

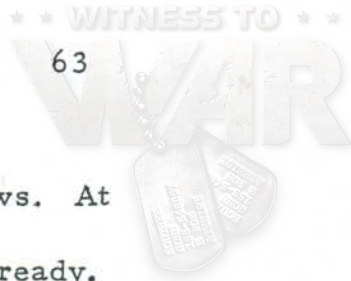


CHAPTER THREE

SEA SCHOOL

Sea School was mostly spit and polish and learning to live aboard ship. We were issued dress blues, the prize duds of the Corps. The place was a soft billet for old fat heroes of World War I. We never saw them except at weekly dress parades, where they looked like fifty-gallon drums with legs, quite a contrast to the lean young N. C. O.'s who ran the place. They sat in the offices all day and chewed tobacco.

We spent hours polishing shoes and brass buttons. One morning I was put on a detail cleaning the officers' spittoons. When I saw those revolting things, I made up my mind I wouldn't clean them. I told the sergeant this. He threatened me. I told him I wouldn't even clean one of those for my grandpa. He said I'd find this wasn't for Grandpa. He took me to the first sergeant. I told him the same thing. He scheduled an appearance for me at office hours. I came before a big fat tobacco-chewing major and gave him the same song and dance. He sentenced me to ten days piss and punk (bread and water).



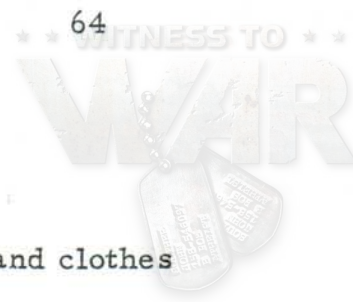
The brig was a basement with bars over the windows. At first I was down and out. Here I was, building a record already. I could see a court-martial and dishonorable discharge down the road. Maybe that dang high school superintendent was right. I wasn't twenty-one and I was behind bars.

However, the windows would open and the screens could be removed. At noon the first day, I heard a tap on the window. It was my buddies, with chow from the mess hall. They brought me goodies for the whole ten days. Hell, this wasn't prison. I ate as good as ever.

When I was released and fell out for the morning work detail, the sergeant looked me in the eye for awhile and then said, "Fuck you, Private Marbaugh." He put me on a detail other than the spittoons.

More trouble was perking. I ran into the guy I had the cake fight with in boot camp. He was in a class ahead of me and slept in the same barracks, in a different room on the same floor. We didn't see much of each other, except when we'd attend the same instruction. Several times I noticed him eyeing me.

One night at about one o'clock, someone yanked my blankets off. It was the kid and he was looped. He wouldn't have it any other way but that we finish that fight. I tried to get him to put it off until morning, but the other guys began hollering to get it over so they could



get some sleep. So down the stairs we went.

Out in back of the barracks was neatly kept grass and clothes lines. We ducked under the lines and before we cleared them, the kid smacked me in the side of the head. I got clear of the lines and he came at me. His chin caught the last line and tilted his head back in perfect position. I lowered the boom, but good, and he went down. We splashed water on his face, but he wouldn't come to. So, we carried him up to the sack, and he never bothered me again.

Sea School progressed and we became salty in our tailored uniforms. A cherub-faced sergeant taught the bugle calls. He had a dirty lyric for each call, something you wouldn't think could come from that angelic face. For liberty call it was, "Who's going ashore, who's going ashore, who's got the price of a two-bit whore?" Fire call was, "Big banana, big banana, grab a bucket, grab a bucket." Another was, "Papa's got the whooping cough and Mama's got the syph." His method worked--we remembered them.

How I loved the dress parades, formal guard mounts, and the superb Sea School Band, not to mention liberty in Norfolk and Charleston. We called Norfolk "shit city," because service men were pretty well discriminated against there. I saw a sign that said, "Sailors and dogs, keep off the grass." English ships docked at Norfolk for repairs. Their marines and seamen were sometimes billeted in our barracks. We



had great respect for one another, but there were always some brawls over in town. One night we came upon a scrap between an English seaman and a Yank sailor. The Yank was obviously a boxer. He would knock the plucky limey down but he wouldn't stay down. Finally, the Englishman's friend said, "I say, old boy, it's no damn use to get up, because he'll jolly well knock you on your bloody arse again." This became sort of a byword with us, and we were always threatening to "knock someone on their bloody arse again."

While I was in Sea School, a voluntary insurance program was initiated, where servicemen could get \$10,000 insurance and have the premiums deducted from their pay. In later years it was automatic and cost nothing to us. I didn't want any insurance, as I never had enough money the way it was. Also, I didn't care much for the sergeant, and he grandly announced that his platoon would be one hundred percent insured, or else. He went down the ranks to sign our names, so we could go to the office and be enrolled.

When he came to me, I said, "I'll take the 'else.'"

We engaged in a "stare down" contest. Finally, he moved on.



The time came for assignment to sea duty. Jim Ward and I apparently were solidly on the shit list. The assigning officer looked at us with pity. "You two will be in the Banana Fleet," he said. Officially it was the "Special Service Squadron." We had drawn a ship called the J. Fred Talbott. "Good luck," said the assigning sergeant, with an inflection that meant we were in store for a real treat.

We reported to the docks and there she was in dry dock. We looked down upon our home for the next two years and felt a sinking sensation. The decks were all torn up, piles of rope and gear everywhere and paint chips all over. She looked too dirty and crowded to have room for two more marines aboard. Jack hammers, welders and all hands were at work, and the noise was overwhelming. On top of that she was a destroyer, a tin can. What the hell, marines don't serve on destroyers.

That's where the "Special Service Squadron" bit came in. Two gun boats, built for the Panay River in China, and two destroyers had been made into a fast-moving unit to guard Central and South American contingencies. In all, about two hundred marines served aboard them. Because of the lack of space the marines also served as sailors.



We were met by a 225-pound snarling sergeant. He was actually one of the most compassionate men I ever met, a real softie, but made damn sure never to let it show. His name was "Smiley" Burnett. He told us to get into dungarees and report to the paint-chipping detail. We couldn't believe our quarters. Thirty men in one small room. We were to learn to live that way and actually come to like it.

In two weeks or less, a striking change took place on the J. Fred. She became a shining greyhound of the seas. We were refloated and went on a shake down run. In those days the ships weren't crammed full of electronic gear, and something of the old romanticism of the sea was still afloat. I had a four-hour watch in the crow's nest as lookout. I was exhilarated. The sea was calm and ships were everywhere. Whenever a new one came over the horizon, I would call down a tube to the bridge, "Sail, ho!"

The answer was, "Where away?"

"Two points off the starboard bow," I would say. Man, did I feel like a salty old dog!

Back to Norfolk, load supplies, and we were off to Panama, our home base. That night we passed through the Cape Hatteras



area during a storm. Lord, were we boots sick. A buddy from Oklahoma just lay and moaned, "Oh, Lord, I wish I was in Oklahoma!" We were sick all the next day, and that was the last time I was ever seasick, regardless of how rough it got, and I was in some pretty rough stuff the next two years.

Some people never get over it. One old chief told me he had thirty years at sea and still couldn't decide which end to stick down when he went to the head. He said when he retired he was going to take two boat oars and walk inland. When the first person said, "What are those things?" that's where he was going to settle down.

Things settled into shipboard routine. I had never drunk much coffee. Now I learned that when you were aroused at four a.m. for a watch, and the decks were bucking and heaving, a cup of hot coffee made the stomach behave.

It was the duty of the old watch to have a pot of coffee ready for its relief. The first time I did it, I went to dump out the old grounds and dumped the coffee basket off the perk stem over the side. My heart sank with it. I knew I would be on the shit list forever if the new watch didn't have their coffee.



Then I remembered that some kind soul in Sea School had told me to take my own coffee pot aboard ship. I rushed down to my locker, got the guy up who slept on it, and grabbed the coffee basket. It just fit. I made the coffee and no one was the wiser. Bless that guy who told me to take my own coffee pot aboard!