

The After Battery Rat

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Sea Stories

Sea stories hold a unique niche in the annals of verbal and written history and legend.

They all have a basis in fact and must be told or written in the language of seafarers in terms and idiom only they understand, involving incidents and situations only men who have lived the life can fully understand and appreciate.

They are best told in the company of sailors in dimly lit bars, over cheap beer and tobacco smoke. The only other thing in life that remotely resembles sailors swapping sea stories would be a major league Horse Manure Taco Luau.

The crafting of sea stories never involves outright lying...the proper term is 'truth manipulation'. All truth is pliable...plastic. God makes plastic truth so that his bluejackets can fashion yarns that entertain men who spend a lot of time broke, drinking beer and sniffing barmaid perfume.

You cannot take 'Sea Story Studies 101' at Yale, Princeton, Harvard or the Correspondence Institute for Heavy Machinery Mechanics. To become proficient, one must serve an apprenticeship under a master seagoing bullshit artist. A naval bullshit artist is not a liar...he is a man who treats the content of cow pies as the Playdough of naval history.

Most of the master submarine sea story crafters in the *Deep Draft Institute Hall of Fame* are diesel boat sailors. The reason is, that acceptable subject matter was drastically reduced when the sub force adopted the gentlemanly sensitive approach, recalled all the Cro-Magnon behavior manuals and made the lower enlisted elements climb down out of the trees.

It is probably beyond the comprehension of today's totally squared away force but there was a day when a hug and pat on the ass was a perfectly acceptable way to greet a WAVE and you could spend the weekend with one, without worrying about the residue of your very personal body fluids ending up in some naval investigative DNA lab.

The recounting of sea stories requires...no, make that demands...saltwater apprenticeship. You cannot learn the delicate balance between seawater and bullshit at Yale, Harvard, Columbia and Dartmouth, or from Martha Stewart on TV. No, you have to have smelled wet hemp, diesel smoke, rancid armpits, dirty socks, spoiled eggs, state five sea vomit, inboard vent emissions, and three day old cigar smoke. You have had to live a life where all of your earthly possessions could fit in your mother's breadbox.

The recounting of sea stories is an art...an art learned in dark locations illuminated by neon Budweiser signs, where you can hear Johnny Cash, the clink of pool balls and the crunchy sound that empty SlimJim wrappers make when you step on them.

They involve locations most people never heard of and subject matter that would have your Aunt Tillie's Altar Guild grabbing smelling salts. Very few sea stories were ever made into Little Golden Books or Disney movies. Sailors are among the few people who can watch a program about the tribal sexual practices of the inhabitants in a remote region of South Borneo on the Discovery Channel and yell,

"Me'n Jack had her and her sister."

Some jaybird once sent me an e-mail and said,

"You lie a lot."

He must have been some kind of deductive genius. I tried to explain that unlike Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, I wasn't writing some kind of New Testament sequel...just the semi-coherent ramblings of a long ago bluejacket and his tribute to a lost way of life he loved. I just want men I respected, and shared lousy air and Spam with, to be alive once more. I have found that you can resurrect the dead with a damn ballpoint. That is one of life's most wonderful gifts.

There is a writer of sea stories, who can best be described as a creator of classical bluejacket literature. That would be Mike 'Boy Throttleman' Hemming. Mike's writing is the kind poetic song of the soul that makes English teacher's smile and take pride in the cultivation of his gift. Mine on the other hand, make my English teachers try not to hit their shoes when they heave their lunch.

Please don't reference anything in this lucky bag of contrived bullshit if you are writing important stuff that requires historical accuracy. What this is, is one screwball's memories of Pier 22 life painted from a bull turd pallet simply for guys who were there and shared the magic.

It's about the boat sitting out in a Pennsylvania fresh water river getting her diapers changed regularly by people who never danced the North Atlantic fandango with her or loved her with the ardor of youth. It's about her lads...the guys who only had her hull numbers 481 as their street address. They were, are and will always be, family.

Most of all, writing sea stories is fun... great fun. Over the past five years, I have spent many enjoyable evenings sitting alone in our family room shuffling through my memories...a cavalcade of faces, voices, experiences and time spent pissing against the wind.

As every true sailor knows, there is honor in remembrance and it is through the continually Brasso'ed memories of 'long in the tooth' old worn out sailors, that ships, long ago struck from Navy rolls, live on. They live on via the immortality of the sea stories told about them in circles of men who loved them and give a damn.

Shelly, Keats, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Louisa May Allcott never wrote sea stories or told them. Guys like 'Brass Knuckle' Jackson, 'One Nut' Daniels and 'Cinderblock' Williams tell sea stories. Shelly, Keats and the rest of that silk-skivvied crowd never pissed off a pier waiting on a liberty launch or dropped his watch in a rubber and tied a knot in it to waterproof it prior to swimming to the boat swinging the hook 400 yards offshore, after the last launch had made her rounds.

Serious publishing houses don't publish sea stories because most naval historical authorities look on them as worthless and having absolutely no literary merit...and the bastards are probably right.

No hand that ever held a heaving line, chipping hammer or a GDU wrench, ever wrote anything they made a \$20-a-copy book out of...except Ron 'Warshot' Smith and, and Ken 'Pig' Henry...and maybe one or two others. Most of the authoritative writing is done by officers who understand the need for sterling silver napkin rings and how to drink 100 year old brandy from a snifter...and never drank 'dollar-thirty a gallon' wine out of rinsed out peanut butter jar in the superstructure forward of the bow plane bull gears.

My favorite critic, Tom 'Old Gringo' Parks, an old Pre-World War II S-Boat Motor Mac said it best...

"Dex, your stories are great for one good sit down head call."

Old Gringo fully understood the value of sea stories.