

A Summer Cruise on Board the USS Iowa by Don Frost (20)

As one goes through four years at the Naval Academy, you have the normal academic school year, as other universities do, but then during the summer, you spend two of the three summer months in various indoctrination activities. At the end of my first year I was assigned for two months to the USS Iowa, a battleship. This was a great time as we cruised from Annapolis, made a port call at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, then across the Equator and on to Rio de Janeiro where we anchored for several days. Our return to Annapolis included a two-day port visit at Trinidad.

On the Iowa, there were about 200 of us who had just completed our first year and we were assigned as Seamen Apprentice. We took the place of regular crew members, performing the most basic shipboard duties; when I say basic, I mean BASIC! We swabbed and holy stoned the wood decks; we shined chrome and brass including the Ship's Bell; after applying lemon juice to the steel decks in our berthing compartments, we shined them with buffers to eliminate rust build up; in the engine and boiler rooms, which are in the bowels of the ship and where the heat is extreme, we wire brushed the corroded valves and piping and cleaned the bilges; and many other such glorious tasks! In addition, we practiced the skills we had learned at the Academy such as navigation, gunnery, damage control, etc. We were each assigned to a specific location and team for drills such as General Quarters, Abandon Ship, Man Over Board, etc.

My General Quarters station was as a powder bag handler, two to three decks below the main deck and right under the forward number two 16-inch gun mount. The Iowa has nine 16-inch guns. The 16 inch is an enormous gun, 66 feet long, weighing around 390,000 pounds, firing a shell weighing from 1,900 to 2,700 pounds that can travel up to 23 miles. The shell is rammed into the chamber of the gun and then one to six silk powder bags, weighing 110 pounds each are placed in the chamber behind the shell. I was stationed in the powder magazine where the powder bags were stowed. We would take a powder bag, place it on a lift that then raised it up to the gun mount on the main deck. The powder magazine is not a good place to work. You might recall in 1989, when the Iowa was still active and out on a training exercise, there was an explosion in a powder magazine and 47 sailors were killed. Shipboard life can be dangerous!!

Our first stop was Guantanamo Bay, better known as Gitmo, where we spent a couple days running various training exercises. Next, we steamed south for Rio de Janeiro. The trip to Rio was routine, as we stood watches, conducted drills, carried out shipboard maintenance, watched movies at night—just a normal sailor's life when at sea. However, there were two memorable events: sleeping out on deck at night; and crossing the Equator!

We were allowed to take our skinny, light mattress out on deck to sleep because it was extremely warm in our berthing compartments. That was quite an experience. We were sailing

in quiet waters and the Iowa traveled with just a slight roll. You would lie on your mattress, looking up at the crystal clear night sky, with no light pollution! What an awesome sight. I remember to this day that majestic sky with the stars shining so brightly and thinking just how was all that brought into existence; I didn't figure that out until 22 years later! Gazing up at the night sky in the Southern Hemisphere is somewhat different then when one views the Northern Hemisphere sky. In the Northern, you have the North Star as your point of reference, while in the Southern, you have the Southern Cross providing one of the navigational foundations. But on to the next experience to share which was totally different and loaded with excitement of a different nature!

Have you heard of a human Pollywog? Or a Shellback? How about the Royal Belly Button? I'm sure you've heard of King Neptune and his Royal Domain. At sea there is an event which changes you from a Pollywog into a Shellback, but there is a somewhat unique accompanying ceremony which brings you from one to the other, if you survive! Let me explain for you Landlubbers! On board ship you have both Pollywogs, those who have yet to cross the Equator, and Shellbacks, those who have crossed. (I crossed eight times in my career.) According to the Laws of the Realm, as administered and enforced by King Neptune and his Royal Court, when crossing the Equator, the Shellbacks on board are required to conduct an indoctrination ceremony for all Pollywogs, thus bringing them into the Realm of King Neptune. Oh man, is it a ceremony, at least it was on board the Iowa that beautiful summer day as we sailed south in the Atlantic Ocean.

It all starts the night before when "Davy Jones" subpoenas all Pollywogs to prepare to appear before King Neptune and his Royal Court the next morning. On the Court you have the Royal Doctor, the Royal Baby, the Royal Judge and similar Titled officials each dressed for the occasion. Those Shellbacks who were not on the Court, dress up as pirates or beach bums and are responsible for maintaining order among the Pollywogs for the duration of King Neptune's visit. It is better known as "Pollywog Harassment"!

The day started early for us Pollywogs as we were taken to breakfast which was simply a biscuit and coffee made with sea water! From there it went down-hill as we were called to formation on deck. We were dressed in our bathing suits or old uniforms turned inside out. I don't recall the sequence of events, but I do recall, we Midshipmen who were to be the future bosses of the enlisted men, were not spared any mercy! During that two to three-hour ceremony we were humiliated beyond understanding. The indoctrination activities included crawling across the deck through a tube which contained all sorts of objectionable items including garbage from the ship's galley. We had to appear before the Royal Doctor to make sure we were properly treated for bad breath before being presented to King Neptune; the treatment being while lying on a table we were made to swallow a slimy raw oyster or two which had been doused with some kind of horrible sauce! There were a couple other activities prior to reaching the King but the last was kissing the Royal Baby's belly button! UGH! The Royal Baby was the most obese Shellback of the Crew and of course he was dressed as a baby

in diapers! His belly was covered with grease and slime and he sat there with his big gut hanging out. We would have to kneel before this beast and as we kissed his belly button he would grab our head and rub it all around his fat slimy belly! Disgusting.

Then we finally come before King Neptune, who sits in judgment and declares you to be fit to enter His Royal Domain. At that point you had a Royal Bath which was jumping into a large pool of salt water. On getting out of the pool we each were declared a Shellback.

A few day later we sailed into Rio's harbor where we anchored for several days. My time there was a grand experience which was capped off with a visit to the 98-foot-high stature of Christ the Redeemer, which sits on a mountain some 2300 feet high overlooking the harbor of Rio. The other memorable item while in Rio was a dance given in our honor by the Brazilian Naval Academy Midshipmen. It was quite an elaborate affair as we were in our dress blue uniforms and danced the evening away. A couple of my classmates fell head over heels in love, eventually marrying the young Brazilian ladies they met that evening.

The remainder of our summer cruise was anti-climactic, with a two-day port call at Porta-Prince, Trinidad, and then home to Annapolis and a month vacation! Like they say, "Join the Navy and See the World", and get paid to do it!!!