

The After Battery Rat

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The Submariner's Seabag

There was a time when everything you owned had to fit in your seabag. Remember those nasty rascals? Fully packed, one of the sonuvabitches weighed more than the poor devil hauling it. The damn things weighed a ton and some idiot with an off-center sense of humor sewed a carry handle on it to help you haul it. Hell, you could bolt a handle on a Greyhound bus but it wouldn't make the damn thing portable.

The Army, Marines and Air Force got footlockers and we got a big ole' canvas bag.

After you warped your spine jackassing the goofy thing through a bus or train station, sat on it waiting for connecting transportation and made folks mad because it was too goddam big to fit in any overhead rack on any bus, train and airplane ever made, the contents looked like hell. All your gear appeared to have come from bums who slept on park benches.

Traveling with a seabag was something left over from the "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum" sailing ship days. Sailors used to sleep in hammocks. So you stowed your issue in a big canvas bag and lashed your hammock to it, hoisted it on your shoulder and in effect moved your entire home and complete inventory of earthly possessions from ship to ship. I wouldn't say you traveled light because with one strap it was a one-shoulder load that could torque your skeletal frame and bust your ankles. It was like hauling a dead linebacker.

They wasted a lot of time in boot camp telling you how to pack one of the sonuvabitches. There was an officially sanctioned method of organization that you forgot after ten minutes on the other side of the gate at Great Lakes. You got rid of a lot of issue gear when you went to the boats. Did you ever know a smokeboat sailor who had a raincoat? A flat hat? One of those nut hugger knit swimsuits? How bout those roll your own neckerchiefs... The ones the girls in a good Naval tailor shop would cut down and sew into a 'greasy snake' for two bucks?

Within six months, every boat sailor was down to one set of dress blues, port and starboard undress blues and whites, a couple of raghats, boots, shoes, assorted skivvies a peacoat and three sets of leper colony-looking dungarees.

Contribution from Dex

From Mike Bickel:

Robert D. (Dex) Armstrong (aka After Battery Rat) continues to travel with us during our journey helping us remember those good old days aboard the boats. Dex was a Requin and Torsk sailor but he's along with us now as a valued "Associate" member of the Sirago crew. This story ought to jog a few brain cells.

Mike



The rest of your original issue was either in the tender lucky bag or had been reduced to wipe down rags in the engineroom.

Submarines were not ships that allowed vast accumulation of private gear. Hobos who lived in discarded refrigerator crates could amass greater loads of pack rat crap than boatsailors. The confines of a diesel boat side locker and a couple of bunk bags did not allow one to live a Donald Trump existence.

Space and the going pay scale at the anchor end of the submersible social order combined to make us envy the lifestyle of a mud hut Ethiopian. We were the global equivalents of nomadic Monguls without ponies to haul our stuff.

And after the rigid routine of boot camp we learned the skill of random compression packing... Known by mother's world-wide as 'cramming'. It is amazing what you can jam into a space no bigger than a breadbox if you pull a watch cap over a boot and push it in with your foot... Of course it looks kinda weird when you pull it out but they never hold fashion shows at sea and wrinkles added character underwater appearance.

There was a four-hundred mile gap between the

images on recruiting posters and the actual appearance of submarine sailors at sea. It was not without justifiable reason that we were called the 'sewer pipe' Navy.

We operated on the premise that if 'Cleanliness was next to Godliness', we must be next to the other end of that spectrum... We looked like our clothing had been pressed with a waffle iron and packed by a bulldozer.

But what in the hell did they expect from a bunch of jerks hot-sacking in a 'Hogan's Alley Hell Hole' on a contraption that leaked like a screen door and smelled like a skunk jamboree?

After a while you got used to it... You got used to everything you owned picking up and retraining that distinctive pig boat aroma... You got used to old ladies on busses taking a couple of wrinkled nose sniffs of your peacoat then getting up and finding another seat... It came with Dolphins.

Do they still issue seabags? Can you still make five bucks sitting up half the night drawing a diesel boat and Dolphins on the side of one of the damn things with black and white marking pens that drive old master-at-arms into a 'rig for heart attack' frenzy? Make their faces red... The veins on their neck bulge out... And yell,

"Jeezus H. Christ! What in god's name is that all over your seabag?"

"Artwork, Chief... It's like the work of Michelangelo... Dolphins... My boat... Great huh?"

"Looks like some gahdam comic book..."

Here was a man with cobras tattooed on his arms... A skull with a dagger through one eye and a ribbon reading 'DEATH BEFORE SHORE DUTY' on his shoulder... Crossed anchors with 'Subic Bay 1945' on the other shoulder... An eagle on his chest and a full blown Chinese dragon peeking out between the cheeks of his butt. If anyone was an authority on stuff that looked like a comic book, it had to be this E-8 sonuvabitch.

Sometimes I look at all the crap stacked in my garage, close my eyes and smile, remembering a time when everything I owned could be crammed into a canvas bag. Maturity is hell.

