

## Scary, Scary Night

During the Winter and Spring of 1958, my ship (USS Plumas County, LST 1083) was on a WestPac (Western Pacific) cruise for seven months. On one particular night, we were anchored in Hong Kong harbor and I was the Officer of the Day (OOD). Most of my fellow officers were on shore leave as were most of the crew. I made the rounds of the ship (checking that the anchor was secure and that all other departments were properly secured) and turned in around 2300 (11:00PM). I was awakened about an hour later by a messenger explaining that they were having trouble with a drunk sailor on the quarterdeck. I threw on my clothes and headed to the quarterdeck. When I arrived, I saw the watch personnel standing together on one side of the gangplank, and a sailor I knew quite well, standing on the other holding a 45 caliber gun. I said, "What's going on here?" The Petty Officer of the Watch said, "Jones (not his real name) came aboard and started giving us a lot of crap...and when we tried to take him to his bunk, he grabbed Petty Officer Smith's 45." I looked at Jones and said, "Jones, you need to give me that 45 or you're gonna get yourself in a lot of trouble." I knew Jones quite well as he was the shortstop on the ship's softball team and I was the third baseman. We had probably played fifty games together on this cruise, thirty alone against the natives in Rongelap. Jones was our best Engineman and was responsible for all of the ship's boat engines. He stood there, weaving from foot to foot as drunks often do, intermittently aiming the gun at each of us present and telling us that the whole world was screwed up. I said, "Jones, hand me the 45 and we'll take you to your bunk." He said, "What is going to happen to me?" I said,

“If you don’t cause anymore trouble, you’ll probably get a Captain’s Mast in the morning.” He said, “ Will you tell the Captain that I’m a good sailor?” I said, “I’ll tell him you are a good sailor when you aren’t drinking.” He handed me the gun and the watch crew took him to his bunk and handcuffed him to it. The next morning, the Captain held mast and reduced Jones in rate, fined him two months pay and confined hm to the ship for the last three months of our cruise. Nowadays, that seems like a very light sentence but that is what the Captain gave him as his punishment. (Drunken/Rowdy behavior was easily forgiven in those years.) I told the Captain that Jones was a good sailor when he wasn’t drinking, that he was our best Engineman, that he always kept our boats running in tip top shape and that he was the best hitter on the softball team. After the Mast, Jones thanked me for standing up for him and said he would never again threaten anyone with a gun.

Lesson learned? Not really. Later that day, while circling the ship testing an LCVP engine, Jones took off with the boat...out of the harbor into open waters. A second boat was lowered into the water, but after searching for several hours, returned to the ship without any information as to where Jones had gone. We notified the shore patrol, who assured us they would find him. We departed from Hong Kong the next day without Jones (another serious violation on his part...Missing Movement). Several days later, we received a radio message that the extremely expensive LCVP had been found...destroyed by pounding waves on the rocky coast outside of the harbor. Several months later, we were informed that the shore Patrol had found him on the streets of Hong Kong and that he had been

sent back to the states for prosecution in a Naval Court. We never heard another word about him.

I believe that one of the reasons Jones gave me his “unauthorized” 45 so readily was because of our friendship on the softball team. I didn't like having a Loaded 45 pointed at me but am grateful that the issue was solved peacefully. Jones was a super Engineman, an excellent softball player and I hope that when his incarceration was completed that he turned his life around and became the person he was capable of becoming.

Thankfully, I have never had another weapon pointed at me. One scary, scary night was enough.

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