

The After Battery Rat

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Once We Rode Smokeboats

One of the most gratifying things about writing these goofball recollections has been the e-mail I have received from numerous old 'out to pasture' bastards who have taken the time to say they approve and remember. That's a gift and deeply appreciated.

I hope I have never characterized myself as anything other than a full-of-oats jerk... Because that was all I ever was. An idiot who was damned proud to be accepted by my wonderful shipmates and who was the silly sidekick of the most loyal shipmate a bluejacket ever had... Adrian Stuke. Adrian Stuke would have freely given me anything he had and he knew he could count on the same from me... Unfortunately, as boat sailors at our level on the social scale, we never had a helluva lot.

We worked hard... No shirker lasted long in small boat service. There was no way to disguise sloth and worthlessness in an 80-man crew. You had to pull your load or you would find yourself in another line of work. I never heard the words 'loafin' bastard' and 'hardcore submariner' used in the same sentence. Stuke and I would have rather had the COB slap us on the shoulder, shake our hands and say... "You worthless sonuvabitches never cease to amaze me... You do good work." than get a medal.

And we did do good work. The only way to earn respect on a diesel boat was to do a good job. Officers used the term... 'Well done.' Damn, those words made a young fellow feel good.

We all took a lot away from our tour in submarine duty than we ever recognized at the time. Honor, respect for damn hard work, patriotism, respect for the deeds of the men who gave us our gallant history... A high standard by which to judge leadership... And a deep appreciation for the highly qualified senior petty officers. Chiefs and senior POs made every diesel boat what it was. I was a raghat at test depth level in the stew pot of ships' company. Cussing Chiefs, and what appeared to me as old bastards at the time, was a way to pass time... It was cheap entertainment. But, we knew that these men were the men providing us the professional knowledge we would need to truly become worthy of calling ourselves submariners.

This is an enlisted chronicle. Most stuff written about submarines is written by officers, technical experts or self-appointed 'never been there' authorities. This is about enlisted men simply because I was a bluejacket and it was all I knew.

None of my seagoing expertise was of such value

Contribution from Dex

From Mike Bickel:

As we get closer to this next reunion, many of us are thinking about our favorite boat. Whether Sirago or Sea Leopard or some other favored smokeboat sister, we fondly reminisce. This is the subject of this issue's "After Battery Rat" provided, as always, by Dex Armstrong.



Mike

that I was consulted by commissioned personnel forward. Stuke and I were only invited forward to explain aberrant behavior like being overcome by an inebriated, uncontrollable urge to leapfrog parking meters on Granby Street or explain our participation in some dust up in Bells.

"When are you two bastards going to become 4 OH SAILORS?"...was a frequently asked question during our behavioral consultations. We never got into hot water of a depth requiring a 'mast' but we did find ourselves treading water in soup we had to explain. But, you tend to remember the pranks and monkeyshines. They represent the good times. The acceptable idiotic behavior expected from the young.

In recounting shenanigans, you tend to gloss over the truly meaningful. Things like the feeling a good man has when he simply watches the gentle rise and fall of your national colors aft of your conning tower... The feeling of organizational connection with submarine combat veterans. The thrill you felt when you raised a foreign shore or passed a large foreign ship on the open sea... The tug you felt at your heartstrings when you rendered shipboard honors to the Sub Force honored dead. There

were many such moments. Every American bluejacket, worth a damn, carries such memories in the lucky bag of his heart. It makes us what we are.

The simple mundane and seemingly endless moments spent at our mess tables at sea bonded us into a crew... It was at chow and play in our mess deck that we forged the deep lifelong friendships we all have... The only people who will ever understand us, truly appreciate the life we lived, will always be the men with which we shared coffee and bullshit conversation inside the pressure hulls of aged smokeboats. The names of the unshaven, sweat-soaked, good-hearted bastards we shared strong coffee with will be forever engraved in our hearts. We and we alone, knew the value of the insignia we had earned. We knew that each man we called 'shipmate' had proven himself as worthy of being 'Qualified in Submarines' by completing a difficult and highly demanding course of instruction. They had mastered the intricate details of both location and operation of all shipboard equipment. Every boat sailor knew he could fall asleep secure in the knowledge that the men on watch could properly react to contend with any situation, evolution or emergency that might arise.

At no other time in my life have I been associated with a team as professionally competent as a diesel boat crew. I say diesel boat crew simply because I freely admit that I don't know the first damn thing about any submersible that post-dated petroleum-powered undersea boats. We were a tight mob... A group of men dedicated to a singular purpose. I hope the men of today have similar feelings. We were taught that 'The ship comes first.' Any bluejacket who adopts that as the guiding principle upon which he bases his Naval service can only become a credit to himself, his shipmates and his ship. The reputation of a ship simply reflects the attitude and professionalism of her officers and men.

If you ever find yourself in the presence of a bluejacket or veteran who denigrates the name of his ship... He was most likely a bum. Ships with bad reputations incubate bums.

I am proud of every boat I rode... I was always taken in by the crews and had the privilege of serving with damn fine men... An experience that was not unique to me.

Not that anyone gives a damn, but given my service experience... If given the opportunity to find myself 18 once again in a recruiting office full of slick talking Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps goat ropers, I would say, "Which one of you silver-tongued bastards can get me a rack in whatever you clowns call the after battery, today?... And, oh yes... A clean coffee cup?"

I wouldn't trade any of it. Well, maybe the really cold, I mean nut-frosting hours on lookout watch and the freezing rain topside watch, a little less of that wouldn't be missed.

There is a patriotic selflessness in enlisted service. Officers are always, gentle and reserved. They spend so much time setting a proper example (properly so) that they collect proper memories... The raghats had a great bottom-up view of sea service... We met hookers... We butt-buffed barstools in dives, pubs and gin mills where generations of the world's bluejackets had tossed down suds and fondled women that would have been run out of your hometown on a rail.

I am sure that we tied up in locations that had sites worth visiting but raghats generally gravitated to places with absolutely no educational value whatsoever, unless you were compiling an international directory of the 'sump pits of the globe.' To us, it was where boat sailors were expected to go... There was always some qualified man who had been there before and knew where to go... So we followed him to some rat hole where beer was cheap and where you met very interesting women... Some of which could actually read and write... And all of which knew the exact amount 'American' it cost to get beyond her skivvies.

Old boat sailors can name fifty or more foreign beers... Make out the exchange rate of weird foreign currency... Remember barbequed monkey strips, strange fruit and drinking stuff an officer wouldn't use to clean a head with. Old boat sailors can remember passing forbidden bottles of assorted firewater around in a returning motor launch until the last man tossed the empty bottle over the side. They remember the return to quarterdecks of some of the finest ships that that ever plowed saltwater.

All we have now are those memories. I have since visited places we went as young men. We all have found that marriage and domestication has tamed us... And with a gentle bride in tow, it is impossible to visit the locations of enlisted good times.

This is rambling discourse originally intended to thank those of you who have followed this thread of bluejacket memories. Frankly, I am amazed that anyone out there gives a damn... But I really appreciate your kind support. I wish some real writer would capture the life we lived, but I doubt there would be a readership base to support such a publication... That's a bloody shame because there are universities that publish entire books on June bug reproduction and the gahdam political trends in places with populations you could fit in a VW bus. Somebody should be able to ferret out something of literary merit in the last years of the Diesel Submarine Navy. Not officers' stuff... It's all officer stuff... No, I would like to read a book about simple *Raghat Jack the Last of the Smokeboat Boys*. His life... His contribution to the history of the United States Submarine Service... A book that validates our existence and records our passing. Is that too much to ask?

And, oh yes, never let us forget that we served in a service where returning to your ship after giving your white hat to a wide-eyed five year old was always understood and forgiven with a smile.