

# The After Battery Rat

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## A Couple of Old Memories

One evening, Ray Stone and I were sitting around putting a dent in the beer supply in the garage refrigerator. Just two old coots sitting around swapping old stories and laughing like a pair of idiots. Are we unique? I mean, do other old boatsailors sit around after dark listening to gahdam crickets... Pulling pop tabs and piecing old recollections together anywhere other than my back patio?

Dredged up a couple of old ones.

It was late one night aboard Requin... Riding surfaced. Stuke and I had the 8 to 12 in the shears. We had a belltapper in our relief section... A kid who was notorious for dragging his ass out of the rack late and turning up 15 to 20 minutes into the next watch. He was a decent kid... Meant well, just had this weird quirk... He was a belltapper.

Belltapping is a major sin or was... Was in the old days... It was never used as a noun... It was always an adjective that preceded 'sonuvabitch.'

It was bad enough on a nice balmy tropical night, but on nights when you were plowing the North Atlantic in the dead of winter... Cold, wet and wondering if chunks of ice were forming in your arteries... Where your bladder had been sending you the 'you're well overdue for a piss call' signal for the past thirty minutes... Relieving late can be a little inconsiderate. You spend some rough minutes sliding up the cuff of your foulweather parka to sneak a peek at your watch and wondering if you could get somebody to run a bloodhound through the boat and locate the bastard before you turned hard and froze to death.

Well, he finally turned up and I pointed out the contacts I had been working handed him my 7x50s (binoculars) and hauled ass below.

When I stepped into the crews' mess, the Below Decks Watch from our section... Section 3, was sitting there stuffing what was left of a plate of mid-rats, into his goofy face.

"Hey, you lazy bastard, are you incapable of getting Mr. Belltapper rolled out and up to the gahdam bridge in time to save a shipmate from freezing? It's 2000 degrees below zero up there, you idiot... It's cold... You may have a nice warm cozy watch down here strolling around the gahdam boat... But we are up there freezing our butts off. You know those frozen fish they sell in grocery stores? This is where they catch the bastards."

"Hey cook... I'm going aft and piss a giant icecycle... Then I'll be back for a plate of mid rats... If that's okay with you, you non-qual idiot."

"You've got it, Dex."

When I got back the messdeck was empty... No plate of mid rats and from what I could see... No damn cook. It was rapidly turning into a bad night.

So I looked into the galley. There was this green cook striker digging chow out of a sharpshooter bucket with a spoon.

"What in the hell are you doing?"

"Fixing you a plate of chow. I thought everyone had been fed... Didn't know about you... You were so late, I didn't figure you were eating. I scraped out all the leftover chow... But it's okay... I'm digging it out of the middle of the bucket... It's okay... It never touched the sides."

'It's okay... It never touched the sides' became a very popular saying on Requin after that... Everything was okay as long as 'it didn't touch the sides.' We applied it to everything. Silly? Sure, but we milked it for every last laugh.

Another memory.

If you rode a diesel boat in Squadron Six, you will remember the topside watch shacks that kept you from freezing to death in the wintertime. They were designed by the same sonuvabitch who invented the one-hole outhouse. They made them out of plywood... They weren't crafted by folks who built pianos or fine furniture... They were rickety, beat up gray painted plywood contraptions with a hinged door that had a Plexiglas window in it. They had a shelf for the topside logbook. Most of the time they had a phone rigged inside... If you had one with a phone, you spent the night answering calls from women wanting to talk to husbands and boyfriends...

"Is Charlie aboard?"

"Hello... Is this Requin?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Is Lt. So-in-so aboard tonight?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Would you tell him Billy has the measles?"

"Yes ma'am."

"Is Seaman First Michael Doo-Dad aboard? This is Bob Whatcha-Macallit from Crazy Jacks Used cars. Tell Seaman Doo-Dad that he is four car payments behind and he needs to get in touch with me."

"Sure, I'll tell him that the bloodsuckers are after him."

"This is Als' Bar... Tell Jack Gates we found his wallet... He can pick it up from Maggie."

"Is Willie Jackson there?"

"No, ma'am, he's ashore on liberty tonight."

"Would you be so kind as to tell him his mother called to wish him a happy birthday?"

"Yes, ma'am, would be happy to."

It went on all night. Guard shacks usually had writing all over the inside... More stuff than the inside of an Egyptian tomb.

Phone numbers... All kind of phone numbers... Mostly ladies with loose panty elastic... The broadcast numbers of all the good Norfolk radio stations... The phone number to the quarterdeck of the Orion... Limericks... Crude pictures.

In the wintertime, the Electricians rigged up an electric heater... It was a sorry excuse for something meant to provide warmth... you had to tour the complete deck and check the lines to see that they were tight. When you had a heater with a heating element the size of a toaster, opening the shack door every fifteen minutes cancelled out whatever heat you could generate between door openings.

We had a skipper who had a real aversion to the topside watch practice of caulking the wide cracks in the plywood guard shacks with geedunk wrappers and chunks of cardboard torn off Krispie Kreme Doughnut boxes. The skipper was a very good man... The only problem was that his naval career had been spent totally beyond standing four hour mid-winter topside watches freezing his gonads off in a wind tunnel, Birds-Eye frozen guard shack.

These are the kind of memories old diesel boat raghats collected. Nobody, other than idiots who rode those old boats, would ever understand or give a damn... Hell, why should they?

But hopefully there are there are a couple of old stove-in, gray haired former E-3s out there somewhere who remember spending four hours in darkness stamping their feet to keep blood circulating in damn near frozen toes... Answering the stupid phone... Herding returning drunks to the After Battery hatch and praying they didn't break their fool necks on the way down the ladder... Tightening loose deck locker lids... Unwinding the colors aft that kept getting wrapped around the staff with every change in wind direction... Taking the slack out of frozen mooring lines... Drinking cup after cup of all night bottom of the pot coffee passed topside by the Below Decks Watch... Writing 'Moored as before, all lines secure' in a raggedy-ass green cloth-covered book with coffee stains on damn near every page... Listening to late night Norfolk radio and the ads from the big "O" Naval tailors where some pirate bastard named 'Old Bill' wanted to put the entire Navy in \$29.95 tailor made blues... Answering the phone and yelling down to the Below Decks Watch,

"Hey below! Go wake up Wally and tell the sonuvabitch Annie is on the phone... And tell Bob, Trixie called."

I hope somebody remembers. It's not much but it was a part of E-3 history. These are the kind of memories the animals collected... And you would be surprised at how they can fill an old diesel boat sailors evening recounting those times over cold beer on a warm summer evening with an old shipmate.

I hope nukes have those memories when they grow old.