

The After Battery Rat

Volume 8, Issue 3 – Insert. By Dex Armstrong with Permission

August 2007

Off Watch at Sea

The late night hours underway submerged became late in life gentle memories.

Night people have always been a different breed of cat. There's something kinda special about people who own the middle of the night...cab drivers; Waffle House waitresses; 'Dirty Apron Bill', the short order cook at the I-95 truck stop; and midnight shift highway patrolmen. Great people, great conversationalists...there are few competing distractions so you tend to pay more attention to what people say during the hours most folks are sleeping.

Coffee always tastes better when it has percolated to the point of massive liquid reduction...stuff one step above hot tar. Coffee that can pop rivet your eyelids to your eyebrows...a concoction resembling boiled Egyptian mummy wrappings or Pakistani bunion pads. Late night submarine, bottom of the pot midwatch, wake the dead, put hair on your chest jamoke can dissolve your adenoids. But, you never forget it...and you never get any cup of coffee that matches submarine midwatch coffee the rest of your life.

When you turn in to an after battery rack...as you are corking off you can pick up bits and pieces of messdeck conversation as on duty crewmen pass through the crews' mess airlock door.

"Yeah...Mary told him to..."

Then the door would close.

"Back around 1952, my old man..."

And then the door would shut again. You never learned what his dad did in 1952. If it was one of those mid-western farm kids, his dad probably bought a damn hay baler or married some big, corn fed gal with John Deere tractor seat butt.

It was great layin' there in your hot sack rack picking up bits and pieces of late night 'Go nowhere' pass the time, revelations. Every smokeboat sailor had those gentle memories.

Aft of the After Battery berthing compartment was the enlisted head. Here you could pick up entire conversations from guys using the side-by-side, port and starboard sinks...or between some using the urinal and some socially convivial bluejacket with his butt parked on a freckle maker head seat.

"Hey Pete...That you?"

"Yeah...it's me...That you, Ralph?"

"It's me...Hey, when we pull in tomorrow morning, you got the duty?"

"Naw...Section Three has the duty...I'm in two."

"You hittin' the beach?"

"Yeah, if the COB opens the Saltwater Savings and Loan."

Note: Slush Funds were totally illegal and outlawed by the United States Navy...they operated far beyond anything remotely resembling Federal banking regulation, inspection or protection. It was a cross between an Aboriginal headhunters' credit union and the booty split of the brotherhood of pirates.

The Chief of Naval Operations and Secretary of the Navy had no idea of the complexity of E-3 finances and the periodic difficulty of financing a night of inebriated lust.

Our slush fund was run out of a beat-up 'Have-a-Tampa' cigar box in the COB's bunklocker. Every payday, the animals tossed five bucks in the box. You could borrow \$10.00 for \$11.00 or \$20.00 for \$22.00. Profits went to beer ball games, ships parties aft of the conning tower fairwater, Luaus, and flowers for deceased people...and one baby crib for a strapped E-3 new dad.

The Saltwater Savings and Loan was a great, faith based financial institution, that saved more submarine sailors than Billy Graham.

All night long, the lads on duty in the maneuvering room and both enginerooms sent men forward to get coffee.

Another set of sounds that originated from the crews' mess were the rattle of silverware being washed and the banging of pots, pans, aluminum trays and crockery. Messcooking was not a delicate art...the messcooks created racket like tossing horseshoes on a tin roof.

But the racket was a familiar sound...one of those comforting sounds that a boatsailor accepted as indicating all being right in the underwater environment in which he lived.

Every time someone passed through the watertight door from the forward engine room, you would get a momentary ear full of the pounding of a pair of Fairbanks-Morse 38D rockcrushers...then it would suddenly stop and you would hear the click of the spring loaded latch.

Some nights, cooks and messcooks would play hell with your sleep when they started rooting around the compartment in search of the location of specific canned goods needed for future meal preparation.

"Jeezus, what in the hell's going on?"

"Lookin' for some gahdam cans of beans."

"You gotta disturb a working sailor's sleep to find a couple of cans of lousy beans??"

"There isn't a sailor sleeping back here that would qualify as a working sailor on his best day."

"Yeah...nobody listens to a stupid, worthless canned food heater-upper."

"Mickey...don't bother to ask what's in the soup the next time yours tastes like somebody peed in it."

Nonsensical, go absolutely nowhere conversation between men who would have shown up for a kidney transplant if either needed one. The gentle, no malice bullshit that was the common coin of diesel submariners.

No narrative of the nocturnal activities of the underwater kingdom would be complete without mentioning the acid-eaten dungaree voltage ferrets...the main power electricians.

Those bastards would show up...open a manhole hinged door in the thwartships passageway and drop down into a world where they snaked around taking battery temperatures and topping the cells off with pure distilled water. In short, they feed the electron wizards that pushed us through saltwater below snorkel depth.

In my tour in the boats, I never met a bad electrician. They, like enginemen, machinist mates and other auxiliary rates were numbered among God's most generous people.

I have no idea what late night sounds a modern day sailor will carry with him into old age, but, I do know, having seen living conditions aboard the most recent classes of the modern high-tech submersibles, there are certain memories we will not share in common.

No modern day nuke rider will carry the memory of feet in stinking socks stepping on him on the way to an upper bunk just below an air conditioning condensate drip pan.

He won't have memories of waking up to a close-up view of a bare butt when the Chief Corpsman was conducting a sick call crab check in Hogan's Alley.

He won't remember the aromatic wonder fog that accompanies the venting of #2 Sanitary Tank Inboard.

He won't remember midwatch cheese sandwiches made from Navy contract self-healing, scab forming mayonnaise and sliced cheese that could patch a tractor tire blowout.

He, or maybe she in the not so distant future, won't leave the boatservice with memories of CPO dried armpit salt stains that would deflect a 20mm round.

Each generation will collect memories to pass on to downline generations.

These are mine...the ones I carry in my heart of wonderful times spent among the finest men I would ever know during the time I spent as an oxygen thief on this planet.