

Cockroaches

I came into the galley of the tug Peter B. McAllister through the port door and saw that the cook was peeling potatoes on the starboard side of the long galley table. "Hi cookie" I said as I went to get my coffee from the big aluminum percolator. "Harrumph" he answered back. When I brought my coffee over to the table to put my sugar and milk in I saw he was pushing something away with the back of his right hand, the one he had the potato peeler in. I looked closer and realized it was a cockroach. "Whoa", I said, what are you doing? What the heck's a matter with you, why don't you kill it? Are you kidding, he answered, if I kill every cockroach that comes to the table it will soon be disgusting and you guys will be complaining about all their bodies all over the table. If I kill them they keep on coming. I said that's awful but he countered with, "That's the way it was". With that he pushed another one back. And it was true, after awhile we got used to seeing cockroaches everywhere. At first we would kill them on the red and white checkered tablecloth but it made a mess. Eventually we just watched them. It was so bad that we got used to them and we would actually wait until a cockroach would crawl across and over the potatoes or vegetables in the serving dishes before you would grab your portion. We had bought insecticides at the hardware stores and got what we could from the company but nothing seemed to halt their advance in any way at all.

After a while no one said anything, unless we got a new crew member on board. We got so used to it we didn't even think about it anymore.

I had just gotten married and the Peter B. was going to be tied up for the New Years holiday. I was selected as the watchman for her and ten or twelve other tugs that were also going to be laid up at Pier 13 North River in Manhattan. Naturally I wanted to be with my wife, Gail, as we were just married the previous August and I wanted to spend the holiday with her. I called and asked if she would come. She was staying with her parents while I was away and they didn't want her to go. They didn't know anything about tugs or Pier 13. I talked her into it anyway. She wasn't too happy but she said yes to please me.

I checked the bilges and batteries of all the boats in my care and then drove quickly over to Staten Island to pick her up and bring her back to Manhattan. We had to park under the Westside Highway structure and make our way out the pitch black Pier 13 with only my flashlight to guide the way. At the end of the pier we had to climb down a ladder, Gail wasn't happy but she closed her eyes and made it to the deck of the tug against the pier. We had three more tugs to climb over though until we got to the Peter B.

I had everything planned. We would stay in my room that I had scrubbed and cleaned, changed the bed linens and shined the stainless steel sink. Then just before midnight we would go up into the pilothouse and get set to blow the air horn to help celebrate the coming of 1962.

So we got settled and sat for awhile in my room and then I said, "Okay let's go, let's go and blow the whistle it's almost midnight."

All the rooms had outside doors so we went out and walked up the dark deck. I said to myself "I should have turned the deck lights on". Normally I kept them off to conserve battery power but to make her more comfortable I should have turned them on. To get to the pilothouse we were going to go through the galley, the companionway through the fo'c'sle access and then to the pilothouse. I opened the steel weather tight door and told

her to step over the high sill as I turned the galley lights on. Well, you wouldn't believe the sight. To this day I get the willies, but Gail absolutely shrunk down and screamed at the same time. The floor and table was a black mass of moving cockroaches. They were so thick you could barely make out the red deck paint. I thought she was going to faint. My god it was awful. They were scrambling to get back behind the walls after the light came on. Gail ran out the door so fast I had to grab her to keep from going over the side because the galley light had temporarily blinded her and she didn't know where she was. She was screaming and crying but when I looked back into the galley they were almost all gone. She didn't care she wanted to go home. She was gagging and still whimpering. She said she was not going back in my room, she didn't want to stay. I said "It's alright, it's alright". I told her they were not in the pilothouse or the rooms because there was no food there. I finally convinced her to come back in the galley and I quickly went up to the pilothouse and turned the lights on before she came up just in case.

We went up to the pilothouse and as it turned midnight we blew the horn and kissed. We went back through the galley to my room but the lights were still on so there was no sign of the cockroaches. She was itchy and squirmy all night long and that put a large damper on my plans. I drove her to her parent's home first thing in the morning; she didn't want to stay for breakfast.

On the January 2nd when we came out to go to work I told the crew what had happened. They couldn't believe there were that many. I told them to turn the lights out at night and see what happens. The galley lights were normally never turned off when we operating. We were scheduled to go into the shipyard in February for our annual overhaul and reported the problem to our Port Captain and Port Engineer.

Well, we went into the shipyard and began the overhaul. The third day the exterminator came and set himself up with a backpack pump sprayer and began spraying the chemical in the forepeak and worked his way aft. I don't know what kind of magic potion he had in there but they were coming out of every crack and opening in the walls and overheads. You could almost hear them screaming. Then they began falling out of the cracks and crevices between the galley and the engine room. They were falling on the engine, in the cylinders and the on mechanics heads and in their collars, dead, half dead and alive. The guys were wriggling and screaming and took off to the safety of the dock. We closed the boat up and no one was going back in that day. The next day when we opened the doors it was unbelievable. They were covering the galley floor 2" deep and covered the floor plates in the engine room. We used brooms and shovels to pick them up and throw them over the side. It was truly disgusting. No one could believe it, they never saw that many cockroaches at one time in one place. To this day I don't know what chemical the exterminator used but I was on the Peter B. for another year and a half and never saw a cockroach again!