

The After Battery Rat

Volume 13, Issue 1 – Insert. By Dex Armstrong with Permission

February 2012

Gentle Memories of Smokeboat Sailors

We all have them... Warm memories collected during our service in our nation's diesel submarines. They are the kind of memories that get you through the long winter nights, when you sit in your favorite rump-sprung chair, watching the dying embers of the fire you've been daydreaming in front of for the last two hours.

Pictures of rollicking bluejackets singing socially unacceptable songs in returning liberty launches... Crawling up and out of the After Battery hatch, to be greeted by bright sunlight and a view of some weird place where folks talked funny and ate roast goat on a stick... Trying to communicate with cab drivers in made-up-on-the-spot sign language and gestures you picked up in Tarzan movies... And watching your quartermaster break your colors and 'two-block 'em' in a nest of ships flying ensigns from places you read about in *National Geographic*.

The memories of girls in next-to-nothing bikinis coming down your starboard tanktops in speedboats that probably cost more than Arleigh Burke's retirement package... The memories of exotic women with garlic breath, runs in their stockings and seen-better-days high heels who gave you the 'Come here Joe' finger sign and promised you,

"Best bang-bang you ever have, sailorman." and overstated the worth of the product by a mile.

Memories of your wardroom passing over the brow in high collar whites enroute to some function and the Old Man stopping to tell you to make sure none of your animal shipmates returning three sheets to the wind, drowned or use their skulls to knock dents in his tank tops.

Memories of duty nights in foreign ports sitting on a five gallon paint can aft of the sail, listening to music on a transistor radio that sounded like some guy was boiling cats while some gal sang in an unknown tongue through a vacuum cleaner hose.

You had to ride the old 'petroleum ponies of the sea' to collect those memories.

Filipino stewards sitting around trading ukulele strings and strumming homesick tunes... Cooks sitting in the messdeck, sharpening knives and giving you a play-by-play description of some Brooklyn Dodgers game that happened way the hell before you were born... The Chief of the Boat sitting on a padded chart locker by the hydraulic manifold telling you that when he rode submarines in 500 B.C., they had real submariners... Who rode boats with stone pressure hulls and COBs who would beat you to death with a dinosaur shin bone if you got two feet off the ordered depth.

Memories of the Old Man in the conning tower making firing observations through the attack scope in a tee-shirt, khakis, flip-flops and knocking his Pall Mall ashes off in a tuna can.

They come and go... You seem to forget the highline transfers where you ended up with a bunch of sea print films the Navy used to torture General Court-Marshal criminals. You forget the nights standing lookout when it was so cold, the contents of your bladder froze and you peed snow cones for three days. You forgot how many trips you and the other idiot jaybird messcook had to make to the garbage dumpster on the pier the night the new cook introduced the crew to boiled liver and turnips.

Memories of fifty cent haircuts on the USS Orion... The sonuvabitch had never gone to barber school. I think he went to some kind of 'A' school where they sent guys too damn stupid to turn into Bosun' Mates, tender MAAs or porta-potty attendants and taught him how scissors work. Only E-3s and people with absolutely no self-respect ever let a barber on Orion get turned loose on them. The only real honest-to-god barber onboard only cut officer's hair.

Memories of East Main Street, Norfolk where you could get drunk, get laid, get crabs, catch typhoid, wake up tattooed, rolled, blind or turned to a pillar of salt, for less than ten bucks.

Remembrance of a bright sunny Mother's Day when Mrs. Sullivan, the lady who lost five sons when a ship went down in World War II... When this lovely lady came down to Pier 23 to have Mother's Day dinner with the crew of the USS Sullivans, we all knocked off ships' work... Put on our dress canvas and joined damn near the entire enlisted roster of

Subron Six lining both sides of the DES-SUB Piers access road. We stood there for the better part of an hour... Boatsailors and tin can sailors... Shoulder-to-shoulder...

"She's coming..." passed from lip to lip like lightning... We saluted and cheered as the DESLANT staff car drove by. That moment was my proudest in uniform and the closest I ever got to the meaning of ultimate sacrifice.

Memories of big stainless steel bowls of fluffy mashed potatoes and mushroom covered steaks the size of your home town, turned out by cooks whose favorite ingredient was sweat drips off the tip of their nose...

"Screw you kid, it's hot in here, you dumb bastard."

While your buddies were up at State U. swapping bubblegum in the back seat of the car mommy and daddy shelled out for as a graduation gift, we were jackassing crates of canned goods across the brow in the rain and getting rich off of E-3, Sea and Foreign Duty Pay and Submarine Pay. Somebody once explained to me that as an E-3, The United States Navy paid me fourteen cents an hour, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week... They even covered weekend grabass time... Talk about great deals.

"Excuse me mister... What's your job on this here ship?"

"Well sir, me and this fine looking gentleman are the GDU firing team."

"What'za GDU?"

"Sir, we'd like to tell you but it's classified."

(That's no bull... On Requin it was classified as a job monkeys could not only be trained to do, but could make CPO doing.)

Memories of starry nights when you stretched out on a blanket topside and dropped off to sleep dreaming of what it would be like to take a shower with Debbie Reynolds and woke up with linelocker hinge impressions in your shoulder blades.

Memories of hitchhiking back to the ship wearing a peacoat reeking of cheap perfume and cigar smoke.

Memories of being jammed up in a corner of the topside watch shack trying like hell to roll a 'roll your own' on a windy night.

Thumbing through the official topside watch log book... Reading line after line of "Moored as before, all lines secure" and coming across an entry reading, "Does anybody actually read this stupid boring crap?"

Having a smoke topside standing in a brand new set of Seafarers doeskin tailored blues and having a seagull shit all over the jumper flap piping.

Punching holes in cans of warm beer with a Phillips head screwdriver and the heel of your boot... Then sticking the can in your sock so you could drink in the back of a truck passing through the N.O.B. Gate. The U. S. Marine Corps never seemed to find six raghats drinking out of a black sock, strange... So much for guarding the streets in Heaven.

Memories of old World War II boatsailors drinking coffee with you in the messdeck and telling you about the days when boatsailors played the game for keeps.

"Yeah kid... They dumped shit on us for six hours... There wasn't an operational incandescent light with a filament left... Gahdam cork dust was all over everything... Found a chunk of deck the size of a Greyhound bus, missing aft of the cigarette deck... You sink a damn Jap light cruiser and you really piss 'em off."

Memories of Chaplains giving Christmas sermons about 'Peace on earth' standing directly below the business end of a pair of five-inch guns.

I know I'm not alone. Memories of duty aboard those grand ladies aren't the exclusive franchise of a few... God in his infinite wisdom bestowed the gift of diesel boat memories on us all. All of us who woke up one day sleeping below ventilation lines and a vent gear operating handle, with a laundry bag full of overly mature skivvies, on a flashpad that smelled like a gorilla owned it.

Yes, if you did it, you know what I mean... And if you didn't you probably could care less. ♦