

# The After Battery Rat

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## Dolphins and Some Obligations that Came With Them

The day when those bastards with the unshaven smiling faces hung from the limber holes aft of the forward engine room exhaust, hauled your dripping wet, worthless butt up the tanktops, and the Old Man pinned Dolphins over the pocket of your wet dungaree shirt... Your life changed. You had no idea how that piece of silver-plated metal would alter the world you would live in.

All civilizations have their milestones. In some African tribes they pin all sorts of hell on prospective 'Qualified' warriors... The poor bastards have to tapdance barefooted over a hundred yards white hot rocks... Wear a hornet's nest like a hat, kill a panther with their bare hands and have a witch doctor stitch their scrotum to their knee with a wild boar tusk. Then, after a three-day dance with his drunk as owls buddies, the lad becomes a warrior... Which means he's eligible to kill and eat his enemies and become the Secretary General of United Nations.

I think it is called 'the rite of passage.' Having your skipper pin Dolphins on you is such a rite and it brought with it a set of unrecorded obligations that you didn't fully understand and obligations you knew nothing about at the time. Hell, you could fill all the planets and the Australian outback with the stuff nineteen-year-old non-rated kids didn't know.

First, the unwritten law requires that you never pass up a lad hitchhiking wearing silver fish... You can be flank haulin' up the highway, ten guys packed in a VW bug... And you'll burn flat spots in your tires to pack one more boatsailor in. Why? Because he's a damn submarine sailor. If you pass up a sub sailor the Goddess of The Main induction visits you in your sleep and removes two of your indispensable major internal organs with a rusty electrician's knife. Never, ever pass up a man wearing Dolphins... Tape the bastard to a fender if you have to... But never pass on by a qualified boat sailor.

Never leave a boatsailor sitting in a gin mill broke and nursing an empty glass. Tuck a five in his pocket... Buy the bastard a beer and have the barmaid take his wallet... Total the monetary contents which should be a short heave to zero... Make a note on a bar tab for you to give his topside watch... Poke his I.D. and liberty card in his jumper pocket... Pour him in a cab when it arrives (mark cab license on note for his Topside Watch)... Pay and tip the driver and tell him to haul him to Pier 22 and get the Topside Watch to get him assistance to his rack. Why do you do this? It was called 'Bluejacket drunk insurance'. Idiots taking care of their fellow idiots. The non-rated man's 'Law of the Sea'.

Sailors have always taken care of sailors. When you get down to the lowest common denominator in sea service and what you have are guys who only have each other and nowhere is that more in evidence than with the men who ride submarines.

Take onboard illness at sea. Submarines don't carry doctors... They carry the most outstanding and highly qualified independent paramedics found anywhere. An independent duty corpsman is as good a doctor and follow-up practitioner as you will find anywhere you go. And, they were some of the most dedicated rascals on the planet. No man, in the submarine biz was doing it for what little extra they got paid... And Corpsman sure as hell weren't. What idiot in his right mind would lance butt boils in a state five sea for an extra five bucks a day? And an obligation that came with Dolphins required you to help doc with your sick mates so he can get the rest he needs to take care of what tomorrow may hand him.

"Hey Jack... Jack... Wake up you goldbrickin' bastard."

"Yeah, whatcha need?"

"Doc said to wake you up at twenty-three hundred and getcha' to swallow this gahdam horse pill."

"Okay... Hand it to me."

"Not so fast... I gotta see you swallow the sonuvabitch. Doc made me promise... Said if I let you pull an eye-woolie on me, the Goddess of the Dry Stores Room would piss in my Post toasties."

"Got water?"

"Naw... Cup of orange juice."

"Thanks... I owe you one."

"Oh, damn near forgot. Doc has the Below Decks Watch lined up to take your temperature when he racks out the mid watch... If you are running 102° or better he's supposed to bust Doc out of the rack."

"Thanks... I still feel lousy."

"You look lousy... Hey, I'm gonna swing up in that tip bunk under the return ventilation line. If you need anything, Horsefly, just poke me... Okay? That's no bullshit."

It all came with Dolphins. And sooner or later, you paid some serious dues.

"Hey Dex."

"Yo!"

"There are a couple of airdales giving some half-loaded First Class off the Argonaut a tough time."

"Whatcha mean, tough time?"

"I think they are just about to deck him."

"So?"

"So, he's a gahdam boatsailor, Horsefly... We're not gonna let those bird farm idiots work him over, without making them pay."

"Did you take a good look at 'em?"

"Yeah..."

"Big guys, huh?"

"Big, are you kidding? The last time I saw anything as big as that Aviation Machinist Mate, it was wearing horseshoes and pulling the Budweiser wagon."

Dolphins required you to sacrifice a set of whites and up to a pint of blood to extract a fellow idiot from a perilous situation... Usually of his own making. That old Three Musketeer, "One for all and all for one" thing. It was an insurance policy that insured that one of your Dolphin-wearing buddies would drag your bloody carcass out of the bullring after the main event... And verify and endorse, in his role as incident witness, the accuracy and veracity of the explanatory horseshit you had custom fabricated for your duty officer.

Dolphins were serious juju... Bigtime 'Get out of jail free' cards.

In 1962, I was sent to the reassignment section at the NOB (Naval Operating Base) receiving station after they cut my appendix out. The next morning I reported to the assigned muster location outside the main entrance of J-50. I had been told that the Chief who assigned the daily 'in transit' work details was a first-rate hard ass... A kind of shore duty volcanic maniac. I also knew that Chief Petty Officers were allowed to kill up to three E-3s a month and sell their hides to itinerate nomads who lived in the paint lockers of rusty merchant ships.

When we formed up, his majesty appeared. He looked the part... Built like a Sherman tank. He had fists that could have squeezed ink out of a bowling ball.

"Listen up... Gahdammit, knock off the grab ass and listen up! My name is (whatever in the hell his name was)... I'm a gahdam Gunners Mate and I don't have the time or inclination to put up with wiseass remarks or idiot jerks who try to get past the system rules. You don't want to screw with me, because I will take you apart like a cheap watch. AM I UNDERSTOOD?"

"Aye, Chief."

"Hey you... YOU! Yeah, you the torpedoman striker... You stand fast after the rest of these clowns march off to rake leaves."

He issued rakes and assignments and marched them off. Then he looked at me and I noticed he was qualified.

"You trying to get back to your boat?"

"Damn straight, Chief."

"I'll square it away... Now get lost. Do whatever in the hell you want to but don't commit a major crime or get loaded before 1630."

Dolphins are some powerful things... At least they used to be. Every prostitute knew that they meant \$125.00 a month and S&FD (sea and foreign duty) pay and that worked a little magic. Green boots asked you a million questions... Old subvets bought you drinks... And other members of the fraternity throughout the naval establishment greased skids, untangled red tape and took care of you.

And when you grew old, the crazy bastards came and found you and brought you back to the tribal gathering... To sit next to the fire... Drink the fermented sprits and tell lies until late in the night and recall days long ago when lads with silver pocket fish roamed the oceans of the world... Pissed against the wind and only had each other.

**Dex**