

The After Battery Rat

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Messcooking on Smokeboats

Many people...those who actual never did it, have confused ideas about the submarine messcook. They think that a messcook was at best a flunky assigned menial tasks because he was some kind of mental defective jaybird or some miscreant jerk being punished "a la" Army K.P. Variety.

The Navy decided early on that putting idiots and pissed off people in the business of serving food was a bad idea. I have often wondered how many tough hardboiled; hard as nails Army Non Coms have any idea how many dead flies, mouse turds and boogers they consumed in the course of a career that were served to them by smiling guys they stuck on KP for punishment. It would have to be calculated in increments of tons.

First, the selection process for submarines eliminates the low I.Q. sub par folks with the intellect of Hostess Twinkies...they end up at one of those bootcamps where they issue you a shovel.

Messcooking is an art...a theatrical art. You audition for the part before 70 to 80 raging maniacs...your crew.

It is a form of animal taming and it has less to do with cooking than it does two man crowd control.

I learned the art from an absolute master...Adrian Stuke. If there is ever a submarine messcook hall of fame it will have a forty foot bronze statue of the great Stookey-Man greeting the incoming visitors with a recorded rendition of his actual voice yelling "park yer butt and pipe down."

If you were non-rated, either qualified or non-qualified, you mess cooked in rotation. Messcooking was an equal opportunity profession. If you were E-3 and below and had a masters degree in astrophysics, a doctorate in crown princess gynecology and a fortune rivaling the Sultan of Persia, you messcooked. There was no appeal process. Your name simply found its way to the non-prejudicial merry-go-round known as "watch,

Contribution from Dex

From Joe Roche:

I called Dex Armstrong up the week before Thanksgiving and asked him to do a story about messcooking, which at that point he had never done as a separate subject. This is his contribution. Dex was a Requin sailor.

Joe



quarters and station bill." It was that simple. Nothing that you would ever encounter in life would be that fair and that simple other than the mechanical operation of bra hooks.

What did messcooks do? I am glad that you asked that question. Since I apprenticed under the absolute master as previously described, I feel totally qualified to answer your question.

A) Messcooks, first and foremost herded the incoming chowhounds into the individual Formica topped tables in the messdeck in the same manner as cattle are moved into the designated feedlots at the Chicago stockyards. The tables have been previously set with Pyrex dishes and silverware with at least two fork tines going in the same direction. In rough seas red rubber mats were rolled out on the messdeck tables to keep the dishes from doing the North Atlantic cha-cha all over hell and half Georgia.

B) Next, they served the salad they had previously made.

Preparing salad was a messcooks job. Before my 19th birthday I learned several culinary skills known only to

the finest Chefs of Europe. Stuke taught me how to bang a head of lettuce down on the counter on its' stalk end making it simple to remove.

And...how to peel the green hide off a cucumber then take a fork and score the sides so that when you slice the damn thing, poker chip fashion the edges looked like gear teeth. After two tours, I was a regular Martha Stewart.

Sometimes we misjudged the amount of salad that would be required for a setting. For example, take rough weather...state five seas running...Boat gyrating like a washing machine in the rinse cycle...smell of gastric juice and previously eaten meals wafting forward from the After Battery head. These were indicators of a light turnout so we didn't prepare a lot of salad.

Sometimes we under estimated the turnout. Stuke found a solution to the situation. He would yell...."Listen up...I put a toenail in the salad. Five bucks for the guy who finds the toenail." Suddenly salad consumption fell off considerably. Everyone aboard Requin knew instinctively that Adrian was perfectly capable of tossing a toenail in the salad. We did stuff like that in the pre nuclear Sub Force. Today any messcook who pulled off something like that would probably end up in "acceptable behavior' rehab training.

We served the meals when the animals in each sitting were seated and situated. Absent the civilizing influence of the fairer sex, the prescribed Emily Post gentility rules were forgotten. Elbows on the table, napkins poked in dungaree shirt pockets instead of lap and conversing with a mouth load of meatloaf were approved mess deck etiquette. Most of us had to undergo civility retraining by brides as we acquired them.

There was always some jaybird who would say something to the effect that "mother used to make this dish like...."

"Frank, I know this will come as a complete surprise to you but when your mother was cooking...truckers would take the bypass around your hometown to keep from smelling your mother's cooking."

Or the cook would come out of the galley and knock out the lads' plate in the sharpshooter bucket and say:

"Sorry I offended your delicate pallets...go eat down the street."

This is where lion taming technique came in real handy.

After the meal the mess cooks were the solid waste specialist...either first or second loaders on the "garbage gun" (GDU or garbage disposal unit.) Or if we were riding on the surface we would check with the diving officer and request permission to assemble and toss one and two way trash over the side.

Trash dumping at sea was a highly skilled trade...like knuckle ball pitching and cobra breeding.

In those days, as trash and garbage accumulated in the boat, it just stacked up everywhere. You lived with your disposable refuse until you could hit the surface and launch the stuff over the side.

These were the pre Woodsy Owl, E.P.A. days before anyone gave a damn about tons of garbage, medical waste and trash floating in the world's oceans. In those days, you plowed through all sorts of assorted crap snorkeling around out there. As a lookout I saw oil drums, phone poles and once off the mouth of a South American river, a half submerged bright red V.W. bug.

Messcooking kept you down inside the warm boat when the guys on the bridge were freezing their cajones off. It provided you access to hot coffee and leftover cake. It gave you an opportunity to "Jackass Jaw" the entire crew, three times a day. It allowed you to get a handful of the first tray of hot cinnamon buns to emerge from the night bakers' oven. And, it provided the forum where lasting friendships were formed.

Nobody in the crew ever forgot the really good messcooks.