Ropeyarn Sunday "Sea Stories" and Open Trackbacks

Description

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Last Wednesday,

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I â€œscribbledâ€• some recollections, in a narrative format, or how life at sea is not always exciting, and sometimes, itâ€™s mind-numbing, and tough to stay awake, let alone alert. The words were from a first person experience, as I stood Bridge and Combat Information Center watches most of my sea going career, with a 1/2 of a tour (the other half was spent in drydock for an overhaul), as an Engineering Officer of the Watch. Below decks, there is a world seldom considered in the detail that is intrinsic in keeping a vessel operational, in port, as well as at sea.

I didnâ€™t ask to be an engineer, well, there was the third blank on the â€œpreference cardâ€• that had to be filled in, as my chosen career field gave me but three choices: Combat Systems, Operations andâ€¦yep, Engineering. I put â€œitâ€• last, having served my prior 5 years mostly in Combat Systems, with a beginning tour of two years in two of the Operations Department divisions. I wanted to be where things left the ship with purpose, at high speed, to damage and destroy those formed against us on land and sea. Someone in the detailers shop (I know understand they are â€œcareer managers,â€• but we had other, more colorful names for those who wandered the halls of the Navy Annex (then in Arlington, VA) treating us like so many cards in a playing deck, sending us to do the bidding of â€œThe Navy.â€•

So, I went to a tour as Engineering Officer (which I have blogged about before) and found it engaging, rewarding, tough mentally to keep all things to all standards demanded by the many upper levels of the chain of command, but, when all was said and done, fun. Not without itâ€™s degree of boredom, mind you, but only standing the EOOW watch, spared me from having to live what my men did: Those who kept the â€œplantâ€• operational and safe, day and night, alongside the pier, at anchor, or while slicing through the tall waves of an angry sea. A new appreciation grew within me for the â€œsnipes,â€• who made it happen.

Engineering watches varied from sitting in a space for several hours, which might also have been air conditioned for the electronics of the gyros (and later inertial navigation system), or hot, and humid areas, such as the â€œMain Spaces.â€• If you had a watch in a space, there were many tasks, firstly, to keep the systems within the space in the operational condition as required by the Shipâ€™s current operations. Many times, that was a handful, especially during drills, be they for the engineering readiness, or for the â€œupper deckâ€• guys. Other times, the turbines and compressors and pumps

and generators would be doing the same thing all watch. Then, there was routine checks to be made. Just about every space had a clipboard with log sheets of various design that the watchstanders would record readings of various equipments. More often than not, it was on an hourly basis, unless you suspected something wasnâ€™t running well, but it wasnâ€™t out of spec yet. The men knew these things, when the unit wasnâ€™t sounding â€œnormalâ€• to them. The logs would be reviewed by supervisors, who would circle reading outside of the accepted ranges in red. Those items would then attract the scrutiny required (or should) to determine if maybe services, like cooling water, or air, or fuel might be misaligned, or if there was a failure at hand. The Engineering Officer of the Watch was the interface, to be consulted, and then to determine if the Engineer Officer was to be called, or, in a more immediate case, the Officer of the Deck.

When there werenâ€™t reading to be taken on a long watch, there was usually plenty of preventive maintenance to be taken care of on off line equipment. And, when those tasks ran short, professional manuals/correspondence courses could be read. Thatâ€™s not to say a paperback or two of a few hundred havenâ€™t been read under those circumstances, but being ready all the time sometimes left that opportunity.

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Besides in the watches who spent their 4 hours in a single space, there was the rover, the â€œSounding and Securityâ€• watchstander, who, armed with a clipboard of sheets, a flashlight, and a sounding tape, would patrol below the main deck, keeping an eye on equipment in unmanned spaces, and also checking that locked spaces were, good order and discipline was in effect, and that where we had fluids in the ship, they were at the levels we projected, neither increasing or decreasing in volume beyond what operational requirements imposed. He also was charged with monitoring everywhere he traveled for general fire safety.

These things happened 24/7, even when â€œCold Ironâ€• (the main plant being secured, most often when alongside a pier and receiving shore power and water), albeit with lesser manning and the EOOW responsibility shifted to the Engineering Duty Officer of the dayâ€™s duty section, himself a qualified EOOW, in the event the ship had to â€œlight offâ€• and put to sea.

All the while, these men (and now women) made sure the â€œtwidgetsâ€• had 60hz power, as well as 400hz power, air conditioning, water, chilled water, and lights to make a mere ship into a warship.

For the crew at large, they made sure the berthing spaces had water, to include hot water for showers, working â€œfacilitiesâ€• and air conditioning, too. They did and do this 24/7/365. Most often, they are never thanked properly for their daily and nightly exertions, as itâ€™s just expected they will make things go. Almost all of them are below decks when entering port, returning home from the long deployment, where they canâ€™t wacth for the family and friends on the pier. When the whistle blows and the words â€œMOORED! SHIFT COLORS!â€• is announced, they have several hours of work head to â€œwrap upâ€• the plant before changing into either a dress uniform of their civies to head home. Due to various FAA and other restrictions, just about everything used by the topside sailors has been secured for hours, such as air search radars, missile and gun systems. The engineering plant stays running until the CO is satisfied the ship if properly moored with six standard mooring lines, doubled fore and aft. At that point, shutting down the plant begins, and, now having large metal components being hot from being operational, specific , time tested procedures are in place to let equipment, such as the propeller shafts, to slowly rotate the gear until it is basically at ambient temperatures, lest you find a â€œwarpedâ€• shaft next time you prepare to head to sea.

Beyond that, shore power cables have to be hauled aboard the ship, connected and then paralleled with the shipâ€™s electrical power, before the generators may be secured. This is a physical task, which, requires precision for the power shift to avoid damaging major electronic components of the Combat System. Fresh water and sewage system connections also have to be made and checked for operation, at the same time the rest of the crew is busy streaming off the ship to be greeted by the crowd ashore.

Thatâ€™s by a small glimpse of what happens to make the ship operate, out of the eyes of the public, and sometimes taken for granted by some of the crew, as well. My tour in Engineering allowed me to see the hard and tedious, yet vitally important work that makes warship out an otherwise â€œshore battery.â€•

Donâ€™t forget to thank your local â€œsnipeâ€• for keeping your gear supported and the hot showers you enjoy.

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