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Diplomatic Couriers Sail to China with New U.S. Embassy

Perhaps the most striking part of the ocean voyage was when Diplomatic Courier Stephen Moffit heard Chinese fishermen singing love songs over the ship's two-way radio. Then again, Moffit won't soon forget what it was like to crawl past black widow spiders in the dark depths of a cargo ship.

Both experiences were part of a day's work for Moffit, who spent 19 days aboard a ship starting on October 16 as part of his assignment to ensure that construction material and other office equipment bound for the State Department's new embassy in Beijing, China, remained secure.

Moffit was the first diplomatic courier in recent memory to cross the Pacific by cargo ship for the Department of State. A second diplomatic courier, Brad Lynch, joined Moffit for the final two days of the trip.

Over the next three years, other couriers will make similar ocean voyages about once a month to deliver 2,000 containers full of material for a completely classified building in the new U.S. embassy complex in China. The containers, about 40 square feet in size, will hold construction materials, office equipment, safes, furniture, classified equipment, computers and anything else to be used in the new embassy building. The State Department sent the material by cargo ship because it was too expensive to transport the oversized material by aircraft. By law, all material destined for sensitive areas within

U.S. embassies must be under diplomatic courier control at all times.

Moffit's responsibility on the voyage was to ensure the security of one of the containers, which was stowed deep in the holds of the cargo ship. It was his job to conduct regular "walkarounds" and maintain surveillance whenever the ship stopped in a port. On two occasions, he also had to physically inspect the container by descending 40 feet below the deck to an area where people usually don't go.

"Well, the black widow spiders stayed on their webs, so it wasn't that bad," said Moffit. Still, he compares the experience to crawling into a manhole. "It was completely dark and I just had a flashlight." While Moffit was below, he said he could hear the water splashing against the side of the ship and the creaking sounds of the hull as the ship went through the waves.

On the first night he tried to sleep on the ship, Moffit encountered an unexpected problem. Although most cruise ships have stabilization systems, the cargo ship did not, so the ship rocked dramatically. "When I would try to sleep in my bunk, I would slide from one side of the bed to the other," said Moffit. The next day, the ship's crewmen told him that the secret was to stuff himself between his safety suit on one side of the bed, and his life vest on the other. Once he was snug between the two, Moffit stopped sliding.

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Behind the Scenes

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The voyage took Moffit from Los Angeles across the Pacific Ocean, the Philippine Sea, the East China Sea and finally to the Yellow Sea. When they entered the Yellow Sea, Moffit went onto the bridge of the ship. Everywhere he looked, he could see fishing boats, he said. The sight was arresting, but what amazed Moffit were the sounds he heard. As the captain and the crew gave all their attention to maneuvering around all the boats, the bridge was filled with the crooning of Chinese fishermen singing over the radio

monitors. The crew explained that it is common for fishermen in the Yellow Sea to sing over the radios as a way to pass the time and stay awake.

Moffit said he would like to make the trip at least once more. “I saw some dolphins and porpoises. The porpoises swam right next to the ship. I saw two whales, with their spouts and everything,” he said. “In the South Pacific, I saw flying fish. At night, you could see the stars. It was beautiful, really.”