



TALES OF A SIMPLE SAILOR

MY [ESSENTIALLY] TRUE MARITIME MISADVENTURES

by Don Robison

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To Donna, the absolute love of my life.

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An Abbreviated Nautical Guide 165

This guide helps 'nautical novices' understand basic nautical concepts you will encounter in this book.

PREFACE

I love telling stories. I guess any true sailor does. My friends have encouraged me to write them down for years. It is my hope that in sharing my misadventures you will laugh, and then perhaps you will see something of yourself in them.

These tales are absolutely true. Names, dates, places, and some event details have been altered so that none of my friends or shipmates will be unduly embarrassed. And just to set your expectations, I am not that sailor with the most sea time, and I am certainly not the sailor with the best skills... I am a guy who loves the water, loves the Coast Guard and have had a lot of fun.

I often wonder why so many funny things happen to me... another person could develop a complex about it!

I think my life is really a lot like yours: characterized by love, loss, triumph and failure. As people we present surprising strength and often—amazing weakness. I do, anyway. I think it is this interaction of competence and incompetence, of strength and weakness that set the stage for the real-life humor that characterizes much of my life experience. For me, it is like my strength gets me into certain situations, and then my weakness takes over. Sometimes, I brilliantly pull off escapes to situations that my stupidity has gotten me into... sometimes I don't. That feels like life to me.

I often wish there were fewer punch-lines in my life, fewer things to laugh about. Sometimes I wish my life were all about achievement and power and respect. But if life is best understood as story—and I submit it is—I am glad that mine is one with humor in it. I have lived a blessed life: full of joy, faith, love and laughter. I would take that over power any day (which works out conveniently well for me!).

My dearest friends find mirth in my misadventures; I hope you will, too.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Don B. Agui". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

1 THE INTERVIEW

I suspected the interview would be tough from the beginning. LT Sellar grinned at me, cast an amused glance at his two colleagues, and asked the first question: “Now, Mr. Robison, why do you want to be a Coast Guard officer besides...” and here he looked down at my application essay and read from it; “...feeling the wind in your hair and salt spray on your face?”

Right.

That line sounded great in my head when I drafted it. Now, I understand that it was a little over the top. But for that single sentence, the essay was a pretty good one.

I answered his question in halting fashion, probably as well as could be expected given that my “wind in the hair” comment was obviously the punch-line to a just-before-the-interview joke.

CDR Williams, the head of this Coast Guard Officer Candidate School interview panel, guided the questioning to more routine subjects. Within a few minutes, things seemed to be going smoothly. I spoke eloquently about law enforcement and about national defense. There were questions about politics and I could tell the interviewers were trying to get a sense for my awareness of current events. Things settled into a predictable rhythm and I was feeling much more comfortable with the proceedings. I hit my stride, so to speak.

LTJG Ely, the youngest officer on this panel, asked questions about my leadership and management styles. I defined leadership and gave examples of my experience. We pondered a few case scenarios. I described three strengths and three weaknesses. My goal was to be honest and transparent,

but not give the panel a reason to reject me. It is difficult to be honest *and* transparent in a job interview.

Each officer asked questions and I answered them as I was able. Then, CDR Williams flipped through my application package and asked, “Mr. Robison, I see from your resume that you have been involved with several humanitarian organizations. That is great. I am interested in how you feel about your participation in armed conflict. Would you feel comfortable bearing arms in defense of our nation?”

I responded, “Commander, I believe a man’s duty is to fight the evil of his time, regardless of its strength or hopes of final victory. Yes, I am comfortable with the idea of fighting for our country.”

Wow! Where did that come from? What a great line! “...A man’s duty is to fight the evil of his time...” I searched my memory: was that Churchill? Was that Grant or Lee? Then I remembered. A clear image of Gandalf the Wizard from the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy came to my mind. He was talking to Frodo.

“Please,” I prayed, “don’t let him ask me where I got that.”

Right on cue, CDR Williams asked, “That is profound, is that your original thought?”

I couldn’t lie. I answered, “No, sir.”

Please, don’t ask me who said that.

As if reading my mind, the Commander asked, “Where did you get that idea?”

“That quote is from a book by J.R.R. Tolkien.”

I banked on the odds that he had not read the books. The blockbuster movies had not yet been made. Thankfully, the questions moved on to other subjects. They asked about my math aptitude, and I was able to point to my good SAT Math scores. They asked about my engineering experience and I was able to talk about cars I had worked on and boats I had repaired. The interview meandered here and there for about five minutes.

We had moved on from Tolkien.

Until, to my horror, young LTJG Ely struck the table with his palm and fairly shouted, “WAIT! Wait! Tolkien! Isn’t Tolkien the one who wrote those books about the elves and fairies?”

CDR Williams looked up from the application papers and over at LTJG Ely with concern in his eyes. LT Sellar looked at me and smirked. He was definitely a smirker.

TALES OF A SIMPLE SAILOR

Here was my interviewee tactical dilemma: should I set the record straight and say there were elves but definitely *not* fairies? Perhaps he was thinking of hobbits rather than fairies? Do I lie and say no, denying any real connection with my beloved Tolkien?

I was beaten. I looked at LTJG Ely, then to the others, and simply responded, “Yes.”

I was not selected for OCS at that time.

Their loss.

But, that saying became my motto: “A person’s duty is to fight the evil of the day, regardless of its strength or hopes of final victory.” It was one day about ten years later when I quoted that line to a friend that I realized that it is not right. In fact, it is almost exactly wrong. I think it gives evil too great a place in our lives. Life should be about what we are for, not what we are against. I believe the motto should be, “Our duty is to fight *for* the good, the just, the merciful, and the beautiful regardless of its strength or hopes of final victory.”

Life should be defined by what we are for, not what we are against.



4 COMFORTABLE WITH THIS...

The Coast Guard Cutter *Hamilton* is a 378' long high endurance cutter. She can travel conventionally on twin diesel engines, or she can “fly” on turbine engines. Personally, I prefer fast to slow.

A large cutter is a complicated piece of machinery, and it takes a lot of people to operate her. Qualifying as an underway Officer of the Deck (OOD) is a challenging task; one has to stand engineering watches, deck watches, demonstrate a thorough knowledge of the ship: her systems, standard procedures, and emergency procedures. There are many watches stood as the Junior OOD supervised by a qualified officer. After the candidate earns the Captain's trust, he or she receives qualifications as a daytime OOD.



As an Ensign, I completed the qualification procedure and progressed to the point that I qualified for night OOD. My first solo night watch was during a North Atlantic Fisheries patrol in the spring of 1985. *Hamilton* was patrolling south of Cape Cod and we boarded many fishing boats the day before. It was 0320 when I entered the pilothouse to orient myself to the watch.

I did all the standard things: I checked our position, I made sure I knew who was on watch, I checked the log entries, and I started grease radar plots on all of the contacts we had. On this particular night we had six radar contacts dead ahead at about six miles. I would be relieving LTJG Ted Bull as OOD. Ted was a great guy and we were friends.

I spent a lot of time plotting the contacts ahead and finally figured out that they were all fishing boats steering various courses and speeds. I could just see their lights up ahead. Their relative motion lines came no closer than one mile to *Hamilton's* track. Since Ted Bull had a major role in training me, I conferred with him on this. "Ted," I said, "I need to call the Captain on these contacts. I will do that when I call to report that I have relieved you of the watch."

Ted—an experienced and trusted OOD at that point—offered me some advice: "Tell the Captain how confident you are with a situation, I might make a contact report and then say, 'Sir, I am comfortable with this, I recommend maintaining course and speed.'" Ted always gave great advice, and this advice seemed particularly strong. I would make the report and then give the Captain a confidence building summation of the report.

I reached the Captain using the sound-powered phone on the bridge. The OOD set the selector dial on the phone to the Captain's line, rapidly turn the ringer crank, and then the Captain's phone would ring. These are efficient systems and do not need electricity to operate. To my surprise, the Captain sounded very alert and answered the phone the instant I started ringing him. In fact, he greeted me by name: "Hello, Don." I wondered how he knew it was me.

Just as he came on the line, fog surrounded the ship. I thought—while I had him on the line—that I would report this to the Captain. I should anyway, but this would get all my reporting requirements accomplished with one call.

"Captain, this is ENS Robison, the Officer of the Deck, I have relieved LTJG Bull. Sir, I want to report that visibility has reduced to less than one mile. I recommend maintaining course and speed and setting the low-

visibility detail. Captain, we also have three surface contacts to starboard at about six miles. They are fishing boats steering various courses and speeds. Closest point of approach for any of those boats is about one mile. Sir, we also have three surface contacts off our port bow at about six miles. They are also steering various courses and speeds. Closest point of approach for any of those boats is one mile to port. Captain, I recommend that we keep a close eye on these contacts, maintain course and speed, and start sounding the fog signals.

Oh, and Captain, I just want you to know that I have a good plot on these surface contacts and am comfortable with the situation.”

Without missing a beat, the Captain replied: “Great report, Don. Let me tell you my situation... I am wide awake because my newest Officer of the Deck—an Ensign—has his first night watch. Visibility is reduced and he is sounding fog signals. There are a total of six boats ahead of us steering all over the place. And, to top it all off, my brand new Officer of the Deck is ‘comfortable with the situation.’ I’ll be up to the bridge in a second.”

He was on the bridge fully dressed for the day in about 1 minute... Almost as if he had been planning to come up all along.

If you are looking for a lesson in this little vignette, I think it is that you should never listen to Ted Bull’s advice about calling the Captain. Or... something like that.

5 MY CIGARETTE BOAT

The summertime Caribbean 30 miles southwest of Jamaica was flat calm, the sun was bright, and it was so clear that the tops of the Jamaican mountains could be seen just above the horizon. It was a peaceful Sunday afternoon aboard the Coast Guard Cutter *Seneca*. We had not seen another ship for two days and we were slowly headed south at about 5 knots: on patrol—not really headed anywhere in particular. It was a slow kind of watch. I was the OOD, and I was also next in the rotation as boarding officer. This meant that I would lead the team that went aboard the next vessel *Seneca* would board. I was ready.

I was newly qualified and the next boarding would be my third as the lead boarding team member. So, I had the basics down, but you would not call me an expert. Experts can see patterns in things and can judge which tasks are necessary in a given situation, and which tasks are optional in a given situation. A novice cannot make these distinctions, and it is obvious.

The lookout perched over the pilothouse was scanning the horizon with ‘bigeye’ binoculars. These binoculars were very powerful and permanently mounted on a swivel on a pedestal. Between the location atop the pilothouse and the superior equipment, the lookout could see about a mile further than we could in the pilothouse. Lookouts communicated with the pilothouse through a long brass tube that was 3” in diameter. The lookout opens a small door on his side of the tube and speaks clearly. Down in the pilothouse there is a large bell-shaped opening in the tube that allows the lookout’s voice to resonate. If a lookout speaks clearly and with volume, his or her voice will boom into the pilothouse.

We were about half-way into our tranquil watch with no contacts and no wind or waves in sight. The lookout's voice boomed, "Bridge, lookout. I have what looks like a red high-speed cigarette boat 30 degrees off the starboard bow on the horizon. Looks to be crossing our bow. Lots of spray."

I went straight to the radar to see if I could get a range on the contact, but found nothing. I looked through my binoculars and could just make out what looked like a high-speed contact and white spray. It could have been eight miles from us by my estimation. Cigarette boats were widely used by drug smugglers, and this was the middle of the drug wars, so this was a significant sighting. I watched it for a moment or two, and then called the Captain.

"Captain, this is the Officer of the Deck. Sir, we have a high-speed contact at 030 relative on the horizon. We have it visually, no radar yet. It looks like it is crossing our bow from right to left. I know we won't catch it, but I recommend that we come left and come up to full speed. Perhaps we will close it a little and get a better look."

The Captain thought this a good plan so we came left and came up to full speed. This is very exciting on quiet days in the Caribbean—the whole crew notices the increased rumble of the engines as they come up to speed, and the whole ship vibrates. Within ten minutes the Captain, XO, Ops Officer and a few other spectators came to the bridge.

Now we had an audience.

About the time my entire chain of command had established themselves on the bridge, and understood the few particulars that I could report, the voice tube from the lookout boomed again, "Bridge, lookout. That cigarette boat is coming into view... Uh, it looks like it might really be a big rowboat going very fast."

Silence broke out on the bridge. I pondered this strange report. How, I wondered, could a red cigarette boat be a large rowboat at the same time? I glanced at the Captain who was starting to smile. The Ops Officer was now on the opposite side of the pilothouse looking away from me at a chart. I could tell he was smiling, too.

As I watched through my binoculars, two things were becoming obvious. First, we were maintaining "constant bearing and decreasing range" on the boat—this meant that we would be able to intercept it. "Odd," I thought, "we shouldn't be able to intercept a cigarette boat like that." Second, the boat was beginning to come into focus.

It did indeed look like a large rowboat going very fast. I decided it was time to ask the lookout what he could see.

“Lookout, Bridge, anything else on that contact?” Lookout: “No, sir.”

Within a few minutes, we could see that the boat was a long open boat propelled by a large outboard motor. It was painted red and appeared to have one operator. The XO, peering at the boat through the forward pilothouse windows noted: “Captain, Don’s red cigarette boat isn’t like most of the other red cigarette boats in the world.”

Great, now this is “Don’s cigarette boat.”

Eventually we drew alongside the boat which had stopped in the glassy calm Caribbean. The operator slowly motored his boat right up under our starboard bridge platform and secured his engine. From where I was standing on our starboard bridge platform, I could look directly down into the completely open boat. I was not more than 20 feet from the fisherman who had conveniently maneuvered to a comfortable talking distance. The wooden boat was about 30’ long and empty except for one large fish in the center. A pleasant Jamaican fisherman was smiling at me in the stern.

I turned to the Captain, and he said, “Go ahead and conduct the pre-boarding questions.”

I pulled out the laminated pre-boarding questionnaire form and grease pencil, and surveyed the form. We used this form before every boarding... There were a lot of questions on the form. I didn’t have the experience to know which ones I could leave out during this particular interrogation. I looked to the Ops Officer for help. He just grinned.

I started with a greeting. Since we were essentially face-to-face, this seemed appropriate.

“Good afternoon,” I called.

“Good afternoon,” The fisherman answered with an amiable heavy Jamaican accent.

My form asked for the vessel master’s name. I called, “What is your name?”

“My name is Glenn, what is your name?”

I could hear muffled laughter behind me in the pilothouse. We did not normally operate on a first name basis during boardings.

Flummoxed, I responded, “My name is Don.”

My fisherman friend replied, “Hi, Don.” I could hear a little more laughter from behind me.

The next blank on my form asked for the vessel’s name.

“What is the name of your boat?”

Glenn looked a bit confused as he surveyed his boat. Coming to a quick conclusion, he looked up at me and said very clearly: “I call it ‘my boat.’” I could hear the unmistakable sound of laughter at my back. By now, my goal was to simply finish this interview and move on with my life.

I skipped several questions on the form, in an attempt to capture only the critical information.

“What is the nature of your voyage and what cargo do you have onboard?” I asked. I figured that combining two of the questions on my form might help things move along more quickly.

I knew as soon as I asked it that it was a bad question. Both Glenn and I immediately focused on the single large fish in the center of his boat. He looked up at me with a look of understanding compassion for my obvious shortcomings, and then answered my question simply, gesturing towards the fish: “I am fishing and this is my fish.”



I could already imagine my sensitive shipmates mocking me. I could already hear their bad Jamaican accents as they did it.

I scanned my laminated form for another appropriate question.

“Where is your next port-of-call?” I asked.

Glenn knew exactly what I was asking, but I could see him hesitate. I think he wondered why anyone would ask such a question. He looked briefly over towards Jamaica—the only land for a few hundred miles. He glanced at his small boat. “I am heading back to Kingston, Jamaica,” he said.

I looked around. “Of course,” I thought, “where else could he go?”

Now I felt a trembling hand on my shoulder. My Captain could restrain himself no longer. I turned to see him bent over in silent laughter.

I could barely discern his order: “Make it stop!”

I went to the bridge rail and thanked my new friend, Glenn, for his time. I wished him a good day and turned to go into the pilothouse. I was just stepping into the pilothouse—relieved that I did not have to embarrass myself further—when I heard the fisherman’s call from behind me, “Don! Don! Hey, Don!”

I turned and slowly walked back to the rail of the bridge wing.

“Hey, Don, it was good meeting you. Have a great day!” With that, he grinned, started his outboard and took off.

And as he started to pull away I could hear numerous people in the pilothouse, all with affected (and atrocious) Jamaican accents: “Hey, Don, it was good meeting you.” “I call it ‘my boat.’” “Oh, me? I am fishing, this is my fish...”

I served in *Seneca* for another three years after that, and as is the case with most stories, the story about “Don’s Cigarette Boat” was told and re-told regularly when morale needed brightening, or situations lacked humor. Though I always saw some humor in the story, it was never I who told it.

AN ABBREVIATED NAUTICAL GUIDE

Many readers have little experience with things nautical. These few pages provide the nautical novice with a brief guide to nautical concepts you will encounter in this book. First, we define some key concepts; then, we explain the 24 hour clock and its use.

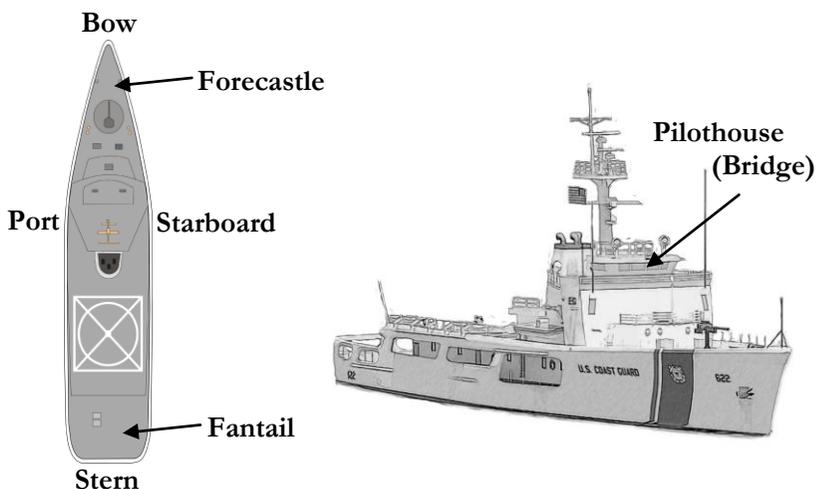
LOCATIONS ABOARD SHIP

Bow: The bow of a ship is the very front of it.

Stern: The stern of a ship is the back of it.

Port Side: This is the left side of the ship as you are looking forward.

Starboard Side: This is the right side of the ship as you are looking forward.



Forecastle (Foc'sle): The open deck of the ship forward of the superstructure.

Fantail: The open deck of the ship aft of the superstructure.

Pilothouse: Also called “The Bridge”; is the large space from which the cutter (or ship) is controlled. It contains the steering station, the navigation chart table, and the captain’s chair.