

SCOUTING'S GRAND OLD MAN OF THE SEA

The U.S. Navy spotted him in boot camp and made him a commanding officer's aide. The BSA spotted him later. It coaxed him from a bank teller's cage to reorganize Sea Scouting and kept broadening his mission although the Navy called him back, at 52, for four wartime years. Later he filled speaking engagements for the BSA all across the country until he was 92.

There you have the career of Commander Thomas J. Keane, a silver-tongued Irishman who spent his life winning friends for these two great organizations. The friendships lasted. Old comrades and colleagues were still dropping by for lunch or dinner in 1984, the year he died.

He once told a gathering of Scout professionals, "I was brought up in Ireland where it was thought the thing to (do was to) give your life to some great cause. A man who belonged to the army or navy or the missionary service, and gave everything he had for his fellow man, was the most looked up to."

That was why, in 1917, when his adopted nation went to war, young Tom Keane strode into the Great Lakes Naval Training Station and volunteered. Impressed by his quick way with words, officers soon posted him at headquarters to beguile the swarms of fretful civilian visitors. Eventually he was a lieutenant commander writing speeches for admirals.

He was married in full dress uniform, which he wore thereafter on suitable occasions (such as speaking engagements) throughout his life. "I still have that black-lined Navy cloak," he remarked in old age. "I wore it to Sea Scout training courses. But then a comic-book character known as Batman was invented, and I had to stop wearing my cape, for it put people too much in mind of him."

Though he left the Navy at the end of his hitch, he wasn't forgotten. One day in 1921 a man went to Great Lakes to ask for help, and the top brass suggested Keane. The man was Howard F. Gillette, yachtsman and financier and hearty backer of Sea Scouting, as it was then called.

Launched "with the ultimate object of making it the graduating course for all scouts," as a BSA report to Congress announced, this experiment was adrift. Only one ship remained active in Chicago, where Gillette was council president. He sought someone to pump new life into the program.

He owned the Union Trust Company, and Keane happened to work there. The banker called in the young man, who knew little of Scouting and was noncommittal. But his wife, Kitty, took a different view that night. "You used to come home from the commandant's office and complain that civilians take no interest in seafaring," she reminded him.

“What’s that got to do with this?”

“Don’t you see? If you get these Sea Scouts organized and teach them about the sea and how important it is to America, you’ll do the great thing you’ve been saying is needed.”

Keane decided to visit the city’s Sea Scout ship. Long afterward he recalled, “I kind of liked what they were doing. I asked if I might come every week. After three months I went to Mr. Gillette and told him my ideas. To my surprise and delight he liked what I suggested. Later the lads liked it.”

Gillette wanted to hire him to organize new ships. Keane said, “Oh no, sir. I’m working for the bank, but I’d like to do this as a spare-time hobby.” Nevertheless the chief teller soon encouraged him to spend his working hours as Gillette wanted. In naval uniform he sallied forth to high schools and business offices, chatting so engagingly about ships and sea lore that listeners begged him to help start Sea Scout units. One by one he activated 20 ships and trained their leaders.

Gillette was ecstatic. He persuaded the BSA to set up a new Sea Scouting department, which he guaranteed to finance for two years. Who should head it? Why, who but Keane?

Not so fast there, said Tom. He wondered if he should leave the bank for a two-year berth on a national staff which in 1923 numbered just a dozen men. But Kitty urged him. So for less pay than he’d drawn from Union Trust, he became “acting director.”

He got along swimmingly at Sea Scout meetings all across the country. He added glamour to the movement with new uniforms, new ceremonies, and drills that transformed recruits into genuinely able seaman. He built up a mailing list and churned out mimeographed bulletins. Benefactors offered yawls, whaleboats, and assorted other vessels. Congress authorized the Navy to make surplus crafts available. In 1927 Keane wrote, “Perhaps no other organization in the world has more boats sailing under its flag than the Sea Scouts.”

Scientists decided Sea Scouts could be useful on polar expeditions. Chicago’s Field Museum financed nine of them as part of the crew of a 140-foot auxiliary schooner on a four-month arctic cruise. Admiral Richard E. Boyd took Paul Siple, a Sea Scout from Pennsylvania, on the 1928-30 Antarctic mission.

In 1928 Keane wrote a novel, *Lubbers Afloat*, which sold well. “It was in wide demand,” he explained, “because most people thought it was called *Lovers Afloat*.”

By then there were more than 8,000 Sea Scouts, but Keane realized the BSA need other older-boy programs as well. He didn’t argue when the chairman of a nationwide Scout executives’ committee told a meeting. “We ourselves are not skilled Sea Scouters, we have done nothing about it, and as a result I wager, Tom, that three-fourths of the councils in America don’t have more than one ship.”

Keane agreed that much more could be done. He became director of the whole Senior Scouting proliferation. He kept the sea branch growing until, when war came in 1941, it reached its membership peak of 27,715 (plus 23,200 Explorers on land and in the air).

Back in the Navy in 1942, he went to Belfast, Ireland, as port officer. But first he talked earnestly to Gillette about a cable circulating from Admiral Thomas C. Hart: "NEED 5,000 OFFICERS TRAINED SMALL BOAT HANDLING AT ONCE."

"In a quarter-century Sea Scouting has trained 200,000," Gillette told Navy Secretary Frank J. Knox, who wrote Chief Scout Executive James E. West about "a new type of service for which the Navy is now in process of procuring volunteers."

Would former Sea Scouts volunteer for the new service? Eight thousand did, and the Navy waived certain training requirements for them. Four of every five PT boat officers were ex-Sea Scouts.

Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz ((whose Eagle Scout son became a submarine skipper) told a National Council meeting in 1946, "I am happy that Colonel Knox lived long enough to see full justification of his faith in the Sea Scouts." He added that 40 percent of the men under his command had been Scouts, who had won 60 percent of the decorations for valor.

After the war Keane became BSA director of Civic relationships and spent much time talking to people in other national organizations. When he retired in 1954 he was in such demand as a speaker that the BSA arranged frequent tours for him. His set speech, adjustable in length to fit any occasion, is widely remembered. It rarely, if ever, failed to win a standing ovation.

"Typescripts gave no idea of how effective he was," says one listener. "They couldn't convey his striking appearance, his lilting voice, his contagious warmth. Even skeptical school audiences were moved by his recollections of the Statue of Liberty, a blind veteran, and much else that might look banal in print. He made us all feel, 'Gee! Wow! Isn't America great?'"

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