

We Will Always Remember Our Boats

by Bob 'Dex' Armstrong

Boats have personalities. I know that would seem strange to a person who never rode one. They have no point of reference. There is nothing in civilian life that can steal your heart like a sweet-running submarine.

The rascals had a sinister look because we have been conditioned by their history to look on them as we look on killer sharks. If you consider what a service that was relatively small in comparison to our total forces deployed did in World War II, it is not without reason that our underwater boat service carries such a reputation. We literally shot the bottom out of Jap shipping. The floor of the Pacific is littered with the rusting hulks that comprised the Japanese merchant fleet. These small boats hauling 24 torpedoes and 80 men parked the majority of undelivered logistical support destined to support Tojo's little fanatical monkeys, beyond reach. The men who rode those boats spent their wartime service, alone far beyond the lines of U.S. controlled waters deep in hostile territory. They were, and remain, damn special people and on the list of my personal heroes, those tough case-hardened bastards head the list.

So, they handed us ships with well-established lethality and a silver pocket insignia with a proud history and an awesome reputation.

The boats looked lean and mean. Even laying alongside the pier, submarines look like hungry carnivores waiting on a meal.

When you first go aboard an operating diesel boat. Your first thought is, "Jeezus, how in the hell do men exist in these cramped rascals for weeks at a time?"

It had nothing to do with claustrophobia. They made sure you weren't carrying a dose of that at New London.

Like a kid said at Great Lakes, "Doc, I ain't got no diseases I can't spell."

No, you took one look at the inside of a boat and your illusions of a life of swashbuckling action and adventure did a swan dive down the dumper. They were jam packed with all sorts of pipes, valves, mechanical stuff and the human element seemed to have just wrapped itself around all that crap. But, the happy-go-lucky sonuvabitches didn't seem to care.

"Hey kid. You the new guy?"

"I guess so."

"Where you from?"

"East Tennessee originally, but I'm living up near D.C. now."

"East Tennessee. Christ, you're gonna be right at home. The boat is crawlin' with you damn hillbilly bastards. West Virginia, Kentucky. Hell, you name it and we'll have some damn hick from there."

"Where YOU from?"

"New Jersey. Gods' country."

"Been through New Jersey, God sure picked a dump to live in."

"You're gonna fit in, kid... You've got a mouth on you. There's two side lockers over on the port side. Jack'll show you. Stow your gear and d anything you can't fit in there goes in a locker you rent up at Bells, in a box to mail home or you can shitcan it on the pier."

"You mean all I get is two of those bread box lookin' things?"

"Boy, you Tennessee boys figure stuff out real fast. You must be one of those rare bastards who made it past the third grade."

"Yeah. In fourth grade, they taught you to be smart enough to never move to New Jersey."

"Hey Horsefly. When do we eat around here?"

"Hell, hillbilly man, you'll find out. You're gonna be dishing it out. Now, go stow your gear, get in your dungarees and haul your non-qual ass up to the messdeck."

It wasn't exactly like being welcomed to the neighborhood by the Chamber of Commerce, but I was to come to know that it was the first step in the chain of acceptance and that being 'roughed up' by a shipmate, having 'tin cans tied to your tail' was a friendly gesture. If the animals didn't like you they wouldn't rag you. They just ignored non-producers and got rid of them.

In a short time, the boat became home. You didn't worry about lack of space, you just crawled over each other like rats in a rat tunnel.

At sea, the walking surface moved. Sometimes like an oil drum bouncing down a mountain. The human body could take a helluva beating in high seas. You just cussed and bounced off everything in the boat including valve handles, hatch frames and every idiot who volunteered for sub duty knew that being smacked all over hell and half Georgia was just part of the package.

One thing always amazed me. Heavy seas in the North Atlantic were unbelievable. Mountains of raging water rising and falling in powerful swells. Your ship got constantly smashed by towering walls of black water. The old girl took it all. She gyrated in all directions. Creaked and d groaned but she kept going. You couldn't help but admire the minds behind her design and appreciate the strength of the old girl.

You became so confident in her ability to withstand anything, that you could rack out and fall asleep like a baby in a raging sea. When you could do that, you and your boat had become lifelong lovers.

To everyone but submarine sailors that must sound stupid, but if you ever attended a reunion where a boat and the lads who rode her came together, you would see an aging bastard cross the brow and pat inanimate objects topside to pay their respect to an old girl that has always owned a piece of their heart. An old flame they will never forget. An old saltwater whore who showed them a good time for a chipping hammer back rub and hundreds of coats of paint. Nobody remembers when a ship inched her way into his heart. But all we know is that she did. It was a subtle seduction where you just woke up one day and she'd stenciled her hull numbers on your heart.

And you connected with the men you served with for the simple reason that what you did, how you lived and the things that made up your life and the pride you had, would never be understood by anyone else in your life. It would never be as important or mean as much as it did to those who experienced it. Together. The crew.



We had the ship and we will always have each other.