

The After Battery Rat

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Pier 22 'The Concrete Boulevard'

Pier 22 'The Concrete Boulevard' I don't know if there still is a Pier 22. Hell, they've torn down every smokeboat sailor's landmark on Hampton Blvd., the 'Main Street' of a sailor's world in Norfolk... So they probably demo'd the gahdam pier too. It's a good thing me, Stukey and Hemming got out when we did. They've changed the damn place so much that today, they would have to paint arrows on the sidewalks if they still expect drunks to make morning quarters.

If the old pier is still there, I'll bet the Old Orion Hotel and CPO Retirement Home went out of business long ago. It was the big landmark... All you had to say to the driver of any moth-eaten cab in Norfolk was "AS-18" and he knew just where to dump you. The Orion, 'Mother Onion', furnished the pier head watches... The Uniform-Of-The-Day guardians of the 'Concrete Boulevard'. They were usually seaman second organ grinder's monkeys, whose vocabulary consisted of,

"Let me see your ID and liberty card.", "Did'ja lose your white hat?" and of course "Ya want me to call your topside watch to give you a hand?"

Your hull number was your street address. But, unlike most of the house numbers in your hometown, it moved around a lot. It could relocate... Change nests... Shift berths to gain access to fuel fittings and to load stores. This could be a little disconcerting to a lad 'carrying a load', wandering around with a fellow drunk back and forth in the vacated nest saying,

"The sonuvabitch has to be around here somewhere... N'less the bastard sunk."

"Hey, kid!"

"Yeah, whatcha need?"

"Anyone hijack the 481?"

"Nah, she's outboard the Onion... Other side... Use the lower brow."

There was always a load of crap all over the pier. Fuel hoses... Ration crates... Drums of hydraulic oil... Parts fabricated on the Orion waiting on boatsailors to jackass them to their boats for repairs... Empty torpedo trollies... Bundles of banded decking to replace missing sections... Empty mailbags... Dumpsters... And a load of other gear adrift. It was home. The center of perfectly understandable chaos. It was a great place to live.

It was a place where an E-3 could plant his worthless butt on a stray crate and enjoy the sunrise over Craney Island... It was a place where the Great Unwashed Serfs of Submarinedom could meet at the dumpsters to unload the residual of the evening meal and

Contribution from "Dex"

As most all of you know, Dex had a terrible tragedy lately with his wife Solveig succumbing to a severe form of ovarian cancer this past December.

Dex has told us that he has greatly appreciated all the support that our crew and the crews from other boats have given him during this tough time in his life.

We will all remember Solveig being side by side with Dex as he related stories to our reunion crew (Reunion 2003).

We'll add her sweet face near his "After Battery Rat" logo so she can be with him as he tells this story too.



Solveig Armstrong –
Sirago Reunion 2003

exchange the latest news while bumming smokes off each other... And it was a place, where on a sunny afternoon, a lad could go to watch women in bright dresses, go to and fro with properly attired naval personnel.

From what I know of the submarine force of today, I am sure that piers are antiseptically clean... Possibly carpeted... With silver-plated dumpsters and gold-plated uranium buckets laid out in properly spaced rows. I can hear the lilting tones of the Muzak speakers playing renditions from the Naval Academy Glee Club... While fleets of UPS trucks deliver filet mignon and pressed duck for patrol rations. Progress has a way of making things better... Or seem better.

Progress calls for the elimination of smells... The distinctive smells

of the old diesel fleet are gone. I'm not sure that is progress... It was part of the life we loved... It was part of our identity. Living like zoo animals and taking our slice clean out of the center of life's pie, was the life we knew and was the hallmark of our pride. We were idiots and we were happy with what little we had. In a way, it was what made us special.

Somewhere, it all changed. Somewhere, young men in ragged, acid-eaten dungarees and frayed raghats became old coots in three-piece suits... More comfortable in wing-tip shoes than red lead-spattered brogans. When we weren't looking, the U.S. Navy traded our pigboats for poodleboats. They started producing properly behaved techno-jackets to replace the old, antiquated lunatic bluejackets.

They started using terms like 'shipboard amenities'. Hell, there was a time that the best amenity a boatsailor could ask for was a gahdam blanket that he didn't have to take a hammer to, just to kill the wildlife that had taken up residence in the damn thing.

They started pinning on Dolphins at internal ceremonies, reminiscent of ivy league graduations... Instead of grabbing the newly qualified man at morning quarters and tossing his goofy smiling butt over the side well past the tanktops, then hauling him back aboard and cheering while the Old Man pinned his Dolphins on a dripping dungaree shirt. I'm sure there is progress in that but I'm not sure why.

It was tradition... Back then, we valued tradition. It connected us to those who had gone before... Especially the giants who fed Hirohito a steady diet of Mark 14 warheads. We were very proud of being the downline recipients of the legacy they passed on to us. Pinning fish on a wet shirt was a ritual that was a bright link in the chain of the continuity that was the history of the submarine service.

The rationale for the elimination of the 'wet shirt' tradition, as explained to me by a very professionally correct and obviously responsible nuclear submarine officer, was that it involved silly, unnecessary and easily avoidable risk. Sounds right... Only one problem.

American boys of an earlier generation grew up climbing trees, shooting each other with Daisy 'Red Ryder' B.B. guns... Jumping off garage roofs and playing with fireworks one level below nuclear ordinance. Risk was an integral part of the excitement of living.

The acceptance of risk was a primary attraction of the mystique of submarine life. The pressure of seawater on steel hulls at depth has always held risk. People who want to avoid risk, become typists in the Ohio National Guard... They sure as hell don't sign up to ride worn out, World War II submarines.

What in the hell is 'unnecessary risk'? Every man the navy pinned the Navy Cross on, took one big-time unnecessary risk. I don't know that I would want to be a part of a sub force that placed an over emphasis on the avoidance of unnecessary risk.

Was the elimination of the unnecessary risk in pinning Dolphins on a wet shirt a gradual process or did they phase it out over time? Was there an interim stage where they tossed guys in the shower and said?

"You fine lads are far more valuable than those idiots who rode those stupid smokeboats... Don't slip on the soap."

It hurts when the service you loved, trashes the little things that marked the unique life that was submarining in your day. Do we resent it? Sure we do... It makes it that much harder to identify with the new force.

Clean, neat, shipshape piers... Ships that go damn near a mile deep, with racks for every man aboard... No watching sunsets on the surface... And filled with lads who got their Dolphins without a short trip over the tank tops of the boat they qualified on.

Screw a no-risk navy...

What happened to the navy that produced '31 knot' Burke? 'Bull' Halsey? Dealey? Ramage? Slade Cutter and Tom Parks? Is there a 'risk avoidance' training phase at Annapolis? Is that why they tore down the escape tower? Is that why they did away with all the sailor bars? Sea store cigarettes? Beer ball games? Russian acrobat drill (swim call at sea)?

In days long ago, girls became women, wives and mothers under the gentle caring ladies who had gone before. 'Homemaker' and 'mother' were revered terms. 'Family values' weren't something we were looking for... We had them. And men went aboard U.S. submarines, worked hard, lived a rough life, earned Dolphins and the right to call each other 'shipmate'... Went from boy to man under the heavy-handed guidance of some of the finest men who ever lived... And became men who took deep pride in their acceptance as worthy of the title 'submariner'... And they sowed their wild oats... Bounced off a lot of stationary objects, left uncounted beer glass rings in exotic (and some not real exotic) places, took risks, and slow-danced with the devil.

They grew up, became responsible citizens, raised families, paid their gahdam taxes, and never forgot the days when they sat on crates, on a lousy looking pier, and watched the sun rise over the Elisabeth River on a June morning.

In the words of a true boat sailor... An old S-boat bluejacket, Tom Parks...

"It was a shining time."