

The After Battery Rat

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Times Change

The sub force has changed... The Navy has changed... Global priorities have changed and the days where nobody explained what was going on to an E-3 are gone.

Today's young men and women are informed and intelligent enough to understand the implications of strategic decisions and understand all the ramifications and downline effects. Most important, they care.

We didn't. One minute, Castro was a hero... Liberator of Cuba... The next minute he was a good for nothing, rotten sonuvabitch in need of a shave. I missed the whole process... Being in the boats was like being lost in space... You went underwater and a whole bunch of folks ran around changing stuff. Somewhere, Indo-China became Vietnam... Baseball teams played leapfrog all over the place... The Giants... The Braves... The White House changed hands... They fired men into space. We didn't really care... We were more concerned about clean skivvies... Finding a tub that we could crawl into for a 90 minute soak... Clean sheets... Cold beer and spending the night with something pretty and soft with a warm behind. Like Neanderthal man, we were taking care of the basics... God and John Kennedy could handle all the other stuff.

In our day, folks tended to stay in their own backyard. We didn't get involved in foreign social issues if they didn't look like they would reach a point necessitating the calling up of the Tennessee National Guard. We didn't understand Europeans... Fifteen years earlier, we had saved their collective butts from bogeymen the likes of which the world has never known... We fed the ungrateful sonuvabitches, cleaned up a lot of their mess and invited them to rejoin the family of man... And they rewarded us with learning just enough of our language to paint "Yankee Go Home" on anything that would stand still long enough for them to get a paintbrush on it. Someone told me it had to do with subtle cultural differences that would be impossible for anyone who had not been raised with their outlook and tradition, to understand.

That's a load... Any ignorant hayseed from the Tennessee backwoods can recognize ingratitude... Hell, those folks couldn't move in any direction without bouncing off white crosses representing a lot of good men who made a one-way trip to guarantee the worthless bastards would have the right to paint stupid stuff on vertical surfaces. I learned at eighteen, you didn't have to be an idiot to live in central Europe but it sure as hell ensured that you wouldn't be lonely.

Today, that wouldn't pass the U.S. global 'Don't piss anyone off' policy test. Today's modern bluejacket must come with an added dimension. The ability to swallow load after load of pure, unadulterated horseshit... Stomach it and move out. Better man than I was, Gunga Din.

To paraphrase the old smoke boat philosopher Cowboy,

"We rode loose in the saddle."

We didn't know any better and if the truth be known, we figured it would always be that way. Opinions didn't take up much space... You could cram six million of them in Hogan's alley before it was necessary to pump 500 to forward trim.

We were what they call 'very low profile' today. When you consider the low number of us, I wouldn't use the term 'low profile'... Maybe we stopped short of a locust plague, but no one ever used the term 'shrinking violet' and submarine sailor in the same breath.

Times change... By age 25, life has deposited as much steel in your spine as you're likely to get and the course of patriotic journey has been charted indelibly in the control room of your heart.

I love to throw rocks at nukes... It's cheap fun, filled time on topside watch if you forgot your harmonica and needed batteries for your illegally bootlegged transistor radio... We threw rocks but we would have bled in our socks if we actually hit someone and hurt them.

Nukes. Let's face it... Nukes knew we old smoke boat guys were fast becoming eight-tracks in a CD world. We knew it... Hell, it didn't take a candygram from Albert Einstein to fill us in, so we tossed rocks... It was the American way.

Somewhere, Mitsubishi started making tape players and hair dryers. Men as old and wise as 'Old Gringo' can remember a day when the good little smiling faces at Mitsubishi brought you little fragmentation and incendiary presents from the sky... They conducted a mass present delivery on December 7, 1941... Mitsubishi products always looked best through the cross-hairs of a 40 millimeter sight. Who would have believed the day would come when American bluejackets would be buying junk made by Mitsubishi at the base Exchange, with no idea that the tiny rascals once turned out Zeros, Zekes and Bettys.

I think it's known as generational difference... Times change... People change... Americans, God bless 'em, have the shortest memory of anyone on the face of the earth. We have taken the concept of 'kiss and make up' to an extreme, bordering on absolute ridiculousness.

In Somalia one minute, Mohammed Adid was a low-life, black-hearted, back-stabbing warlord... The top fly crawling on the dungheap of corrupt excess and human misery. The next minute, he became our 'soapy shower pal'... Our diplomatic corps were tripping all over themselves to get in line to kiss his bony little fanny.

A naval officer told me,

"That under the circumstances, it became necessary to refocus and cut our losses..."

To an old messcook deckape, not schooled in the nuances of international horseshit swapping, it looked like the biggest lad in school pissed in his pants and left the playground with a paperbag over his head.

That's what I mean... You lads, who wear the twin fish that make you my brother, have to find it in your heart to forgive an old half-baked, after battery rat and consider the source.

Times change... Most of the time for the better. Let me just give you one example. Members of the present naval establishment can transit the Hampton Roads Tunnel in both directions without seeing a big sign reading,

"DON'T THROW PEACOAT BUTTONS IN COIN HOPPER."