

A LONG WAY TO GO

LGBTQ+ SEAFARERS

1941-PRESENT



USMMA OPEN SEAS CLUB

&

THE AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE MUSEUM

THE AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE MUSEUM
“Highlights in Leadership and Diversity” Series

#1. *KP Women: Breaking the Gender Barrier* (2018)

#2. *With Courage and Good Cheer: The Life of Peter Chue* (2021)

#3. *A Long Way to Go: LGBTQ+ Seafarers, 1941-Present* (2022)

FOREWORD BY VADM JACK BUONO

Since its creation, diversity has been a cherished value at the US Merchant Marine Academy. USMMA is the only federal service academy that never practiced segregation. Furthermore, Kings Point was the first federal academy to recruit women. A genuinely national school, USMMA attracts young men and women from all fifty states and Guam, American Samoa, Puerto Rico, and the US Virgin Islands. Our student body is increasingly diverse and welcoming to all qualified young people. We are not a perfect institution, but we are making a concerted effort to continue our proud tradition of diversity while upholding academic standards, the core Regimental values of respect, honor, and service, and USMMA's mission "To educate and graduate leaders of exemplary character who are inspired to serve the national security, marine transportation, and economic needs of the United States as licensed Merchant Marine Officers and commissioned officers in the Armed Forces."

While we will never know how many LGBTQ+ midshipmen have attended Kings Point, there is every reason to believe they have always been in the Regiment and always will be. For decades some of our students had to

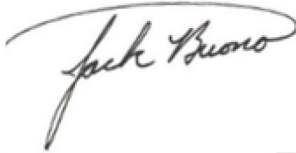
lead closeted, hidden lives as federal statutes did not safeguard those who did not conform to heterosexual norms. Now we are steering a better course. This exhibit provides a broad historical context to LGBTQ+ mariners in the maritime industry. It is a story that has remained hidden for too long. It is now time that the Kings Point community acknowledge the injustices of the past, recognize



Fig. 1: VADM Jack Buono, USMS, Superintendent, USMMA.

the contributions of our LGBTQ+ friends, classmates, and colleagues, and celebrate their futures free of the constraints they faced in the past. This will not be easy for everyone to accept. But as an institution that produces exemplary leaders, it is incumbent on us to promote equity and inclusion and leave fear and bigotry behind us. Luckily, USMMA's Midshipman Open Seas Club and several alumni have supported and advised this exhibit, ensuring it will be as relevant as possible to our midshipmen. I invite the Kings Point family to ponder the complexities, fears, and, yes, the joys of past, present, and future midshipmen who identify as LGBTQ+. My sincere hope is that *A Long Way to Go* will encourage a climate of open discussion, life-long learning, and respect.

Acta Non Verba,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jack Buono". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish over the top of the name.

VADM Jack Buono, USMS

INTRODUCTION: LGBTQ+

Forget everything you thought you knew about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other individuals (LGBTQ+) who do not conform to cisgender sexuality. The LGBTQ+ community is composed of your siblings, other relatives, friends, acquaintances, comrades, and shipmates, whether you or they acknowledge it or not. LGBTQ+ individuals have always been present in American society and always will be. Even if largely unrecorded, they have also been a part of the Kings Point family. They have served the nation, had impressive careers, and contributed to the republic's well-being. Despite recent social and political advances, some still attempt to stigmatize, mock and even persecute the LGBTQ+ community. It is high time for a change. For this reason, the title of this exhibit is *A Long Way to Go*, words taken from the chorus of the Merchant Marine anthem, "Heave Ho! My Lads! Heave Ho!"

Heave Ho! My Lads, Heave Ho!
It's a long, long way to go.
It's a long, long pull with our hatches full,
Braving the wind, braving the sea,
Fighting the treacherous foe;
Heave Ho! My lads, Heave Ho!
Let the sea roll high or low,
We can cross any ocean, sail any river.
Give us the goods and we'll deliver,
Damn the submarine!
We're the men of the Merchant Marine!

During World War II, Jack Lawrence composed this song while an officer in the US Maritime Service (USMS). The song is frequently sung at events at the USMMA, invariably with extra gusto on the "DAMN the submarine!" portion. In an act of generosity and public-spiritedness, Lawrence gifted the song's copyright to USMMA shortly before his death in 2009. It is worth noting that Lawrence was gay and met his life partner and fellow USMS officer while serving his nation.

This exhibit aims to remind the Kings Point community that it has always included LGBTQ+ members. While that fact was suppressed for decades, the time has come to acknowledge the contributions

LGBTQ+ people have made to the sea services, including the Merchant Marine. It is no easy task to do so: for years, rightfully fearing persecution or even violence, many LGBTQ+ individuals closeted themselves and even denied their own identity. This exhibit will place USMMA within the context of both the sea services and American society so that midshipmen, faculty, staff, and the public can educate themselves and arrive at a more thoughtful and considerate understanding of the lives of LGBTQ+ mariners. Most of the information addresses gay, lesbian, and bisexual experiences simply because there is so little known or published yet regarding transgender, queer, pangender, or other gender nonconformists. The available sources focus on men because most seafarers were and remain male. It's a big, complicated topic and one that needs to be handled delicately and without invading the privacy of any individual. This exhibit intends to educate, not insult, belittle, or otherwise offend. We apologize in advance if we have inadvertently offended or made any errors. Most of all, we hope you enjoy learning in the spirit of open inquiry, self-discovery, and understanding of others.



Fig. 2: An early recording of "Heave Ho! My Lads, Heave Ho!" by LT Jack Lawrence, USMS. Lawrence disliked the labels "homosexual" and "gay," but lived most of his life as an openly gay man.

THE GREATEST GAY GENERATION

Tom Brokaw famously coined the term “Greatest Generation” to describe the men and women who made American victory in World War II possible. At least 10% of service members and society did not conform to cisgender identity, including the cadet-midshipmen at the newly created U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, New York.



Fig. 3: detail from “The Fleet’s In!” Paul Cadmus daringly portrayed a gay man offering a cigarette to a Marine.

Pre-war American society perceived seafarers as largely outside of respectable society and thus did not hold them to rigid moral standards as their landbound peers. Certain activities, such as the “shellback” ceremonies held when crossing the equator, enshrined homoerotic components as tradition. Paul Cadmus’s controversial 1934 painting “The Fleet’s In” por-

trays the raucous sexuality of servicemen on shore leave, including encounters with gay men. Gay historian Allan Bérubé explored the surprisingly diverse range of sexualities onboard American merchant ships in the 1930s and 1940s and found shipping out was one option for young men who couldn’t conform to cisgender expectations.

World War II mobilized millions of men and women. The military developed discriminatory policies against what it saw as sexual deviants, but found it could not afford to fully enforce them. The military attempted to disqualify LGBTQ+ for psychological reasons, using the relatively new terms “homosexual” and “lesbian.” This was a change from the pre-war period, when the military punished only those caught in sexual acts that were not purely heterosexual. The military used the term “sodomy” to cover a wide range of activities, and penalized offenders with dishonorable discharges and lengthy prison terms. Ironically, military service led many young people to meet others who were not comfortable with heterosexuality or rejected it outright. Some developed their own vocabulary,



Fig. 4: *Thousands of closeted gay men such as Allen Ginsberg served in the Merchant Marine during World War II. Ginsberg is shown here during his time at the USMS training facility in Sheepshead Bay, NY circa 1945 (NARA).*

self-identifying as “gay,” or as “dykes” and developed subtle codes to communicate with others. The key question for these young men and women was how to serve their country without exposing themselves to ridicule, physical abuse, prison, and a dishonorable discharge.

The merchant marine with its progressive unions was one option, with bisexuals like Herbert Huncke and Jack Kerouac signing up. Gay men like Allen Ginsberg also joined the merchant marine, concealing his sexual identity with “manly talk” and a simple but effective stratagem. Ginsberg brought several Batman comic books with him to the USMS Basic Training Camp in Sheepshead Bay, thereby marking him as a “normal guy.” It’s difficult to know, but it seems like New York’s

sizable gay community recognized the USMS as a way to serve the nation without facing the harsh punishments the military handed out to homosexuals. Among these was the up-and-coming songwriter Jack Lawrence. Initially signing up in the Coast Guard, he transferred to the USMS.

After the war, authors began to address the LGBTQ+ experience in the military and merchant marine in novels such as Gore Vidal’s 1946 novel *The City and the Pillar*. Most LGBTQ+ people remained deeply closeted, some attempting to conceal their secret life by arranging sham marriages or other methods, and for the most part, polite society ignored LGBTQ+ people. Yet some gay veterans voiced dissent, demanding recognition and pushing back against the military’s harsh policies. Furthermore, the 1948 *Kinsey Report* found at least one in ten Americans were not heterosexual. While far from perfect, the Kinsey Report challenged conventional thought and brought forth topics previously considered taboo. It seemed like things would get better for LGBTQ+ Americans for a brief moment.

THE LAVENDER SCARE

With the advent of the Cold War, American society became obsessed with the idea that communists, known as “Reds,” had infiltrated the federal government. In this paranoid environment, the public viewed any nonconformity with deep suspicion. An offshoot of this prejudice was the “Lavender Scare,” which targeted LGBTQ+ as security risks in the global struggle against communism.

In 1950, a Senate subcommittee investigated the “Employment of Homosexuals and Other Sex Perverts in Government.” It collected testimony from military officers that homosexuals preyed on young men, were high-strung and neurotic from leading double lives, and were security risks, somehow linking communism with being gay. Foremost among these was FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover, despite being a closeted homosexual or transexual. By 1953, discrimination against the gay community hardened when President Eisenhower signed Executive Order 10450, which delineated sexual nonconformity as a basis for terminating or not hiring federal employees.

Few groups had the desire or ability to resist the Lavender Scare’s persecution. One of the few to do so was a maritime labor union. The National Union of Marine Cooks and Stewards (MCS), was infamously “red, black, and queer,” challenging conventional American society in almost every sense. Not only was it heavily influenced by Communists, but it supported racial equality in an era of segregation and stood behind the many gays in its ranks. Its union hall had a sign proclaiming “No Red Baiting, No Queer-Baiting, No Race Baiting!” with another sign that read “First Offense--\$100 Fine. Second Offense—You’re Out of the Union.” In the heightened anxiety of the Cold War, the government deemed this union subversive. The Coast Guard declared MCS activists as “security risks” and took away their sailing papers, and the FBI imprisoned its president and disbanded the union.

Concerned with internal security, the Navy investigated LGBTQ+ issues in the 1957 “Crittendon Report.” Its authors stressed: “Many common misconceptions pertaining to homosexuality have become exaggerated and perpetuated over the years.” It concluded there was “no sound basis for the belief that homosexuals posed a security risk.” Furthermore, it recommended that gay or lesbian sailors

no longer receive less than honorable discharges and urged the Navy to keep abreast of society's social attitudes. Sadly, the Navy not only ignored these recommendations, but it also suppressed the Crittendon Report for decades by deeming its contents "Secret." Not only were sailors and officers discharged for being gay, but they could face charges for merely "associating with a known homosexual."



Fig. 5: Allen Ginsberg pictured here in his purser's uniform while he worked on board MSTS ships circa 1956

Despite the anti-gay hysteria, LGBTQ+ mariners continued to sail. Among these were the so-called "Beats," a collection of artists, writers, and free thinkers in general who challenged prevailing ideas about virtually everything. The poet and merchant mariner Allen Ginsberg was arguably the most influential Beat. He embodied nonconformity, a libertine poet whose poem "Howl" changed American poetry. It became an anthem to those dissatisfied with a society that demanded conformity and a government highly suspicious of alternative viewpoints, politics, religions, sexualities, and writers in general. Ginsberg sailed on American ships

during the glory years of the merchant marine in the 1940s and 1950s. Adhering to a principle of total self-disclosure in his writings, he provided some of the best accounts of shipboard sexuality, such as his fling with a Puerto Rican shipmate or his crush on the captain of his ship, the tanker *SS Groveton*. The ship's master was a Kings Point graduate, whom Ginsberg described as "a type of romantic young captain—a sort of narcissistic Nietzschean, aristocrat and master of his ship, a man of silences." After giving his first reading of "Howl" in 1956, Ginsberg worked on Military Sea Transportation Service (MSTS) vessels, the direct ancestor of Military Sealift Command (MSC).

“IN THE NAVY”

Fueled by the Beats and the public demand for social progress, the LGBTQ+ community pushed more aggressively for recognition of their rights from the late 1960s to the 1980s. The 1969 Stonewall riots in New York City and the establishment of Gay Liberation Front (GLF) chapters across the country marked a new angry, militant, in-your-face approach to civil rights. Their chant was “Ho Ho Homosexual, the Status Quo is Ineffectual!” By 1975 the country experienced its first Gay Pride March. Soon the federal government ended anti-gay employment practices, which meant that Military Sealift Command’s civilian mariners (CIVMARS) could now openly express their sexuality.

While LGBTQ+ people made progress in civil society, the military continued to persecute them. But increasingly, those given less than honorable discharges fought back in court, such as Commander Gary Hess, whom the Navy dismissed for being bisexual. The Navy also developed a reputation for ruthlessly rooting out lesbians from the service, especially after federal courts declared laws prohibiting women from serving at sea were illegal. The Navy developed an obsession with rooting out lesbians from the service. For example, the Naval Investigative Service (NIS) questioned every woman at the Newport, Rhode Island Naval Officer Candidate School about their sexual identity in 1977. Often women faced NIS investigation for participating in activities such as belonging to a softball team, found their phones were tapped, or that they were under twenty-four hour surveillance.

Accused LGBTQ+ service members increasingly turned to the courts for assistance. For example, in 1977 the Navy gave Ensign Vernon Berg, III, a 1974 graduate of USNA, a less than honorable discharge for being gay. Berg successfully sued to have his discharge upgraded to honorable. The following year a federal court unanimously ruled that the military must explicitly state why it discharged some gays but not others. Another significant episode was on board the USS *Norton Sound* when NIS aggressively sought to remove several lesbians from the service. The women went to court and publicly chanted, “Turn the Navy upside down, free the women of the *Norton Sound*,” or “Dare to struggle, dare to win.” Notably, the court dismissed the charges against the “Norton Sound Eight.”



Fig. 6: USS Norton Sound was one of the first ships in the Navy to have female crew members. In 1980, NIS accused numerous women from the Norton Sound of being lesbians, leading to a trial of what the press called the “Norton Sound Eight.”

Ironically, the Navy developed a lively gay subculture in the 1970s. The foremost example was USS *LaSalle*, “the gayest ship in the Navy,” with about sixty percent of its 500 crew thought to be gay. The USS *Emory S. Land* was another ship with an estimated 2-300 gay crew members out of its complement of 1200. Notably, Emory Land oversaw the creation of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy during World War II, where Land Hall bears his name.

Despite the growing public acceptance of LGBTQ+ citizens, the military became more homophobic after 1975, with the Navy most aggressively dismissing gays and lesbians. NIS viewed membership in women’s softball teams with suspicion, and the Navy evacuated men accused of being gay from nuclear submarines by helicopters in so-called HOMOVAC operations. Nonetheless, the Navy’s gay subculture thrived, with concealed gay discos on aircraft carriers, and a gay beach at the Diego Garcia base. The American public understood the Navy’s gay subculture when it danced to the beat of the Village People’s 1979 hit “In the Navy.” Furthermore, Navy veterans like Harvey Milk, whom the Navy forced to accept an “other than honorable” discharge because of his homosexuality, became an advocate for gay rights before his tragic murder in 1978. MSC’s USNS *Harvey Milk*, launched in 2021, honors this civil rights activist. Undoubtedly, many USMMA midshipmen and alumni will serve on this vessel.

The US Naval Academy at Annapolis (USNA) was not immune to the witchhunts against sexual nonconformists. Karen Coulton, a lesbian midshipman, dropped out despite good grades and her popularity among her classmates. Most famously, USNA dismissed Joseph Steffan a midshipman battalion commander mere weeks before his graduation in 1987. To add insult to injury, the Navy demanded that discharged LGBTQ+ midshipmen had to compensate the government for the cost of their education, a policy known as “recoupment.” Progress at USNA was slow. In 1993 a federal appeals court ordered the US Naval Academy to graduate Steffan from USNA and directed the Pentagon to commission him as an officer, but the Court of Appeals for the D.C. Circuit overturned that decision in 1994.



Fig. 7: Coat of arms of USNS Harvey Milk, launched in 2021.

DARKEST BEFORE THE DAWN

In the 1980s, American society became more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community and heterosexual activists became important allies. Yet the military doubled down on persecuting gays and lesbians in 1982, declaring that homosexuality was “incompatible with military service.” Studies, however, found that gays in the military primarily identified themselves with their service and held little in common with gay rights activists. Nonetheless, they continued to suffer in judicial proceedings, as when Judge Robert Bork ruled that the presence of homosexuals undermined unit morale and discipline. Queer servicemembers pushed back, creating the “Gay and Lesbian Military Freedom Project” in 1988, the first organized effort to protect gay rights in the military. Nonetheless, the military ejected about 2,000 gays per year.

Arguably the most egregious example of the Navy’s discrimination against the LGBTQ+ community was in the aftermath of the explosion in a turret of the battleship *Iowa* on April 19, 1989 that killed forty-seven sailors. The NIS attempted to pin the blame on a gay sailor whom it claimed had caused the explosion as a form of suicide, but the accusations fell apart under a Congressional investigation. One result of the adverse publicity coming out of how NIS handled the *Iowa* explosion was that the agency underwent a drastic change. The Navy put the organization under civilian control and changed its name to Naval Criminal Investigative Service (NCIS).

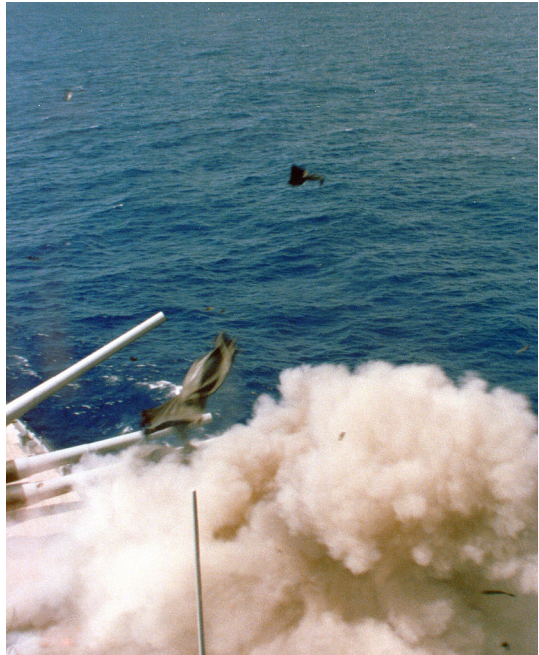


Figure 8: The explosion of a turret on USS Iowa on April 19, 1989 marked a low point in the Navy’s treatment of LGBTQ+ personnel.

By the 1990s there were significant cracks in the military's attitude toward gay personnel. Many officers were reluctant to enforce regulations against queer service members, and civil rights lawyers were asking difficult questions, such as "how do anti-homosexual regulations serve any 'compelling government interest?'" On November 30, 1993, President Clinton signed into law the policy known as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," (DADT) after failing to overcome opposition to allowing gay men and women to serve openly in the military. The military discharged more than 13,000 members of the armed services under DADT (for comparison purposes, the nuclear aircraft carrier USS *Gerald R. Ford* has a crew of 4,539).

Many LGBTQ+ service members felt they could not live freely, openly, and honestly under this policy. DADT also applied to USMMA, although there are no known records of any attempts to apply it. Ultimately DADT was a compromise measure, an awkward bridging measure until the time was right for further reform. That time was in the final year of President Obama's first term in office. On September 20, 2011, DADT was abolished forever.



Figure 9: President Barack Obama signed the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" on December 22, 2010. It went into effect on September 20, 2011.

ACTA NON VERBA

What does it mean to be LGBTQ+ at Kings Point? At some levels, not much. Since midshipmen had to conform to the Navy's regulations, they had to lead closeted lives lest they be expelled. However, USMMA midshipmen lead busy lives, and for many, there isn't much time to ponder their sexual identity. Not much is documented about USMMA's LGBTQ+ experience. Some alumni have stepped forward to share their personal experiences. A lesbian graduate recounts

I dealt with being gay by shutting myself off from other people. I didn't attend any events (no Ring Dance, no mixers, rarely hung out with my classmates). I rarely ate lunch in the mess hall. I spent every weekend working at the Merchant Marine Museum. I was just trying to get through it and out the other side with my license and education. Imagine how much better my experience would have been if I wasn't exhausted from hiding who I was and scared that I might be kicked out at any moment? I would have formed deeper relationships with people and enjoyed my time more fully. I would have been a better friend...a better student...a better leader.

One alumnus recalled a "strong pressure to conform to a model of ultra-masculine, a heterosexual presentation where anything out of the norm was treated with suspicion or derision." A gay graduate recalled a homophobic, misogynistic environment both at Kings Point and in the maritime industry and described walling off his sexuality until after graduation. Others pursued a similar course in their career, immersing themselves in their work and suppressing their personal life. Some individuals are happy to discuss their experience, while others remain reticent, mindful of hurtful statements made by classmates or faculty.

Further complicating the issue is that many people don't understand their sexual identity early in life. Many don't realize it until well into middle life. For example, the late Captain Elizabeth Clark, Class of 1959, transitioned late in life after a long and successful career as a shipmaster, first with Isthmian Lines and later with Sea-Land. In 2004 the USMMA Alumni Foundation presented Captain Clark with a Silver Mariner Award for her twenty-five years of ser-

vice as a master mariner. Her courage in coming out as transgender even inspired other Kings Pointers to confront their own sexuality and come out.

DADT's repeal should have been watershed moment. While the Faculty Forum cheered and clapped at the the news, there was grumbling by some midshipmen disgusted that queer people would now be allowed to serve in the military. Progress was slow in coming. While the US Coast Guard Academy established a Spectrum Club almost immediately after DADT's repeal, followed by the other federal service academies, USMMA lagged in this regard. Finally in 2013 midshipmen and LGBTQ+ advocates among the faculty established a group called KP Spectrum, with the following goals:

The Spectrum Club will help broaden the experience of all Midshipmen and help create men and women of character who are better able to lead in any environment and deal positively and constructively with realities of the world in which they will operate.

KP Spectrum hosted events in conjunction with cadets from West Point, attendance at AIDS awareness marches, and held lunchtime meetings with Humanities faculty until the club eventually came apart after a few years.

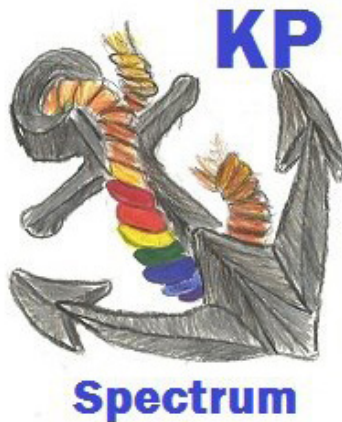


Figure 10: Logo of “KP Spectrum,” sometimes known as “USMMA Spectrum,” as found on its Facebook page.



Figure 11: Athletics has always been an important component of life at Kings Point, but the 2018 “All Can Play” soccer game was also a seminal moment for USMMA’s LGBTQ+ community.

The most significant moment in recognizing USMMA’s LGBTQ+ community may have been the October 20, 2018, “All Can Play” soccer match between midshipmen and the New York Ramblers, the world’s first organized openly-gay soccer club. According to those who organized the event, news of the game was “met with fire and fury by faculty and alumni alike and took a lot of perseverance to ensure that it occurred.” Nonetheless, some eighty midshipmen turned out for the game. Another significant event occurred on March 29, 2021, when the Open Seas Club hosted an online LGBTQ Alumni Panel, during which alumni shared their personal experiences with current midshipmen. Another important development is the Open Seas Club started in 2020 “to promote inclusion on campus and provide resources for the LGBTQ+ community.” It has hosted numerous events to celebrate LGBTQ+ identity and educate others, despite the challenges of COVID-19.

Today, midshipmen can hang Gay Pride flags in their barracks room without fear of reprisal or even much comment. Similarly, the Open Seas Club boasts a membership of over ninety. LGBTQ+ midshipmen, faculty, or staff no longer have to hide, make excuses, or apologize for their sexual orientation. Unsurprisingly given their education at the nation’s premier maritime academy, our graduates have taken leading positions in the LGBTQ+ commmun-

ity. It is now possible and even necessary to acknowledge that there has always been an LGBTQ+ component at USMMA, including midshipmen, USMS officers, faculty, and our esteemed alumni.

Nonetheless, as the song “Heave Ho!” reminds us, there is still “A Long Way to Go” in achieving full acceptance within the KP family, the maritime industry, and the sea services. We hope this exhibit has enlightened, intrigued, and educated all to arrive at a more understanding place for the diversity that underscores our place as an institution that pursues excellence in leadership.



Figure 12: Gay Pride flag in a midshipman's room, 2022.

THE AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE MUSEUM

The American Merchant Marine Museum at the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy collects, preserves, interprets, and displays heritage assets such as historical artifacts, records, documents, and art relevant to the post-1900 American maritime industry. The Museum educates midshipmen and the public regarding the Merchant Marine's contributions to our nation's heritage in times of peace and war.

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Closed during Academy vacations



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