

The After Battery Rat

Volume 14, Issue 2 – Insert 1 of 2. By Dex Armstrong with Permission

Summer/Fall 2013

We Were The Last Rats Off The Old Tuna Can Boats

At some point limber holes, walking decks and tubes aft disappeared. It was a slow process... The 'tuna can navy' just sort of disappeared in ones and twos.

The smokeboats went to the scrap yard like the longhorns on the Ponderosa being shipped off to Chicago. The nests in the squadrons started thinning out.

Displaced personnel started running around like roaches hiding from the Orkin man, and some of the finest ship handling, submarine officers, started getting dead-end 'jocks and socks' assignments. Gold Dolphins started turning up in staff positions in locations that were a two-day Trailway's bus ride from saltwater... Men who had paid their national obligation dues in their early careers, playing a very one-sided game of pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey with Hirohito's navy. It was sad to see Dolphins and a six patrol Combat Pin over the pocket of some poor smokeboat bastard turkey farmed to Naval Supply Depot in Possum Pecker, Arkansas.

The rest of the diesel boat rats rarely heard the snap of the traps that were doing in their kind... No bloody shirts on the pier... No smokeboat sailor hides stretched on racks tanning in the sun on the tender boatdeck... No listing on the ingredients of the content of dog food cans reading 'diesel qualified sailor'. Just a silent reduction.

As big old wallowing black, no limber hole monsters started turning up, we noticed a marked indifference to tribal reduction in the 'Piston-powered Comanche Nation'. We sat on MEK cans topside and watched the SUBLANT high-powered, heavy shoulderboard haulers pass the brows leading to our sources of future Gillette blades, heading down the pier for mutual kitty licking sessions with the guys riding the submersible moonbeam barges.

The Navy started to discontinue stocking repair and replacement parts for the old smokies. That should have been a major indicator that made sense. The guys who run prisons rarely fund multiple organ transplants for guys on death row scheduled for the needle in a couple of months. So we cannibalized the boats being placed on the slaughterhouse conveyor belt... Like removing still operational organs from granny before jerking the plug on her respirator.

"Hey!! They're gonna scrap the USS Snakefish... Get over there and see if you can get her DRT stylus assembly... Her damn coffee urn... GDU wench... Any neoprene hatch gaskets... The volume knob off the RBO and her boat hook."

It always reminded me of animals in Africa ravishing the carcass of some freshly killed animal abandoned by the lion that brought it down.

There is nothing sadder than watching old combat workhorses heading for the scrap yard to be cut up and sold for the value of their metal content. I know that in all aspects of life, realism trumps sentimentality. I know that all ships have a finite useful mechanical life. I know that destruction of the equipment antiquated by progress is a normal and expected part of all mechanical life cycles.

Sure, only a blithering idiot doesn't know that.

But... The Navy gives you ships that you care for, that, become home and in most instances work their way into your heart. You would have to be one coldhearted sonuvabitch to watch an old girl who had hauled you safely through heavy weather and the oceans of the world, head off for the ignominy of dismemberment. A good sailor will shed tears in his soul... The silent painful tribute men who love ships feel in their hearts. We had the additional pain associated with the knowledge that our boats had taken crews of brave Americans to war, survived the risks magnified by being constantly hunted and attacked and had hauled their victorious crews home to the euphoric welcome of a grateful nation.

We bobbed up and down tethered to the pier and each other by frayed mooring lines. From that vantage point, we viewed the future.

And, what did the future look like? It was big... Damn, it was big. Big, black and uglier than a fifteen dollar whore. It may have looked sleek and streamlined at the incredible depths it was designed to operate at. But to lads who had grown accustomed to watching their own kind transit open expanses of saltwater by slicing through it with the ease and grace of a highly honed straight razor, progress looked ugly.

Before you modern day techno blujackets start jumping up and down and peeing in your poopee suits, I write for the lads of my era who rode the boats you guys replaced. I don't know any other life.

Let's face it... The nukes are on TV damn near every night... There are books being published on a regular basis, about every aspect of the nuclear submarine force. There are movies that exploit every facet of the nuclear submarine experience.

The boats we rode weren't whiz bang sexy. The life we lived wasn't an existence that Hollywood makes Richard Gere and Tom Cruise movies out of.

No replacement crews met us when we put our lines over. Nobody worried about the psychological implications of our operation. It was common knowledge that you *had* to be half nuts to ride diesel boats... And the Navy just let it go at that.

There were certain advantages to riding the boats with limber holes and walking decks. You always knew your approximate depth by what was leaking and the rate at which the water was coming in. You didn't have to know a damn thing about fusion, thermal dynamics or rods in reactor cores. Uniform of the day could include a straw hat and dungarees with shirttails out... Sandals optional.

Most of us are 'long ago' submarine sailors... Old late in life unsalvageable coots. When we attended Sub School, they were teaching boats with hull numbers that folks ended up shaving with in the mid to late 1960s.

When we return to what we knew as New London Sub-Base... Now known as Groton Sub-Base, we wander around trying to find familiar landmarks... The escape tank vamoosed... The geedunk metamorphed into a rather unkempt McDonalds... The old Basic Enlisted Submarine School is gone... White Hat Club, gone...

After a while, you feel like a returning resident of Nagasaki in 1946, trying to locate his previous neighborhood from the pattern of remaining outhouse holes.