

My Memories of the Service

By William H. Gass

1 A warship when first underway will shiver nervously. Everywhere its skin trembles; and the crew, from canvas shoe to chalky cap, will shiver too, as their bodies get used to the deck's continuous rocking, the slow swell of the sea, the shake of laboring engines, and the sway of the horizon in the bowl of the eye. The day I reached my ship the sea was like slate, its surface thinly ridged, little wind. It had been a long tedious journey from the Naval Station Great Lakes where I was presumed to be learning about codes, ciphers, and other secrets, to my ultimate goal, an unmarked X in the middle of the Pacific where the Third/Fifth Fleet refueled engines and supplied its men. Rail cars were stuffed with sleeping soldiers and their gear. They carried us through the Rocky Mountains to the Golden Gate where we were to wait our turn to go to war.

I left San Francisco on an oiler for Hawaii in late May. I was nearly the only passenger aboard, wandering about, dining with the officers, reading *The Golden Bough*, a book I had bought in Frisco; and, left pretty much to myself, sinfully enjoying the journey, especially the great storm that struck us halfway, and which was drama without too much danger. Oilers are floating tanks and we were full, sitting deep in the water and low to the wind, so the blow of the waves covered most of the ship's stomach, a strange severing that was finally fun. The stern was like a submarine's conning tower thrust up into waves that broke over its belly. But I didn't know prows looked like that then. I had never seen one.

In Pearl I was transferred to a freighter filled with fresh troops, ammo, and apprehension, and nourished by meals made of left over sausage and canned beans covered with catsup. Youths sleeping in racks of four were stacked in the hold. This creaking slow boat brought its cargo to Eniwetok, one of the Marshall chain, an atoll whose future was to be famously blown into subatomic pieces. To my surprise, over my head was a shed made of maybe shredded palm trees that officers used as a drink and gamble club, and where they sought shade from a untiring sun. The amount of wagering among the crews surprised and even shocked me. I was just a kid and had no right to an opinion, but about the wager I retained a puritanical attitude. Some of us enjoyed a coral swim in water so clear that one of my arms became badly sun burned even though it had been submerged in the ocean for a splashy half an hour. I received a reprimand for allowing this to happen.

2 The above recounts the third collision I was to have with naval authority. The second occurred nearly a year earlier when, as a fresh enlistee still in civilian clothes, I was made to stand in a line, sheepish and silly, and then told in an unpleasant tone to face right. This command could not be meant for me. However, to my amazement obedience was expected. My father often berated me, but I do not remember him so bossy as to provoke instantaneous resistance. He was an evaluator not a demander. He would suggest I mow the lawn, and then describe how badly I had done it. Even now, old and occasionally obedient, any hint of criticism reddens my cheeks. Did that include the editors who advised alterations?

3 My initial encounter? I was a first quarter freshman at Kenyon College. In a building nearby were housed a group of new students studying the weather. We called them “the weather or nots.” We thought that funny. At every five a.m. this group, loudly chanting their cadence, would march along a road below the genuine student dorms. Our request that the weather-or-nots shut up and let us sleep, our suggestion that they march elsewhere such as into the inferno, did not receive a response. So one night I removed the fuse box in their building. It was poorly protected. Oh joyous giggle! They did not know where the thing was supposed to be mounted. After some patriot tattled on me I was suspended from all socializing for a month by a personage called Dean; but my pleasure was real to this very moment of writing. Such mischief had made me a hero on the campus although the weather-or-nots continued to chant while on the same road at the same hour and with a louder noise. They also posted more alert guards.

4 Nor had I seen the breaches buoy that was going to carry me from one ship to another: a basket of rope built for big birds, hung from a pulley, and pulled by numerous young men would carry me across what at that moment seemed a vast and angry stretch of water. The sea was, of course, calm, the two ships barely making headway. The trade of me and my fellow passenger – a big balding guy who appeared from nowhere - for a few fresh vegetables and a movie - would be safely made, although the crew ordered to make the exchange looked skeptical and in every direction except ours. We managed a salute. A voice somewhere said, “Jesus, we just netted the oldest and the youngest ensigns in the navy.”

5 The Pasadena was the flagship of its group. This meant that, in addition to a captain, we carried an admiral and his staff of toadies. What we didn’t have was experience. Our boat was brand new (like me), on its first fight (like me), an amateur at every thing (like me). Although my record aboard was – one ranking officer said – the worst he had ever seen; nevertheless during my sixteen continuous months at sea I gradually received more significant tasks. I was the movie officer for a couple of weeks. It was an impossible job because the movies the men wanted to see were westerns and noirs not musicals. Ships that had Hoot Gibson squirreled him away and looked for bargains in Randolph Scott. If you got stuck with something girlish, for instance an Esther Williams, you were stuck indeed. Sailors did not long for swimming pools and lots of splashing, or even well filled swimsuits, they wanted horses, gunplay and dust.

I was the newscaster for a few weeks or a bit more. The Broadcaster was to announce via the ship’s audio system baseball scores as well as military triumphs. I decided to spice up the news, supply some jokes and describe a number of reported oddities. Not every item I used was pro war, not every thought was a happy one, not every move of our marvelous nation wise. I would fix our location as “GRABLE 36-24-35” or RITA HAYWORTH 36C.” The nightly newscast was an immediate hit. One heard laughter from stem to stern, as well as wisecracks and argument. In three weeks, in the company of a fierce silence I was relieved of this task just when I was beginning to enjoy it.

I was also the secrets officer. This might sound scary, important even, but it wasn’t. I was the garbles officer. When a transmission was too tangled to crack, or jumbled in reception to understand, I tried to straighten it out. I mostly worked on

typewriter or a codifier. When a message came or went labeled for Eyes-Only or Top Secret, I would be sent for and it was I who bore the clip board, like room service, carrying a message to its recipient, hoping for a tip. There were officers on the Admiral's staff who tried to peek at my message tray because to know things made them feel important. Had they looked they would have learned little because these messages were often not important at all. They could even be frivolous. After the Admiral had taken note of its contents, he might make remarks in a red pencil and instruct me to show the secret to another officer. One morning, the Admiral in a feisty mood, tried to drive the pencil through the paper that I brought him; the point broke; he threw the pencil against the cabin's furthest wall; he held out an empty hand toward me for another; and he rejected the choices I offered him because none of them was red. This oversight was to be remedied immediately.

6 But years off, wasn't I to be the stabber of an mss rejected by a publisher?

When it wasn't my watch I would hide in the top secret vault where the ship carried its medical brandy and read Erskine Caldwell and Hemingway. I actually didn't drink a lot of the brandy but I read the same Hemingway and Caldwell over and over. In the vault no one could find me, hidden in Hemingway, engrossed in Caldwell – I remember "I mistrust all frank and simple people..." Tastes change, even for brandy, memory fails, even for men and woman; nowadays I get lost in Jeremy Taylor but I have to consult the text: "It is certainly a sad thing in nature to see a friend trembling with a palsie, or scorched with feavers, or *dried up like a potsheard* with immoderate heats, and rowling upon his uneasie bed without sleep which cannot be invited with musick, or pleasant murmurs, or a decent stillnesse..." and I wonder whether I will be such a case and whether I shall be such a friend to myself.

7 In the top secret vault were kept the keys to codes and ciphers in leaden covers. So they might sink to the bottom of the sea with alacrity. One of my tasks was to keep the various readings of signals up to date, for instance when a plane approached the fleet it gave out coded radar signals that identified it as a friend not a foe. Unlike most of the things on the ship I did, this task was clearly important.

I discovered to my dismay that whoever had this job before me had not registered the fact that these changes in codes had been made. I supposed that it had because we hadn't shot down any friendly planes but I made the omissions known. This caused a fire in the paper mill. Entering out of date symbols in a clerky book was tedious work; there were a lot of codes that were rarely used; and some that automatically altered themselves according to still more secret designs.

I simply told my superiors that there was no longer any need to correct an out of date symbol system. We needed to keep up with what was presently in use. This time it was the ship's captain who threatened me with insubordination. I realize now that I was to cover up someone else's mistake, that the ship had always been safe, and its past must be seamless and without a scratch.

Sometimes when I presented the boss with a badly written top secret message – incoming or outgoing - the admiral would grump at me for someone else's poor grammar. My offer of assistance in their future compositions was rejected with further curses. I was young, stupid; I smirked. I was confined to my quarters where I made

chess moves with another Bad Attitude. He played the game far better than I did. Neither of us felt the dishonor we were supposed to suffer when under hack.

8 I learned how to decode messages meant for other admirals because our guy liked to spy on more than the enemy. Officers desired to look at communications that were temptingly labeled Eyes Only. What were the other big shots saying to one another? why was Halsey whispering to King and not to him? I sometimes enabled our Captain to overhear confidences, but he did not like me for this. I was a partner in his crimes.

9 Strictly speaking I was not a member of the Admiral's staff. I belonged to the boat. Nevertheless, I was so treated. It was actually a useful mistake. When the Captain of the ship could not find me, he assumed I was off on an Admiral's errand; when I was not available to the Admiral, I must be busy about the Captain's business. Reading *The Sun Also Rises*. In the officers' wardroom listening to Giuseppe De Luca sing *Eri Tu* on the phonograph. I guess I have the Navy to thank for my passion about opera. It was the only real music on board, and I played the circles off of it. Something like that must have happened because one morning I found shattered bits of vinyl at my place at table.

10 The Pasadena passed through the horrors of Iwo Jima and Okinawa unscathed. We must have had a secret pact with our enemy: "if we have orders to bomb you, we promise to use only duds; and if you have to shoot at our planes, miss."

The typhoon that I enjoyed on the oiler was probably the edge or subsidence of the famous storm later called Cobra that did the fleet more damage than the attacks of the Japanese. Too many destroyers were allowed to run low on fuel. So they would threaten to roll over with the waves. Too little attention was paid to the sea itself. For what had they trained entire dorms about weather? Steering became difficult as water rose and air speed accelerated. When attempts were made to refuel, speeds were set at ten knots, but then fuel lines tore, phone lines broke, mooring ropes, trying to be helpful, snapped with horrid howls. Misinformed, angry, mad, Halsey turned the fleet into the storm whose winds were now over a hundred. Ships threatened to run into one another. Gun barrels were bent. Planes were swept from the decks of carriers. Sharks began to show up. Nearly a thousand sailors were lost and several ships. Halsey was court marshaled. And given a medal.

Six months later the fleet was attacked (I was now aboard, the world watched) by Viper, a twin of Cobra. The only difference was the ships were well weighed down by fuel and provision this time. Halsey reacted as if he were personally assaulted. Not so many died, but Essex had its flight path rolled up. The bow of Pittsburgh, a ship identical with mine, had its bow torn off. Communication equipment was blown away and the fleet silent. I read the unscripted message Halsey sent to his squadrons when he was able: **WHEN LAST SEEN THE JAPANESE TYPHOON WAS FLEEING TO THE EAST**. Halsey was court marshaled. And given another medal.

11 After August 6 (1945) there was a scramble between naval authorities to find out what had happened at a target some messages had warned all planes away from; and

plenty of bent noses because they had been left out of the “must know” society. A few captains – if the messages that flew everywhere like gulls can be relied upon – catapulted their ship’s plane in the direction of Hiroshima.

There was nothing to be seen but death and oblivion.

12 Right after the surrender, since the fleet was in Tokyo, I was given a little leave, several days during which I could visit some temples, enjoy some hot springs, take a few fine pictures of Fuji, and get a feel for the country General MacArthur was going to be ruling. Piles of weapons were looted at the encouragement of higher powers: I took away one sword, one rifle, and one revolver. It was German, a Luger, as heavy as a hardened heart. They were a great pain to carry about. Ultimately I gave them away. The Japanese were... they were obedient.

13 Then the ships one by one returned to the United States. As a punishment for a poor performance, I was remaindered to a LST (LandingShipTank) but I had scarcely delivered a salute to this new commander when a message arrived altering my destination. I had been rerouted to the USS Estes, an amphibious command ship for the seventh fleet. This ship had fought at Iwo Jima and Okinawa but it was a new kind of vessel - directing preinvasion underwater attacks, special land bombardments, and aerial assaults. The ship did a kind of police patrol up and down the Chinese coast and for a while made Tsingtao its home. Finally it shifted its provenance to Shanghai where I was posted as the on-shore representative of the Seventh Fleet.

I was 21 and incapable of representing anything. To do nothing exceptionally well I was given a driver who didn’t have anything to do either. So we drove into the country. We had picnics. He had never really experienced crows in crowds or bats either. We saw the movie, *Henry V*, surrounded by civil war, poverty, and disease; and there experienced clacking (two wooden squares whacked together to disturb the audiences’ enjoyment). An old hand said it was to convey enthusiasm. I didn’t believe him.

Shanghai was a dangerous city - small pox, cholera, typhus were epidemic. American officers hung out at a mess in the International section of the city. It was from this place drunken sailors staged Rickshaw races, and gave me another moment of shame for the United States. I was glad to go home anyway.