

The After Battery Rat

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Jury-Rigged Gear and 'Make Do'

In the world of the old SSN (that would be Smokeboat Submarine Navy), improvised repair was commonplace. At sea you had to make repairs with what you had available... It was a case of 'use any gahdam thing you could lay your hands on' supply solution.

Boatsailors are some truly ingenious bastards. They can do damn near anything with next to nothing and have proven it many, many times.

I would let an independent duty, submarine Corpsman give me a heart transplant. They were damn good. We never told them that because we didn't want to have to Crisco their ears to get them through a watertight door. But, those wonderful guys were the best.

When you are at sea, you can't run out to the local hardware store and pick up stuff you need to fix things... It is pretty damp between you and the repair parts required to keep equipment 'on line'.

So you improvise... You cannibalize, you use pieces of things never intended for the purpose you use them for and you invent solutions. Noah probably had to invent some contraption to get elephant and hippo shit out of the bilges and over the side. You've got a problem so you turn the crew loose on a solution.

I once saw a line handler on an incoming boat who had orange shoelaces in his left boot.

"Hey Kemosabi... What's with the orange shoelace? Is that the latest fashion in New London?"

"Hell no... Busted the sonuvabitch the first week out. You would think that some gahdam idiot in the crew could come up with a spare shoelace... No, not on this loony barge... So I used a piece of orange shot line."

It worked... That was the whole point. It served the intended purpose and when the smoke clears away, that is the only thing that matters. It will 'make do' until you can effect a proper repair.

I don't know who in the hell made Navy foul weather gear. I assumed some low bidder was turning the stuff out in the basement of a log cabin in the woods somewhere.

When I first got issued mine, I found it a bit weird that the jackets had both buttons and a zipper. Later I learned, as did every other poor sonuvabitch in the fleet, the reason was that the damn zippers were good for about six months. They were lousy... And some brilliant wiseman in Fleet Supply came up with a solution... Stop making them out of brass and go to plastic... Man, that was a bright solution. We never solved that problem... We just buttoned them up and lived with water that came in between the buttons.

Years before I rode the boats, some inventive bastard came up with the solution to the need for a seagoing ashtray. Some clown took a number 10 bean can with a doubled coathanger wire hook to hang on overhead pipe and interior air lines. We made hooks to hang on bunk chains for all sorts of weird crap. Such a display usually lasted about as long as it took for the Chief of The Boat to eyeball it and yell,

"Get that gahdam shit down... *NOW!!*"

COBs have very little tolerance for individual personal inventive expression and the ability to accommodate the storage of extraneous bullshit. Chiefs never acquire unruly collections of extraneous crap. As you accumulate hashmarks, your need for the simple pleasures of life becomes so damn simple you can pack everything in a bunk bag and a couple of side lockers.

They taught us the basic principles of refrigeration. Evaporation is basically what cools things down. So when the temperature reached a point where you could incubate baby chicks, the lads soaked their skivvy shirts in water and wore them when they hit the rack. We all did it... Personal air conditioning. A soaked tee shirt would cool you down enough to allow you to roll off to sleep and in eight hours your body heat and the interior bake oven temperature

would make you wake up dry... Smelling like a Russian acrobat, but dry... And you could fill a saltshaker from the arm pits.

We made mats out of gasket material to keep our plates from sliding all over Hell and half Georgia in heavy seas. It worked... The same couldn't be said for peas and beans. One morning the Skipper said,

"I've noticed a lot of scantily-clad female pictures when I tour the boat. I don't want to continue to see that sort of thing. Am I fully understood?"

"Aye sir."

After quarters we were standing around peeing and moaning.

"Hey Chief... That mean we gotta evict Janet Pilgrim?"

"You dumb bastards... You don't listen too goddam well do you? The old man said, he don't wanna see no more of them titty pictures... So you frigging idiots gotta put em where the skipper don't see th' damn things. Have I gotta wet nurse you sonuvabitches all the goddam time? Whenna ya gonna wake up' an start thinkin' on yer feet?"

So if you wanted to inventory nekkit lady fittings, you had to go places where the officers never went... Lower flats... Inside panels of ratchet head doors, sonar shack... Pump room... Dry storage locker and taped on the inside of every sidelocker door in the After Battery. Hell, the inside of the A.B. Goatlocker looked like the National Gallery of Nekkit Women Art. Proving that you didn't have to become a homo to collect hashmarks.

If there was a way to fix stuff, a boatsailor would find it. We jumped circuits with little pieces of wire... Cut gaskets out of a rubber boot... Made linkage pins out of a cold rolled steel rod... Use two Pyrex bowls to elevate our motion picture projector when the elevation leg broke... We even repaired a key on the Yeoman's typewriter with a letter cut out of a dogtag and filed down. We repaired things just to get enough time out to them to allow us to get back to Mother Onion, our tender... Sort of the diesel boat equivalent of putting a penny behind the burned out fuse in the fuse box until you can get to the store.

The best 'make do' we ever had on Requin was our bridge windshield. When they converted fleet subs to Guppy boats they gave them a plexi-glass, retractable quarter-globe windshield. The old high sail fleetboat conversions didn't get them. We got to feeling like redheaded stepchildren... So one of our officers went over to the Naval Air Station at Breezy Point and he cumshawed a nose bubble off a P2V Neptune bomber. He hauled it up to the sheet metal shop on Mother Onion, along with 40 lbs of coffee in two twenty-pound cans. He brought back the goddamdest looking contraption ever bolted on the bridge of a U.S. submarine.

The nose bubble on a P2V Neptune was elongated and looked like a giant transparent Pope's hat when cut in half. We bolted the weird looking sonuvabitch on the bridge... It may have looked like hell but it sure worked... And it more than made up for all the ribbing we took from all the wisecracking bastards in the squadron.

I get the distinct impression that a lot of the individualism that characterized the old 'don't give a rat's ass' smokeboat force, would be out of place today.

Take ships' insignia... In the old force, the insignia of a boat was usually a humorous, happy-go-lucky rendition of a fish or marine life character. They made you smile. They were funny... Sharks spitting out torpedoes... Crabs biting Japs in the ass... Sharks wearing white hats and smoking cigars... The men... The lads who rode the boats, created them and the good natured personality of the boatservice as we knew it.

Today, the insignias are mostly professionally designed official logos, that in my opinion look like hell... Look like signs on chain-operated hotels or over the doors of college dorms. Another 'change for the better' that has fallen far short of anything resembling progress. Once again proving that there is absolutely no link between change and improvement. A change that negates and diminishes tradition is not necessarily a good thing. Once lost, traditions are rarely returned to you... They become history and have a life that expires with the men who lived them.

The Hallmark of the Diesel Submarine Force was making do with what we had and laughing at those who gave up before they figured out a way to get the goddam job done.

Dex