

Small Boats

As I look back it was my love of the small boats that made me volunteer to be in the “A” gang on board a supply ship in the US Navy. That and the fact I had open gangway when in port. It was a kind of reward for so many hours spent working on the refrigeration system and all auxiliary equipment. Coke machine, ice machine, ice cream maker even the ships laundry I kept my uniforms looking sharp especially the whites. All this and I still had to stand engine room watches underway.

I could go on liberty anytime day or night as long as I left a contact number or place I would be close enough to be back on the ship in less than an hour. This was to insure that the reefers kept the food stores from perishing and the officer’s dainty little butts did not get too hot. The only two places air conditioned, were the captains quarters and the officers mess deck. The real perk for the job was the fact that I had keys for every secured place on the ship.

From the candy locker and food lockers to the supply holds, you name it, I had access. If an officer or chief needed a machine part or anything to keep the ship steaming I was the guy they came to. If they went through normal channels the process would take three days. Even with the newly installed lightening speed IBM punch card system, it was still a pain to wait. To this day when I fill out an application for work, if the question arises, have you ever stolen anything, I have to explain “steal no, misappropriate for damn sure”.

Anyway, I got off course here, correction steer to 180. We had four small boats on board. Two LCVPS (landing craft vehicle and personnel) one motor whale boat and the Captain’s Gig. The LCVP was that boxy looking craft that the bow dropped down to allow ingress and egress. Like the one McArthur used for his photo op in the famous “I shall return” news real. As a Machinist 2nd class petty officer it did not fall in my normal purview to work on the diesel engines or stand boat duty but I did both.

We were anchored in Naples bay outside the harbor when a freak storm blew up. The word was passed for emergency getting underway. The problem was we had one boat boom out with the Motor Whale boat tied to it. “Duty boat crew muster on the main deck”

Three men are required to operate a small boat. The coxswain, bow hook and engineer. I was the engineer. Sullivan was a black 3rd class Boatswains mate from Brooklyn (he looked like George Jefferson), the bow hook and Dragoo, also a 3rd class, the boat handier and the best one on the ship. We put on life jackets and inched our way on to the boat boom.

A rope ladder extended from the boat boom to the center of the whale boat. The ship had already started an up and down motion from the swells, at first five feet but increasing with each swell. To get in the boat you had to wait until the whale boat was up and drop into it. I was the second one down the Jacobs ladder and landed with a bang in the boat well.

I looked up and saw Sully frozen to the ladder. The wave that dropped me in the boat had washed over him filling his foul weather gear with water. As he held deaths grip on the ladder water poured out of his hood and sleeves. On the next rising swell this one about fifteen feet I grabbed the soaked sailor around the waist and yelled “let go Sully”, he did, unfortunately he was a little late with his release the boat had dropped about five feet so we tumbled into the boat, Sully on top of me. We untangled from each other and moved toward our positions for pickup. Me to the stern, Sully to the bow. Dragoo moved the boat forward to the davits.

Here came the real tricky part. The hook from the davits had this system of pulleys housed in a metal casing the

contraption weighed about 100 pounds. In normal calm seas it works like this. You thread a line through an eye on the boat and pull hard. The hook snaps into the eye and you are hooked up ready to be picked up. In heavy seas it's a crap shoot. I managed to keep the pulleys from crushing me and got hooked up. Sully and I yelled to Drago that we were hooked. He held his arm above his head in a circular motion signaling to the davit operator to haul away. The problem was Sully was not hooked and we were jerked stern first into the air, all three of us almost went over the side.

The deck ape davit operator was quick to drop the cable and we fell meeting the up coming wave like a freight train. When the prop hit the water the little diesel chocked down and almost stalled. Had that happened we would have been toast. Unhooked from the ship we made a wide circle and weighed our options. We could try for the harbor and fleet landing. We were low on fuel and with this storm I felt we could not make land fall before running out, or we could try again to be hauled aboard. I'm not sure if our decision to try the ship again was based on sound logic or was it the fact that our next port of call was Barcelona. The choice was to be swept out to sea, be stuck in Naples or make it on the ship and have liberty in Barcelona in two days. Not sure which head made the decision but my vote was for the ship and Barcelona.

The next approach worked like a drill, with much effort we managed to get hooked up and slowly were picked up to the pounding of the last few waves. I found that during this time I had used every curse word I knew in Spanish. There was a cheer from the crew and I was for the first time aware that we had an audience. The XO came on the IMC and said they had witnessed the three brave men in action (I said under my breath or the three dumbest) and requested for us to lay down to sick bay to be checked out and receive a shot of Brandy. First time I ever had a legal drink aboard ship and discovered I didn't like Brandy.