

Sea Stories - from Lee Doyel, USS Tracer

I was aboard USS Tracer (AGR-15) as Engineering Officer from 1960 to 1962 stationed at Treasure Island, CA. There were two or three piers there of concrete and wood. The wooden ones have long since been removed. There were usually two or three ships moored at the piers. During this time it seemed that the USS Watchman (AGR-16) spent a large amount of time in port. I didn't pay that much attention but started hearing from the crew about "Pier 16" referring to the Watchman. She would be there on our departure and there on our return. It did seem she was in port and made less patrols than the other ships but a check of ships logs and operational schedule might prove that a misconception. You know how sailors are when they start talking and relaying opinions. I do know that on occasion sister ships made patrols that were scheduled for the Watchman due to Watchman having mechanical problems, i.e. wiped shaft bearings, boiler tubes, evaporators, or some critical pump or electronic equipment. I know aboard Tracer we repaired a lot of things underway or on station. We never missed a patrol due to mechanical problems. On one occasion on the way to station we laid to and took off the cover to the large piston to tighten down the retaining nut. It had loosened enough so the piston was "slapping." After repairs we continued to station and completed our patrol. Tracer's CO was always chiding me about how clean the Watchman's engine room was. They had aluminum deck plating and all the brass was polished. It really was clean but I told him they spent all the OpTar (operating funds) on decking and polish rather than maintenance.



Toward the end of my tour the Watchman earned an "Efficiency E" which were awarded to ships for their performance. That kinda galled me as I knew Tracer was a better ship. In fact it received an efficiency E after I left. It also received the best mess afloat. Setting at the pier and looking across at that E painted on the wing of the Watchman's bridge irritated me and I made a comment it would be nice if it was painted out. I don't recall who was around but apparently a Snipe (engineering type) heard me. Anyway shortly before I transferred off the ship I had the duty and was making my nightly rounds. I forget the time but I'm sure it was past midnight. The ship was port

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side to the pier with the Watchman starboard side across the pier. I was on the port wing of the bridge after checking the bridge and looked aft. I saw a dark shadow of a man carrying some items making his way to the after mooring lines. Strange, so I decided to watch and see what would happen. The individual slid down the mooring line to the pier with his items and crossed the pier and boarded the Watchman via their mooring lines. As he crossed the pier I was able to see he had a gallon paint can and a metal tray.

I stayed on the bridge in the shadows and waited. Sure enough the individual appeared on the Watchman's bridge and proceeded to paint over the efficiency E on the starboard side with grey paint. He disappeared and I assumed he went to the port side to do the same thing. In a few minutes he slid down the aft mooring lines of the Watchman and onto the pier. However when he tried to re board Tracer had trouble and finally gave up, leaving the Quarterdeck as his only way back aboard. I had recognized the individual (who shall remain nameless) as a snipe who had the duty that night. Knowing he would be questioned at the Quarterdeck, I proceeded to the Quarterdeck and engaged the watch in conversation distracting him and keeping his back to the gangplank long enough for the individual to come back aboard unseen by the quarterdeck watch.

I am sure that individual was nervous about what I might say to him the next day but I never mentioned the episode and neither did he. I would liked to have taken a picture of the blank wing of the Watchman's bridge but my camera was out of film. I don't know how long it took the Watchman to realize their precious E had been painted over. (Have a sea story or photos to share? Email to Mel Harder, YAGRS secretary: mel.harder@snet.net)