

## LIBERTY BARS

Our favorite liberty bars were unlike no other watering holes or dens of iniquity inhabited by seagoing men and women. They had to meet strict standards to be in compliance with the acceptable requirement for a sailor beer-swilling dump.

The first and foremost requirement was a crusty old gal serving suds. She had to be able to wrestle King Kong to parade rest. Be able to balance a tray with one hand, knock bluejackets out of the way with the other hand and skillfully navigate through a roomful of milling around drunks. On slow nights, she had to be the kind of gal who would give you a back scratch with a fly swatter handle or put her foot on the table so you could admire her new ankle bracelet some "mook" brought her back from a Hong Kong liberty.

A good barmaid had to be able to whisper sweet nothings in your ear like, "Sailor, your thirteen button flap is twelve buttons short of a green board." And, "Buy a pack of Clorets and chew up the whole thing before you get within heaving range of any gal you ever want to see again." And, "Hey animals, I know we have a crowd tonight, but if any of you guys find the head facilities fully occupied and start urinating down the floor drain, you're gonna find yourself scrubbing the deck with your white hats!"

They had to be able to admire great tattoos, look at pictures of ugly bucktooth kids and smile. Be able to help haul drunks to cabs and comfort 19 year-olds who had lost someone close to them. They could look at your ship's identification shoulder tab and tell you the names of the Skippers back to the time you were a Cub Scout.

If you came in after a late night maintenance problem and fell asleep with a half eaten Slim-Jim in your hand, they tucked your peacoat around you, put out the cigarette you left burning in the ashtray and replaced the warm draft you left sitting on the table with a cold one when you woke up. Why? Simply because they were one of the few people on the face of the earth that knew what you did, and appreciated what you were doing. And if you treated them like a decent human being and didn't drive 'em nuts by playing songs they hated on the juke box, they would lean over the back of the booth and park their soft warm breasts on your neck when they sat two Rolling Rocks in front of you.

Imported table wipe down guy and glass washer, trash dumper, deck swabber and paper towel replacement officer. The guy had to have baggy tweed pants and a gold tooth and a grin like a 1950 Buick. And a name like "Ramon", "Juan", "Pedro" or "Tico". He had to smoke unfiltered Luckies, Camels or Raleighs. He wiped the tables down with a sour wash rag that smelled like a skunk diaper and said, "How are choo navee mans tonight? He was the indispensable man. The guy with credentials that allowed him to borrow Slim-Jims, Beer Nuts and pickled hard boiled eggs from other beer joints when they ran out where he worked.

The establishment itself. The place had to have walls covered with ship and squadron plaques. The walls were adorned with enlarged unit patches and the dates of previous deployments. A dozen or more old, yellowed photographs of fellows named "Buster", "Chicago", "P-Boat Barney", "Flaming Hooker Harry", "Malone", "Honshu Harry", Jackson, Douche Bag Doug, and Capt. Slade Cutter decorated any unused space.

It had to have the obligatory Michelob, Pabst Blue Ribbon and "Beer Nuts sold here" neon signs. An eight-ball mystery beer tap handle and signs reading:

"Your mother does not work here, so clean away your frickin' trash."

"Keep your hands off the barmaid."

"Don't throw butts in urinal."

"Barmaid's word is final in settling bets."

"Take your fights out in the alley behind the bar!"

"Owner reserves the right to waltz your worthless sorry ass outside."

"Shipmates are responsible for riding herd on their ship/squadron drunks."

This was typical signage found in classy establishments catering to sophisticated as well as unsophisticated clientele.

You had to have a juke box built along the lines of a Sherman tank loaded with Hank Williams, Mother Maybelle Carter, Johnny Horton, Johnny Cash and twenty other crooning goobers nobody ever heard of. The damn thing has to have "La Bamba", Herb Alpert's "Lonely Bull" and Johnny Cash's "Don't take your guns to town" in memory of Alameda's barmaid goddess, Thelma. If Thelma is within a twelve-mile radius of where any of those three recordings can be found on a jukebox, it is wise to have a stack of life insurance applications within reach of the coin slot.

The furniture in a real good liberty bar had to be made from coal mine shoring lumber and was not fully acceptable until it had 600 cigarette burns and your ship's numbers or "FTN" carved into it. The bar had to have a brass foot rail and at least six Slim-Jim containers, an oversized glass cookie jar full of Beer-Nuts, a jar of pickled hard boiled eggs that could produce rectal gas emissions that could shut down a sorority party, and big glass containers full of something called Pickled Pigs Feet and Polish Sausage. Only drunk Chiefs and starving Ethiopians ate pickled pigs feet and unless the last three feet of your colon had been manufactured by Midas, you didn't want to get any where near the Polish Napalm Dogs.

No liberty bar was complete without a couple of hundred faded ship or airplane pictures and a "Shut the hell up!" sign taped on the mirror behind the bar along with several rather tasteless naked lady pictures. The pool table felt had to have at least three strategic rips as a result of drunken competitors and balls that looked as if a gorilla baby had teethed on the sonuvabitches.

Liberty bars were home and it didn't matter what country, state, or city you were in. When you walked into a good liberty bar, you felt at home. They were also establishments where 19 year-old kids received an education available nowhere else on earth. You learned how to "tell" and "listen" to sea stories. You learned about sex at \$25.00 a pop! -- from professional ladies who taught you things your high school biology teacher didn't know were anatomically possible. You learned how to make a two cushion bank shot and how to toss down a beer and shot of Sun Torry known as a "depth charge."

We were young, and a helluva long way from home. We were pulling down crappy wages for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a-week availability and loving the life we lived. We didn't know it at the time, but our association with the men we served with forged us into the men we became. And a lot of that association took place in bars where we shared the stories accumulated in our, up to then, short lives. We learned about women and that life could be tough on a gal.

While many of our classmates were attending college, we were getting an education slicing through the green rolling seas in WestPac, experiencing the orgasmic rush of a night cat shot, the heart pounding drama of the return to the ship with the gut wrenching arrestment to a pitching deck. The hours of tedium, boring holes in the sky late at night, experiencing the periodic discomfort of turbulence, marveling at the creation of St. Elmo's Fire, and sometimes having our reverie interrupted with stark terror.

But when we came ashore on liberty, we could rub shoulders with some of the finest men we would ever know, in bars our mothers would never have approved of, in saloons and cabarets that would live in our memories forever.

Long live those liberties in WestPac and in the Med! They were the greatest teachers about life and how to live it.

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Ships that can not STEAM are no longer weapon systems. They are monuments to failure and have neither impressed nor sunk an enemy. FADM Ernest J. King

Some people called it WESPAC, Holy Loch, or the MED, I called it home.