

The After Battery Rat

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Dex, Do You Remember the Sirago?

Do you remember the Sirago?

You bet your thirteen-button blues I remember her.

I remember crossing her brow on the way over to the Requin... Some nights, hauling such a package that I had difficulty operating my locomotion gear below my thirteen-button flap. Most of us were subject to alcohol-induced leg mutiny the first night in. The topside watches would pass you from boat to boat until *your* topside watch recognized you and passed you down the after battery hatch to the below decks watch.

"Hey below! Got a returning, bent all to hell, drunk."

"Pass him down... I've got him."

"Well, put him on your call sheet for a 0300 piss call... He's hauling a load."

"Got ya... 0300, aye."

I know that I've held many detailed conversations with the Sirago topside watch in fluent Drunkanese, a language essentially the same as the unknown tongue.

We may not have served on the same boat, but if you have awakened aboard ship to find a pair of the same barmaid's earrings in your jumper pocket... You're family.

If you've shared the same section of a Hampton Boulevard curb while redepositing the better part of a fully loaded Little Italy pizza in the right turn lane, by the NOB (Naval Operating Base) gate... You're family.

If you've ever shared adjoining head stalls in Bell's, standing on the head seat so the Shore Patrol can't see your feet to make them think you didn't run in there to hide during a post 'free for all jail break'... You're family.

If your dog tags ever left the impression of your name, rate and serial number on the same set of bare tits... You're family.

If you've ever crawled topside in freezing dead-ass winter to catch heavies and haul a guy's boat's mooring lines aboard, haul them in and secure them to your cleats and double them up later... You're more than family, you're blood brothers.

If a topside watch at half past 0300, splits his last two Marlboros with you... You should marry his ugliest sister.

If you are both up in the Squadron Office, stealing office supplies for your yeoman and you trade a stapler for a three-hole punch... Such a transaction automatically makes you family.

If at any point in your Subron Six tour you were on a first name basis with a guy catching a smoke behind the Edible Garbage dumpster just forward of the Kittiwake... You're brothers.

If you ever peed on each other's screw guards and rubbed ballast tanks... You're brothers.

If you share a cab and split the fare... You're family.

If you meet each other up in the Orion radio shack, trying on starched white hats so you can steal one that fits... Such a rendezvous means you can turn up at each other's house for Thanksgiving dinner or be best men at each other's weddings.

If your immunization card is signed by the same pimply-faced Orion corpsman... You're family.

If your COBs get loaded together at the Chiefs Club... You're family.

If your respective boats ever screwed each other in the same movie trade... It's like being adopted.

If you stood topside and laughed your ass off when men from both boats got tossed out in the slip and hauled back aboard to have their Dolphins pinned on a sopping wet shirt... You're family.

If you were ever involved in an Orion paint locker raid and you ran into other guys rooting around in there that you knew were other boatsailors and you asked,

"Where in the hell did you guys get keys to this place?"

And the answer came back...

"None of your damn business... You writin' a book?"

They were either Sirago or Cubera guys.

We were young... So damn broke, it took four of us to fund a five-mile cab ride.

When we boarded the Grandby Street bus after standing in the rain, wearing a peacoat that could absorb fifty gallons of water and never drip, and got so heavy it broke both your ankles, we smelled like soggy sheep who'd been swimming in diesel fuel.

"You a boatsailor?"

"Yeah... Sirago."

"Requin."

"Let's give the old lady with the shoppin' bag our seat."

"You betcha."

"Hey driver... D&S Piers."

And you would run into each other again in a late Sunday night fuel hose free for all, or jump into their stores loading party to give them a hand. You remember, one of those human jackass lines... Those E-3 conveyor belt lines where the Navy moved stack of boxes, crates and bags, like ants.

You would be three sheets to the wind standing on a pier, waiting for the liberty launch after it made a run and you saw a cab dump some poor sonuvabitch wearing Dolphins and a straw hat, who had no idea what planet he was on or how he got grass stains all over his new whites.

"Hey Stuke... I know that bastard, he's off the Sirago... Let's get him back."

Thirty minutes later, after he had tossed his cookies in the launch bilges and showed you all the photos of his girl he carried in his wallet, you passed his pre-hangover, inert form to his topside watch and watched the numbers on his sail fade into the darkness, aft of the launch wake.

We shared each other's night baker's sticky buns... Assisted each other's injured to the Orion's lower brow... We ogled each other's wives, girlfriends and in some rare cases, daughters. We bought each other beer and we shook each other's hands when we said our goodbyes to the squadron and tossed our gear on the pier.

Yes I remember the Sirago.

Her hull numbers were an address on the street where I lived and her crew was... And always will be... Family.

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