

# The Stowaway

by Daniel Lynch

Morning was making her presence known as I was driving north on A1A heading towards Port Canaveral where I was stationed with the Navy. The color that the sun produces against the clouds over the Gulf Stream is always spectacular and today was no exception. At the time I was living at Patrick Air Force Base Florida and commuting about ten miles each way where I worked at Naval Ordnance Test Unit or NOTU. I was a member of the port operation department that managed, maintained the various berths, and then managed logistics with the ships while in port. I had only been there about six months, and I felt comfortable with it; just knowing who to call was ½ the job. But today was Saturday and I was the oncoming Command Duty Officer (CDO) and not a normal workday. The CDO represents the Commanding Officer after hours and on weekends.

The port ops building had normal office spaces, a bunkroom, a conference room and was where I normally worked on weekdays. Today was looking good because there were no ships in port which meant that if something occurred it would be out of the ordinary and normally easy to resolve. I would not know till the afternoon that events would get unordinary, that most of the people I worked with would think unremarkable and soon forget but for me it turned into an experience I have not forgotten. I have always wondered what happened to the subject of the story or the protagonist, not really knowing why. It is true sailors can make bad decisions, yet he screwed up in a way that most of us, when we were younger, wished we had.

Port Canaveral is due east of Orlando on the Atlantic Ocean and is today one of the busiest cruise ship ports in the world. However, 70 years ago the port did not exist. It was during World War 2, that warfare changed drastically and ushered in the arm and space races. This new reality of modern warfare required bases for research and testing along with all the needed infrastructure that was necessary in keeping the United States ahead of all adversaries. The government reached out to industry giants and hence the birth of the military industrial complex was born. The east coast of Florida was perfect one of these areas ideal for this new warfare. First came the Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, a sprawling partial of land with forty-five miles of coastline surrounded by thousands of acres of protected wilderness.

In the 1950s rockets sometimes never made it off the launch pads or blew up seconds later. This part of Florida back then had a fraction of the population it has now, so it was much safer for the public. Another factor was that the property needed for the base was already owned by the government and there was no legal opposition. So, in 1949 the “Cape Canaveral Air Force Base” was authorized and 2 years later dredging commenced to facilitate a port. The navy’s new class of Poseidon submarines capable of launching missiles while submerged would

require a deep draft facility for evaluation, testing and support and Port Canaveral perfect location. The Poseidon wharf was first to be built and later in 1977 work began to dredge a deeper basin to support the Trident class submarine. Today the Navy side of the port is still primarily in the business of testing new and improved weapons as well as being an ideal spot for navy port visits. During the years that followed, the cruise ship industry grew in popularity, resulting in the Disney Corporation entering the market by building and homeporting the cruise ships Magic and Wonder. Today, Disney is one of the primary tenants of the port. The Disney Corporation can thank the navy for this.

I relieved the off-going CDO and settled in for what I hoped would be a slow day. The CDO managed the navy side of the port along with a petty officer who held staff the office if the CDO was not present in the building. On any given day, the CDO would take phone calls from clueless people and on weekends for some unknown reason these calls seemed to triple. Sometimes I enjoy taking these calls, they gave me a chance to practice my own brand of sarcasm with a person who had nothing better to do then waste my time. There might be some retired guy who wanted a tour of the base because he thinks it was the same place his ship stopped 30 years ago. Or it was the person who drove over to use the base exchange that did not exist. On a side note, the local rednecks were over the moon that the navy built the Trident wharf. Being only a couple of hundred yards from the Atlantic Ocean and well as being sixty feet deep, attracted a wide array of fish species that normally could only be caught offshore and for a long time the wharf was open for fishing, if they had access to the base and the pier was empty.

However, just after I arrived, some local jerk started a fire on the wharf while cooking his catch and then that was the end of fishing on the base. But my all-time favorite call was from a retired army officer who lived close enough to hear the bases loudspeaker system. Every morning at 0800 the phone watch would start a programed recording of our national anthem as well as the anthem of a foreign ship if there happened to be one in port. This annoying nerd had some kind of atomic clock on his wrist and would call CDO if the recording started early or late, demanding to know why the Navy, unlike the Army could not keep track of time. If I took the call I would make boarder line sarcastic apologies to him, leaving him to believe that I was going to find the underlying cause of this issue by moving it to the top of my action list. But today no such calls were made, hence no tours, no fishing, no first alarm fires.

Morning became afternoon as it always does and suddenly the phone rang for the first time around 1600. On the other side of this call was my counterpart from a destroyer squadron up in Mayport, a naval base near Jacksonville and about a 2-hour drive due north. After some small talk, their CDO briefed me on an issue and requested our help. As the story unfolded, late last night during the final day of a port visit in Nassau one of "their guys" (no name or rank provided) a crewmember on the destroyer USS Porter had somehow boarded the wrong ship around midnight and managed somehow to remain unnoticed as well as unaware of the

ship getting underway. The ship that “their guy” had mistakenly boarded was the Disney Magic, which was on its way back to Port Canaveral.

My first thought, being quite cynical, was that alcohol was the cause because nobody sober could mistake a destroyer for a cruise ship. I supposed that a certain amount of alcohol in a person might make it plausible for the mistake seeing that ships were indeed moored right next to each other. After getting underway the Magic discovered “their guy” and reported this via satellite phone link to the navy and requested someone accountable take custody after arriving on Sunday morning. The destroyer squadron was planning to send down a driver to pick him up and take him back to the Porter which was scheduled to arrive on Monday morning.

Not knowing for sure, I supposed that the Disney corporation did not want to make a big deal of this, seeing how this might turn into bad publicity for them. At first, I had a degree of indifference to him which changed later. So, after I hung up on Mayport I called my boss who asked me to call our CO and tell him what was going on. Our Captain was a previous enlisted or “mustang” and seemed to enjoy this news after a full explanation of the situation. He instructed me to be the “accountable person” to take custody seeing that I knew all the details.

This was OK with me because I was not going to get relieved until 8am anyway. Before hanging up, he said do not leave before seeing the “stowaway” get into the car and going out the front gate. Now the term “stowaway” struck me as strange, up to now I thought “their guy” was just a simple AWOL. Now suddenly, he appeared to me in a different light; his new status as a stowaway suddenly made him more sympathetic to me.

Now I had a simple plan, after the Magic moors at 6am I was to take custody and then made sure he got into the car coming down to take him away, it was simple tasking. Their guy, as I started to refer to him, was in a lot of trouble and would certainly face the green table once back onboard the Porter. This mystery sailor or stowaway had missed movement which the navy takes very seriously. Missing movement by being AWOL was serious stuff and later I supposed there could be other charges against him like disorderly conduct or damage to the ship, but I had to wait till morning to find out.

It was late, and the phone watch had racked out for the night, but I stayed up. I had nothing better to do than ponder the identity of “their guy” and what kind of sailor he was. I knew that at one time or another I had made some bad choices but never one like this. Stowing away on a cruise ship had the possibility of being a unique sea story, one that would put anything I had encountered on the oceans to shame, and I oddly started to envy him. Then, again with nothing better to do my suspicion kicked in and I started thinking that he might be a more senior member of the crew experiencing the worst day of his career.

I love conspiracy and started to think about why the Mayport CDO was keeping a lid on this by purposely not saying anything about his identity or rank which hinted to me that “their guy” might be a senior member of the destroyer’s command. Sadley the navy experiences weekly the firing of leaders for misconduct not so different from this. It may seem impossible for an officer or a Senior Chief to be so stupid as to go aboard the wrong ship, but then extreme lack of judgment occurs all too often.

I was feeling sorry for this guy not knowing him but also knowing all too well the availability of vice in a place like the Bahamas affects judgement that creates events that ruins careers. It is all too frequent that drugs and alcohol make sailors do senseless things.

Then the phone rang about 1am Sunday morning and again it was the CDO of the destroyer squadron. This time he provided a glut of latest information concerning “their guy” who turned out to be a Gunners Mate Apprentice (GMSA) who had been attached to the USS Porter for only 3 months.

I was a little disappointed about this news for now the reality was that their guy was just a “NUB” a sailor’s term for a new guy who knows nothing. His shipmates reported that he was last scene with a group of young French girls strolling down the main drag of Nassau stopping for drinks and laughing at every chance. The CDO suggested that the girls had “likely enticed” our young Gunners Mate back to Disney Magic for a tour and one last wonderful moment for all to remember. I was still on the phone, but I was thinking (instead of listing) that trouble was brewing, and this might be their guys’ first and only port visit depending on how fun that he had.

Before hanging up with Mayport, their CDO reminded me that after taking custody of him he might say something that might be used against him legally if the not yet known portion of the story went out of control. I imagined that this guy was the same guy who went to everyone’s high school, a new transfer who dressed impeccably, disliked all sports, had no male friends but somehow was popular with the cheerleaders. Then I thought, as sailors do, about how young these girls really were, where their parents were and the possibility of this becoming something more than just AWOL.

I must admit that I was making more of this than I should have, but then again, was I? For a moment before nodding out I surmised that their guy at this very moment was having a wonderful time but like “Cinderella” it would all be over at 0600 at which time he would become navy once again.

I woke up early and at 5am watched the Magic pass by the Poseidon Wharf at a distance of one hundred feet. I never got tired of watching these massive ships pass by at such a close

range with all the still half-cocked passengers out on their verandas waving stupidly at anyone like me watching.

It is a 10-minute drive from the Poseidon wharf to the Disney pier and once there I was waved into a holding area near the bow of the ship separated by a chain link fence. The ports groundkeepers are also the line handlers, and it does not take long for those guys to tie up such large ship with twenty plus lines. In time a watertight door about eight feet above the water line cracked open and a boarding ladder (Lear jet type) appeared that allowed the pilots and pursers' quick access off the ship. Moments later a bland looking fella escorted by a uniformed member of the Magic came down off the ship and onto the wharf and I was sure that this was "our guy."

Both walked over to where I was standing, and a police officer allowed their guy to pass through the gate. I asked the Magic's Officer who escorted him over to me if there was any damage or anything else we needed to know but he said nothing, only waving his arm and saying it without saying it good riddance and then suddenly he was in custody of the Navy. The short drive back was not what I had imagined, because their guy was not what I was expecting.

What I had anticipated was not what was sitting next to me, a now meek sailor lost in his own thoughts hung over and stunned about what just happened. After a pitiful attempt at small talk failed, we arrived back at port operations and with no other place to keep him I sat him down in the conference room all by himself. I tried to get his story while driving back but their guy was not talking. I was relieved that he had not told me about last night or mentioned anything that I needed to report back to Mayport. He was just a nineteen-year-old nerd whose life was passing before his eyes, alone and very freighted.

My relief showed up on time and was ready to relieve me and was glad that he was going to have nothing to do with the situation. I was a little surprised that he was not interested in the kids' story even though it sounded like a great one. At 8 o'clock turnover was complete, and it was time to go home. I changed clothes and started to head out the door when I realized I had forgotten that I had something left to do, such as my orders from Captain Stolarz, that I was to ensure that he got into the car that was coming to pick him up. It did not matter the driver was late, I was still responsible for this guy. Suddenly I felt remorse and empathy for this poor kid who now was crying as I walked back into the conference room. Had I not learned anything in the last 20 years? By leaving I would have placed expediency over principle and done myself great harm.

Whatever I had planned for today was not as important as trying to help this poor kid out in the short amount of time we had left together. Doing nothing is always the worst choice a person can make. Sitting down across from him he was still in a "leave me alone" mode but

eased up a bit when I now in civilian clothes appeared less hostile to him. Then he told me the whole story of his first port visit that had gone wrong.

It turns out the group of girls he hooked up with were not from France but Canada and all where college kids from Quebec celebrating their recent graduation from college and this was good news, the girls were old enough to make their own choices. He told me it was the girl's idea to sneak him onboard just for a look around and maybe a picture of two. He never mentioned how he got past security and onboard the Magic, but he did tell me that once onboard and his flock of hicks that seemed delighted to show him around before now seemed to fly away rapidly. Now with time being late the last few Canucks sneaked away to their cabins leaving our poor Cinderella all alone.

Now with dreams amiss and on a strange ship that was now swaying with the seas our guy became a victim of a lot of drink, found a poolside lounge chair and promptly passed out. Next thing that he remembered was being racked out by housekeeper who found out he was not a paying customer and soon taken into custody. Brought to a holding tank he confessed everything about sneaking onboard and him being a crewmember on a Navy destroyer.

Hearing his story reminded me of myself in far less unique situations and how I felt at the time. He asked me what to expect when he got back to his ship as far as charges against him, displaying all the naiveness that a young sailor in his boots would have. He really had no clue and thought that he was going to get discharged for what he had done. He told me that his father was ex-Marine and how disappointed his parents would be if he got the boot.

As far as I knew there was nothing more about his adventure, no damage, no one hurt and most certainly no loss of the USS Porters ability to operate without him. Knowing what I knew I reassured him that it would be extremely unlikely he would be discharged for this. I clued him on to the fact that the navy expects young sailors like him to screw up occasionally, an experience along the way, an event to learn from. Then came the best advice I could give him, which was to not fabricate the story but instead tell the complete truth.

Do not try and make it look like it was the Canadians fault and that he was somehow a victim. When you walk up your ship's brow do not say a word to anyone. All your shipmates will want to know how much fun you had with the girls and go ahead and let them think about that. Continuing, I mentioned that missing movement is serious charge, and he will get written up for it.

However, he might luck out and go only to XO mast and get dismissed without it making its way into his service record. A UCMJ charge such as this can be pulled from your service record, if the command is sure a lesson was learned and your performance reflected that; it's

a way that the Navy takes care of you, when you're young and full of potential, thus not allowing a misadventure to hinder you the rest of a possible career.

I told him that the most important thing is to show remorse when you see your Chief. Tell him what happened and that you messed up but are now deeply sorry for what happened and all you want to do is get back to work. All you need to do is tell the truth and you will be fine.

Just then the duty driver walked by the conference room door and I knew that it was his driver and our time was up. He was in plain clothes and older and I got the feeling that they knew of each other although nothing was said. We both got up and the stowaway sheepishly followed the driver out the front door giving me one last look and then he was gone.

When I returned to work on Monday, nobody I worked with mentioned anything about him which surprised me. It is not every day that something like this happens, but nobody seemed to care about this guy at all. He was just another stupid sailor from another command that got himself into trouble and he was absolutely of no concern to Naval Ordnance Test Unit.

Sometime later I thought briefly about calling the Porter to find out what happened to him, but I realized how awkward and unprofessional on my part that would have been, it was none of my business, so I let it go. This happened a long time ago and I still hope that he took the advice I gave him. I hoped that it all blew over quickly for him as I predicted. I hoped that he had a remarkable turnaround and during a lengthy career in the navy embraced as well as cultivated this yarn into the greatest sea story ever.

I even imagined him telling the story again at his retirement ceremony speech proudly remembering the night he had the time of his life.