

The Firing Range

By: Robert Mattsson

“Good morning Barney” I said pleasantly to the deckhand as he sat down to breakfast.

“Ya”, he answered grumpily.

“What do you want this morning?” asked Cookie

“Vy, do ya have something different today? He asked sarcastically.

Oh boy I thought to myself, it’s going to be one of those days. Usually when we got near the end of our two-week tour on the canal tug ‘Peter B. McAllister’ I was the one who got grumpy and edgy. I wanted to be home with my beautiful wife and the crew knew this and would tease me until I blew my stack or I got off the boat. And I could usually get off the boat first if we were near land, another tug or a bridge I could jump to, because as the oiler I didn’t have to shake hands with my relief like the rest of the crew. As soon as the chief said I could go I would begin scheming.

Barney settled for eggs, bacon, sausage, potatoes and toast while I ate my oatmeal with fresh farm cream we had picked up the day before in Toledo. Barney was mumbling about not having fish for breakfast when Captain Vic came stumbling and grumbling in. The captain wasn’t grumpy because tomorrow was crew change. He was grumpy because he was Captain Vic and he was always grumpy. Instead of talking to the two grumpy Norwegians I kept eating and looking down at the brown linoleum tabletop covered for the most part with a red and white-checked tablecloth. The table and the refrigerator underneath it were built into the bulkhead between the galley and the foc’sle. It was a work of art but it was the only boat I had been on up to then that had brown linoleum for the table top instead of green. Cookie scrubbed it every day and then wiped it with cooking oil to make it shine. I was wondering who got to pick the color when the port door opened and the chief engineer; Bill (his real name was Norbert) came in with his normal cheerful demeanor and fresh scrubbed looks. A nice looking man, he always kept himself and his clothes immaculate. He was a very orderly and talented engineer. From Germany, he would sit and tell me stories about inflation in the old country when he was a youngster that would amaze me. The stories weren’t told though until my work was finished and he had me go over my studies. I was studying for my engineer’s license and I just knew that if I didn’t put everything I had into it and failed when I sat before the Coast Guard examiner he was going to take it personally.

Bill helped the cook get his meal on the table because it was 0545 already and then he poured his own coffee. There wasn’t much talk at the table, the cook was babbling to the captain about grub money (again) and the captain just grunted back. Something was up with Barney but I couldn’t tell what it was and I had my own thoughts anyway. If we couldn’t make it to Tonawanda, N.Y., the western entrance to the Erie Barge Canal by tomorrow afternoon then we would have to change crew at Syracuse a day or more, later. It was relatively calm on the lake today and we were in pushing gear with the barge in ballast so we should make it across the lake in 25 to 28 hours. A few days ago on the way to Toledo, heading west it started out smooth but the weather changed so quick it caught us off guard and all hands were needed to get the pushing gear and steamboat ratchets in and the towing bridles and hawser out. We were all soaking wet and tired but felt like we beat the weather and saved the day. Then we were in for a rough 12 hours. Now I was hoping the weather would hold so we could make good time across the lake. I would try to get off at Tonawanda but the captain and chief would worry about me putting in for expenses from a different port then the rest of the crew if they changed crew in Syracuse. I would tell them that this was the 60’s and it didn’t matter to the office but they were from the old school and I was not going to change the way they thought.

Bill asked me what my project for the day was going to be and I answered that I was going to do general cleaning and get ready for crew change. Actually I was going to try to do as little as possible because after two weeks I was getting tired of it. I still had to do the brass tonight before we changed crew, if we changed crew, so maybe I would sneak in a little of that in the lower engine room this morning.

The captain got up and went to relieve the mate without picking up his dishes. He never did, after all, he was the “Captain”. Barney got up and put his dishes in the sink and went below to the foc’sle sleeping quarters to get his gear and pipe and tobacco so he wouldn’t bother his colleague while he was off watch and in the rack. The chief was finishing up when I put my dishes in the sink, poured myself more coffee and sat down again. I should have went to the engine room, made my rounds and relieved the first assistant so the chief could relax but I was afraid the ‘First’ had some of his work that he wanted to pawn off on me. He could do this when the chief wasn’t around because technically he was my boss too. Of course, on a

small tug everyone is the oiler's "boss". Finally Bill cleared his spot, poured more coffee to take with him and thanked the cook. I noticed the steering shaft running along the overhead of the galley moving one way and then the other. It had been almost motionless the whole time we ate breakfast because we were steering a course on Lake Erie from Toledo to Buffalo and there was no reason to be turning the rudder to any great degree. Captain Vic was a nervous, antsy type of guy when he wasn't drinking and he never drank on board. There was no alcohol allowed on the tug but "up the street" was a different story and it looked like he was "up the street" last night. When he was on watch, especially on open water he would walk from the port side of the low silhouette pilothouse to the starboard side and take a spoke of the wheel in his hand and bring it with him as he went. Then he would do the same on the way back. Our wake looked like a snakes path.

Watching the steering shaft move reminded me that I had to clean the commutator and blow out the carbon dust on the Direct Current steering gear motor. I also had to grease the steering gear and slush the steering chains before I got off so now was a good time to do it. I hurried out of the galley and into the upper engine room where the chief and the first assistant were talking and quickly told Bill what I was about to do. He nodded appreciatively as the first assistant tried to tell me something but I quickly turned and using the handrails only, slid down the ladder to the lower engine room. I liked it in the lower engine room, the big, 880 horsepower, six cylinder Superior Diesel engine was thumping away at 270 RPM in tune with the valve gear clicking and clacking, the 5 foot diameter flywheel making a whooshing kind of noise and the belts driving the main air compressor from the intermediate shaft pulley slapping away. All the sounds sort of blended together but if one of the sounds stopped or changed in pitch or volume a good engineer would know immediately that something was wrong or had changed and would investigate.

I finished the steering gear maintenance in just over an hour. Everything went relatively smooth, partly because Captain Vic kept moving the rudder and that made it easier to slush the chains. I washed up in the tiny sink on the starboard side and climbed the ladder to the upper engine room. Bill was sitting on the settee in front of the engine operating controls reading the paper. I got on top of the engine, standing on the heads and oiled the valve stems with the fuel/lube /Marvel Mystery oil mixture and the rocker bearings and rollers with lube oil. When I was done I sat on the settee next to Bill and we talked about the end of the canal season. This was when the locks would freeze, the levels would be low and frozen and the tug would go into the shipyard for overhaul. I wasn't worried about being laid off because even if the company didn't keep the whole crew on during the overhaul they always kept the chief and the oiler. The chief they kept for his knowledge and the oiler was kept to do the dirty work.

Barney had been walking back and forth along the deck and I finally realized he was trying to get my eye. He held his fingers up to his mouth and tilted his head back indicating I should join him for coffee. Cookie was in the rack as was the mate, engineer and deckhand from the opposite watch.

Barney had a chart out on the table. "What's up Barney? What are you doing with a chart down here?" It was unusual to take the charts out of the pilothouse, especially during daylight. "Ya, you want to get off in Tonawanda don'cha". "Yeah, but why the chart and how come you're so anxious, you never care when you get off?" "Vell" said Barney, "my daughter is in a play or something at school the day after tomorrow and my wife wants me there". "Well that's great but what are you worried about? We'll make it, we will just be a little late". Barney then told me that captain Vic was going to steer North to avoid a large military firing range instead of going straight through because the Notice to Mariners indicated they would start at 0900 today. If we lost a couple or three hours and had to slow at all for weather then when we called in tonight the dispatchers would say 1800 or 1900 hours tomorrow was to late to change crew and would reschedule us for the next day at Syracuse. Neither one of us wanted that to happen. "Well, what can we do?" I asked. "Vell Bobby boy (when he pronounced my nickname it sounded more like Boppy then Bobby) I have a plan".

The plan was to try and get Vic out of the pilothouse or distracted with the log book or charts or anything that would keep him occupied while Barney steered a straight course and I jacked the engine RPMs up a little to make better speed. First though, we would have to convince Vic that we could cover the distance and be clear of the firing range before 0900. Then we set up the rest of our plan.

"Hey Bill, do you want to play pinochle?" I asked. "In the morning?" he asked. "Well, yeah, I figure we are on a long run, Barney can steer and I'll ask Vic if he wants to play". When I reached the pilothouse Barney was already trying to convince Vic that we could cover the distance by 0900. Captain Vic wasn't buying it though, he was afraid we would get in trouble if we didn't clear the area on time. I told him we would certainly make it and if it got close and it didn't look good, we could speed up the engine and make it for sure. Which was quite big of me because I did not know how far we had to go or what speed we were

making at the time. I also said we didn't know for sure if they were even going to be firing today. Barney piped up with the point that if we were close to the end of the restricted area that would be okay too because they probably only fired live shells in the middle of the area. That seemed to make sense to Vic and to me, so while he was still nodding in agreement I told him that the chief wanted to play pinochle, and asked if he was in. He brightened right up and said "Ya sure. In the morning?"

I got the worn out pinochle cards from the galley pantry and put the coffee on, filling the basket to the top so it would be the way they liked it, strong and bitter, Bill made the rounds in the engine room to make sure everything was running well and Vic filled out his log and set the course for Barney to steer.

The first three hands we all passed on and on the forth Bill bid 340. Bill made his bid and Vic blamed it on me. This was not a good start, I didn't need Vic to get mad and storm off to the pilothouse. We passed again and then Vic won the bid with a measly 290 but it was in spades and he covered the bid in his meld so he didn't have to play it out and we had to pay him double, which made him very happy. While Vic was dealing I ran off to the engine room and pushed the throttle up one notch moving the injector wedges in ever so slightly and came back to the galley. We were looking at our new hands when Bill said to me "Did you raise the RPMs?" Jeez, I thought, it was only one notch, how the heck did he notice that? "Yeah, well the exhaust temperatures looked a little low, I guess the headwind died down," I said. "Ve didn't have a headwind this morning" murmured Vic as he set up his cards. Bill didn't say any more and I just looked at my cards. The steering shaft over our heads was hardly moving so Barney was holding up his end but I needed to get the engine speed up one more notch to make a difference. We played for about another 10 minutes and so far I hadn't won a hand because all I could think about was getting the engine speed up one more notch. Cookie came into the galley and asked to sit in. This was great because with four playing everyone took a turn sitting out. When you sat out you paid or collected but didn't have a hand.

When it was my turn to sit out I went to the engine room and very, very slowly pushed the throttle up one notch. The engine sounded a lot louder and faster to me. All the sounds seemed to increase in volume and frequency, the vibrations felt worse also and I expected the chief to come running into the engine room any second. He didn't, but when I got back to the galley he gave me a funny look. He must know what's going on I said to myself. He made rounds at 0800 and came back to the galley without saying anything and I didn't hear or feel the engine speed being lowered. At 0830 I had to oil the rocker arms and valves on top of the engine and wipe up. The engine was running well and at the RPM where I had last set it at. Instead of moving the throttle up another notch, I turned the thumbscrew on each injector rocker down a little which would increase the fuel without pushing the fuel wedge in any more, sort of fine tuning and getting a couple of more RPM without the speed jumping up in a larger increment where the chief would notice. I went up to the bow and through the open pilothouse window asked Barney how he was doing. He indicated everything was fine and smiled with his pipe in his teeth. He looked pleased with himself and very relaxed. Back in the galley by 0845 and the cook and the captain were yelling at each other and Bill was getting more coffee. Bill was out and I was in, the cook had won so he was dealing. We all seemed to get a good hand so there was a lot of cautious bidding that was taking a long time when at 0900 on the button Barney blew the whistle, blew down the voice tube and started to shout out the window. We all jumped up and ran out to see what the hell was going on. Even the deckhand and mate that were off watch came running out in their underwear to see what was happening. "What is it", they yelled, fire? Collision? Are we sinking? Barney said "Vic, you better get up here, the Army is on the radio screaming at you for being in this zone". Vic went pale and started to stutter, Barney said he wasn't going to answer the radio, the chief wanted to know what was wrong and the mate said he hoped we hadn't tried to go through the firing zone! Bill shot me a look that said 'now I know what you were up to'. I was red in the face, Barney was scared to death and Captain Vic was in shock. Vic made his way to the pilothouse and Bill told me to go with him and help out. Vic answered the frantic radio call with a trembling voice and a heavy accent. The officer on the other end wanted to know what we doing there, why we didn't know this was a prohibited zone, that we had almost been fired on, what was the name of the unit, where were we from, what company did we belong to, what was the captains name, what was his USCG license number, what was the official number of the boat, how many crew on board, how could we be so stupid. Well, Captain Vic was just about in tears and couldn't talk. To be questioned and yelled at by someone in authority, especially the federal government was incomprehensible to anyone on board. They called twice more before Vic shakily picked up the microphone and began to answer in Norwegian. Barney and I both began to yell at him and this just made things worse. I took the mike and said the captain was going to get his license number and the other information they wanted, that this would take about 10 minutes and what did they want us to do in the meantime? The guy on the other end seemed to calm down a little and asked how long we would be before

we were out of the zone, I looked at Barney and he said "half hour", "Are you sure Barney I don't want these people coming after us!". "Na, ve vill make it, you'll see". So I told him half an hour and in fact we were out of the zone in just over 20 minutes. When Vic had collected his composure and papers, we read them off to the officer on the other end of the VHF radio and he said he would be contacting our office and that made all of us sick to our stomachs. When I got back to the engine room Bill was not at all talkative and I noticed the engine speed was back down to normal full. That watch and our next were not very happy and there was very little chatter. I think that if the captain wasn't so embarrassed by his lack of composure he would have fired Barney on the spot. We finally made it to Tonawanda and changed crew. Barney made his daughters play and when we came back a week later all was forgiven except for a little deserved hazing for Barney and I. We never heard anymore from the firing range and we never sailed through that section again.