

## **There were thresholds in time...**

Milestones you never recognized until years later that marked the progress of those who today call themselves veteran smokeboat sailors. Men who became ships company in petroleum powered submersibles with hull numbers that mostly started with numbers below the mid 500 range, will remember.

By the time the Old Man pinned Dolphins on you, you had gone through at least one pair of Mammy Yokums, your white hats weren't boot camp stuff anymore...

You knew what a peacoat button popping off and hitting a bar-room floor sounded like... How to fold the jacket inside out on the inside and zip it up to tuck under your head when you crawled into an empty rack...And you owned faded dungarees.

By that time you had a nickname.... "The Chinese Whore", "Wingnut", "Fly", "Doc", "Rat", "Hobo", "Dipstick", "Yo-Yo Man", "Crunch", ... You remember.

Hanging nicknames on each other was a baptismal necessity for acceptance by boat sailors.

Prior to pinning on your silver fish, you had probably dirtied up five or six aprons messcooking and either dumped ten tons of leftovers in the ocean or jackassed them to a pier dumpster. You had stood a couple of hundred topside watches and ridden herd on several hundred returning drunks.

You had written "All lines secure, moored as before" a million times in a green cloth covered book, ...

Consumed enough coffee to float your tender, and taken enough late night pees on the screwguards to qualify you as a division landmark...

The seat of your liberty whites had butt-buffed every horizontal surface at Bells Bar to include the bar counter, the pool table rail, tables, benches and the top of the juke box...

You had figured out that the only way you would ever be able to hold on to a gahdam watch cap was to go to the small stores on Orion and buy two for every sonuvabitch riding the boat...

Experience had taught you that stenciling your name on stuff meant absolutely nothing in the submarine service.

Your high school had told you that in communist countries nobody owned anything. Everything belonged to everybody. Hogans' Alley on Requin must have been a hotbed of closet communists. Back there everyones gear was up for grabs...

To include racks and blankets...With the exception of a thriving blackmarket in sidelockers. When anyone got orders and shoved off, vultures stood by with master combination locks to homestead vacated real estate.

It was impossible to hold onto paperback books. If you fell asleep reading page ten of a Harold Robbins' novel, you woke up to find it had developed legs and walked off. It would show up two months later in the after battery head tucked behind the Yarway levelometergauge.

By the time everyone on the boat owned at least one of your original black sock issue, it was perfectly legal for qualified men to kill, cook and eat non-qualified men for a variety of infractions not specifically enumerated anywhere in the known world. And if a non-qual ever changed the station on the RBO, when a bunch of old coots were playing Acey-Deucey or Hearts, he could be crammed in the GDU and shot out.

You learned that there was a helluva lot of stuff about the submarine force they forgot to fill you in on at New London.

You had discovered that when a Chief started with, "Back when I qualified..." You were in for thirty minutes of total horseshit about the days when Noah packed diesel boats with two of every kind of animal he could locate to include one that grew up to become a Chief Petty Officer.

You had actually witnessed men, selected for their sharp minds, the elite of the fleet, open beer bottles with their teeth and spit out the cap. You had learned that bad Chevron packing could be taken care of with wire and a number #10 can... Checked regularly to keep the Atlantic Ocean from running into your side locker and lousing up your cigarettes...

Or you could stow your Marlboros in a water proof container and say to hell with it.

You could look at the Watch, Quarter and Station bill and see your name five or six times with lines drawn through it where the COB had bounced you from deck force to messcooking a couple of times. You had learned that being allowed to use the officers head in the forward torpedo room during battle stations did not automatically improve your I.Q or put you in touch with the big picture...It just meant that your butt had been in direct contact with the world of forbidden pleasure...

And you had hung around the brow a number of times waiting for a departing shipmate to arrive topside hauling all his earthly goods in a canvas bag, just so you could tell him good-bye, shake his hand and tell him to stay away from naughty girls and the nuclear navy...

And you never knew how much he meant to you at the time.... Or the number of stories you would tell on him in years to come.

And things happened. Your rag hats got soft... Your dungarees faded... The cuffs on your foul weather jacket frayed... You figured out how to sew buttons back on your peacoat... And that hot coffee with a little North Atlantic water from over the bridge was not half bad and that you had become a blood brother in a tribe of idiots with whom you would be forever linked.