

# The After Battery Rat

Volume 9, Issue 3 – Insert. By Dex Armstrong with Permission

August 2008

## We had Ugly Enginemen

The Good Book tells us that God created the earth and all in it, in six days and that he and Moses pulled a twenty-four on the seventh day. The Creation was a fairly complicated exercise in fabrication and I figure they were pulling liberty every night so it's no wonder they turned out things like, giraffes, armadillos, hippos, hammerhead sharks, and duck-billed platypuses. They had to have been half-in-the-bag when they bolted some of that stuff together.

Late on Friday night, He created Enginemen... They must have been so bent out of shape, they had no idea what they were making... Nobody would have created an Engineman on purpose.

After a few million years (That is like a first-time enlistment for deities and their immediate families), God contacted John Holland and said,

"Hey John... Build me an iron contraption I can fill with some of my most marginal idiots and stick underwater out of sight. And then I'll cram a bunch of Enginemen in the iron monsters to liven the damn things up. After fifty years or so, I'll create a 'Mike Hemming' and turn that wild man loose on one of those subsurface looney bins just to see what happens."

Since then, the U.S. Submarine Force was never the same.

I have it over the rest of you. I actually rode with Mike aka 'The Boy Throttleman'. We were true shipmates. I am sure, given the odds, there must have been other Enginemen as crazy as Hemming, but at least the good Lord fixed it so that they never turned up in the same squadron.

The Engine Rooms were located aft of the After Battery compartment. There were two Engine Rooms each containing a pair of Fairbanks or General Motors engines. The 'Jimmies' (General Motors) engines were configured in a "V" cylinder arrangement and the Fairbanks 38 Ds were configured in opposed-piston fashion with an upper and lower crank shaft connected to a vertical drive. The engines drove 500 kw generators that fed batteries or the electric motors that drove the boat. Engine rooms were noisy, dirty, stunk of smoke and oil, and the interior decor was made up of collections of overflowing butt kits, oily rags, dirty coffee cups, maintenance manuals covered with dirty fingerprints, torn skin books and scroungy, raggedy-ass Enginemen.

Every lad who rode diesel boats will tell you that being an Engineman or a Machinist Mate made you special. We all remember them... We can see their laughing faces. The crazy bastards had the toughest job on the boat. There was no such thing as a 'light' engine part. The rascals who built the power that kept the old gals plowing saltwater, worked with tools that were Paul Bunyan size. To be an Engineman, a man had to have the arms of a gorilla, the spinal column of a mule, and possess the mechanical ability of a railroad engineer.

They were good... Damn good. In the age before nuclear power, with its aseptically clean engine spaces and spotlessly attired personnel, there were big laughing bastards who kept power going to the big bronze screws that drove iron ships across oceans and helped win a war.

Being an Engineman or a Motor Mac doesn't get you a lot of recognition. The Navy, God bless it, has a reputation for clean efficiency... Clean, well regulated ships and crews... Uniform of the day... Shined brass... Well painted... And officers who looked like they fell off a wedding cake. Submariners in the old smokeboat navy didn't fit that image... And the guys riding herd on the rock crushers that provided propulsion to the diesel-powered fleet submarines were 180 degrees out from that image, so their contribution has never been recognized or acknowledged.

That's a shame because they did tough work under as rough a set of conditions as any man should be called upon to endure and took it all, including the unmerciful ragging of their shipmates... In good natured stride.

These stories have become an idiot's feeble attempt to recapture a time in submarine history nobody cared about enough to record. From 1945 to 1970, a lot of very good men rode petroleum-powered submarines. We did the unheralded bull work while the sunbeam-powered undersea love boats, the glamorous sweethearts of the heavy braided who, along with their P.R. flacks, were giving the nukes hugs and kisses.

The Navy was building undersea craft that only required some clown to toss a shovel full of neutrons and protons in the propulsion hopper every ten years so they could spend months at a time disturbing marine life. But at the same time, big, ugly hairy-chested, whisker-loaded rascals were still punching holes in the ocean with old worn out pigboats.

And we had Enginemen and Machinist Mates who nursed 32,000 horses in each engine room... Kept them driving generators that made all the sparkies it took to push the old iron scrap yard cheaters, through the saltwater.

Oh hell, we knew that we were no more than warts on the behind of the great *Goddess of the Main Induction*... The redheaded step children at the family reunion, but dammit, the Navy owed us a few paragraphs to record our passing. Once there were guppy boats... Fleet snorkel conversions... Radar picket boats. How could they gloss over the Cold War contribution of the lads who rode the picket boats? There were boats rigged for UDT (underwater demolition teams) and later SEALs. Hell you could go on and on... But nobody ever did.

You turn on your idiot box and watch programs about 'Submarines', and lately there has been a lot of stuff about the boats. At the end of the program your family turns to you and asks,

"Didn't you do any important stuff?"

"Guess not. We just were out there... Smelling weird... Drinking coffee you could patch potholes with... Breathing lousy air, smoking a 'dollar a carton' sea stores and doin' nothing worth mentioning."

But we had Enginemen... We had big ol' noisy, stinking, smoke-belching engines. Every one of us remembers trying to work his way past engine covers laying in the passageway and greasy, cussing Enginemen and Motor Macs

"Hey Bobby Ray... Ya having bad luck?"

"Bad luck... Are you kidding, horsefly? Hell, with my luck, if I was Jane Mansfield's baby, she'd bottle feed me... You going forward?"

"Heading that way."

"Well why don't you drag your worthless ass back here with a cup of whatever Rat is perkin' in the pot?"

When an old bastard who wrench-wrestled submarine diesel engines throws his earthly gear in the big Lucky Bag, he goes directly to Heaven... No damn receiving station... He reports directly on board one of those low hull numbered, solid gold smokeboats at the big silver pier in the sky... Wears clean socks and silk dungarees... Gets to park his old worn out butt on a rocking chair in the Engineroom and tell lies... Goes forward late at night for mid rats of humming bird wings on toast and decent coffee... And there's always a big-titted blonde to scratch his back in the places he can't reach, with a short handled box wrench.

That's something they missed on the History Channel and the book *'Blind Mans Bluff'*. While folks were out there bluffing blind men, Mike Hemming and Bobby Ray Knight were out there cussing... Up to their eyeballs in grease and lube oil, baby sitting cantankerous machinery and just being hardworking happy-go-lucky sonuvabitches... And they were not alone.

They don't put up statues of sweat-soaked stinking raghats in parks but somewhere there should be one to the Smokeboat Engineman with a greasy bandana hanging out of his hip pocket and a dirty cup full of coffee in his hand... But it will never happen, horsefly. It's all about stuff powered by snap, crackle and pop that could fry your cajones... Encased in lead, that lasts for years.

I know... I watch the History Channel.

Oh yes... At the big silver pier in the sky, nobody has to fight for a fuel hose or gets blamed for oil slicks.

***Dex***