

The After Battery Rat

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Remembering Diesel Boat Thanksgivings

Memory is a wonderful means of cost-free transport. It allows old rascals to revisit their youth and romp all over yesteryear with the freedom of people with far younger legs.

After Thanksgiving dinner this year, I took a short snooze in my magic carpet daydreaming chair and revisited the old Requin mess deck once more for one of those old fashion 'no holds barred' Thanksgiving rollicking raghat free for alls.

Thanksgiving in the old sewer pipe navy was a really big deal... especially at sea.

Before shoving off on a run, the cooks laid in the requisite goodies... six to eight frozen turkeys (to be precooked the night before, two at a time and reheated reload-style prior to serving)... a half ton of spuds... twenty cans of yams... ten cans of cranberry sauce... assorted nuts... cornbread stuffing in cellophane bags and five boxes of El Cheapo cigars.

Cigars were a most important part of any fleet submarine celebratory meal. These were the days before the gloom and doomers invented 'secondhand smoke'. Hell, the air in the old diesel subs was 80% to 90% tobacco smoke, anyway. It was not without reason that the contraptions were called 'smoke-boats'.

The cigars were purchased by vote of the totally illegal... against regulation... every boat had one... slush fund committee.

The slush fund, known in the compartments inhabited by raghats as the 'saltwater saving and loan', was a long-standing boatservice financial institution that operated far beyond regulation by the FDIC, Federal Securities and Exchange Commission, the FBI, Secret Service, or the Naval Investigative Service, and it's interest rate didn't have a damn thing to do with the chief monkey at the Federal Reserve. It was a bluejacket financial Institution run along the principle of Jesse James economics... out of a cigar box under the foot of the COB's flash pad.

Every sonouvabitch in the crew was a deputized collection agent and was prepared to deny it's existence up to the point that they administered the truth serum or set fire to your feet.

Where was I? Oh yes, the slush fund committee bought the obligatory five boxes of 'enlisted acceptable' cigars. By enlisted acceptable, I mean rolled dried vegetation of dubious origin, capable of being lit at one end allowing smoke to pass to the other end. Connection with anything that would be recognized in Cuba as tobacc, was highly unlikely.

Starting before sunset on the day prior to Thanksgiving, the cooks ran everyone but the two idiot messcooks out of the galley and started cooking the birds that had been removed from the reefer (freezer) on the Monday prior to Thanksgiving and thawed out in the cool room.

The messcooks got the job of reaching into the cavity, locating the bag of giblets and removing them. This required washing your hands with some kind of super germ killing soap supplied by and supervised by the Corpsman.

This is the type of job that, if not handled properly can get the poor messcooks ragged. So it must be handled like true professionals. To avoid terms like, "flunky gut handlers", and "bird gut shufflers", we would lay the bird carcass on the messtable, cover it with a fresh dish towel and give a running gynecological commentary during the removal process. Messcooking is part theatrical art and part menial servitude.

During the turkey cooking process, the aroma migrated into the berthing portion of the After Battery compartment. Before the last bird cleared the oven, the animals were so damn hungry that cannibalism was becoming a serious consideration.

The messcooks spent the time while the birds were cooking, whittling the hides off a half million potatoes. Every boatsailor of my day will remember those great big stainless steel bowls of what was announced over the IMC as "fluffy mashed potatoes". There was something about sub force mashed potatoes. I have never had better. The boats used real butter and made absolutely fabulous gravy.

It is no secret that the submarines got the best cooks. If you were a cook who came with a sub duty entry in your service jacket, you could damn near write your own ticket.

Thirty minutes prior to the appointed time that the messdeck opened, the hungry rats began forming a line that extended through the forward engine room.

The waiting animals began laughing, hooting, hollering, pushing, shoving, and engaging in what in the days before the kinder and gentler, sensitive revised naval vocabulary was known as 'grabass'.

"Okay, okay, let's knock off the grabass."

"Hey Chief... you close enough to see if those two lazy ass messcooks have the table set up? Hell Chief, I could chew the hip pockets out of a set of Mongolian dungarees."

"Try to exercise a little self control."

"Hey Buzz, damn messcooks are wearing clean aprons and new white hats."

"Must be the end of the world."

"You think we'll have pumpkin or apple pie this year?"

"Pumpkin... we loaded a case of canned pumpkin pie filler before we singled up."

"Hey chief... how're they doin'? I may starve to death any minute now."

"You won't be missed."

"You break my heart... whaddaya think comments like that do to my morale and sea warrior spirit?"

"Jack... is it possible for you to shut the hell up for ten minutes and give your shipmates a break?"

It was the kind of aimless bullshit conversation that filled time. Filling time while waiting was an art. Comments made in waiting formations didn't count against the allotted time God gave you on earth... God understood his submariners.

We could seat 14 at a sitting. After the first sitting got situated and the holiday bounty began, the food kept coming. After the meal, the cigars were passed around. Within a couple of minutes, smoke filled the messdeck and depending on the sea state, the word was passed to open topside access hatches. The lads waiting for the follow-on-sittings were strung out down the outboard passageway all the way back to the After Battery head. By the time the guys in the first sitting were relaxing and firing up their EL Cheapo stogies, the lads waiting were getting restless.

In an environment devoid of feminine civilizing influence, restless men begin to get vocal and as hunger escalated, vocabulary degenerates and the intent and solemnity of the holiday gets somehow forgotten in the press of the moment.

"Hey, you bastards gonna take all day?"

"I think the tribal elders are having smoke and bullshit for dessert."

"Many nasty smelling smoke sticks involved in pow wow."

"I think the sonuvabitches are incinerating a skunk."

"Hey... you one way bastards. Give your shipmates a break."

The longer they took the worse the mutiny got. Waiting in a restless chowline for comfortably situated lard ass senior rates to complete both meal and post chowdown convivial bullshit exchange, was hell. It was like stroking and burping a three-month old. After a while, the smiling cigar-puffing bastards started drifting aft.

"Hey you gut bandits outdid yourselves this year... great chow."

You could hear the clatter of dishes as the messcooks set the tables for the next setting. Turkey... gravy... the best gahdam mashed potatoes you would ever have in your life... fantastic pumpkin pie... A big ol' fat El Roi Tan... sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with the finest men you would ever know... men who, in later life would drive a thousand miles just to shake your hand again, tell you that you were still a worthless bastard and make your wife laugh half the night. Men you would drive a thousand miles to pump a pint of blood for.

Every Thanksgiving, that is what I'm grateful for. I'm thankful I served in Arleigh Burke's Navy... thankful God gave me the sense to volunteer for submariners and thankful for the years spent with the big hearted, fun loving ugly bastards I shared turkey, cigars and bullshit with, on the day the pilgrims set aside to have some kind of luau with the Indians.

As an old coot, when I look back and inventory the good times, those were some of the best.