

ROLF YNGVE

The Mouse

The executive officer ... shall be primarily responsible to the commanding officer for the organization, performance of duty, training, maintenance, and good order and discipline of the entire command...

Standard Organization and
Regulations of the U.S. Navy

Zero Three Thirty—0330—has always been the normal hour to relieve the morning watch, the watch associated with the rise of spirits brought on by the smell of night-baking newly out of a ship's ovens and the dawn over the sea. Of course, in the Pentagon, there is no night-baking. Nor is there really a dawn, only the maze of corridors and offices, empty and the same, where at 0330 one Saturday morning, Commander James Ehrlich found himself stabbing his key code onto the tiny buttons of an electronic lock. When it failed to click open, he was first irritated, then puzzled, then resigned to find himself in front of the wrong door on the wrong floor without actually remembering his half-asleep stumble up from the vast east parking lot, up all those echoing stairs.

He corrected himself. He turned, made his way up another flight. At least he'd made it to the right section, the outermost of the building's concentric rings, the E-ring, where his boss, the admiral, could look out of his office to see Arlington National Cemetery, and in those days, the gravestones had not yet crept down onto the flat, treeless lawns but remained still within the deep shade of the mature trees planted for wars long past.

Ehrlich's desk had no view of Arlington. His cubicle was housed in the inner side of the ring with a view into the bleak stone of air corridors built to cool the building in the 1940s. The windows had long been sealed shut and gave the inner offices no fresh air, only an ill, indirect light. He could see nothing now, of course. Dark. He flipped on the lights.

Mildew

What was he doing rising out of his warm bed to trundle into his office on a Saturday? He had been recently promoted to the rank of commander. At sea, he would have been considered too senior for this sort of assignment. But by Pentagon standards, he was only senior enough to be considered trustworthy. No one thought twice about giving him this early morning task, and he was presumed to still have the energy and optimism required to go in to work at what he thought of as Zero Three Dead-Fucking-Dark Thirty on a Saturday morning to write a point paper for the admiral to read at 8 AM sharp.

If asked, he would have said he felt only a little disappointment about the early hour. His wife and their toddler were living in Norfolk, but he still might make it home for half of Saturday and all of Sunday. And it could have been worse. His most recent ship was at that very moment, at sea. Had he been aboard, there would have been no chance to spend any of the weekend at home. A half-weekend with his wife and son was a vast improvement, and he was telling himself that he could write the book of Genesis from scratch and still hit the road for home by noon when he saw the small, gray, Pentagon mouse. On his desk. Rigidly adhered to the sticky paper of the modern mousetrap someone had set yesterday evening after Ehrlich had left work for beers and sea stories with the other geographic bachelors.

He shifted in his seat. The mouse watched him. Not an accusation. Not even fear, a single moving eye, dark, unblinking and dying.

Ehrlich noted the scent of mildew. This was nothing new. He had been back in the Pentagon long enough to have reduced this mildew odor to a subliminal nod, part of the atmosphere but not important—unlike the day of his arrival when, out of habit, the scent had been of concern to him. Had he smelt anything like this on his ship, he would have had sailors on their knees scrubbing the starch out of the space and ventilating it, airing it, returning the area to the level of tolerance one requires to survive in any meaningful fashion at sea. Ashore, there were other standards, and it was axiomatic that a month on station wiped out any standard from the previous duty station, where, in Ehrlich's case, he had set the standard as the executive officer of

USS Ferrell, the ship off the Virginia coast, keeping its families from home that very morning.

Old XO–XO–New XO

In fact, at that moment, the morning watch on Ferrell was in the process of relieving the midwatch, the officers and sailors as cranky as two-year-olds about staying at sea over the weekend to do casualty control drills on the engineering plant. Ehrlich had not been away long enough for the ship's memory of him to fade; he was still referred to as the Old XO. They had a New XO who seemed a lot like the Old XO to the crew and as a result, Ehrlich would soon be forgotten, and no one would refer to him at all on Ferrell. Some papers he had signed would remain for a while, but they, too, would soon be gone and those who had served with him would soon forget his given name. He would be remembered as the old XO, the new XO, my XO or sometimes even, our XO.

In the Pentagon, Ehrlich had become OPNAV N52.4a. He was responsible for no one but himself. Four officers more senior to him were his bosses, but no one even referred to him unless it was to ask for a point paper first thing on Saturday morning. They certainly didn't expect him to worry about mildew as he had when he'd been XO. In the Pentagon, as OPNAV N52.4a, mildew was no longer his watch.

Lucky

As for mildew, Ehrlich was particularly sensitive to the scent that morning on account of the mouse stuck to his desk. "Mold means mice, mice mean mold," is what his mother used to say when he was a boy, and it was his mother's admonition he heard rather than the other possible thought, his memory of Lucky, the mouse he'd owned as a ten-year-old and for whom, despite all threats from his parents, he had found a mate through purchase at the pet store where they were kept to feed snakes. The mate and Lucky had enthusiastically produced a mouse explosion, heavily inbred and quickly diseased until his father found this secret stash, a mouse holocaust, all the animals starved into cannibalism because the boyhood version of Ehrlich had lost interest in them.

His father brought the whole deformed, ravenous cage of Lucky's offspring back to the delighted pet store owners with their snakes.

Ehrlich never lost interest again.

This probably formed the basis for the splendid concern he developed for his subordinates, a reputation for diligence that had made him a good XO and earned him a life writing point papers in the Pentagon.

Human Remains

What was the purpose of this point paper? Some task of extreme national importance? Not really. It is sufficient to say that it would cause six people to work at some time over their weekend. By Tuesday, the point paper Ehrlich was to write and revise eight times would find itself overtaken by events and abandoned in a file folder for the next thirteen years until Flight 77 would cauterize it along with the mildew and the mice who infested that section of the building.

Flight 77 would not cauterize Ehrlich. By then he will have long been promoted to captain and will have commenced his graceful slide toward retirement. He will find himself at the US Embassy in Rome as the planes hit, wondering *what-the-fuck?* as three of his friends along with a couple thousand other people in the Pentagon, Manhattan and Pennsylvania shared their versions of *what-the-fuck?* before finding themselves reduced to human remains.

Affection

One of these friends was on the USS Ferrell that very morning, awake and standing watch. At the moment Ehrlich and the mouse gazed at each other, this friend, a shipmate of sorts, happily imagined Ehrlich, his old XO asleep at home with his family.

This is the affection of shipmates.

It, the ship—especially a destroyer like their ship—can create a special bond between people. Ehrlich had been his shipmate's immediate superior. The shipmate had been the operations officer, or Ops.

These names, XO, Ops, Captain, are immutable. Years after the fact they will be remembered, and in certain circumstances former shipmates refer to each other by the names they used when they knew each other best. When Ehrlich finally gets a phone to work in Rome, when he finally speaks with someone who knows what's going on at the burning Pentagon, it will be his former captain he reaches. Nearly a decade and a half will have gone by since his time on Ferrell and the morning he found the dying mouse, but he will still feel like that man's XO when he hears his former captain say, "Did you know Ops was in the building? Did you know he was in his office?"

At that instant, he will become the XO again. This man will be his captain again, and the blame for his shipmate's death will feel as though it was somehow his blame. Even though he will always know that nothing could have been done, he will hope that Ops had been content. He will hope that Ops had been at peace with himself.

Ops

In fact, on 9/11, Ops will be feeling specifically grateful and relieved by the little break from sea duty until the news of the burning twin towers popped up on CNN. He had been looking forward to a few years away from standing watch, the narrow staterooms, the sheer release from the responsibility for another three hundred souls. He will think it's good to get a little breather, just for a while—even in the Pentagon, then back to sea. But as he bends over his computer screen to plan contingencies for immediate response to the initial attack on New York, (not really having any answers but working nonetheless) he will look up at the television to see the second aircraft plow into the tower, and at that moment, he will wish he was at sea.

There was something that draws them to ships.

Especially in these moments when they think of all the possible things that might have been done to prevent those aircraft from their obscene turn into those buildings, all the moments that could have been seized to prevent that astonishing revelation of failure—especially in those moments—it is the ship itself that draws them, their familiar place, their practiced home where they had been shipmates together.

There is no such thing as a shipmate in the Pentagon.

On the day of the attack, there will be nothing for Ops to do. His job on the staff will have no bearing on any operation connected with defense of the homeland, nor will anyone give his section any real tasking out of the panic of that 9/11 moment in Manhattan. Like all of his colleagues, he will think that this lack of tasking is the reason he feels the pull of his ship so strongly, his recall of the notion of shipmates, their trust for each other on watch. The man who was Ops and who would soon be dust, dreams of all the moments he could have done something, *anything* better and different, all those moments when he could have cared better for shipmates. Then Flight 77 makes its incomprehensible turn, straightens, lowers, and for a while, all the mildew and mice disappear.

Rat Guards

Flight 77 was still years in the future and as unforeseeable to Ehrlich as it was to the mouse affixed to his desktop. He had never before experienced this sort of mousetrap. The method was obviously suffocation, every attempt to escape as tightening as a lie. He wondered if such a trap would work as well on a rat. Certainly they could be caught. Like mice, they will bump from one barrier to the next, instinctively searching for something to eat or some other rat with whom to mate.

But would it kill them?

The reason Ehrlich cared at all about rats came from their internal circuitry that compelled them to seek out mooring lines. Rats breed themselves to think that those thick hawsers draped up from the pier lead to the shipload of food that oozed such an irresistible odor, the scent begged them to chase each other up from the pier, heedless of any danger or trap, and they will board, these rats, unless they are hindered by rat guards—big, round, flayed out collars of galvanized tin placed in preventive cones around every line leading up to a ship, electrical cables, phone cables and of course, the mooring lines. He'd seen wharf rats mob a ship's rat guard. Heaped atop each other, they had fallen off the lines and into the water like panicked refugees at a closed border, they lusted so. And he had imagined just this scenario after they had moored in Naples, a port where rats overran everything like a bad conscience.

KITA

That morning in Naples, they had tied the ship to the pier as usual, but somehow, the rat guards had not been deployed. Ehrlich had seen Ferrell's naked lines beckoning, and had imagined voracious, foreign rats already gathering to stream up in clumps. Or even just two rats slipping in unnoticed—two alone could quietly breed across their own generations to produce deformed rodents in evil droves. And they would be unhindered. The ship's sailors might have forgotten to crawl out on the mooring lines to set the rat guards, but Ehrlich had thought it more likely that someone had decided to let the duty section set up the rat guards, so the off-duty watches could get a head start on liberty ashore.

Unsat.

As that moment, as USS Ferrell's XO, Ehrlich was wholly in charge; the captain had left the ship on arrival to meet with the commodore for glasses of Prosecco, tasty poo-poops and the one-on-one visibility the captain needed to nurture his promotion. As such, Ehrlich was free to use whatever means he desired to correct the situation and forestall the inevitable rat assault. He'd been thinking lately that the ship needed a little shake-up, so he chose rage.

Rage has always been a tool in the kitbag of leadership arts. It has had its advantages and disadvantages, its adherents and detractors. There was even a formal school of management in the Navy mutated to define rage as an acceptable and effective approach. Kick In The Ass, or KITA as it was called—such a satisfying Japanese ring to it. More thoughtful practitioners defended KITA as an essential performance skill required of every true authority figure. It was cited, sometimes, as a useful tool in battle. Others condemned it as last resort of the small-minded, the unprofessional, the defeated.

Whatever one's position on this issue, it was generally agreed that rage generates an immediate response, etches a lasting impression, and introduces the probability of future rages in the minds of a ship's crew. And rage was especially effective, as in the case of Ehrlich, when it rose out of someone who had never before let slip the sort of performance he would unleash that afternoon.

He gave some thought to his rage, then stepped out to assault the evil empire of the ship who had been so sloppy as to leave its lines ashore unprotected.

Checklist

The Naples smog cloyed the ship's quarterdeck at the head of the brow where the in-port officer of the deck, an inconsequential ensign, was already in position to manage the ship's business while tied up to a pier. There, Ehrlich found Ops as he had expected, stationed as the ship's command duty officer, the CDO, the officer who would be left in charge if Ehrlich could ever get off the ship.

If Ehrlich had known that Ops was destined for Flight 77, he might have chosen a less rage-like response. But of course, no one can really foresee which errors they will truly regret and which will be forgotten. As it was, his consideration, instinct, experience and crankiness from short sleep and long hours at sea demanded that he apply the same sort of punishing, unanswerable questions others had flame-sprayed onto his skin when he'd been an ensign as inconsequential as the officer of the deck who hid behind the CDO. He chose to start with, "Officer of the Deck, do you notice anything wrong as you look down along the pier?"

Ops shuttled sideways into Ehrlich's line of sight. He didn't want to stick up for the ensign. But he knew he was expected to intervene.

Ops said, "No, sir," before the ensign could immolate himself by answering the question. This redirected Ehrlich to say:

"Ever think of using the checklist, Ops?"

Aye-aye

The sense of relief the inconsequential ensign felt over Ops' intervention would be exquisitely remembered the day he would see Ops' name carved onto the stubby black rock they erected in Arlington to memorialize those not found after Flight 77. As he looked at the name on that stone two decades in the future, he would remember how Ops examined the checklist, how it had the words "Install rat guards" at item number four after "Double up lines" and "Secure engines," and "Put over the gangway," and long before it said, "Request permission from the XO to pass Liberty Call."

This had been the moment when three sailors, out of uniform and readied in their liberty clothes of t-shirts, jeans and beaten jackets, wandered down to the quarterdeck in anticipation of what they had believed to be their imminent release to go ashore.

“Rat guards,” said Ops, “We need to rig the rat guards.”

“Rat-FUCKING-guards,” Ehrlich’s voice rose into a squall. “Get ‘em out there! OUT! OUT!”

“Aye-aye, sir,” snapped Ops.

The phrase ‘aye-aye’ may seem a naval cliché, almost playacting, but ‘aye-aye’ remains in use with its strict meaning—I have heard and I will comply—along with a more complex and accurate sense: I’m junior to you. I will do what you tell me. And I hope you have said the last word to me about it because I don’t want to get my ass chewed anymore.

The Rat

At this moment, a small Naples-bred rat looked up from the pier, one paw on the mooring line. His lean snout parsed the air for competent predators and the galley. He scented no danger, only some rich cooking, and not yet culled out from the more risk-averse pack, the rat stepped up and scuttled as they do in their clumsy-quick rodent way directly for USS Ferrell’s quarterdeck.

They all saw it. The entire watch: Ops, the inconsequential ensign, the junior sailor who was the messenger of the watch, the experienced petty officer of the watch carrying a baton and a sidearm, the three sailors hoping to get ashore first. And Ehrlich, Ferrell’s XO— all of them watched that rat clamber up the bone-white mooring line.

Rage was no longer silly playacting. Here came the first one of rats in droves waiting to board with all their twisted rat children and deformed rat spouses. Ehrlich shot his finger at the open oval in the fat steel chock where the mooring lines tumbled onto the ship to grip the double stump of the bits. He commanded: “Petty Officer of the Watch, *stand bere*. Don’t let that fucking rat get aboard.”

Battle

Three years after leaving the Pentagon and after his encounter with the stuck mouse on his desk had long left his memory, Ehrlich would distinguish himself in battle during the first Gulf War. In command and in action, he would be calm, focused, lethal. He would engage with alacrity and precision and while his citation would not note this, he would withhold fire to accept surrender from a tiny group of terrified Iraqi sailors rather than shell them to death. He would consider that his finest moment.

However, on the quarterdeck, facing that rat, Ehrlich was not yet the naval officer he would become. He raged to Ops, *“Get the fucking rat guards out, out, out!!”* He snatched up the microphone of the ship’s general announcing system and raged for the entire ship and pier to hear, *“Now on the Ferrell, close all exterior doors. That is, close all exterior doors, now-now-now!”* He raged at the ensign, *“Post guards at all the mooring lines now-now-now!”*

This presented precisely the opportunity the rat needed. The quarterdeck watch, battered by these orders, failed to back up the petty officer of the watch who, facing the rat, had found himself frozen as he considered whether or not he had been specifically told to employ his sidearm. He drew and pointed the cold Colt model 1911a .45 caliber automatic, but the rat called his bluff and dived aboard.

Wyatt Earp

The truth is, the petty officer hadn’t been bluffing at all. He actually cocked the hammer and pulled the trigger. But to his lifelong relief, the hammer fell with an empty click, which sounded like a door slamming shut to the messenger of the watch who found himself shocked into action by that little sound. The messenger, a very young sailor, whipped out his baton and proceeded to give chase as the rat scrambled down the main deck.

The petty officer placed his gun carefully back into its holster. Slowly at first, then with more enthusiasm, he followed the messenger. He had thought no one had seen him try to use his weapon, but the messenger of the watch and the three sailors waiting to go on liberty had all breathlessly awaited the gun’s discharge, and had all felt disappointment in the petty officer’s failure to achieve the Navy-wide level of mythic fame such an engagement would have given him if he had remembered to load the sidearm.

Later that afternoon, the petty officer of the watch would wonder why his shipmates kept chanting behind his back “Earp, Earp, Earp” as he tried to eat his dinner on the mess decks. He would discover that he’d earned the call sign “Wyatt Earp” which would follow him through the Navy, into college, and finally his law practice where it would achieve great utility when he became a truly deadly practitioner.

The Checklist

There has always been a sort of checklist normalcy to these raging moments when XO’s clamp down to tighten up a ship that seems too loosely managed, and Ehrlich was no exception. There was Ehrlich’s most sincerely enraged vilification of the department heads on the quarterdeck, especially when he caught two of them already in civilian

khaki pants and polo shirts thereby visibly demonstrating the failure of purposeful oversight inherent to lackluster officers. There was Ehrlich's scatological description of the ship interspersed with threats of a perpetual field day of cleaning unless people started to do their jobs. There was the mustering of the master-at-arms force to bring nightsticks out for the sailors stationed to repel rats. There was the mustering of all hands at quarters for the department heads to give their permutation of the orders verbally nailed to their foreheads, and the subsequent scatter of sailors back to their berthing compartments to change out of their liberty clothes and back into their dungarees, scour every corner of the ship, clean everything over again and be ready for Ehrlich to storm through, holding up a dropped sock or candy wrapper as if it was flesh scourged from martyrs. "What's this! What's *this*! You call this fucking CLEAN?"

And most importantly, there was the ship-wide search for the rat guards.

That's what XO's do, and Ehrlich thought nothing of it. He would tour the ship enraged, spit commentary on every tiny shortcoming, let the crew know they were stuck together until they helped each other out. As far as he was concerned, they could all stay on board until they caught that rat, got up the rat guards, and by God DAMN, for once clean up this shithole! Why did he have to be the only one concerned about something like rat guards? It wasn't funny. Rats on board a ship are simply and literally pestilent. It's sloppy wrong and dangerous, and you can't afford that sort of shit, he bellowed—so. Shock all those tired sailors up onto their feet, in the engine room, the mess decks where they lolled in front of Italian TV—somebody had the motivation to rig that up. (No rat guards though. That would be too tough.) Snap them up out of their languor just by a rush through the ship, no word even has to be said, but just his presence at the slam of a hatch captured all the pissed-off, XO rage at the crew who had already dropped the tight watch and careful habits they'd maintained at sea, dumped their responsibilities like the socks that littered the decks, and where were those rat guards anyway?

No one knew. Almost.

His Only Hope

The rat guards had been stowed away by two sailors who had decided to get creative because the line-locker where they were normally kept had been filled with bicycles bought when the ship had visited Palma de Majorca two months before. However, of these two sailors, one had been medevaced—helicoptered off to the fancy sickbay on the aircraft carrier after he'd slipped down a ladder and broken his ankle.

And the other? Here was where coincidence played: one of the three sailors in their civvies who had thought they were going on liberty was a relatively senior boatswain's

mate, Squiciarini, who was there at the front of the line because he had permission to go on leave to meet his wife's extended family who lived in Naples..

BM₃ Squiciarini had actually given some consideration to telling Ops where the rat guards were placed. But he had decided to keep it to himself. He had thought his brain would burst if they didn't let him off the ship because he was sure he could see his wife's Italian relatives waiting for him at the distant gate to the pier, and he was pretty sure if he confessed to storing them fucking rat guards, he'd be the fuck back in his uniform, getting his ass chewed by the chief at least, and no fucking leave. Period. He had thought he was totally out of luck when the XO left his savage order to the quarterdeck: "Nobody leaves this ship until we catch that rat!"

With those words, the other two sailors about to go on liberty had slouched off, but in desperation, Squiciarini remained with his sea bag stuffed with civilian clothes and the cartons of cigarettes his wife's uncle would smoke for the next six months.

His only hope was Ops.

"Sir?"

Betrayal

What the operations officer saw was a boy still teenaged thin. Squiciarini's hair had already started to recede as it would until he paid for a weave when they finally got good at hair replacement the year before Ops was to have his what-the-fuck moment in the Pentagon. By then, long out of the Navy, Squiciarini would not know that Ops had been in the Pentagon. He will never know that Ops had become part of a memorial, and he will have long forgotten his sense of hopelessness as he looked at Ops, a twenty-seven-year-old officer with six years in the Navy whose perseverance had made him a lieutenant and a department head and therefore, in Squiciarini's world, an asshole. Probably a double asshole because he'd been grown in the Naval Academy in the years when the school's ethics code was generally known to be, "Don't lie, cheat or steal, but whatever you get away with is ok."

Ops had been a department head just long enough to have a pretty good sense of what he could get away with, and it seemed to him a shame that poor Squiciarini, his relatives waiting for him, couldn't catch a break. Ops even thought that this small sailor standing limp before him, leave papers in his hand, might actually remember an act of kindness, and perhaps Ops would be known on the ship as one of those compassionate officers he'd always wished to become.

By now the messenger of the watch and Wyatt Earp had returned empty-handed to the quarterdeck, so there was an audience as Ops looked at the boy Squiciarini, thought of all the times he himself had wanted, just once, to be let off the hook. Then

he held out his hand, “Give me your leave papers,” and Squiciarini was certain these would be shoved in a drawer to be forgotten. His family would wait for him until they got tired, then leave, he was certain, but it really wouldn’t be his fault. It would be the ship’s fault and the Navy’s.

Ops took out his pen, signed him out on leave. “Squiciarini, I want you to hustle down the pier and don’t let the XO see you standing around ashore, ok?”

That was *most* ok by Squiciarini and any lingering notion he had of telling anyone where those rat guards were stowed left him in the sense of urgency Ops had given him to leave the ship and escape recall by the XO.

Ops would never know anything about that betrayal. To him, it felt pretty good he had given a break to someone, and he could see the inconsequential ensign, the messenger, and Wyatt Earp look at him in wonder. He winked at them, feeling quite good about himself while the only person who knew where the rat guards had been stowed hustled guiltlessly down the brow and onto the pier to his reunion and great relief.

Ship’s Lore and Shame

The way this should have come to an end: the rat guards should have finally been ferreted out after a short and organized search. Liberty would have been put down, and within the Naples bars that night, all the thousands of conversations between the one hundred sixty eight officers, chief petty officers and sailors on liberty would have etched that day into memory as the Great Rat Hunt. It would have become a part of the ship’s lore, fading slowly as each watch relieved each watch until the last person who remembered the Great Rat Hunt was gone, and the ship was left empty of anyone who had a personal stake in those words, “You think that was bad, you should have seen the Great Rat Hunt. One rat, and the XO kept us on board forever.”

But the messenger of the watch changed all of that.

The messenger of the watch had the misfortune of birth as the oldest in a family of six children. He could not prevent the sure knowledge trained into him through his entire eighteen years of life that he should have done something to make sure the rat guards were up. He could not stand the discomfort of belonging to the one division on board the ship that had totally fucked up and was now the cause of the entire ship’s incarceration on board and even worse, one of his division, that worthless Squiciarini, was already ashore. All his friends, those he admired, the ones who had taught him, praised and even looked after him—shamed. Even that. Still worse than a little ill-feeling, his witnessing of the ass-chewing the XO handed to Ops, then Ops’ sticking his neck out to let Squiciarini off, who didn’t deserve it—this shamed him. He could

not resist it. He thought of Ops as the perfect big brother he'd never had. And that wink at him, it made him feel complicit, related, and well—*respected* was the word he wanted to find. Respected.

But he knew he didn't deserve any of that because he'd failed to kill the rat. After Squiciarini dragged his overstuffed sea bag onto the pier, he and Wyatt Earp had finally been able to make their report to Ops that the rat had slipped away. Ops had said, "Shit," rolled his eyes and he had said, "Christ, can't you guys to do anything right?"

Shame made the messenger decide to fix this, right away, on his own.

The American Practical Navigator

The messenger liked the ship, wandered it, knew its odd spaces. And the flag bag locker was the oddest space he could think of—a little closet where the signalmen kept their extra gear, it was hidden deep below decks under four watertight hatches and down all those ladders to the bilge where every surface sweat condensation and oil slick. It was never visited; the signalmen who owned the flag bag were air creatures who hated to leave their perch high up in the wind and the sun.

He bet the rat guards were down there as, in fact, they were. Just as he imagined, they had been stowed in that bilge where there was a dry grating in an alcove above the bilge water pooled from all the condensation off the ship's hull. The messenger would get those rat guards, and the XO wouldn't be mad anymore, his chief would be proud of him, Ops would be rescued and consider him not only a hero, but perhaps his friend.

The messenger didn't tell anyone his plan and hoped no one else would figure it out. He had ambitions. He was pretty sure he wasn't quite like all the other guys in the deck force. He considered himself a little brighter and a little wiser. At sea, when on watch as the helmsman, he would frequently find himself chatting with the officers who were, after all, only a little older than himself. At work, he always did a bit more than was required of him. In port, once, he had gotten a book to learn how to use small stuff to wrap handrails and helms with the intricate and turban-like knots called Turk's heads characteristic of particularly nautical and squared-away vessels. Everyone knew he kept a copy of Bowditch, the *American Practical Navigator* in his rack instead of the usual fuck book (not that he didn't have those also). But they didn't know he kept its quote in his wallet: "The officer whom the crew respects as a *man*, admires as a *seaman* and recognizes as a *gentleman* will have little or no trouble with discipline and cooperation of all on board."

Relieved

Finally, relieved of his watch and ignored by everyone, the messenger of the watch piped, "Permission to go below." No one answered; he edged away and ran to the ladder not down to the bilge, but up to the signal bridge. He flew up the seven decks to the small shack perched like a comic hat over the ship's pilothouse, the signal bridge. There, he found, as he expected, only the junior signalman, who had been posted, told to polish the space, then abandoned by his seniors to weather the XO's inspection alone.

"Give me the keys to the flag bag!" The messenger held out his hand. "I'll bet somebody threw the rat guards down in the bilge by the flag locker."

The signalman wasn't supposed to hand up the keys, but he did it because he remembered that some boatswain's mates had been down near the line locker one afternoon at sea and thought the messenger might be right. He even thought about closing up the signal shack and going with him, he was so sure of it, but the leading signalman had ordered him under no circumstances to be gone when the XO made it up to the signal shack to inspect its corners and crannies. The signalman gave the messenger the keys and stayed where he was supposed to stay, which was a good thing or there would have been two of them.

Guardian

Of all his travels through the ship, the messenger loved the skip down the ladders from the signal bridge to the lower decks the best. He had done this many, many times, even in his one year on board. It always meant he was going off watch, flying down free and light after relief from the pilothouse or as lookout, the path through the ship which seemed to presage the future he imagined for himself as he twirled through the empty pilothouse where he could envision himself, most certainly, standing watch as the officer of the deck underway, guardian of all on board, the movement and safety of the ship at sea, then below, past the combat information center, where he was certain he would one day rule as the tactical action officer, fighting the ship, exercising gun and missile, past the captain's in-port cabin, a palace he dared desire in his secret wishes that everyone knew. He evaded officers' country and the wardroom, where one day he would eat with all his brother officers, stiff-walked forward ("Never run on the ship," XO says) then down another hatch past the chiefs' mess where one day his loyal chief would guide the good men of his division, and past the hatch down to the chief engineer's main control, that unknown realm of engines and fuel and water he was certain he could master—until he came to the big lower deck hatch to the trunk, big enough to allow the hoist of a refrigerator-sized pump when opened. It was bolted heavily down, its gasket dogged onto a coaming by eight fat nuts. In its center, a small

circular hatch called a scuttle gave access for a single person at a time with a quick-acting wheel to spin it loose.

He stopped. He unlocked the scuttle. He would only be down there for a minute. He spun the wheel to loosen the dogs and it popped up. He stepped through with the trick of stepping forward, down onto the ladder. He slipped in and hesitated for an instant before closing it after him. Someone might see and ask some question to stop him. Someone would check on an opened scuttle, and he knew he wasn't supposed to be down this hatch. This was a hatch they locked closed for some reason.

Shipmates

It was a strange piece of luck for Ehrlich to find the scuttle. Some might say there was some invisible hand at work in this, but there wasn't. He was only doing his job.

Ehrlich thought, *This is what the XO does, this is what the XO does, he squares it away, he squares it away*, as he hustled down the passageway to get to the engineers' berthing compartment where he knew it was going to be an absolute disaster. He'd just come from the chief's mess where he had encountered the command master chief and two of his cronies having coffee. The master chief's pals, he told *them* to get out in their spaces and be ready to present them for inspection or he would fail them on the spot. They lazily emptied out their cups, rinsed them, left him alone with the master chief to whom the XO said, "I'd think you'd be out helping the crew get off on liberty, Master Chief."

The command master chief did not have a division; his purpose was the running of the chief's mess and the support of the crew. Ehrlich thought of him as a union boss, but by regulation, he was the captain's direct advisor, the senior enlisted man on board. That position, plus his age, nearing fifty and his retirement that loomed with bewildering proximity only three months away, let him say, "The crew's liberty? I'd say that's your lookout now, Shipmate."

This is where the word 'shipmate' becomes derogatory, scathing and belittling. In such a little sentence, the senior enlisted man on the ship, older than Ehrlich, but really no wiser, perfectly communicated insubordination in a manner that could not be punished—they were alone—with these few words, he expressed his contempt for Ehrlich's rampage, threatened to describe all to the captain upon his return, and imparted his estimation that Ehrlich had failed in every respect as a *man*, a *seaman*, and a *gentleman*.

Ehrlich walked out of the chiefs' mess without a word, knowing all of it true.

The Scuttle

Ehrlich was no longer enraged when he saw the scuttle, closed but only partially dogged down, the padlock loose on the lid. He chanted to himself, “This is what the XO does, this is what the XO does.”

A better man would have simply found the rat guards.

Put them up.

Gotten rat guards from somewhere else.

“He squares it away. He squares it away. This is what the XO does.”

Maybe he had a right.

A better man would have simply fixed the problem instead of this ringing out, this endorsement of terror. Foolish to act like this. But the crew, so stupid and dangerous leaving a hatch like that unlocked. He opened the hatch, looked down. His call below found only silence.

Sloth. He’d let his ship go to sloth. Ehrlich knew, then, that he hadn’t been as diligent as he ought to have been.

He’d been too slack.

Ehrlich dogged the hatch down, locked it. He stalked away to the quarterdeck to see if anyone could find some way to come up with new rat guards.

Reposed

The ship had been waiting for someone. The long, deep trunk into the flag locker and bilge, through every deck, lower and lower. Doors on each level led to compartments, locked and secured, watertight, airtight; their rubber gaskets pressed onto their knife edges to seal pump rooms, electronic spaces, storage rooms—sealing them shut against the danger of flood and fire—these empty spaces of the ship had been waiting for someone. Brightly lit, the trunk invited the messenger down one ladder then the next, and further even five decks below to the bottom where the messenger tried his keys on the flag locker. Of course, now he couldn’t remember why he thought that the rat guards would be in the flag locker; the signalmen would never store anything for the boatswain’s mates, it was all too confusing to work out, his judgment already affected by the deep breaths of methane he’d taken going down the vertical ladders, step-by-step, breathing it in where it had seeped up over time from potatoes dropped months before from the bag a working party had broken on the edge of the opened hatch as they filled the ship’s stores. Six potatoes, left in the bilge water to fester. Later, other sailors in another compartment deep in the trunk installed new stanchions in place to mount equipment, and they had left behind the inert gas used by their arc welder, argon. Heavier than air, the argon had settled into the bilge over time and shouldered

aside some of the oxygen the messenger might have found to prevent ship's methane from working so quickly.

He tried the keys on the flag locker's padlock, in a hurry because the ship had given him a nagging sense that he might be late for something, confused even further by the carbon dioxide pooled in the bottom of the trunk from the fire extinguisher once used to put out the trash basket fire caused by a spatter of welding slag. There was something he was supposed to do, something he had to do for the operations officer. It had to do with the bilge and for a moment, he remembered the missing rat guards and remembered he'd seen them in the bilge. (He had not. He had only imagined them so.) He dropped the keys on the deck, stepped down the short ladder into the bilge where it was dark. Quiet in there. So quiet. No ventilation, no creaks or ticks. The ship stationary next to the pier, not even the mumble of the ship's propulsion. But this made no difference to the ship's wet rust. It slipped under the bubbled paint of the I-beams of the steel framing, squirmed under his feet. Someone called out. No matter. He had his sea legs and maintained his balance. He did not slip into the five inches of water with the moldy scum on top exuding a slight scent of rotten eggs, the hydrogen sulfide's contribution to the carbon dioxide and now, even carbon monoxide trapped under the low overhead of the deck above the bilge.

The messenger couldn't remember why he was there, then remembered he was supposed to bring something. But what? He had done something wrong. He shouldn't be in the bilge. He climbed back up the four ladder rungs into the light. But he was so tired. His arms didn't seem attached. He was supposed to take his arms back up to the top of the trunk, but they were too heavy, so he sat down. He had been up very, very early that morning; he had risen up through the ship with the promising scent of the night baking all around him and out into the clean air of the sea breeze wafting ashore from the first limbs of the rising sun. He had gone on watch to come into port and after arrival— he had been on watch and that had been enough done in one day, as his father used to tell him, enough done to take a break. He leaned back against the door of the flag locker to close his eyes. The quiet whisper of the hold descended upon him like the warm hand of his mother grateful to him for all his younger brothers, sound and home, grateful for all his duty performed. And he—most grateful for this quiet moment in the vast hollow under all decks, low, alone, reposed.

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