

Give the Boatservice Back Tradition



by Bob 'Dex' Armstrong

Someday, the submarine force will find a leader who will have the insight to recognize the wisdom of returning a lot of the lighthearted tradition and give back some of the little things that meant so much to the old tattered foul weather jacket and raggedy dungaree force.

A good beginning would be to return the tradition of never pinning Dolphins on a dry shirt. It was a good tradition... Oh yes, I know the arguments against the tradition... Safety... Unnecessary risk. In the world of grown men... Adult, red-blooded bluejackets, that rationale is pure bullshit. The foundation of all military service is risk... The acceptance of risk in selfless service to one's nation. Tossing a lad into the ocean he lives in, involves minimal risk. Hell, strap a lifejacket on the lad. The honor of this baptismal ritual and the effect it had on a man's personal pride and his entry to ship's company and the fellowship of proven submariners, far outweighs the risk.

If you want boatsailors to reenlist... To remain for career service... You must give them back the cocky pride that once was ingrained in the men who wore cloth Dolphins just above the cuff of their right sleeve.

That can be done... It would take one hell of a force commander but it could be done.

First, de-emphasize all the personal benefits of specialized training as enticements to retain boatsailors and instead emphasize the brotherhood of undersea service. Riding heavy steel under the sea is the common denominator... Being taken in to that brotherhood used to be all that mattered. Wearing 'twin fish' over your pocket meant that you measured up... They marked you as a man apart... An accepted part of a very elite Naval Force... They made you special.

In the old days before the wholesale proliferation of all the meaningless bullshit pocket hardware that the Department of Defense uses as bribes to make kids appear to be warriors... The golden calf icons of mediocrity that get handed out like Crackerjack prizes that mean nothing... The lads of today know in their hearts that they risked nothing, dared nothing and sacrificed nothing for 90% of the meaningless chest jewelry they wear. Quit treating men like children and handing out toy horsecrap. All that the men of yesterday required was the privilege of serving in submarines.

There is something wrong with a military force where peacetime junior enlisted personnel wear more ribbons than a field grade officer who fought from North Africa to the Rhine. It is a silent insult devised and perpetuated by small-bore command leadership to diminish the deeds of the giants of what Tom Brokaw has termed 'The Greatest Generation'. The desk bound public relation hacks have missed the mark. By inflating awards and turning American decorations to ticket punch milestones, everyone got shortchanged and brave men whose valor was rewarded with the decorations that have become travel souvenirs, got their pockets picked by the feather-merchants who piss on the tradition of hard men who rode armed ships in defense of what they believe in.

Let sailors go back to crushing wings in their goddam white hats. Who in God's name came up with that toilet bowl roll white hat crap? They ought to find them and hang all of them up by their heels. I see ships returning from overseas deployment and the bluejackets lining the rail looking like the navy has parked bidets on everyone's head... Give the lads back that seagoing cocky crushed white hat... The one worn by men that threw heavy ordnance, went in harms' way and won wars.

The world once witnessed proud American sailors rolling down streets in foreign ports with white hats rakishly cocked over one eye with a set of characteristic port and starboard wings... His wallet clamshelled in his waistband and his pack of Luckies tucked in his sock.

The brass will puff themselves up like a mating barn owl and say, "The United States Naval uniform is not meant to be a vehicle for personal expression and individual affectation."

Horseshit.

It used to be. It set us apart from the chickenshit regulation of the other robot handpuppet forces. Sailors never took a pee by the numbers or spent a whole helluva lot of time memorizing Rockettes routines. It was a force of extremely proud, highly competent individuals who took pride in buying tailormades and looking like a damn sailor was supposed to look.

You've gotta ease up on the lads today... Give them back that means of self identification. The poor bastards look like some toy manufacturers idea of what a sailor should look like or what some fashion designers imagined our navy should be wearing. Navy leadership should remove anyone from influencing naval uniforms who never woke up in a stretched canvas rack six hundred plus nautical miles from the nearest deep water port. Any idiot who never wore snug-nut skivvies and thirteen-button bell bottoms shouldn't be allowed within ten miles of any decision on raghat uniforms.

Next, you must reconnect present-day submarine sailors with their heritage. I have talked with a number of lads riding today's technological marvels. Most of them feel no connection with any non-uranium powered submersible.

We were fortunate. We shared mess tables with the boatsailors who rode boats under Lockwood, skippered by the meateaters that destroyed more enemy ships than any American sub sailors before... Or since. They handed us our heritage... Our birthright as submarine sailors. In those days heritage was passed from the barnacle encrusted bastards to the next generation in sea stories told over coffee.

That can't be done today...

The old 'Dead air and seven knot submerged' bastards are gone. There are no more pre E-8 and E-9 red hashmark Chiefs... No guys who listened to fifty pound TNT packages detonate and bust up crockery, gauge faces and hull packing. They are history... Rickover relegated the sonuvabitches to the pier dumpster for obsolete gear.

I know that the lads who make up the crews of those two hundred yard, high speed automated undersea luxury liners look on smokeboat sailors as Neanderthal relics, but like it or not, they are downline links in the hundred year chain of submarine history.

Some submarine force commander is going to wake up one day and have the spiritual revelation required to give our submarine history to our fine sailors of today. You say,

"How in hell could THAT be accomplished?"

Simple really... The History of the force exists in books... Film... Logs, records, diaries and in the graying heads of the men who lived it. The men whose deeds gave us our proud legacy.

With minimal expenditure and use of limited manpower resources, the United States Submarine Force could prepare a series of underway lectures... After chow... Talks to be read by junior officers when the boat is underway. A gentleman by the name of Theodore Roscoe wrote a book about *Submarine Operations of World War II*. Simply reading from that book would connect today's submariners to a very important part... The most important era in our history. The book should be a part of every boat's library the day she's launched. They spend zillions on subs, so a fifty to sixty dollar book that can be obtained from The U.S. Naval Institute in Annapolis shouldn't knock a helluva dent in the developmental piggy bank... The return on investment would be measured in improved pride, elevated morale and warrior spirit.

We diesel boat sailors had little or nothing in comparison to today's crew comforts taken for granted by today's submariners. But we had deep pride in what we were a part of. We didn't share our boats with follow-on crews. We were the boat. We owned our hull number... Every bolt, rivet and packing gland... And every rust stain that ran down our superstructure.

Let us pray that some saltwater admiral turns up someday with a set of deep submergence cajones and sends the word to every boat in the force to the effect that all this Top Gun, Navy SEAL horseshit is about to take a backseat to the tough seagoing bastards that make up the community of undersea sharks. He is going to elevate the visibility of the U.S. Submariner to the point where eight-year old boys want to grow up and get on a bus to New London.

Hey, I'm just an old worn-out E-3. Nobody in possession of his right mind would listen to an After Battery Rat... But if I was SUBPAC or SUBLANT, I would (a) find out what Art Smith, Ron "Warshot" Smith, Roy Ator and Capt. Slade Cutter eat for breakfast and serve it every morning and (b) I would buy Tommy Cox and Bobby Reeds's 'Brothers of The Dolphin' CD and play the damn thing every morning on every boat in the fleet until every lad knew the words by heart... And could sing it in any bar on the globe. And I would play that song at 0600 every morning at New London at a decibel level over outdoor speakers that would knock every sonuvabitch at the Coast Guard Academy out of his rack. Hell, I would have noise pollution guys from the E.P.A. skydiving on the base with tiger nets. That is one of the many reasons that the people up forward rarely sought advice from idiots aft. But seriously... The boatservice became a dysfunctional family when Rickover's boys started considering the gravel gut service to be 'The other side of the tracks'. Officers never saw that, but we sure as hell did.

We can change that... All we have to do is do what raghats do best. Look on each other as shipmates and take back our deeply meaningful history and tradition that link us in the tightest brotherhood ever created. If you wore Dolphins 'once upon a time', then join the United States Submarine Veterans, Inc. (click on the link) and show your support for the lads riding steel ships under the sea in selfless sacrifice in defense of this fine nation.

They are our legacy.

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