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OUT IN THE AREA

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It's been more than half a century since we rode the boats and here we are – older, fatter, grayer or balder, and hopefully wiser – telling sea stories on the Baltimore waterfront. Whatever – those plywood jockey days of the first half of the Nineteen Forties represented, for most of us, some of the defining moments of our lives.

When we received our orders to Melville we felt that being selected for duty with the Mosquito Fleet was like a coronation: we were so proud. We had bought one of those silver tie clips even before we reported. However, when we first strolled down the hill toward Narragansett Bay and saw those deadly looking boats nestled in the lagoon, some of us wondered just what we had gotten ourselves into by volunteering.

We started out not knowing a heat exchanger from an auxiliary generator or a lazarette from a flux gate or a vee drive from a butterfly muffler. But we learned quickly at the hands of those salty Ron Four boat captains who never missed a chance to tell us how rugged life was "out in the area" or criticize our boat handling and station keeping. They spent most of their time drinking coffee in the chart room and arguing with the equally-salty Instructors about the relative merits of the Elco over the Higgins or vice versa.

We regularly made Torpedo runs on the Vineyard Haven light ship, patrolled outside the anti-submarine nets, ran missions to Block Island, and practiced boat handling at the decrepit dock in Fall River. We learned what made a Torpedo run, field stripped a 50 caliber, passed aircraft and ship recognition but, if truth be told, most of us never became proficient in blinker.

Our nights and weekends were spent at the Newport Casino officers' club or the Skoll Room of the Viking with that IITYWYBMAD slogan ("If I Tell You Will You Buy Me A Drink") over the bar. For a change of pace we would go to Providence to admire those waitresses in the transparent skirts at the Bacchante Room of the Baltimore or go sailing at the Bristol Yacht Club.

Then suddenly one day – unless we were lucky enough to draw new construction at Bayonne or New Orleans – we found ourselves actually "out in the area" in the Channel or the Med, the Aleutians, the Southwest Pacific or the Philippines or elsewhere. We spent our tours of duty nursemaiding LCI's and LST's, laying water-hugging smoke for invasions, sinking barges, fighting E-boats, strafing beaches, ferrying admirals and correspondents, scouting up rivers, dodging Kamikazes, dropping off coast watchers or guerrillas behind enemy lines, evacuating wounded, gathering local intelligence, fishing downed pilots out of the water, drawing shore battery fire for the fly boys – in other words everything except that for which the boats had been designed.

Who would trade the memory of returning from a successful patrol under a fuchsia and magenta dawn sky with a broom tied to the radar mast and the engines whining and the boat skimming over a sea as smooth as glass. She was up on her step because the Chief Motor Mac conned the Exec by saying "let's wind 'em up and burn out the carbon."

Remember that sense of pride when that grease-stained guy riding the center engine stuck his head out of the engine room to shout "that was great Skipper, you docked her with only two shifts."

What a panoply of memories come rolling back: splitting the watch with the other boats in the nest, the boredom of refueling (usually the Exec's job), the awful smell of Copperoid bottom paint, the perpetual game of hearts, torpedo juice, the day we got radar and learned a new form of navigation, that movie we saw so many times that we still recite the lines, powdered eggs, at brine tables, drawing diesel-tasting chow from the tender in tureens, stingy supply officers, tired engines and nicked wheels, the beer rations, censoring the crews mail, Tokyo Rose or Axis Sally, the abrasiveness of salt water soap, the sluggish pump in the officers head, the speed spoke on the wheel, how we grew to like the guys on our tender, the taste of Spam covered with Chutney, how we preferred faded khakis over those hated gray uniforms, the wonder of how our tiny boats withstood the pounding of a North Sea storm or a Sulu Sea typhoon.

Then one day they dropped the big one and it was all over. We traded our silver tie clips for a ruptured duck and back in our hometown bars or at the local Rotary Club we were always eager and proud to answer the question "what did you do during the war?"

We got a brief repuance in 1946 when we took our wives or girlfriends to the local theater to see "They Were Expendable" – at least twice. The girls might even have been wearing one of our silk survival maps as a scarf. We had an additional 15 minutes of fame when one of ours was elected President and recruited many of his former shipmates for duty in Washington. Then in 1963 Hollywood made "PT 109" and this time it was our kids we took to see it – at least twice.

Every TV rerun of "They Were Expendable" or "PT 109" provided us with bragging rights at the office or the country club, but deep down in our souls the show we really identified with was "McHale's Navy." That was us: unshaven, dressed in cutoff remnants of uniforms, baseball capped, impertinent, irreverent, close to our crews. Like them we were world class scavengers, whether looking for a case of ice cream mix, a couple of new gun barrels for the 50's or a new screw for the starboard engine. We were also world class traders on the hunt for samurai swords, pearls, lugers, maps, rising sun or swastika flags, enemy uniforms – anything we could swap for a case of cigars, a fifth of bourbon, or a late movie with those big ship sailors who never got ashore.

Like Borgnine's boys we bastardized the sleek beauty of our boats by those canvas tents we erected on our foredecks, those privies extending over the stern, and those mattresses on top of the day room and like Lieutenant McHale we allowed our cook to go fishing with depth charges.

Recently I took my new wife to Battleship Cove to see the reconstructed Elco. Her reaction was "I didn't realize they were so small" while all the time I was thinking I didn't remember my boat being so big.

Today our proud plywood navy is as obsolete as the Yankee Clipper, the Merrimac, or the four pipe Destroyer. A relic of another war in another era. Even Peter and Tare don't exist anymore. In today's Navy we would be Papa Tango – at least it's not the Macarena.

But for us – riding the boats was a never to be forgotten rite of passage.