

The Odyssey

By

Thom Cantrall

The sun had made its appearance, but was not high in the sky. The warm air of early morning was promising another hot July day in Northern California as my family dropped me off at the north end of Santa Rosa on an on-ramp to Highway 101. It was one of those sad/sweet moments as I kissed my young sweetheart goodbye and set out on yet another adventure in a young life of many such adventures.

It was 1962 and I had yet to have seen my first anniversary of service in the U.S. Navy, but had just completed the Missile Technician Class A School in Dam Neck, VA, adjacent to Virginia Beach, VA... between there and the Great Dismal Swamp, actually. This was a point brought home every time a Water Moccasin would slither its way into the hallways of the class buildings adjoining this great body of brackish water and weeds.



Figure 1 USS Gato - Fleet Submarine

I was just finishing a short leave period at home and it was time to return to duty. In my seabag, I had orders to the U.S. Naval Submarine Warfare Training Center, Sub-School for short, in Groton, CT. I was expected to be on board by the third of August, so had plenty of time to make this trip.

Before we left A School, four of us had made a plan for returning to Connecticut. I would make my way from my family's home in California to Ephrata, WA, about eighty miles east, southeast of Wenatchee, Washington, which is about two hundred miles east of Seattle. At Ephrata I was to meet Denny "Foghorn Leghorn" Deycous. Foghorn and I would be driven from his home there to Spokane, Washington, where, at a particular gas station at the junction of U.S. Highway 395 and what would soon become Interstate 90, we would meet Mike Dodge who owned the car we would drive to Monona, Iowa. At Monona we would add Jim "Jake" Jacobson to our troupe and then on to New London, Connecticut.

My plan for getting from Santa Rosa to Ephrata called for me to hitchhike in uniform up Highway 101 to just north of Crescent City, CA, where I would turn inland on U.S. Highway 199 to Grants Pass, OR. At Grants Pass I would turn north on U.S. Highway

99. At some point, probably at the Columbia River, I planned to go east to U.S. Highway 97, a route I had once traveled north to Ellensburg, WA. From there I would go on east to Moses Lake, WA and then north on State Highway 17 to Ephrata.



Figure 2 Giant Redwoods on Hwy 101

I had no idea how long this trip would take, but I calculated it to be something over eleven hundred miles, almost all on two-lane highways, so I figured a minimum of twenty-nine hours and a maximum of thirty-five hours. Since we had to meet the Truck (Mike Dodge) at seven pm, I planned for the worst and left Santa Rosa at eight thirty am after

a leisurely breakfast and a sad, slow ride to the freeway. It must be remembered that this was 1962 and the Interstate Highway system as we know it today did not exist.

The trip had a rather inauspicious beginning as it took me several minutes of standing with my thumb out before someone stopped to offer me a lift. As it turned out, that was the longest wait I had in any one place in the whole trip. Many rides were short, just a few miles up the highway to where my hosts had to turn off to their own destinations, happy in their minds that they had



Figure 3 Avenue of the Giants - Hwy 101

done their bit to help a serviceman on his way. The drive up the coast highway was, as always, beautiful with the roadway winding through the great stands of the coastal Redwoods, *Sequoia Sempervirens*.

This area is now known as "The Avenue of the Giants", but then was just "the highway".

Many of my hosts were interesting and they varied greatly. One of my favorites in this stretch was a Canadian family who were returning to their home in British Columbia after a trip, a "holiday" they said, to Southern California. The father was generous in his offering of a Canadian brand of cigarette. The whole family was very pleasant and fun

to be with and I rode with them for more than a hundred miles until the highway came west to meet the ocean north of Arcata, California. Here, my family took leave as they wanted to spend time playing on the beach there. As happened often on this trip, as I was unloading my seabag and thanking



Figure 5 The Beach at Orick, CA



Figure 4 Hwy 101 in Humboldt County

my hosts, another vehicle pulled in behind us to help me load my bag into the rear of their truck.

I was only a few miles out of Orick, California here and while it was not the longest ride I would enjoy on this trip, it was, doubtless, the quickest I would encounter! As it turned out, two young men who had picked me up had been working on the truck and this short trip was the test run. We fairly flew those few miles into town at speeds exceeding eighty miles per hour. I will admit that I was not sad to say goodbye to this pair and move on.



Figure 6 Orick, CA

An older couple picked me up coming out of Orick. It was so sweet how they told me about their nephew, or such who was in the Navy too, did I happen to know him? He was on a ship in San Diego, she thought, but it could be Texas, too, she wasn't sure. I just smiled and told her that with over two-million men in the Navy at that time, the chances were small that I'd know him, especially since I had been doing time at a small school command in the backside of nowhere. She had a picnic basket full of very delicious sandwiches and there was iced Pepsi-Cola in the cooler, so the ride north to Crescent City

was pleasant and beautiful. We parted at the junction of Highway 199 as they were continuing on north along the Oregon Coast.

Unfortunately, with the junction being as it was, I had to walk almost a half mile to get into a position where I could safely await a ride where my potential host could get safely off the highway to load me. This was the longest walk I had for the entire trip.



Figure 7 Hwy 199 Junction... and my longest walk of the trip..

After the short wait in the late afternoon sun, an ancient pick-up loaded down with firewood rumbled in to load me up. The occupants were a couple less than thirty years old. The driver was one of those coarse-haired, burley, broad-shouldered, tobacco-chewing types wearing a red and black checked logger's shirt. This was one no one would ever want to

challenge in any endeavor if encountered in the local tavern. Her boyfriend didn't appear to be any kind of soft touch himself! While my ride with this couple was short, only the fifteen or twenty miles to Gasquet, (pronounced Gas-key) California, it was most interesting with most animated hosts. They, like most of my hosts



Figure 8 The tiny town of Gasquet, CA

who were leaving me at a town, drove me through the town to a convenient spot on the outside edge, so that I would have the advantage of any traffic leaving town.

This couple was barely back on the pavement when a late-model sedan pulled over and a middle-aged man eyed me suspiciously. "I guess you're ok," he stated. "One can't be too careful today, you know?"

"Would you like to see my Military ID, Sir?" I asked.

"No, I'm sure you're ok," he replied. "Climb in."

As we made our way north and east, we chatted a bit and he then asked if I could drive. It seems he had taken advantage of a sales trip to the coastal area to enjoy a day of Salmon fishing. Rising early for that highly successful outing would not have been the problem it turned out to be had not a bottomless bottle of Scotch Whisky assailed his person the night before. The resultant



Figure 9 Hiway 199 near the CA/OR border

short night and busy day had left him in a quandary as to how he was going to get back



Figure 10 Grants Pass, OR 1960

to his Medford, OR home without spending a second night on the road. As it turned out, I was his answer to a prayer of sorts and I was able to let him sleep the few hour's drive into Grants Pass. On arrival, he directed me to drive to the north end of town to the junction of Highway 99N even though it was a bit out of his way to do so. While I was unloading and he was returning to his

place under the steering wheel, a very nice, very clean 1956 Chevy pulled in under the lights of the well-lit junction, evening having over taken us on this last leg of the journey.

Although I had not noticed on the drive, it was now late enough for the lights to be a necessity. As we set off again to the north, the young man driving introduced himself to me as a fellow sailor... on leave from his San Diego, California duty station and was en route to Seattle for a couple weeks of recreation at the home of his girlfriend's family.

At this late date, I do not recall his name, although James seems to creep into my mind. What I do recall is a feeling of relief that I now had a ride through most of the night until I reached that far point where I'd have to make my eastward jog to pick up Highway 97.



Figure 11 N. Fork Umqua River, Myrtle Cr. Oregon

We stopped soon for dinner at one of the many roadside diners that offered either the best or the worst food to be had. In those days before Denny's, Shari's or even Burger King, Mc Donald's or KFC, the roadside restaurant was an adventure in eating all on its own! Our luck was good, however, and we enjoyed a pleasant meal in a relaxed

atmosphere with an attractive and attentive waitress tending our every need. It was during this interlude that I received two startling revelations. First, my host mentioned casually that it was not exactly Seattle he was heading for, but some place called Wenatchee. He stated that he wasn't sure where it was, but knew he had to go through Seattle to get there. I didn't know exactly where it was either, at that time, but our totally prepared waitress handed me a Washington state road map. It was the work of but a moment to find the elusive town and to discover it was but eighty miles from my destination in Ephrata.

"Wow," I exclaimed, "I'm with you all the way, if that's ok with you!"

“It’s more than ok, it’s great,” he replied. “If you can spell me a bit driving, we can drive right through the night and be there in the early morning!”

It was like an anvil had been lifted off my shoulders to not have to worry about how I was going to transit up the Columbia River Gorge in the middle of the night. I knew I could do it, but didn’t know precisely how at that time. God really does look out for small children and sailors on land.



Figure 12 Columbia River Bridge in 1962

My second surprise came moments later when I went to pay my bill and was told that the older couple who had just left had paid my bill. I could have been blown away with



Figure 1 3 Seattle World's Fair, 1962

a feather, I was so astonished. When I asked, she admitted that, no, they had not left her a tip on my dinner, but that was alright, because she was happy to do all she had done. That she was so willing enabled me to be more than generous in that capacity, making sure that this princess among thieves was well rewarded for her diligent

and friendly service she’d provided us.

On through the night we drove, first me, then him until about four am when we found were in downtown Seattle, driving around the site of the current World’s Fair, marveling at the beauty of the spacious grace and the majesty of the Space Needle, the identifying signature of Seattle to this day.

Daylight had not yet made its appearance as we were wending our way up the mountain highway that would become Interstate 90, but at this time was merely a trail through the

trees trying to reach the heights of Snoqualmie Pass. About half way between the town of North Bend and the Cascade Mountains summit at Snoqualmie, our car suddenly coughed once and died. We drifted to the side of road, both of us at a loss as to what to do next. We suspected a fuel problem, but the late hours of a dark, moonless night was not the time to be trying to troubleshoot any problem. As we were contemplating what to do next, a late model pick-up pulled in.



Figure 14 The Gas Station on Snoqualmie Summit Today

“Obviously,” the driver stated, “nothing much can be done here, so why don’t I just tow you on up to the pass? There is gas station there and a restaurant. I know the fellow who runs it and he is a good mechanic and an overall good guy... though, if you say I said that about him, I’d have to deny it!”

The world was just turning from black to gray as we watched through the windows of the café at the peak of Snoqualmie Pass while enjoying a generously proportioned breakfast. We were waiting out the hour until the adjoining garage/gas station opened for business. The entire staff assured us that the gentleman who operated the place was diligent in opening on time, so he would be in at precisely six thirty am.

“You’re right,” the mechanic said. “The fuel pump died on you. I can get you one out of North Bend when he opens at eight... will that do?”

“I suppose it’ll have to do,” my host said. “What are you going to do, Thom?” he asked of me. “You can wait it out with me, or go on ahead, whatever works better for you.”

“Just a minute,” the mechanic interjected, “are you two traveling together?” When we indicated we were, he continued, “Well, for the good of the Navy, he can open early.” A phone call later and the arrangements had been made for him to pick up the new fuel pump in North Bend at seven fifteen am.

The final outcome was that we left Snoqualmie Summit at eight thirty am with the new pump installed and purring along nicely. Remarkably, the mechanic charged us only for the pump. He charged no labor and nothing for having driven the twenty-five or so miles each way to pick up the part. We were beside ourselves with joy for the treatment we

received at this remarkable establishment. I have driven by that restaurant and station many times over the past forty-five years and even today, a warm feeling fills my heart as I remember this very special moment in my life so many years ago.



By ten am, I was in East Wenatchee, unloading my seabag and contemplating my chances of getting a ride before getting a ticket for hitchhiking as it was not permitted at that time in the state of Washington, as my cousin found out the hard way a couple of years before when he was returning to California from Seattle. As it turned out one more time, I need not to have worried as there was a car waiting for me even as I completed my exit and good-byes. An Air Force sergeant en route to work gave me a ride for the

full eighty miles to the park in the center of downtown Ephrata. It was approximately eleven thirty am when I called Foghorn to let him know I was in town. I had hitch-hiked one thousand forty miles in just under twenty-seven hours.

I spent the next few hours visiting with Denny's family and taking a nap until his brother suggested it was time and we



Figure 16 Hwy 395 Junction, Spokane, WA

drove the two hours on into Spokane. By seven pm we had met the Truck and the three of us were heading east into the fading light with our next scheduled stop being in Monona, IA to meet our last pilgrim.



Figure 15 Bell Hotel, Ephrata

Chapter II

The night passed slowly as we meandered across Montana. At this time, there was no speed limit in the daylight, but at night, police patrols were not really necessary to enforce the law as it would take a very brave or very stupid soul to attempt to speed in the midst of so much life on the highway. We saw deer very regularly, often, seemingly grazing along the white line, elk occasionally, to say nothing of the lesser creatures of the night. About the time we thought that these traffic obstacles might be abating their assault, we rounded a long, sweeping curve to see a huge Hereford bull grazing placidly

along the shoulder of the road. He seemed to be totally oblivious to his surroundings, existing entirely in his own world while totally ignoring the meager traffic passing him in the night.

Daylight welcomed us into the city of Bozeman, MT, the original Cowboy Town, USA. Even though the clock had not yet reached six am, every café was busy and old pick-ups were everywhere. As we walked into a likely looking eatery, we were greeted by a full house of mostly men ranging in age from too young to shave to a couple that looked as if they might have been here to see the carving of the mountains that surrounded the town. All



Figure 17 Elk on the Hiway... Montana



Figure 18 Cowboy Town, USA

half wild cattle in half wild country was the same this day as it had been a hundred years earlier. There seemed to be a trend that required that being seated at a table meant you took your hat off, but if you were seated at the counter, no such amenity was necessary. There were some at the tables even to whom it seemed that tipping one's hat to the back of one's head constituted "removal"... especially when the hat racks in the immediate vicinity became full.

looked to have attended the same school of fashion, being clad in worn Levi's, western shirts with snaps rather than buttons, a bandanna around the neck and pointed toed boots were the footwear of choice. Each was topped out with a wide-brimmed sombrero, mostly of straw here in mid-summer, which marked these men as to their occupation. There were more than a few who carried sidearms as the dangers encountered working with



Figure 19 Typical Montana Men

I must say, that was, without doubt, one of the most memorable breakfasts of my life! I ordered steak and eggs, rare on the steak and over easy on the eggs with fried potatoes and a big glass of milk... still my ideal breakfast. I expected to be overfed in this café, but I didn't, as it turned out, know the half of it! My steak, first of all, was not the four to six-ounce piece of low-grade whang leather you get in the national chains today. It was a twenty-ounce T-bone about an inch and a half thick. Beside the steak were four eggs cooked perfectly and the other end of the platter, for no mere plate could start to hold this feast, were enough fried potatoes to make Idaho blush. On a separate plate was a stack of toasted home-made bread surrounded by a cube of butter and about six different jams and jellies. I looked at what sat before me and wondered if, perhaps, she had misunderstood me and thought I was ordering for the whole table. That I was in error in this supposition became apparent with the arrival of about a bushel of pancakes that was steered to one side of the table while an omelet approximately the size of Delaware was delivered to Foghorn on the far side of the table. Along with his omelet came a side of bacon that, had they left the legs on it, could have walked in on its own. All of this was flanked by a stack of fried spuds to rival that now holding down my platter. What a breakfast! I must admit that, while I gave it my all, I simply could not finish it. I had always considered myself a healthy eater, being an active sort, but when it came to breakfasts, these Montana boys were in a class of their own. The steak was delicious and cooked precisely to perfection

"I've seen critters wounded worse than that that were still walking" was Denny's observation, if I remember right. The eggs pretty much disappeared but there were enough potatoes left for two "grand-slam" breakfasts down the street now. The left-over steak and the toast I carried with me on leaving in case I should, somehow, find myself getting hungry again before reaching Connecticut... a slim likelihood, I felt just then... or, perhaps, we might encounter a band of starving Cossacks and we could supply them for the next week or so.

Denny made fairly good inroads on his omelet but everything else just kind of stayed there. As for the Truck, poor Mikey never finished one of his giant pancakes and I was sure we would have to render aid to him before we got him out of there and into the car.

During the time of this marathon, the conversation in the restaurant was general with no lines drawn as to who was talking to whom. Within minutes, it was known that there were three sailors in the place and we were welcomed most warmly and sincerely as men among men, though we were all just nineteen years old and a mere year out of high school.

It was a later start out of Bozeman than we had planned for, but hunger was not likely to be a problem for some time. The trek on across eastern Montana was interesting as I had never before seen the plains. “Miles and miles of nothing but miles and miles” was the thought that came to mind. I thought this to be the most desolate landscape to be found in the country, an opinion that was to undergo great revisions over the next few years as I drove across the nation another four or five times using the southern route across Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and the California desert.

Afternoon found us with parched throats somewhere near Miles City, MT when, like an oasis in the Sahara, an A&W Root Beer stand appeared out of the shimmering sky to land on the horizon. Mike was driving this leg and he pulled us into a slot where a very attractive daughter of one of the ranches surrounding us came to the car for our order. (Yes, car hops were real... even in MT) Of course, we had the tallest, frostiest root beer imaginable and somewhere in the middle of enjoying them, our driver decided he wanted to keep his mug. He opened the car door, placed the tray on the pavement with a generous tip and we left the place behind with two people in the car protesting vehemently. It was at this point that Foghorn and I decided we might have chosen our traveling companion with a bit more care. The fact that he owned the car was about all that kept us from throwing him out on his butt. We thought it might be somewhat difficult to explain to our next commanding officer how we, with his car, arrived safely and in good time while he was still in Montana, probably fighting Indians.

Our route took us across just a corner of North Dakota then into South Dakota. It was our arrival in South Dakota that was most highly anticipated as, at that time, a person of our years could legally buy beer. As I was not then, nor ever, actually, a great fan of beer, I was elected driver long before the term “designated driver” ever came into common use.

Evening found us in a small café in a tiny town on the banks of the Missouri River. The



Figure 20 Lightning Rent the Sky

waitress was again young, friendly and quite attractive... our favorite kind, it seems. As it turned out, she was neither naïve nor gullible. About mid-way



Figure 21 Evening in Dakota

through a pleasant dinner, there began a tremendous electric storm. The lightening flashed

brilliantly and the thunder crashed so loudly it seemed the earth was going to be rent in twain. In the midst of this show of God's splendor, I was innocently flirting with our waitress, trying to convince her that being as frightened as I was, it was imperative that she sit with me and hold my hand lest I flee screaming into the night. While my efforts were not being rewarded with any great success, we were both enjoying the sport, although it did seem that she was not really buying fear as my motivation for her holding my hand. This reverie was shattered in an instant when an unbelievably bright flash was punctuated by a bolt of lightning hitting the light pole across the street turning the darkness of a misty night into the brilliance of a noonday. The flash was followed instantly by a deafening crash of thunder and the darkness of midnight as all the lights in that part of town went out. By this time, the light sprinkle that had ushered us into town had managed to work itself into the frenzy of a full-blown storm and water was falling so heavily that one could not see across the street even before the lights went out.

Another flash briefly illuminated our environs only to be extinguished by a crash of thunder that rattled the windows in the café. I heard a squeal of fright and our waitress fairly flew across the intervening space and landed in the booth next to me. Astonished as I was, I was just as pleased when she buried her head in my chest, all the while sobbing in seeming terror. I wrapped my arms around her shoulders and held her close, whispering soothing mantras into her tiny ear. All too soon, for my part, the storm passed on and she was able to regain her composure enough to sit up straight and be embarrassed at what she had done. I took great care to make her realize that she had done nothing improper and, in fact, the pleasure had, indeed, been mine!

Although the storm moved on across the prairie, our lights remained out so the now shy young lady remained seated by my side, although she was no longer clinging to me in need. Another staff person brought a candle to our table which provided the light, if not



Figure 22 *Sunset on the Missouri River in Central South Dakota*

exactly the ambiance, to finish our dinner. It must be admitted, however, that the level of company in our booth was so much higher at the end of our meal than it had ever been in the beginning.

Naturally we were reluctant to leave this

small café, me more than most, and not merely because of the torrential rain still falling. Unfortunately, this too had to pass and with it a warm hug of friendship and a wish for good fortune, we made a dash to our car parked immediately in front of the café. As quickly as we made our exit, we were not effective in keeping our tail feathers dry and by the time we were safely inside the car, we were soaked to the skin.

Our trip continued through the night on across the prairies of Dakota. I'm not sure, it was dark and the rain persisted, though not with the same fervor as it had in town, but I think I we saw a tree once! We passed through Minneapolis, MN sometime in the middle of the night and morning found us fighting dense fog while making our way south from Eau Claire, WI.

Chapter III

By mid-day we rolled into Monona and had reached Jake on the phone, much to his great dismay. It seems we were a day earlier in our arrival than he had expected us to be. Evidently, in our planning, we had allowed a full extra day in case of emergency and he had construed this to mean that we would pick him up a day later than we had planned.

As we sat over a spare lunch provided by Jake's family, we decided to spend our Saturday night in Iowa at a dance hall in the nearby town of Postville. Jake had a date planned for his last night home and he was loathe to leave without seeing that date through. Seeing the lady he was taking out that evening, I can't say that I blamed him for his reluctance to leave early.

"You see," Jake began, "in Iowa, they can only sell beer in the bars. You normally cannot buy liquor over the bar, but this place in Postville sells drinks too. Of course, you have to be over twenty-one, but they don't check all that closely there either."

Our first stop was a laundromat to wash a set of uniform whites, since it was much too warm in mid-summer Iowa to wear the woolen blue uniform. We had no sooner gotten started than one of the women in the place said, "I'm sure you guys have more important things to do that sit around here all day. You just leave those and we'll take care of them for you," indicating the rest of the ladies there. Several nods from around the room assured us that our clothes were in good hands.



Figure 23 Dress Whites

I was about to explain how to iron them inside out when this dear little, old gray haired lady piped up, "Just never you mind about that, my husband was on three ships during the WAR and I learned to iron whites before you were born! Just give us about two hours and we'll be done."

Our next event in our schedule was to somehow get a shower, or, at worst, a bath. The Jacobsons were not that happy to see us and did not offer any more hospitality than that pitiful lunch we'd had earlier, so we took it on our own to get this done in our own way. It took us but a few minutes of discussion and a ten-minute ride and we were at a secluded spot on the banks of the Mississippi River. Into the river we went, soap and shampoo in hand. Over the next half hour, we were able to complete all our ablutions, including a respectably close shave.

By the time we had eaten a good dinner and returned to reclaim our fresh laundry, it was time to dress. We accomplished this in the men's room of a local



Figure 24 Downtown Postville, IA

truck stop of sorts and emerged clean and pressed, fresh shaven and with an air that spoke of the pursuit of fair game in the night ahead.

Although we had felt a bit of trepidation in our ability to locate this barn in a town none of us had ever been in before tonight, it turned out just as we were told... "Drive straight through Postville and, as you leave town, you'll see it... you can't miss it." It was true and while the time we spent driving through town was remarkably of brief duration, we did, indeed, spot it right off and wheeled in, parked and walked to the door.



Figure 25 Postville Barn... Oh What a Night!

It was amazing, as we walked in, to realize just how huge the barn was and how well arranged it was for its new purpose. That it had been a working barn on a busy farm was evident, but tonight it would be hard

to tell that. My only real concern was just how many people would actually show up at such a place on the edge of a very small town in the middle of “farm country, USA.” I needn’t have worried, as it turned out.

As we entered, there were, perhaps, twenty people in the cavernous facility and the doorman, an older gentleman with a huge smile and warm hand shake ushered the three of us to a table just a bit back from the dance floor... as I prefer. I like to be able to talk sometimes and when too close to the front, even in those older, quieter days, the band made just too much noise for meaningful conversation.

“I’m Charlie,” he stated without that warm smile ebbing a bit. “I’ve been doorman here for over thirty years. You boys have what you want and I’ll be back to see you in a bit.” With that, he was gone in a flash. And a rather attractive, if business-like waitress showed up to take our order.

I must say, this was probably the first person I’d seen since arriving that did not appear to be happy to see us. When I ordered a “ditch”, a western term for whiskey and water, she looked at me like I was some kind of insect that had crawled out from under a rock with no other purpose in life than to irritate her.

“This is Iowa,” she hissed, “We only serve beer here!”

I just looked at her and asked softly, “You don’t swerve drinks? We heard that we could get a drink here...”

“No!” She stated flatly, “it’s beer of nothing...”

To be truthful, I was ready to leave at that point, but my two companions were either more mellow than I was or they were much thirstier. To this day, I’m not sure which it was, but suffice to say, we decided to give it some more time.

In a matter of a very few minutes, Griselda the Grim returned with our beers, took her due and left... never to return to our table again the rest of the night. I really don’t think she wanted to be there that particular night.

The dust had but settled in her wake when Charlie came bouncing back to check on us. “How’s everything with you boys?” he asked brightly. “Are you getting everything you need?”

“We’re doing great,” I responded, only slightly mendaciously. “Except I understood we could get a drink here, but the girl would only sell us beer.”

“Just a moment,” he responded as he took off for the bar at a pace that totally belied his years. I could see him in deep conversation with the two or three people behind the bar and, some kind of consensus arrived at, he sped back to our table and said: “Anything you want is fine now. You have to understand we must be careful of strangers, but as long as you’re in those uniforms, you’re okay with me!”

Thus began the most convivial of evenings. That first beer was the only beverage we were allowed to purchase for ourselves the entire night. As might be understood, we did not order again through Griselda the Grim, but went directly to the bar and there was always someone wanting to buy a drink for us. Also, we were never short of willing partners on the dance floor as there seemed to me to be an abundance of young, attractive ladies in the near vicinity of our table. The mystery was solved when I was dancing with a young woman I particularly favored and, with whom, the feeling seemed to be mutual. While we were dancing, she remarked to me, “You know, Thom, a strange thing happened when my sisters and I came in tonight. We asked for a table up front like we always do and Charlie told us ‘no, you don’t want to be up front tonight, there are three sailors in the back!’” Charlie was funneling all the best women back to where we were seated!

Throughout the evening, one person or another would drift in, look us up and tell us Jim was on his way and would be along shortly. This probably happened six or seven times through the night, but he never materialized. In fact, the dance was done and the last kiss stolen on a magical stroll in the moonlight was but just a beautiful memory when his brother arrived to tell us to meet Jim at his home in Monona. I didn’t really want to do that just now, as I had been invited to coffee with my favorite young lady as had my two compadres with their ladies, but we decided we’d better remember our purpose and move on. I cannot begin to tell how difficult it was to kiss that lady goodbye and climb back into a car that now seemed more a prison cell than a conveyance and resume our trek east.

I’m not sure how we made the drive to his home but soon we had his gear loaded, goodbyes were said and, with Jake, the only one sober of the four of us, at the wheel, we were back on the trail again.

Chapter IV

About that night’s drive, I have no recollection as I was asleep in my little corner of the car. I probably was dreaming of the little girl I’d left behind in that tiny Iowa town. I

awoke to a bright sun peeking into my eyes as we were nearing Chicago. From the windy city it was due east across Indiana and on into Ohio.



Figure 26 Cleveland Mysteries



Figure 27 Signs hidden behind trees

Evening was rapidly approaching as we approached Cleveland, the City on the Lake, and we knew we had to change freeways here. We were all alert and watching but never did we ever see a sign announcing our impending freeway change. Yes, there were signs announcing "Interbelt East" and "Interbelt West", etc., but a car full of Western Boys had no idea what an Interbelt was! The end result was we got to see the Lake Erie waterfront up close and personal. It was about this time we decided some local knowledge might be useful and we wheeled into a familiar looking gas station. This was in the era when they were still service stations and, as such, dispensed information as well as gasoline. It was here that we learned that the term Interbelt could roughly be interpreted as a freeway or, at least, a highway, because not all of them, to be sure, were free. After gaining this little

nugget of knowledge, we were soon on our way out of town, happily sailing eastward toward Pennsylvania.

It was just a short trip across that portion of Pennsylvania created such that the Keystone State could have its own port on the Great Lakes.

It was very late when we rolled into Niagara Falls, NY and the town was pretty much asleep. We were sure we would not be able to see much of the Falls since it was nearly midnight, but we were anxious to try, at least. Since



Figure 28 And it was all perfectly clear...



Figure 29 *Gorgeous Niagara Falls*

uniformed watchman approached us to inquire as to our intentions in the vicinity of these closed facilities. A few moments of conversation served to relay our hopes and that we were simply four sailors en route to our new duty station and had hoped to catch a glimpse of the sight we'd heard of our whole life.

"Follow me," he uttered. "We'll see what we can do for you." With that, he led us through several doors and a couple of gates then said, "Wait here."

We could see the white froth of the Falls in the bright moonlight and it was beautiful. We were marveling in our good fortune that we were able to actually be allowed to see this sight in the night when, to our utter surprise, the entire scene was



Figure 10 *The falls at night - Simply Gorgeous*

bathed in lights bright enough to be daylight! I cannot begin to describe the thrill of seeing that magnificent site bathed in the myriad of lights now playing on the cataract. The most amazing fact was... there were only four young sailors and an older watchman to see it...

It was late when we, at last, bid a fond farewell to this helpful man and found ourselves driving through a quiet, residential neighborhood populated by now dark homes and the occasional small business even. It was in one of these areas that we noticed the bright neon lights that indicated a neighborhood bar. A quick discussion among a mostly subdued group yielded the opinion that since we had a half hour until closing time, a night cap might well be in order.

There were but four others in the bar as we entered. The juke box, like every other juke box in every other similar establishment was playing Patsy Cline's "Crazy", the great Willie Nelson tune. First one couple then the other moved to the tiny area that served as a dance floor in the little bar. We made our way to the polished wooden bar and each, mounting a stool, we ordered a drink apiece, safe in the knowledge that, this being New York, we could legally do so. New York at that time had a legal drinking age of eighteen, a fact not lost on four wandering sailors. Time was short, we knew, so we had no designs on a long stay, but when the bartender, who, it turned out, owned the place as well, learned who we were, he served us another... on the house... and brought forth a photo of a submarine, telling us that he'd had a couple of guys stop in last week who were submariners and they'd left him a picture of their boat. Although it meant little at the time, the picture of SS(N) 593... the fleet Fast Attack Submarine U.S.S.



Figure 31 USS Thresher SS(N) 593 Lost at Sea April 1963

Thresher would become a name remembered in solemnity when, a few months later, she was lost at sea with all hands.

Closing time came and went, marked only by the proprietors locking of the front door, turning off the outside lights and closing of the shutters on the single window. The two couples continued to dance and the four sailors continued to talk and to drink slowly, though one, the next driver switched his drinks to straight Pepsi-Cola.

Daylight found us somewhere in the middle of New York state, in amazement at the discovery we had made over the night of a phenomenon not found in our native west... the Turnpike... we were astounded at the rate at which this rapacious beast devoured the few funds we had remaining. A hurried War Council concluded that even the cost of another night on the road would be preferred to feeding these quarter-mongers, so we got off the Turnpike and plotted a course across what remained of New York and Connecticut. Our bypass cost us a few hours, perhaps, but by mid-afternoon, a full day ahead of our deadline, we rolled up to the main gate of the Fleet Submarine Warfare Training Center in Groton, CT and ended an odyssey of epic proportions.

Afterword



Figure 32 My Boat... USS James Madison SSB(N) 627 Gold

This story is 100% true and occurred exactly as described. There were other trips in subsequent years, including one in which I travelled from Charleston, SC to Santa Rosa, California in fifty-six hours. But there were none so memorable as few days in late July and very early August of 1962. I have no idea of the fate of my mates on this trek... as

alluded to, we were a bit more than miffed at Dodge and his antics on this trip, so didn't try to remain in contact. Foghorn and I remained friends all through our school tenure... from Sub School, we returned to Dam Neck and Polaris Missile Class C School... and from there we went to out boats. I to USS James Madison, SSB(N) 627 Gold then under construction at Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock in Newport News, VA... I think Denny went to a boat at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in Vallejo, CA... probably the USS Daniel Boone SSB(N) 629 as they were crewing up at that time... Jake... I have no idea about him at all... but we all shared a few days that will live forever in our minds...

Thom Cantrall