

The After Battery Rat

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The Thinning Ranks of Lockwood's Iron Men

Do you remember them? The old rascals with the red hash marks and rate chevrons? Five or six rows of damn meaningful ribbons... Dolphins and a Combat Patrol pin?

Back in the days when those forged in combat, case-hardened bastards roamed the piers of submarine bases and butt-buffed barstools in establishments throughout the world no self-respecting devil would be caught dead in... We called them simply... the World War II guys.

They had not only 'seen the elephant', they saddle broke him and rode him all the way to Tokyo.

If you melted down all the gold hash marks and rates in their submarine service, you wouldn't have had enough material to have hammered out a Birmingham bus token.

Gold geedunk and good conduct medals were not a big defining area of consideration in the world of these red blooded American giants... Men, who had gone to sea in iron sharks and chewed the heart out of the Japanese naval war machine, didn't require any additional credentials to reinforce their personal reputations.

The rollicking bastards had written their saga in a trail of rusting hulks and busted bar furniture from Hell to Hokkaido... And had sent an endless stream of oriental miscreants off to Buddha amid fire and the smell of burning Torpex. In 1945, they were the unquestioned hairy-chested jungle kings of the Pacific... 'Uncle Charlie's, get the hell out of my way' card-carrying rascals... Admiral Charles Lockwood's iron men.

In my day, they were the men who held the senior leadership positions... The proven and seasoned leadership of the submarine service. They were the 'old men of the sea' to us. And all we wanted... All we aspired to be, was to be like them and worthy of their acceptance.

As we grew old... They grew even older. I am not sure they mellowed, just grew long in the tooth and spent more and more time burying each other and cussing hearing loss and the pros and cons of Polygrip, Viagra and Metamucil.

Every year, some idiot jaybird would show up on their TV tube and tell about this wonderful World War II Memorial, that was to be built in their nation's capital. Then, mister TV man would disappear until next Groundhog Day.

There was the Tooth Fairy, the Easter Bunny, Santa Claus, and the World War II Memorial. The 'eternal patrol' sailing list grew longer and longer and no national recognition for the greatest generation. We built monuments to honor the participants of lesser 'wars', conflicts... Conflicts that never really ended... Ones we lost... But we just never got around to honoring the quiet generation that fought and won a world-wide hell raiser and handed this nation its last two fully Unconditional Surrenders against two of the most insidious regimes Satan ever gave birth to.

Old Gringo, Capt. Ned Beach, Capt. George Street are numbered among those who got their final orders and couldn't wait. They are numbered among those who will never see the Memorial built to honor them... Every day the list of eligible and deserving wearers of the combat pin, shrinks.

Of the sins of man, indifference and ingratitude are the most difficult to survive. Bureaucratic indifference compounds the shameful nature of our national failure to extend to these very non-demanding warrior giants a long overdue national handshake. Shame on us... Shame on us all.

What we do or not do, will not change the record they wrote in valorous deeds and sublime self-sacrifice so many years ago. They will always be the men who went to sea and struck their blows for freedom, liberty and our American way of life from beneath the sea. Men who shared bad air, depleted rations, and the deafening sounds of enemy depth charges, together. Men who wore sweat-soaked dungaree shirts and repeatedly pinned the tail on Hirohito's donkey.

No, they created their own memorial... The one signed by the little grinning buck-toothed monkeys on the deck of the USS Missouri in Tokyo Harbor... A harbor totally absent of Nip war vessels that missed the terminal festivities because of U.S. submarine prearranged dates with Pacific Ocean floor oxidation.

Many of the still remaining World War II boat sailors will miss the ceremonies and hoopla attending what effete artists and fawning politicians have created as a national thank you. Again... Shame on us.

Your true 'thank you' will rest with history's accounting of what you did, why you did it and the magnificent legacy you passed to the down line members of the United States Submarine Service, and the appreciation of the yet unborn, who will mature in free air without the weight of the despot's heel on their necks.

You were iron men who took iron ships to sea and left an unparalleled record of courage and duty, faithfully performed. A record that should serve to inspire every lad who enters his country's Navy in search of adventure in a service with an extremely proud heritage.

What you did makes what came before and since pale to bullshit by comparison. Somebody needed to say that... Somebody who wore Dolphins and simply wanted to drink beer in your company, listen to your history, ride your boats and feel your handshake of acceptance... You were, are and ever will be, heroes in every sense of the term, to that lad. Your self-sacrifice was unparalleled in the annals of naval history.

So thanks from an old gray haired sonuvabitch who danced with the Goddess of The Main Induction, long after you left her to us. She had holes in her stockings, strands of white hair and sagging tits, but she could still do that North Atlantic saltwater fandango and bounce around like a twenty-year-old fan dancer.

God bless anyone who slammed hatches on the iron monsters that went to periscope depth and sent the saltwater valentines that kept me from ending up eating fish heads and rice, listening to Tokyo Rose bring me the news and saying the pledge of allegiance to that goofy-looking meatball flag.

Dex