

## **Boys In Blue** **by Bob 'Dex' Armstrong**

Once upon a time, many long years ago when the Navy paid E-3s less than a hundred bucks a month, and sailors still wore their uniform on leave, and hitching rides was the only way a submarine bottom feeder could go from point "A" to point "B", there was a place where you could find hundreds of idiots in dress canvas every Friday night.

It was called Falmouth, Virginia, just across the Rappahannock River from Fredericksburg. The proper name was Falmouth but to every bluejacket heading north it was 'foul-mouth'... The junction of route 17 and route 1. Starting at about six in the afternoon to well past midnight, it looked like three hundred yards of 'Popeye The Sailor Man'... Idiots and AWOL bags. One A-Bomb could have wiped out most of the Second Fleet.

It was a bizarre sight: sailors returning from overseas deployments hauling stuff home to mama, their girls or wives and dear old Aunt Tilly, were jackassing some of the damndest stuff ever seen on American highways after dark. One half in the bag tincan sailor stood there one night in 'freeze a penguin weather' next to a four-foot plaster statue of some Catholic saint... Must have been Our Lady of Frostbite... There we were, pea coat collars turned up... Hands in our pockets, white hats inverted to cover our ears... Stamping our feet and hoping for a ride... And there was this saint standing next to an AWOL bag with a 'Heading to Philly' cardboard sign propped up against her.

I remember some clown with a painting of a topless, well-endowed Polynesian girl on black velvet. Nobody was near the stupid bastard because you didn't need an I.Q. better than six to know that no Christian family would pick you up standing next to an artistic representation with bare tits as the focal point of its message.

Another guy had a giant witch doctor mask. I saw a kid wearing a foul weather jacket over a blue and white striped robe and hospital issue pajamas.

"Hey kid...I know it's none of my gahdam business, but what kind of uniform is that?"

"I'm in Norfolk Naval Hospital... They take your damn clothes and lock 'em up so you can't leave until the bastards turn you loose."

The kid proved that there was a big hole in that bright idea.

Everybody had a cardboard sign...

'Will help pay for gas.'  
'Just back, six months in the Med.'  
'Mother near death.'  
'Need ride to Baltimore.'  
'Trying to get to New York on a 72.'  
'New dad...boy...8lb. 6 oz.'  
'Going to sister's graduation.'  
'Heading to DC... Or anywhere near.'  
'Trying to get to Colts Game.'

I saw signs with more original bullshit than you could find in any major library in the world. You had to hand it to the U.S. Navy; we could create horse manure at a rate faster than Ringling Brothers and The Canadian Mounties combined.

In the summer all you had to contend with was heat, dust and mosquitoes... it was winter that was hell.

Fortunately, civilian drivers were sympathetic to sailors standing out in the cold. They were kind.

Many of you have warm memories of the kindness and generosity of your fellow citizens. Husbands and wives who had sons or daughters in uniform. Truck drivers who had served and old ladies who needed someone to spell them driving. Families with kids, little boys who wanted to wear your 'sailor hat'. Farmers hauling smelly animals who just wanted someone to talk to... Looking back, I met a lot of good people... Damn fine people.

Met a lot of good sailors too.

One night when I was freezing to death and figured I would walk across the U.S. 1 bridge over to Fredericksburg and get something to eat... Hit the head and warm up long enough for the bluejacket mob to thin out. I walked into a place called 'The Hot Shoppe.'

I hit the head. Got cleaned up... Took off my peacoat, hung it up, took a seat, then ordered a bowl of chili and a cup of coffee. While I was sitting there, a gentleman and his wife sat down at the table next to mine. The place was fairly empty. Then the man got up and came over.

"Pardon me, can't help noticing your Dolphins. Are you presently riding the boats?"

"Yes sir... USS Requin... The 481... Subron Six, Norfolk."

"I rode The USS so-in-so during the war... Would you be so kind to join us?"

I joined them. I was honored... They were so kind. When I sat down, the gentleman asked where I was heading.

"DC sir."

"You're in luck, we are heading to Washington... We'll just have dinner and have you in DC by ten or eleven."

"That would be great sir... Thank you."

"Now son, we're having dinner and we would like you to join us."

"Oh no sir... Couldn't do that... I just ordered some chili."

"I've cancelled that... I think I still outrank you. I am an active duty officer stationed in Washington... Now take this menu and order something substantial."

It is a fine memory. I have returned that favor many times.

I write this to explain to today's bluejacket that there was a time when we wore our uniform and were cordially embraced by a population that went out of its way to assist servicemen and honor their service. Volunteer service was accorded honor. We hitchhiked... It was not a forbidden practice. It allowed us to carry the pride we had in our service to the public.

I hope we haven't lost that... There have been a lot of changes in the Submarine Service but I hope the pride in wearing your uniform in public with silver Dolphins over your pocket has not grown outdated. That would be a gahdam crying shame.