

The After Battery Rat

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Hittin' the Beach

When we knocked off ship's work, we hit the showers aboard and waited around for evening chow. We had an old Hallicrafters TV hooked up in the crew's mess. Waiting for chow, we watched either Rocky & Bullwinkle or a little children's program produced locally in Norfolk and called (I believe) J. P. Sidewinder. The animals loved Rocky & Bullwinkle. Deep intellectual thought and conversation were reserved for long boring nights underwater at sea.

So in port, sitting alongside, we watched the flying squirrel, Boris and Natasha, Dudley, Inspector Fenwick and Little Nell, Professor Peabody, and all of Rocky and Bullwinkle's wonderful pals.

"Okay... Okay... Turn off that damn idiot box and clear out so the messcooks can set up for evening chow."

So, we cleared out and formed a line of ravenous beasts running down the passageway from the messdeck After Battery airlock door, aft to the forward engineroom watertight door. The time spent waiting in line was filled with horseplay and major league grabass.

"Attention... The evening meal is being served in the crew's mess. Tonight's meal... Succulent roast pork, savory green beans, mashed potatoes, hot rolls, milk, iced tea or bug juice. Tonight's movie following chow cleanup is Shootout at Deadwood Canyon starring Buck Brown, Dave so-in-so, and the lovely Dorothy Whatchamacallit. The first sitting being served."

After chow, the lads going on liberty went topside, crossed the brow and disappeared into the night.

If we didn't head for our barracks at J-50, we would head up to 'The Strip'.

The Strip was a three-block Mecca of stores, restaurants, locker clubs and beer joints catering to every sailor's basic needs.

For the most part, the submariners hung out at Bells'. Life was always worth living at Bells'.

In the '50s and '60s, the section of Hampton Boulevard between the gate at the Naval Operating Base and the gate at DesSub Piers, was like the Main Street in an 1870's cow town... A wide-open cow town. It was a neon-illuminated, quarter mile of tree-swinging bluejackets.

The Strip was where the single lads headed when they hit the beach.

Every naval group had its home beer joint. If you weren't a destroyer man, there were certain bars you stayed the hell out of. If you weren't naval air, there were others where you knew you weren't welcome. Submarine sailors hung out at Bells'.

Bells' was home. If you rode a SUBRON SIX boat, Bells' had a seat at the bar to fit your butt.

When you put your lines over and you didn't have the duty, you threw on your dress canvas and headed over to Bells' for beer, Slim Jims and Hank Williams.

"Hey... Anybody wanna buy a beer for a seagoing naval hero back from the sea?"

"Sit down, Eddie... What're you drinking?"

"Take a draft... We had a rough run."

"What kind of rough run?"

"Heavy weather off Newfoundland... Boat rolled over."

"Rolled over? What'n th' hell happened???"

"Both periscopes fell out."

"Hey Eddie, you know why they don't send donkeys to school?"

"Naw..."

"Cause nobody likes a wiseass."

It was always like that. Loud conversation, the clink of glasses, click-click of pool balls, barmaids telling sailors not to pat their fannys, ragging the shore patrols wandering in and out, Johnny Horton singing about the sinking of Bismarck, some idiot extolling the virtues of the New York Giants to a room full of fellow idiots who couldn't give less of a damn.

It was back in the era of Schlitz, Pabst, Hamms, National Bohemian, and Rolling Rock. The days when breakfast following a duty night would consist of Slim Jims, Beer Nuts and a pitcher... The three major food groups.

Bells' was the submariner's fraternity house. Those who patronized Bells' never forgot it... Even if it only lives on in our minds... As a treasured memory.

Some boatsailors took the city bus into Norfolk. They went to either East Main Street, the center of brewed products and sinful activity, or the Granby Theater.

If you were broke, there was the USO. The Norfolk USO was a big room with very comfortable overstuffed brown leather chairs. It was run by older middle-aged 'do-gooder' women who had big boobs and wore sensible old lady shoes. These women appeared to be very interested in church attendance and when you last wrote a letter to your mother. Most naval personnel who came into the Norfolk USO were just looking for a place to take a leak and pick up a bus schedule.

I liked the USO. If you were broke, it was a great place to go. You could get a hot chocolate and sleep in those overstuffed chairs, knowing that nobody was going to shake you awake to handle lines or load stores... And yes, I wrote a few letters.

There was a rundown, on its last legs, amusement park called 'Oceanview'. The only thing keeping the whole place from collapsing was the termites were holding hands. There was no such thing as amusement ride mechanical maintenance at Oceanview. I remember that the worn out seat upholstery on the roller coaster was all patched up with electrician's tape.

There was a vendor who sold great hot dogs using a relish made by his special recipe. It's funny, after all the years, I can still smell those damn hot dogs. Another great memory.

For single guys with no place to go, there was J-50, our submariner's barracks. J-50 was a recently built, state of the art, cubicle-divided barracks. It had a great big monster shower that had an inexhaustible supply of lobster-cooking temperature water and was so big that it could handle populations the size of third-world countries. After six to ten weeks underwater with total soap and water deprivation, breathing dead air and cultivating major BO, a live-steam hose-down was a virtual gift from God.

When Admiral Grenfell homesteaded the top deck of J-50 for his boat sailors, it was like casting the well known pearls before the subsurface swine. It took the animals over a month to become adequately housebroken to barracks life. In the years I was an inmate in the SUBRON SIX wild beast lockup, sailors came and went but the 24-hour poker game went on forever.

There's a line in Rudyard Kipling's Tommy that reads; *"An if sometimes our conduct isn't all your fancy paints, Why, single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints"*

J-50 was a kingdom where you could sleep between clean sheets, listen to your records, get a hot shower, phone out for pizzas, and breathe fresh air. The only downside being when they needed an all hands working party, they knew where to get all the single guys. We were just a phone call and a short bus ride away.

Looking back, it was a great way to grow from boy to man. None of us were aware of it at the time, but we had joined a family that would last a lifetime. I'm glad that I joined the sub force... I've never had any regrets..