

What an 'After Battery' Was - by Bob "Dex" Armstrong

They don't have them anymore. Well, they may have some for small-scale work but submarines don't carry anything like the 252 tons of batteries we carried. We hauled 126 tons aft and 126 tons forward, resulting in the professional hallmark of the main power Electrician... The most acid-eaten dungarees in the U.S. Navy.

The batteries aft were housed below the walking deck of the compartment that served as a kind of Sherwood Forest for the enlisted 'merry men' that made up the ships companies of what were this country's diesel submarines.

The After Batteries of the nation's submarines once served as the jolly clubhouses of some of the most materially deprived, hardest working, fun loving bastards that ever served at sea. It was a place where over time thin-skinned bluejackets grew armadillo hides and personal insult and leg pulling reached heights that would never be fully understood by the sensitive wing-clipped technicians of today's force. Nobody had to prove he was a good guy... A team player or one of the most generous bastards that ever lived... His Dolphins said that and his goodness was certified by the simple fact that he was accepted by his shipmates. This left him free to hurl outrageous insult, baseless, totally absurd accusations... And insensitive attacks on everything people hold dear. It was ships' entertainment... Kind of a playground game.

We were far beyond the civilizing influence of feminine contact. Nobody in his or her right mind would have considered stationing female naval personnel on a smokeboat... For the same reason that at the time, the Girl Scouts weren't holding Brownie meetings in gorilla cages at the zoo.

America still had places where red-blooded American boys could be rowdy and do and say what has since become socially unacceptable... And damn, it was fun. Nobody died, became irreversibly psychologically damaged or had his soul consigned to hell beyond future salvation. Submarines were iron canisters of rowdy fun-loving lads who engaged in a level of naughtiness that would have brought down celestial lightning bolts on a church picnic. The humor was original, engaged in by all and relentless. Like prize fighting, if you dropped your guard and left a sensitive nerve exposed, left a vulnerable opening... You got tagged. That was how it worked... The rules were simple. If you didn't want to play... Get a transfer or go find a quiet place and slit your throat. Until you figured out one of the two choices... Stay the hell out of the alligator pit that was the 'After Battery'.

We received zero instruction in sensitivity and consideration of inner feelings. We didn't engage in lockstep behavior or mutual kitty licking. That would have been laughed off as total absolute Bulls..t.

We were all big boys and bouncing stuff off each other was a major part of the life we loved. There is a line in Owen Wisters, western classic, The Virginian where the Virginian tells Trampas, "When you call me a sonuvabitch, smile."

We did a lot of smiling.

A modern submariner would probably find it impossible to understand, but beneath all the crap you would have found as fine a body of men as any that have given selfless, dedicated service to this nation.

Our problem seems to be that we never changed. Down-line, the sub force started to go with quiet machine spaces, clean air and the poopie suit of the day. Submarine skippers started crying on the televised evening news, the President found himself apologizing to nations responsible for the wanton death of millions... And, we never went through the attitude scrubber or had our souls recalled for a sensitivity makeover.

We remain a pack of old crusty bastards who still throw our crayons in the air and don't give a damn if we color life way beyond the designated lines. Maybe we are weak-minded idiots because we can't live life or celebrate some form of service other than that, which we lived. Personally, I feel sorry for the poor, uniform of the day, bastards of the Sub Force today who have to get an authorization chit from the behavior monitor Chief, simply to sow oats and do a little pissing against the wind.

The sad fact is that you can't miss a life you never knew. When Hyman decided that technical competence was incompatible with diesel boats' happy-go-lucky professional competence, he created a eunuch society to go with decidedly weakened coffee in far more delicate cups. When you trade heavy rolls and sunsets, you lose.

If Rickover was around today and saw that adverse publicity newsprint involving his Navy far outweighs anything the peacetime smokeboat service ever racked up, I wonder what he would say. I wonder what he would say about his boat skippers up to their armpits in control room tourists running Disneyland OPS... Who knows? That might have been his vision of the future.

I miss it... I miss the hooting and hollering of good men. I miss the raw, unvarnished humor of the merry men of long ago. I miss not having a place where old men, who paid their dues at a time when forgoing crew comforts and gentlemanly hygiene were expected... A place where these old unsalvageable bastards can go and verbally kick hell out of each other simply for yukks. They can tell us we have outlived our era... They can tell us we are out of step with the reality of today. We found very special women to marry us. Maybe they are the only ones who truly understand us.

But no matter how they love us, we can never make them understand what the After Battery meant to us. Only the old gray-headed sonuvabitches, who parked their worthless butts on potato lockers, cussed the cooks and ragged each other, will ever know. Maybe when we die... Maybe wherever you go they have an 'After Battery'... A bunch of unshaven dirty rascals sitting around an old nicked up mess table drinking coffee that would float bricks... And when I step through the watertight door from the control room, some idiot messcook will hand me a cup and some old raggedy ass Engineman will yell, "Hey Dex! Plant your worthless, good for nothing ass and tell us what's going on in the world of loafing Torpedomen."

And, I will be home!

Thanks to Steve Bostwick (63-65) for passing this on after receiving it from Brad Mooney! A real treasure it is!

