“Wouldn’t it be wonderful if our knitters could somehow see mariners unwrap their gifts on Christmas Day?”

— Jeanette DeVita, Program Manager, Christmas at Sea

Anonymity has always characterized the gift giving program of the Seamen’s Church Institute (SCI), distributing warm handcrafted items sent in by knitters from across the United States. Knitters mail or bring their items to the Institute’s headquarters, and more volunteers pack them into boxes with cards and other useful items (see elsewhere in this newsletter information about these non-knitted gifts). Knitters trust SCI chaplains to get their creations into the hands of those who need them—onboard container ships, towboats, and ashore.

Some feel that a special magic enters into this process. From somehow obtaining enough knitted items to pack all of the boxes to matching coordinating sets of hats and scarves (even though often knitted by two different knitters), a mariner working at Christmas time receives a handsome gift from a stranger across miles of land and water. Chaplain Marge Lindstrom, working from SCI’s Port Newark Seafarers’ Center, says that she feels the “right scarf finds the right neck.”

In this edition of The Knit Before Christmas, SCI’s volunteer knitting program newsletter, SCI has created a Christmas card culled from the many notes and letters received from mariners this past season. The newsletter includes items one might expect to receive in a holiday greeting from a long-distance friend, including a “Christmas Letter” (reporting on changes in commercial shipping), photographs, and a Christmas Wish List.

For over a hundred years, SCI has connected mariners with land dwellers, who make an otherwise regular work day into a special holiday celebration. These warm creations meaningfully contribute to offering hospitality in our ports, thanking mariners for the hard work delivering the goods that enrich our own holiday celebrations. It inspired one mariner to remark, “kindness can be found anywhere….”

Meet Blair & Brett VanBrunt
from Garner, NC

In 2009, just after celebrating their first wedding anniversary, Brett set sail for the Gulf of Mexico. The couple spent one of their first newlywed Christmases separated by miles of water. “[Christmas] is the most depressing time to be at sea,” said Blair. “You miss so much family and fun.” (continued on page 2)
(continued from page 1)

As part of SCI’s Christmas at Sea volunteer gift giving program, Brett received a handknit hat this year. Although Brett would rather have been home for the holidays, Blair said that the gift made the challenging days a little less lonesome. “And,” she said, “it couldn’t have come at a better time. The Gulf was experiencing a really cold spell, and the crew needed those knitted goods!

And we knew someone made that gift. We felt the love in it.”

Recounting their own experiences of SCI’s outreach over the years (Brett, working since age 18 on the water), Blair affirms why she and her family support SCI, “When no one else was there, SCI was…taking care of the sailors.”

Want to share your story of SCI?
Email us at sci@seamenschurch.org
Your support makes a difference in the lives of the mariners we serve.

The Seamen’s Church Institute of New York & New Jersey
241 Water Street
New York, NY 10038
www.seamenschurch.org
The Rev. David M. Rider
Executive Director

Editor, Oliver Brewer
Assistant Editor, Margaret Lee
Design & Production by BlissDesign
This newsletter is printed on recycled paper.
It is written that, “It is better to give than to receive.” We of the Gale C thank you for your giving hearts and kind gifts. We appreciate all the time, talent, and energy that went into making Christmas on the river for us. We thank you from the bottom of our hearts.

May the Lord keep you always,  
Crew of the M.V. Gale C

The deck crew would especially like to thank [SCI] for the scarves, because they really help to keep us warm when we have to work outside. The snacks were great along with the puzzles that help to pass the time when we are off watch. Our hearts also go out to all the kids that took the time to make the cards for us for the holidays. It was really nice to get Christmas cards while on the river for Christmas.

Thanks again from the crew of the Aubrey B. Harwell Jr. for the time and the dedication of all the people who have made a difference in our lives. We do appreciate it.

Captain Mark D. Hanlin; Pilot Kevin Baker; Engineer David Honey; 1st Mate James Byrd; 2nd Mate Brian Sims; St. Leadman Buddy Hess; Leadman Virgil Waddle; Deckhand Joseph Sokolowski; Cook Ed Calvert

A Mariner’s Christmas “Wish List”

Along with the handmade items knit by our volunteers, mariners also receive small gifts in the boxes SCI chaplains deliver at Christmastime. These items—like hand lotion and facial tissue—may seem small, but carefully selected gifts make a big difference in the lives of those working hundreds of miles away from the convenience of a local supermarket.

Collaborating with chaplains, surveying real mariners, SCI has compiled a list of no-frills items for which mariners have specifically asked.

To gather these items, SCI depends on help the same way it does for collecting knitted items. Church groups, service organizations, and knitting circles can help the Institute create gift boxes filled with practical gifts for long journeys across the open sea.

Clip the Mariner’s Christmas Wish List below from this newsletter, share it, and help SCI fulfill Christmas wishes of many mariners this season.

All items must be in new and unused condition and in their original packaging. We cannot accept items that are used or unsealed.

Christmas Wish List

- Unscented, Colorless Lip Balm
- Unscented, Hypoallergenic Hand Lotion (2-4oz bottles)
- Sealed Packages of Holiday Sweets
- Books or Activities like Sudoku, word searches, or playing cards
- Facial Tissue
- Microwave Popcorn
- Chewing Gum
- Handmade Christmas Cards
Dear Friends,

The International Maritime Organization declared 2010 “The Year of the Seafarer” to recognize seafarers’ contributions to the world and encourage seagoing as a career. This celebration of mariners offers an opportunity to reflect on the many challenges the last few years have presented: a slowed worldwide economy, increased threat of criminal prosecutions, heightened security restrictions, and of course, piracy.

Piracy, always a concern for mariners, leapt to the forefront of everyone’s minds in the last year with the increase in attacks off the coast of Somalia and the dramatic rescue of Captain Richard Philips of the M/V Maersk Alabama. But the Maersk Alabama offered only a small window into the business of piracy. In 2009, 217 piracy attacks occurred off the coast of Somalia and in the Gulf of Aden, with many crew members held hostage for months before release.

On the homefront, last year mariners and chaplains in the US faced the nationwide implementation of the requirement to have a Transportation Workers Identity Credential (TWIC) in order to enter secure areas of a port without an escort, which caused some confusion and delays as people adjusted to the new regulations. While the initial TWIC card problems have cleared up somewhat, mariners and chaplains still face shore leave restrictions and access to vessels issues.

The last few years also brought “Oily Water Separator” cases across our doorstep. Oily water separator cases involve alleged illegal dumping and record book falsification prosecutions in the US, and mariners can end up detained here for months at a time as witnesses and sometimes suspects.

The challenges faced in 2009 echo the challenges faced throughout the centuries for seafarers. These men and women navigate hazardous waters and sometimes face even more challenges in their ports of call. Through their trials, the need of these reliable workers for an advocate and friend remains. Thanks to your generous contributions, organizations like SCI continue to connect seafarers with the support they so greatly deserve.
Seafarer’s Beanie

Material:
About 200 yards of worsted weight yarn
Needles: size 7 16-inch circulars, size 7 double-pointed needles (dpns)

Gauge:
18 stitches x 24 rows = 4” square

Directions:
Cast on 85 stitches

Place marker and join to knit in the round, being careful not to twist.

Knit in stockinette (K1 row, P1 row) for 3 inches or 17 rows.
Purl one row.
Knit 18 rows.

Fold up brim and knit together cast-on edge with live row, stitch by stitch. This might feel awkward, but work slowly and carry on; the effect is so neat that it’s certainly worth it. Make sure to knit the first live stitch together with the first cast-on stitch and the rest of the stitches will line up nicely.

Purl one row, knit one row (Garter stitch in the round) Continue working garter stitch in the round for 3 inches. (K1 row, P1 row). (For me, this was 24 rows or 12 purl bumps.)

Begin decrease sections switching to dpns when knitting in the round becomes difficult. Decrease on knit rows.

k5 k2tog, k5 k2tog to the end of round, purl one row. k4 k2tog to the end of round, purl one row.

k 3 k2tog to the end of round, purl one row.

k2 k2tog to the end of round, purl one row.
k1 k2tog to the end of round, purl one row.
k2tog to the end of round.

Break yarn, thread through remaining live stitches fasten inside hat, weave in ends.

I took this photo in Oakland, CA while I was visiting the Bay Area for the Stitches West Convention and introducing area churches to the Christmas at Sea program. This seafarer had come in the Center to relax, wire money home, and get something cold to drink. He left with the new Seafarer’s Beanie you see in this picture. As you can tell, it really suits him.

—Jeanette

Knitter’s Note:
This hat looks deceptively small when it comes off the needles, but don’t worry. The Garter stitch gives it room for expansion. It fits. Try it on.
Dear Stitching Friends,

Certain perks come with the role I play at Christmas at Sea. I treasure opening the mail as one of them. Whether beautiful handmade caps and scarves, the heartfelt notes you write about the reasons you knit for CAS, pictures of your knitting group, comic strips clipped from the local newspaper (usually knitting jokes), or letters from mariners and their families, each day thoughtful people remind me of the ways in which Christmas at Sea touches lives.

Of course, SCI receives mail every day of every year, but the number and tenderness of the thank you notes we received from mariners this year overwhelmed me. Mariners sent pictures of themselves and wrote personal notes and cards, which the entire crew signed. CAS received notes from retired mariners who have not sailed in years but still remember us, touched by the gifts they received. Our gifts have given a message to mariners, reminding them that although they might be feeling lonely, they are not alone.

As a knitter myself, I know what it means when someone shows appreciation for the gifts I give. So, I hope you enjoy these notes and pictures in this edition of the newsletter, knowing that your gifts made a difference to the mariners we serve.

Our shelves are once again already filled with caps and scarves and more are arriving each day. Thank you for your steadfastness…and thank you for your notes!

Happy Stitching,

Jeanette

In 2009, SCI distributed more than 16,000 handmade items to deep sea and river mariners.