

The After Battery Rat

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Running Mates

Submarine sailors pair up like the animals on the Ark. I'm sure psychologists would give you some stem-winding, mind jamming explanation but when you boiled all the bullshit out of it, it would come down to: Everything you did took two sets of hands; you often needed someone to either keep you from doing totally stupid stuff or to help you DO totally stupid stuff; or to throw you a rope and haul your butt back when you were up to your ears in hot water.

Sea stories are a two-way street... It takes a teller and someone with ears. I had the best running mate a sailor ever had... Adrian Stuke.

He came from Quincy Illinois. When Mrs. Stuke gave birth to Adrian, she tied a knot in the tail of mankind no one has been able to untie. For over half a century, Adrian Stuke has had life in a hammerlock.

Stuke and I were in the same watch section, deck force, lived in Hogan's Alley, and shared enough pitchers at Bells we could have floated a Texaco tanker. I'm no twinkle toes about to pop out of the fairy locker, but I loved him then and still do. He was, and still is, the closest pal and best thing silver dolphins came with.

Adrian Stuke was, going away, an unvarnished nut... An all-American red-blooded after battery rat. In combination, we could stir up more stupidity and generate more hell in five minutes than any other two idiots in the entire Navy. Every investigation into the source of particular nonsense that broke out on Requin began with the COB or exec having a conversation with us. We could have been 500 miles away from the action but somehow everyone knew we had a hand in it. We admitted to stuff we knew absolutely nothing about simply to maintain our perfect record and squadron-wide reputation.

Just to give you some idea of how close we are, I am in his will... If he checks in to the Great Receiving Station in the Sky before I do, he's leaving me all the photos of Janie in a bikini - all except the cellophane thong series.

He was the best stern planesman that ever lived. When we had the planes, the boat was as level as a pool table. If God and St. Peter sat down and picked the all time best submarine crew, Stuke would be on stern planes. According to Stuke, I would get the bow planes if every boat sailor who ever manned them declined, and Zip, the blind monkey got run over by a truck... You always hurt the one you love...

Once we were busting our butts painting topside using 225 air, paint pots, and the worst collection of sprayers that existed in the whole world. We were half stupid breathing MEK (Methyl Ethyl Keytone) and it was hotter than the hubs of hell. We were getting more paint on each other than we were getting on the superstructure.

A group of non-producers had gathered on the deck railing on the Orion. After a half-hour of pointing, laughing and wise-ass comments, we decided that some kind of response was in order.

We found a large cardboard breadbox and cut out a four-foot hand. We taped the hand to the top of our attack scope and tied 21 thread shot line to three of the fingers. We tied the lines together and ran the scope up so we could use the lines like puppet strings and give the lads on 'Mother Onion' the single finger salute. It was working great. We then tied the lines to a pad eye on the bridge so we could run the scope up and down... As the scope rose to maximum extension, the fingers would

be pulled down leaving only the index finger pointing to the sky. For the better part of ten minutes we were enjoying life running the scope up and down, giving Orion the bird. We were congratulating ourselves and thinking how clever we were.

Then the exec appeared and treated us to an impassioned discourse that included warship dignity, naval usage and misguided playground mentality. The guys on the Orion gave us hell as the exec supervised the removal of our improvised recognition signal.

One time, we were at sea on Christmas Eve and everyone's tail was dragging. The entire crew was moping around with that "My dog just died" look.

Stuke goes into the radio shack and gets a bunch of ALL NAV radio messages the big cheese shore duty guys send out to the armed forces overseas... Meaningless obligatory horsecrap.

"Okay guys, here's one from COMSUBLANT... 'Wish I could be with you tonight'... Can you imagine how gahdam ugly your wife would have to be to want to be out here on this stinking contraption rather than wrinkling up mama's nightie?"

"Here's one... Secretary of the Navy... Five bucks to anyone who knows the sonuvabitch's name... I figured... Anyway, he states, 'Wish I could enjoy Christmas with you fine men'... Fine men, aye... He obviously doesn't know that Tom Brennen joined the Navy... After all that money the Navy shelled out putting Brennen's photo in all the recruiting offices with 'Don't let this bastard in the U.S. Navy', you slipped by Tom... This idiot wants to eat with us... Must be queer for turkey roll, powdered potatoes and bug juice..."

"Here's one for you, Dex... Personal greetings from the president... It's personal... It reads, 'Don't let the rest of the crew know but the Commander in Chief is very aware that Dex Armstrong is between him and all the naval forces of evil... And that your devoted service allows him to go to bed knowing the world is safe for democracy and all one and two way trash is being handled in a truly professional manner..."

He, Adrian Stuke, gave us the ability to laugh at ourselves. He found the pearl in every cow pie, the diamonds in every hog wallow... He was my running mate.

He finished his enlistment, collected his gear, gave me a hug and shoved off. For several years, he was the Lone Ranger, the Cisco Kid and Butch Cassidy... I was Tonto, Poncho and the Sundance Kid. We rode together, swung from limb to limb together and tap danced out of scrapes together. I missed him with that same feeling you get when your sandbox pal had the chicken pox.

There were no more peaceful nights where we would stand aft by the screw guards catching a smoke and Stuke would say,

"Dex, it's too damn quiet tonight... Let's come up with something, go below and stir 'em up... You know, give a chief a heart attack or something..."

He sure left a hole in the rat gang.

Today there is research being conducted in some of our major universities in an attempt to find out how a lovely girl like Janie can live under the same roof with Stuke and survive. It may be the miracle of our age.

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