

The After Battery Rat

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The Barrel

Diesel boats had a conning tower, a compartment above the rest of the compartments contained in linear configuration in the main pressure hull. It was called 'The Barrel'.

The barrel was the size of a VW bus and was packed with gear. The radar console... Dead reckoning tracer (DRT)... The torpedo data computer (TDC)... Engine order annunciators... Gyro repeater... The helm, the main scope, attack scope, torpedo firing panel, and a whole truckload of communication gear... With conduit, lines, and wiring up the kazoo.

It had an upper and lower hatch. The lower hatch led to the control room. The upper hatch led to the bridge and sail door.

In the winter, the upper hatch became a cold-weather wind tunnel. If all the watertight doors were 'on the latch' and you had engines on the line, the engines sucked induction air through the hatch and through the boat every time someone opened the conn hatch. In less than a minute you could turn four compartments into frozen-food lockers... And you could blast freeze the helmsman. I stood helm watches where I could actually feel ice cubes passing through my arteries. At the end of the watch one night, I peed a three-foot icicle and left a snowball in the head. All North Atlantic helmsmen know what Butterball turkeys feel like.

On nights like that, Quartermasters and Radarmen huddled around the radar console. The console radiated heat like a fat girl's fanny on a cold night. I used to stand forward on the helm and secretly hope they were microwaving their crotch gear.

Being a helmsman could be rough. Imagine this: The auto dealer sells you a big car with the steering wheel mounted in the trunk. You crawl in there, close the lid, and drive from Philadelphia to Chicago with your wife sitting in a lawn chair on the car's roof giving you steering instructions over a cell phone... And gives you instructions to relay to a dwarf under your dashboard, who's working the gas pedal.

I can remember nights when we were coming into Pier 22.

Contribution from Dex

From Joe Roche:

Like us, Dex (aka the "After Battery Rat") is spending his watch in the Conn this issue. It was absolutely fantastic having Dex at our reunion this last May—to hear him reminisce—remind us of the "old days" aboard the boat. Just listening to him or reading writings such as this one almost brings the smell back.

Joe



"Five degrees right rudder"

"Five degrees right, aye"

"Two thirds speed"

"Two thirds aye"

"Answering two thirds"

"Meet her"

"Meet her aye"

"All back one third"

"Answering all back one third"

"All stop"

"Answering all stop"

"Five degrees right rudder"

"Five degrees right aye"

"All ahead one third"

"Answering ahead one third"

"Shift your rudder... All stop"

"Shifting rudder... Answering all stop"

"Rudder amidships"

"Rudder amidships"

All that in two minutes.

On firing runs, the barrel got real crowded. It seemed like everybody and his brother was crammed into the place. It was very entertaining to watch officers and Quartermasters stepping on each others toes, and yelling, "Gahdammit quit dunking the scope!" to the poor bastards on the planes.

Being a planesman fighting surface turbulence on a torpedo firing run is no picnic either. You get yelled at a lot. If you've ever sat on a hard locker spending an hour looking at a stupid gauge the diameter of an oil drum head... Watching an eight-inch needle and trying to keep 311 ft of obstinate pig iron within one foot of your ordered depth... Then you've had a preview of what kind of activity takes place in the basement of Hell.

But there were lazy nights in the barrel... Night steaming on a balmy summer night. The O.D. didn't give a damn if the helmsman gave him a snake wake, just as long as you didn't run the damn thing off the edge of the earth. Running the old gal three and three... Drinking hot coffee and bullshitting with the Quartermaster and the Radarman. Sure, it got better than that, but those times involved beer and something with painted toenails.

OK – got the painted toenails.... Where's the beer? - Joe

