

The After Battery Rat

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Officers...the Gentlemen Forward

Only met...make that served with...one bad officer. He was an ensign who suffered from one helluva case of retarded maturity. In the words of the skipper,

"The lad needed time to do a little growing up."

The captain put him on the pier. I don't know who was on the receiving end of that transfer, but I sure felt sorry for the poor bastards.

The rest of the officers I served under were first rate... Very professionally competent gentlemen... Or so it always appeared to me, an individual at the absolute anchor-end of the boat-service food chain. I have always been proud of the quality of individuals who rode forward on my boat. That's not patronizing bullshit... At this stage of the game, honesty doesn't bring light-duty chits or constitute ass-kissing.

There were two kinds of officers... The 'engaged' and the 'disengaged'. Some officers, for very understandable reasons, maintained their distance from the lads aft. To them, the old adage 'familiarization breeds contempt' or at the very least an erosion of awe and respect forced the situation.

Looking back, I find that to have been pure bullshit. Through the looking glass of forty years of maturity, I realize that I respected my 'engaged' officers the most. The men who dealt with their men on a personal level...who extended the hand of personal friendship and led by virtue of the reciprocal respect generated by the uniquely American concept of team quarter-backing. The 'someone has to call the shots' principle you learn on playing fields in elementary schools...that you learn from Boy Scout patrol leaders and Safety Patrol Captains your own age.

I had two such officers, previously mentioned in this tap-dance in the manure pile...Lieutenants Buckner and Schilling. I consider them to be icons of my youth. I learned very important lessons in leadership from them that I did not understand or even recognize at the time.

Contribution from Dex

From Joe Roche:

We have had a great number of articles from and about the crew. The theme for this quarterly newsletter is the officers. This contribution from Dex seems right on target.

Joe



An 'engaged' officer is the kind who does not feel that having a cup of coffee in the crew's mess or visiting a sick sailor in an After Battery rack, will forever taint them with a scarlet letter or the unforgivable sin of fraternization with the untouchables. You never forget that kind of leadership.

You remember the nights after a number of days of exchanging dead air for fresh through the gahdam snorkel mast and creating night and day with electrical switches...and tracking daily cycles with 24-hour clocks. You remember that sea stores cigarettes had started thinning out to the point that *Luckies*, *Camels*, and *Pall-Malls* were starting to look good. And, some officer would make a trip aft, toss five packs of *Winstons* on a messdeck table, smile and say,

"I hope every one of you dumb bastards get lung cancer."

"Aye sir, we'll do our best."

Or the day you were laying in a rack at Norfolk Naval Hospital and a fellow you shared coffee with many nights on the bridge, turned up to tell you that the COB was getting gahdam sick and tired of not seeing your ugly face at morning quarters. You knew that he didn't have to do that...and that a man in his position must have things a helluva lot more important in his life than visiting some 'flat on his back' E-3 jerk in a place stinking of ether and alcohol. There were other very fine officers who would not have done that for a variety of very valid reasons, but you don't get a great feeling when you recall their names and faces. You just remember they were damn competent officers, good men who chose to keep their distance and maintain some kind of mystical social separation.

When a submarine takes a fatal plunge to the ocean floor, all aboard gain and maintain a unique eternal equality.

I am not one who cared or resented an arms-length relationship with certain individuals forward. I have always felt that if a man is honest in his belief and conducts himself in accordance with what he feels is correct, then good men are obligated to accord him respect. In my day, that was the universally accepted norm in the Submarine Service.

All of us saw officers' hats on tables in exotic locations not normally frequented by nuns and radio evangelists. We saw coats with shoulder boards hanging on hooks in establishments that sold intimate companionship in thirty-minute increments. And, we remember assisting officers returning to the boat slightly under the weather and having difficulty with their mother tongue, down into the forward torpedo room so the below decks watch could assist them to a point of authorized horizontal storage. We all saw it and knew (A) It was nobody's business and (B) It was part of the fraternal obligation of those wearing twin fish, to make damn sure it remained nobody's business.

I recall riding back in a launch and some officer, off another boat anchored out and 'swinging the hook,' was talking about some dark-eyed honey turning tricks in some commercial establishment ashore.

"Gentlemen, she was pure heaven. She knew things that you never saw in books. Any of you guys ever hear of the upside-down butterfly dance?"

"Hey sir...was her name Juanita Cha-Kita?"

"Sure was...you have her?"

"Yeah, had her twice. Once last year and again last week. Man, he's not lying...that chic packs a college education into fifteen minutes."

"Hey sailor...you goin' back?"

"Yes sir. Sir?"

"Yes..."

"You think that makes us family?"

In a way, when our DD-214s turned yellow, our Dolphins tarnished, our hair turned gray, and we started scheduling yearly prostate exams, we all became family and on a first-name basis. We peed in the same location, ate at the same tables and wore the same kinds of obnoxious Hawaiian shirts. We told lies and put our arms around each other's shoulders and laughed...laughs nobody else would have understood. We introduced the women in our lives and we were family.

And you know what? The gahdam world maintained its scheduled rotation and didn't fall off its axis.