

## How I Became a CT

Bob Biancur, CT-R3 1966 - 1970

As boys, my cousin and I enjoyed watching “Navy Log” and “Victory at Sea.” We both knew then we wanted to go to sea and become sailors. He, being a few years older joined first, and I while still in high school enlisted at age 17. It was August of 1966, when I got my hair buzzed off at Great Lakes Training Center, and quickly discovered that the Navy wasn’t a 9 to 5 job. There were quite a few other things I needed to learn and not question, such as the importance of the 96 count manual of arms. I couldn’t understand why we spent countless hours twirling antique, non-working pieces (rifles) instead of learning marksmanship. Then there was that day devoted to learning marlinspike. Four years in the Navy and I had never seen another piece of rope, nor tied another knot other than for tying my shoes. Yet, I kept hearing, there is a right way, a wrong way, and the Navy way (to do things). There were other important expressions to memorize, such as: “If it moves, salute it -- if it doesn’t, polish it.” So far, nothing we did bore any resemblance to “Navy Log.”

I was sure I was going to be a radioman because I had a novice class ham radio license by age 12 and had aced the code aptitude test after enlisting. My first set of orders had me report to Bethesda Naval Research Hospital, at Bethesda, MD. There, about 30 sailors from my former company were asked to participate in a research study called ARGUS, which stood for Advanced Research on Groups Under Stress. After undergoing a battery of tests, six were chosen for the actual experiment, while the remaining ‘volunteers’ were assigned sundry tasks for assisting test subjects. I was selected to go into extreme isolation. Researchers assured our group that volunteering would, in no way, affect where or what we did next in the Navy. (First Lie) We were also told that there would be no physical or psychological aftereffect. (Second Lie) We couldn’t walk a straight line when we got out and required an escort for three days.)

After completing a month of psychological testing, restricted to barracks, and having given many blood and urine samples, the experiment was about to get underway. The lucky six were taken to six prepared chambers. They looked like bank vaults, were very heavy, soundproofed, and outfitted with the barest of essentials. We were allowed inside for a brief inspection. I noticed that the bed was wired to record movement, two microphones hung from the ceiling, an electronic testing panel blinked on the wall near the bed, and two glass gallons of drinking water lay stored under the bed; a carton of survival crackers and a carton of pressurized canned cheese lay stacked on a tiny table, along with some pills to take daily, and a chemical toilet, also wired, rounded out this delightful ensemble. Oddly, a funnel in the wall served as a low-tech urine collection system. Before being locked in I had to change into flimsy hospital garb. They said that they could always hear us but would never respond other than to issue directives. The air pressure changed noticeably when the heavy door was secured for the final time. It would not be opened again until the end of the seventh day, or unless something really bad happened inside. I was now ensconced in a tiny room just large enough in which to stand and just barely long enough to hold the bed. I had never before experienced periods of darkness, silence, or isolation to such an extent. It was eerie and I began to wonder why they chose me over so many others. For the sake of brevity suffice to say that I completed the seven day ordeal, and, in doing, learned something about meditation and self-introspection. I received a letter of appreciation for undergoing this psychologically arduous experiment, designed to advance future weapons systems.

My new orders were cut for Bainbridge, MD, the location of the radio school. I was placed in temporary barracks and told to report to the galley at 0dark30 next morning. There, instead of earphones, I was handed an apron and told to start making breakfast for 5,000 men and women. Then clean up after them, prepare the noon meal, clean up, and do it again for the evening meal. This can't be. I'm here for radio school. I discovered that many of the volunteers from Bethesda were also with me. We were in disbelief. Cook, clean, scullery, grill, holystone the grill, bake, prepare foods, steam vegetables, operate huge rotating ovens, learn night baking, steam-clean garbage cans, paint details, etc. This grueling work went nonstop for about four months, though my total time there was one year. I think a few of the guys cracked up and went over the hill. What preserved my sanity was discovering horseback riding at

the rear of the base. It proved heaven sent and provided my only form of relaxation, as I couldn't stomach 3.2 beer at Fiddler's Green. Riding also helped keep my growing navy resentment in check. I often encouraged other disillusioned and dazed swabbies to join me at the stables, but it was a hard sell. The riding operation took in abused and problem horses with attitudes and boarded a few privately owned horses. The very first one I ever rode was a huge horse called Mr. Rum. I wasn't fond of that horse but it's the one I usually got. In the beginning I had to stand on a stool so I could get my foot into the stirrup. Once in the saddle my legs stuck out at an angle due to his huge girth. They cautioned me never to stand near his hind legs 'cause he'll kick; and don't ever let on that you're scared of him 'cause he'll sense it; and don't ever get off him 'cause he won't let you back on. "Hey! Can I have a different horse?" "We try to match the rider with the horse. If you want to learn to ride, ride Rum. Oh, and one more thing -- he won't let go if he gets ahold of your ear." The stablehand held him as I kept well away from his business end while mounting. I learned early that he didn't like making the decision about which way to go at a trail fork. Rum stopped so hard once that I almost landed in front of him. Another time, I didn't get very far when that SOB ran over to a split rail fence and wedged my leg between it and his belly. I pulled on the reins till he was looking at me, and still he wouldn't budge. The 'hand had to come over and free me, yet held fast about not swapping him for a more manageable one.

My new-formed troupe of wannabe equestrians wended our way toward the trails at roads end. All went well until some damned fool's horse started galloping, inciting the others to follow. It looked like a wild west stampede with a half-dozen scared city slickers trying to hold on. We were out of control and I could feel my horse slipping on the pavement with his iron shoes. I remembered the warning about not running them on pavement but there wasn't much I could do for them. Slowing, they slid into one another in panic and started rearing and kicking. (Remember, don't let on you're scared.) I got kicked on the left leg trying to stay on at all costs. Once stopped, the ride was abandoned and the horses were only too pleased to head back. When mine got near his stall he bolted in, again out of control. I had to duck to avoid being knocked off. A stablehand again came to my rescue by wedging a pointed stick between the wall and my horse to prevent being pinned, while I bailed off with a limp. He remarked about the horse being a little sweaty and needing to be walked. I said,

“That’s not his sweat, it’s mine.” They all swore off ever riding again and headed to the club.

Next day went to dispensary for a swollen knee. Doc asked my job and I said, “Permanent mess cook.” “You can’t handle food with an infection from a horse kick. Take this note to your supervisor. He’ll need to find you some other kind of work.” Grudgingly, I was reassigned to Special Services, thanks to my new buddy Rum. All that time I had spent doing a harsh slog of relentless galley work, including a stint at the naval academy prep students facility, NAPSTERS, seemed fitting punishment for a serious military violation. It had been so unfair and I could find no answers.

After transferring I continued to ride Rum, and when I thought we had made progress together, he’d show his true feelings -- such as the time when I had to dismount to cross a snow-covered, icy footbridge and he wouldn’t let me back on. I held the reins for all I was worth but he kept pulling and I was nearing the bitter end. He then reared up and put a fear in me that I’ll never forget. My God, he was a huge and powerful animal. The reins trailed dangerously as he made his way down a slippery slope of icy brambles. He squatted on hind legs with forelegs straight out and slid down the embankment as if he knew what he was doing. I was hoping he’d do a couple of cartwheels for inflicting such indignity, but he was surprisingly surefooted. It wasn’t all that long before I heard the sound of approaching horses; the distinctive rhythm of a lively horse, and the muted clip-clop of a slug. As they came into view I saw a horse I didn’t recognize. It sported fine comportment, had a lively, rhythmical gait, free flowing mane and flashing tail. It carried its head high as to give the impression of a show horse. I thought to myself, the ‘hands must keep the best ones for their preferred riders. The rider trailed a gentle, swayback mare, it’s head bobbing low as it struggled to keep up. I felt foolish and downhearted standing there as they made a dramatic approach, the rider looking smug, perched high in the saddle. It was Rum! He was riding Rum! The ‘hand dismounted, passed me the reins, and with nothing more than a bit of head-motion to indicate, “Come on, let’s go.” That was classy. I bounded into Rum’s saddle with newfound spirit that can only be described as a feeling of renewed determination and exhilaration. Either I learned something or Rum gave in -- what ever it was, we now fit like hand in glove.

I did ride other horses on rare occasions and one in particular was very accommodating, a privately boarded horse, but mostly they wanted me to master Rum.

They taught me to ride him by using gentle heel and leg pressure, holding the reins properly, using proper form, and sometimes snapping the reins against his flanks to motivate him. Once, I stopped to break off a low hanging branch over a trail. I had both hands on the branch and bent it till it snapped. He thought I had flicked the reins against his sides and bolted forward, and I almost tumbled off backward. My mistake. I would have liked to have ended this part of the story by saying that Rum and I finally bonded, but that wouldn't be entirely true. We rode well together considering our rocky beginning, and he cut me some slack after I learned his ways, but years of abuse had taken its toll. I know I did him some good by treating him kindly and, in turn, he gave what he could and helped me through a rough patch of my own.

My first new job in Special Services was to paint the exterior of a cinderblock building with dark green paint, using a roller and 5 gallon buckets of paint. That building seemed like it would never end and I figured I'd finish up my enlistment painting it. The Third Class in charge of me, an affable guy who enjoyed drinking copious quantities of beer, gave me the key to the only jeep on the base. It was probably a WWII relic, wide open, and must have had a half-million miles on it. That Jeep was so old that the outline for the shift pattern on the knob was worn smooth. In about a week I was toolin' around in it like it was made for me, though it was a while before I could find reverse. I loved it. I took it off base to get supplies, to get more green paint, bags of powdered lime to line the officers' softball field, used it to pull a rolled up chain-link fence around the infield to give it a professionally groomed appearance, and took occasional pleasure rides off base as I got bolder. The Shore Patrol would wave me in and out of the main gate, no questions asked. Sometimes my buddies piled in and we'd rent a boat on the Susquehanna, or have a leisurely lunch off base. I finally caught my first break after four months of drudgery work, and started liking the Navy.

Even so, it bothered me that I was still a seaman without a real job after nearly one year here. I just wanted something worthwhile to do. After painting the building (only one side) the Third Class with four hashmarks now wanted me to build him a small office inside. He wanted it sheet-rocked, taped, and wired. He said that he'd sign for whatever materials I needed to get the job done. I told him that I didn't know how to do that. He replied, "I don't care how you do it, just get it done." He got me three very grateful galley slaves to help with the project. One guy ran wire, we framed out a

small space, and put up drywall. We had no clue how to do this and our construction bore witness. It must have been a comical sight as we tried to get the drywall to stay up while nailing it overhead. As shoddy as it was, the Petty Officer liked it. Things seemed to be going too well.

Then, one day, I had to start pulling watches at the gym. It was another mindless job handing out equipment and maintaining order. A student in radio school asked me if he could see the radio room. I had been instructed to allow unrestricted use of the facility except for the radio room. I was also curious about the ham radio station, so together we went upstairs and I unlocked the door. The equipment was in disarray and the room a mess. He offered to use his own money to get the station back on the air. I thought, what harm could come of that? So, every time I had gym duty I let him in. He really did a good job repairing the equipment and got it working. I don't know how it happened but I was brought up on charges of allowing unauthorized access to an off-limit space, and promptly received notice to appear for captain's mast. In the ensuing days leading to the mast all I could think about was a reduction in rank from seaman to seaman apprentice, and a couple more years working the scullery. I hated the Navy again.

The dreaded day came and I stood in line waiting my turn with about 12 other swabbies. An old salt turned to me and asked my charge. I told him what had happened and he said, "You've got yourself a serious problem, mate." We heard the Old Man bellow, "What ever possessed you to break windshields on your way from the club?" The answer was inaudible, but not the Captain's retort: "Reduction in rank and forfeiture of pay!" I was finally called and stood ramrod straight in front of the Old Man's desk. He kept looking at me without saying a word. Just before I was about to faint, he asked, "Are you the one I see driving that Jeep all over? (I'm thinking, this is going to be a lot worse than I thought.) How long have you been here?" I said, "About one year, sir." "What have you been doing all that time?" I told him the litany of odd jobs I had been assigned. He stared incredulously and I wondered how much longer I'd last. The Captain then stood up, extended his hand and offered an apology. I thought I was dreaming. He surprised me by saying that he has received compliments for the ball field I maintained. Then, calling the yeoman or personnelman over, instructed him to offer me any open rate (billet) and that I was to transfer immediately. I asked for radioman school at Bainbridge, and was informed that it wasn't available. At that point

I really didn't care what I got. He countered with, "How about CT?" Like I was supposed to know what that was. "It's a glorified radioman with a security clearance," he said. OK, I'll take that. He confided, "There's just one little glitch. There are no funds available for your transportation to Washington. You'll need to pay your own way. If you decline, no deal." I didn't care, I just wanted out of Bainbridge. On leaving the room I almost blurted, "So, what about my mast?"

Without even so much as a farewell party with my friends, I posted a note on my locker and wished them well. I wasn't even sure if I could pay for this move. I got into a cab with all my belongings and never once looked back. I stepped off the bus at Washington at a late hour not knowing where to report, or what to do. My stomach was running on empty. I barely had enough money to pay the second cab fare. I groped for any remaining coins in my pocket and got something from a vending machine, and then set off to find lodging in the dark. (That harsh stipulation about paying my own way became part of my service record.) Next day, I wandered around looking for the chow hall. There wasn't one. I was among civilians working for the government. I was shown their dining facility, but I couldn't afford to eat there. It was getting more bizarre by the minute. Eventually, I found someone who provided me cafeteria food vouchers. All I knew was this is the place where you start the process for getting a security clearance. After a few more days of wandering around and eating well, I saw another sailor. I ran up to him like an old, lost friend and told him my story. I moved into his barracks because I didn't like being alone in the creepy one I was in. Now, at least, I had a new friend who didn't know any more than I. We found a civilian who was able to brief us a bit more. She made some calls and told us to report to the fire department until they could determine what to do with us. I was given a simple watch schedule there. That other fellow must have received orders because I never saw him again, which left me in an empty barracks again. I don't remember much else except for eventually receiving orders giving me a few weeks at home and then report to CT-R school at Pensacola. I was relieved to learn that I wouldn't need to pay my own way again. I really enjoyed "A" school. The food was good, the classes challenging, and I did quite well. I finished second in class 24-B, and probably would have finished first had it not been for an incident.

At the end of each week we were required to pass the code speed of the week. A marine friend and I usually breezed through the curriculum and code tests. After completing the weekly code test our class would break for chow about 2100 hours. I told the marine that I had just received a care-package from home, and buried in popcorn was a pint of Southern Comfort. After chow, we dashed up to my room and passed the bottle. We knew we had both done well on the code test so there was nothing to worry about. We ended up putting a good dent in that bottle and got back a little tipsy. The instructor informed the class that many students had done poorly on the test. Still no big deal for us, right? Then he said, "Since you goldbricks didn't practice enough this week, I'm going to give you one last chance. "All-y'all (plural maybe?) need to pass this test and anybody who don't, goes on my s-list." We still figured we were exempt because we had already passed. "Now, I want everybody to relax, put on your cans, and show me what you can do!" Holy crap! We had to take it again and the keys on my mill looked like they were swirling around. The marine couldn't suppress his nervous laughter and caused the class to crackup. After regaining composure the test began. My fingers were useless and I couldn't copy. The Gyrene started laughing again while trying to pry apart a pileup of jammed keys. We both flunked. The instructor called us into a private room and demanded an explanation. Another instructor came in to help decide our fate. We explained the innocence of our indiscretion by noting that we had already passed the first time. They mulled it over in private and allowed us to slide, but I think it lowered our class standings and cost me my first choice duty station.

I arrived at Kami Seya on 21 May 1968 and got my first glimpse at a real Navy job. I was soon encrypting and sending messages using one-time-pads and a semi-automatic hand keyer. Without explanation, I was moved to the main room of ditty chasers and resettled there -- but not for long. I and several other new guys were given orders to report to Hakata, on the southernmost Island of Kyushu. The most disappointing part of transferring was leaving the best chow in the Pacific, for the absolute worst of the worst at Hakata. On a positive note, I was in service during the attack on the USS Liberty, the capture of the USS Pueblo, and the EC-121 shoot-down, and have always considered myself fortunate in that regard.

During my four years I served with a wide range of the general Navy populous and can unabashedly say that CT's are the cream of the Navy's crop of enlisted men, except for a few lifer's who felt intimidated or threatened by the abilities of their charges. The former CT rating was an elite cadre of dedicated specialists who forged lasting bonds of friendship. About six years ago I started searching for former CT shipmates. Those that I've found couldn't wait to meet again -- and we have by hosting yearly reunions.

My only regret was not having had the opportunity to go TAD on a boat, a skimmer, or EC-121. I will always cherish letters of commendation for the special work I was privileged to do toward the end of my convoluted enlistment.

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