

# The After Battery Rat

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## Being a Torpedo Pusher

One morning I was eating my customary in-port breakfast... Three eggs scrambled, Spam and toast. I can't be the only sonuvabitch in the known world who loves Spam... The supermarket shelves are packed with Spam cans and I'm sure as hell not supporting that kind of production at the rate of a couple cans a week. I just may be the only guy who will admit it... It's like IC Electricians having sex with owls... They all do it but none of them own up to it.

Where in th' hell was I? Oh yeah, I was wrapping myself around morning chow when the COB comes up, puts his hand on my shoulder and tells me to lay topside when I get through "Stuffing my face." (Chief had the social grace of things that lived in trees in Kenya).

I finished... Scraped my scraps into the sharpshooter bucket, handed my plate to the kid douching dishes in the deep sink, made no attempt to tuck my shirttail in and climbed topside. It became clear that the Chief of the Boat and I were going to have another 'father and son' discussion about the course of my future. These intimate moments always began, "Armstrong, I am firmly convinced that you are not as stupid as you do your best to convince me you are... Nobody is that gahdam worthless. There are times when you appear quite smart... Then, you go and do something very dumb and destroy my faith in you... Why do you do that? Why do you take pride in being Clown King of the Second Fleet? Where is your ambition? Where is your desire to seek advancement and rise to the leadership challenge presented by service in submarines? Armstrong, what IS your problem?"

"Listening to this bullshit every time you and I have one of these 'Come to Jeezus' sessions."

"Dex, I am just about to toss your worthless butt into the bullring of life. From this point on, consider yourself a torpedoman striker."

"Jeezus Christ Chief... Is this negotiable? Is there anything short of an abnormal sex act that you would take to forget we had this little career adjustment conversation?"

"Get used to it, sweet pea."

"Does this mean I gotta go up to the forward room and listen to old men snore... Officers going to the head... Stewards cuss in Filipino... And the gahdam ocean trying to flatten bow buoyancy?"

"No, the deal I made with Dyshart to take you, specifically stated that you would remain the Crown Prince of Idiotville in the after battery alley. Your new sea daddy will adopt you only if you live in another location in case lunacy is contagious."

And that was how I became a torpedoman. I was the victim of a kind of shotgun wedding...

"Fleet idiot, do you take heavy tubular ordinance for your wedded wife? To love, honor and obey until your DD 214 doth part?"

"I do."

"Do you torpedo gang, take this self-professed jerk... To love, honor and obey... To crush his toes... Put knots on his head... To dive tubes... To check NAVOL monitors... Rig

## Dex Armstrong's Writings

New Contributing Writer for Sirago Newsletter

### From "Dex" Armstrong to Mike Bickel:

Please do anything you wish with my inane ramblings. Your e-mail is one of the kindest, most considerate communications I have ever gotten. Put simply, you touched the heart of an old bottom feeding E-3 who loved his service in the boats.

I was blessed to have ridden boats with fine Officers and senior Petty Officers, who showed remarkable toleration with a young idiot... and under whose guidance I grew from boy to man. I will be forever grateful and indebted to them for what influence they had on the man I became. You could grow a two-mile high rose bush by extracting the horse manure from my stories. They are sea stories written in an old coots attempt to validate his credentials as a lad who was given both the honor and opportunity to serve under the fine leadership of the best force ever assembled. I would never represent myself as anything but what I was...an idiot E-3 who wore silver dolphins and was not bolted to the planet. The stories are written for raghats who were idiots like myself, in a vernacular we all knew but remains unfit for a Methodist picnic or ladies sewing circles.

We nested alongside Sirago many nights...she was an address on the saltwater street where I lived. Sir, you put a smile on an old bluejackets face. It is nice to know that there is someone who lived in the Forward Battery who does not want to coat me with tar and feathers and ride me off Pier 22 on a rail. Those stories are love letters written to the Goddess of the Main Induction that I loved then ...and still do. *-Dex*



loading hatches... Clean Cosmoline-covered spare parts... To check exploders... To be little Miss Mary Sunshine gopher and low man on the totem pole whore for every sadistic animal calling himself a torpedoman?"

"I do."

"I now pronounce you man and gang. You may now kiss all the torpedo pusher's fannies."

And that was how it was. How a kid from East Tennessee was kidnapped and forced to marry the ugly toad that never became a princess.

My career change put me in direct contact with mature senior rated men... Family men so gahdam henpecked that they had to make a deal with 'Rent-A-Set', the testicle leasing folks, to enjoy overseas liberty. They taught me the torpedoman's trade and I taught them how to double team and steal anything not firmly fastened to Orion's hull. Being a Master Orion Thief was a real asset.

Loved the torpedo gang... Great guys. The low man got to be the owner-operator of the forward and after signal ejectors... The Pyrotechnic Prince. I got to shoot 'smokes and flares'... Wrestle Mark 14s and 16s... Mark 27s and 37s... And clean the lower flats. I got to rig the torpedo recovery boom and handle a vang line... And a snubber when we slid 'em back into an elevated skid in the forward room. And I got the honor of re-establishing the collapsible frame you had to drop to get fish into the room. If it weighed a ton and had to be monkeyed with, it belonged to Mr. Career Ladder Climber.

Requin had no tubes aft. When they converted her to be a radar picket in the 40s, they cut out the four after tubes and never reinstalled them when they converted her back to straight 'SS'. They put in a big 'poker table' with a horseshoe-shaped seat that had over padded red naugahide cushions.

It was a great place for poker and beer... Convenient too, allowing you to dispose of empty beer cans by shooting the sonuvabitches out of the signal ejector. Because of this unique feature, it was not unusual to see the heavy hitters of the payday poker games crossing the nest and dropping down Requin's after hatch.

"0600... Gentlemen, straight stud or draw poker... No bugs... None of that one-eyed jack shit... No gahdam Girl Scout camp games... Nobody is interested in any games your gahdam grandmother taught you when you were sick... High-low split pots are okay... Any friggin game invented in Louisiana and played by Cajuns is out... Oh, You, Tee, OUT! Any game that takes more than 15 seconds to explain is out. Progressive pots are a no-no... Nickel, dime, quarter, and maximum three raises... After 2300... Table stakes shoot-the-moon poker until Saturday morning prep flag. Should the sound-powered phone buzz three times indicating wardroom occupant heading aft, chips in table pot go in the Colonel Sanders Chicken bucket, all hands get tossed into this white hat that goes into this side locker and players responsible to get money and chips in their pockets... Put full cans or partially full cans in the locker with the Pabst Blue Ribbon sticker on it... And shoot the signal ejector. When the officer steps through the watertight door, I will say '...and she had a glass eye.' and everyone laughs. You got it?"

The torpedomen were responsible for the coordination of enlisted vice and clandestine activity.

As time passed by, I did my damnedest to mature but in spite of my disconnect with the planet, I recognized the wisdom of my placement. Torpedomen are strange folks... I fit right in.

When I see nuke movies, I see the fish running into the tubes by some hydraulic ramming system. I wonder if the lads of the present force know that there was a time when torpedo ordinance was as heavy as an average car and grown men had to jackass the sonuvabitches into the tubes. Having been part of the jackass team, I can tell you that the distance from skid to stop bolt was a mile and a half on a hard reload night. It cost a gallon of sweat and made for an interesting evening... We didn't need exercise bikes, weights or treadmills to get a workout on Requin.

We were good at what we did... Not bragging, that's just a fact. Officers felt good about our record of dependability.

One night, we had a malfunction on a one fish shot. The damn thing cleared the outer door, failed to activate and went straight to the bottom.

Over the conn circuit, we heard the word 'Range'.

I was standing close to the guy holding the forward room handset. I said,

"The only way those sonuvabitches will get any range on that one will be for the Old Man to throw the old girl into reverse."

My comments were picked up on the handset and within the hour I got called to the wardroom.

"Armstrong..."

"Aye, sir."

"Armstrong, your worst enemy is your big mouth."

"Aye, sir."

"Your comment didn't win you the Mr. Wonderful Award in the conn tonight."

"Aye, sir."

"Do you want to be the ship's clown... Is that what you're striking for?"

That hurt... Because it was true.

After that, I eventually became a respected member of a great gang. I was still stupid... I still stepped on my crank occasionally, but I worked at being good.

A couple of months later, we delivered two critical hits on a firing evolution. We got a 'Well done' from the Old Man. Chief Long grabbed the handset and said,

"Sir, both were maintained and loaded by the ship's clown."

"Damn fine work... Clown."

From then on, things were great. The gang was great.

Torpedo pushers were a rare breed who never tired of telling the entire crew that their entire purpose was to get us to where we could deliver lethal valentines to nasty people. It was our way of triggering interesting reactions.

If you weren't a torpedo pusher, you missed something wonderful... The forward room was a great place to work... Except when the damn stewards racked out up in the Bridal Suite below the loading hatch and played their gahdam ukes and sang weird songs... And when officers sang in the shower.