

Salute to the Altair (AKS-32)

She wasn't much to look at but like most homely ladies she had a heart big as all out doors and a need to be loved. Even on her best days she could never compare in looks with a slick destroyer or a behemoth bird farm carrier but oh my, she was a worker. She could keep up a steady 15 knots and churn along not missing a beat while the sixth fleet came along side to sample her wares. Like back street lovers with a brief kiss from high line to high line and a promise of more to come.

That crew in the early sixties she loved the most they took her from unfit for sea duty to proudly showing the red and white E's on her stack for excellence. With paint, sweat and hours of work even though they cursed her at times there was love in the heart of all who served in her. The old girl showed her appreciation by never letting her boys down and always returning them to Barcelona where she could rest and they could play.

As she sat in the bone yard in Texas awaiting the searing torches that would tear her to pieces, she reminisced. Soon they would rip her right down to her keel where she began. That steel back bone that stood true through thousands of miles of storms, cold and heat. From the battle for Okinawa to her life in the Atlantic and Med she had had a wonderful life and reflected on it.

She recalled the stormy passing through Cape Hatteras in early 60s, bobbing around like a cork on a string under tow from a sea going tug. It was embarrassing not to be able to rely on her own turbines to make this trip to the Brooklyn yards. In the yards however she began to renew her strength. CWO Goodson was breathing a new life into her engine room changes in her evaporators meant she would never be with out fresh water. New nozzles in her turbines meant better underway speed control.

The deck apes (funny how she never thought of them as monkeys) they were always so dedicated to their work fighting rust and keeping her top side in ship shape. The electric wenchers and all her rigging under their supervision were put in perfect working order. Her store keepers had a place for everything and everything in it's place mostly.

Then came the sea trial she was a little nervous with a new untried crew heading to Cuba with stops in Jamaica. Her very first shakedown in the fifties was to Cuba also. Just before that she had been renamed the Altair. She wondered how many plank owners are still around and how many even remember her. They were a fine group of seamen. She was sure most of this crew would be career sailors.

The shakedown went well the men performed outstanding with their first replenishment drills. Soon she was back in Norfolk awaiting orders to deploy to the Med. When the word was passed to single up and she got underway she virtually trembled with excitement. She was not sure if it was a bad shaft bearing or the crew's anticipation of liberty in Barcelona. The night before arriving in Spain her hull vibrated with energy she knew it was the crew. The entire crew was stricken with channel fever and was wide awake the power from all that energy was electric.

While her view of Barcelona was limited from her birth at the pier near Barceloneta she could still see the Ramblas a promenade lined with sycamore trees festooned with flower shops and

kiosk where you could buy confections, news papers and perfume. The ever present cry at an Andalusian pitch of the lottery lady “ Para Hoy Igual” brought dreams of riches to all that purchased a ticket.

She could smell more of Barcelona than she could see. An off shore breeze sent a bouquet of fragrances that covered the bay like a warm blanket. The pine scent from the crest of Tibidabo mingled with the smell of flower, and the food being cooked along the Ramblas. The perfume worn by the ladies of the night was like the cherry on top of a sundae. She loved being in Barcelona it was a time to relax and repair between logreps. There was a love affair with Spain that was so deep it lacked explanation

There was so much emotion that flowed within her hull. The heartbreak and anger brought on by a Dear John letter. The joy of announced birth over shadowed with the sadness of not being there. The collective glee of anticipation when the word is passed for liberty or mail call. The explosive anger with shouts and sometimes blows when a shipmate is caught stealing or a line was crossed that started as a joke but ended with fury and blood.

As much as she loved Barcelona she loved the open sea more. Supplying the sixth fleet was her job and her heart was quickened by it. To be out there steaming true in her little corner of the world, the Mediterranean. This is what she was built for and yearned to do. To hear the whine of the electric winches and the shout of the deck crews as they send net after net of cargo to what ever Romeo ship came along side. The roar of the Sikorski and smell of spent aviation fuel at her flight deck made her giddy. She recalled how skilled the pilots were off loading lading to other ships in the fleet. She was the first to try this form of replenishment and met the challenge with open arms.

There was that night in Cannes when a cruise ship hit a reef and was sinking. It was a long night as she worried about the rescue detail that went to save the passengers and crew. She was almost as nervous that night as she was in the Atlantic storm. She ran from it till she almost ran out of fuel. The captain made a bold move and turned into the wind. She remembered the roll, two degrees more than her hull was designed for. But she came back Altair always came back.

Through it all she remained true to her officers and crew never letting them down. What’s that noise? It sounds like snakes scurrying across her decks. It must be the acetylene hoses being drug by workers. Is this the end? She heard the crew chiefs talking about how to cut her up, they mentioned she would be rendered into rebar and sent to New York to be used on something called the Twin Towers. Maybe there was hope a second chance maybe she would see her ocean again and fight the good fight.