

The After Battery Rat

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Painting Tanktops, Superstructure and Limber Holes

Summer day... Shirtless, tanned bluejackets hanging over the side, brandishing hoes with straightened-out blades, scraping scum and sea grass off tank tops.

Twenty feet forward, two guys in the squadron paint punt would be grinding places where oxidation deterioration had started to establish a new colony. The same members of the topside gang would return to the freshly ground away locations and slosh 'rust inhibitors' like red lead and zinc chromate on them.

Submarines had a unique capability... 'List control'. We could, for lack of a proper lay term, lean the boat over on one side or the other, to expose the area of our ballast tank's waterline so we could clean, prepare and paint them.

I was up waiting on the inter-base jitney, that twenty-seat cattle wagon which ran between DES SUB (destroyer and submarine) piers. If you are old enough to remember the name of Hoppy's horse (Topper) and rode a boat in SUBRON SIX, you remember that navy-gray four-wheel bread box with the three seats that had the springs poking through the seat cushions... Grinding gears and a driver with arm tattoos of hula girls and an anchor. He was one ugly sonuvabitch and swore he was a retired BM First.

Well, I was standing there waiting on the rattletrap express, when this midshipman walks up...

"Scuse me sailor, is this where you board the mobile base connector?"

"You talking about the NOB jitney?"

"The bus that goes between bases."

"Aye, sir."

You knew he was a new guy because he was wearing whites and nobody in his right mind climbed aboard that filthy cattle wagon without something to sit on, to keep from lousing up the seat of your trou. Most bluejackets either picked up a folder from the yeoman's shack to sit on, or simply stood up. I had grabbed a brown folder.

Chief Petty Officers have this impression that an E-3 standing at the jitney stop is planning to goof off and spend a non-productive morning joy-riding from base to base in a continuous chain of round trips... Which we did, from time to time.

However, if you stood there with a brown official folder... An empty, but very important looking genuine yeoman's shack folder, every CPO on the planet visually accepted that there was no question you were 'squared-away' and on a fully justified mission beneficial to the operation of the United States Navy.

Actually, you didn't want to arrive for your geedunk appointment with the seat of your whites looking like you slid down a coal pile. But, back to the midshipman.

Right as he arrived, the USS Cutlass (SS-478) starts listing over for pre-scheduled maintenance. The midshipman tapped me on the shoulder.

"Look at that ship! It has rolled over!"

"Aye sir, they do that sometimes. In fact, sometimes they roll over and turn upside down. It takes a couple of days to bring them right side up again and send divers down to get the scopes if they fall out."

One thing about being qualified, it gave you numerous opportunities to share your technical expertise with the general public. But, back to the topside gang...

Once we got the tank tops prepared, we connected our paint pot up to the 225 lb. air line that was connected to the ships service manifold, forward of the conning tower fairwater. We mixed M.E.K. (Methyl Ethyl Keytone) with #7 navy

gray paint, took a straightened out cotter pin and cleared the paint gun nozzle, and rigged the hose. We loaded the paint pot and passed the hose, loaded pot and paint gun over the side to the two jaybirds in the punt.

Submarine sailors, by the very nature of their duty, don't see a lot of sunlight. Submarine pressure hulls and several hundred feet of saltwater were about as good a level of sunblock as one could get... SPF 1000. At 400 feet, sunrise and sunset were regulated by electrical switch.

Summer topside maintenance gave shirtless animals doing the work, world class sunburns. Topside work was usually performed immediately following arrival from a 'run', a time when the topside gang was at its most vulnerable to epidermal incineration. The evening following a midsummer first day topside turn to, found seven or eight upright walking lobsters, moaning and groaning at the evening meal.

"Gahdammit, get yur hand off my shoulder!"

"The next guy who slaps me on the back will wake up on a damn funeral home slab!"

In a week or two, the shirtless topside monkeys looked like Key West cabana boys. We saved a fortune in today's tanning parlor fees... But, we were fortunate in that our Chief of Naval Operations did not allow submariners to bring skin cancer aboard his submarines.

After we got the tank tops painted, we ground out the edges of the limberhole openings and moved into the superstructure to wire brush pressure lockers, decking supports, exhaust lines, and all the rest of the below the walking deck gear. Once E-3s disappeared below the walking deck, red-blooded American 19 year olds discovered the operating advantages of the 'out of sight, out of mind' principle of human behavior. As long as you could produce simulated sounds associated with productive activity, you were home free.

I can remember once when I was messcooking, the Chief of the Boat came into the messdeck, drew a cup of coffee and fired up a rum-soaked crook. Above the compartment, my shipmates were goofing off in the shade next to the snorkel intake, reading skin books or corking off. One guy was beating on the induction piping with a chipping hammer, using random, theatrical blows.

The COB smiled.

"Listen to those bastards up there busting their butts."

"Aye chief, they don't come any better or more hard-working."

Somewhere up there was a book entitled *The Diary of a Twenty Year Old Nympho* and I was on the list circulating in Hogan's Alley to read it next.

We worked hard when we knew we had to... when the ship or the skipper truly needed to get something accomplished. However, there is something invented by the U.S. Navy based on the 'Idle hands are the Devil's workshop' principle... it is called, 'Make Work'. One of the most important requirements and professional qualifications of a chief petty officer is the ability to create aimless 'make work'.

The idea behind 'make work' was that non-rated submariners left unengaged in chain gang projects would turn to a life of crime project intended to overthrow Latin American governments, hijack the tender for a joyride up and down the Elizabeth River, or organizing the Hampton Blvd. barmaids into a union.

Without the mature guidance of the naval chief petty officers (men who as E-6s, have staggered over the brow drunker than Hogan's goat) they wouldn't be able to keep the younger members of ship's company from plundering Honduras, looting CINCLANT, or setting fire to the rest of the planet. CPO hats destroyed the brain cells controlling their E-3 memories.

I rag on chief petty officers... That's what E-3s do. But I would be the first to say that much of the character of the man I became was hot-forged into my heart, spine and thoughts by some damn fine chiefs and leading qualified petty officers. Chiefs had to ride herd on rambunctious lads... I was one.

As a former leading seaman on an old Tench class boat, I'm proud of how we maintained her. A downline skipper of the boat told me that my band of deckapes did a crackerjack job. We did.

Dex