dose of clap in the whole damn Pacific” (p. 40.) gives Doc a chance to reveal how comical he can be at the naive boy’s expense.

The story’s other funny highlights include the men’s lengthy observation of the blonde nurses, the girls becoming aware that the sailors have been watching them; the efforts by Roberts, Pulver, and Doc to mix a bottle of Scotch from Coca-Cola, iodine, and other vital ingredients; the men’s bursting into the French Consul’s house on one of the remote islands they have anchored simply because they can find no brothel; the crew’s excessive drinking while on leave and later their attempt to bring on board an enormous variety of things including a goat; their secretly keeping aboard a girl for three days; and Mister Roberts’ and later Ensign Pulver’s assertion of manhood and disobedience by tossing the Captain’s precious palm trees overboard.

## Conclusion

These and other incidents (funny and serious) take place to give the story the right balance. *Mister Roberts* is a harmonious whole equipped with equal amounts of drama and humour, happiness and sadness, anger and goodwill, all of which touch the reader's soul on both funny and sad levels. It includes a genuine observation of the feelings of the American military men who, despite their efforts, never actually got to fight, and it provides the reader with the necessary background knowledge of life behind the scenes of war.

Like other war novelists, Heggen has women play a minor role in the world of men, which is stereotypically masculine and has the characteristic of physical strength, aggressiveness, and lack of emotional response, as in the case of Captain Morton. The blonde nurses are the object of the admiration of the crew, and a girl spends some time with the men on board, but otherwise *The Reluctant* is a man's world. Occasionally the men relate their love life during watches, and the officers in Doc's cabin discuss the American women's moral standards that have changed because of the war but that is all. Women are appreciated for their quality of being sexually attractive and not for being equal partners in combat or making an equal, significant contribution to society.

Above and beyond, in Heggen's story, a capable officer causes his superior officer's animosity while gaining his subordinates' acceptance and admiration. The fight, presented in a humorous vein, produces the reader's laughter and amusement and is largely responsible for earning the long lasting popularity of the book and for making all of us understand what practical wisdom is: knowing what is good, right, or best, given a particular set of circumstances.

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