

STRIKE YOUR COLORS!

World War II left a good many relics scattered over the world. There was a congressional law that “new” machinery and equipment manufactured for the war and exported overseas could not be imported into the US again. As a result, I myself saw many brand new road graders and bull dozers being pushed over the cliffs of Guam into the Pacific Ocean! But there was a surfeit of equipment scattered over the atolls of the Pacific, and particularly in the Marshall Islands.

So when the Joint Task Force Seven arrived in the Marshalls for the nuclear tests of 1952, the scrounging of WWII relics followed. They were placed into task force service--specifically many T-boats and M-boats.

When we were working on the “up” islands (islands to the north) in Bikini Atoll in 1956, we lived in T-boats, anchored in the lagoon, and traveled to and from the islands in M-boats. Occasionally we would return to the island of Bikini for supplies, transportation to Enewetak, or Kwajalein.

Although the lagoon was normally quiescent, certainly compared to the open sea, there was sufficient motion that after two or three weeks on the T-boat the whole world developed a beautifully regular roll, soothing even to landlubbers like myself. But a trip to Bikini was welcome. There were movies there, and ice cream!

On one occasion several of us in my Group J-15 were to return to Bikini for some reason or other, and the hour trip was quite welcome. The M-boat was run by an employee of Holmes and Narver, H&N, an AEC subcontractor. They were the equivalent of a civilian navy. The regular Navy was one of the elements of the Task Force, and they oversaw the Navy interests and activities. In truth, the civilian scientists were in charge of the show, but all principal support of airplanes, ships and communications came to us from the military.

The commander of the task force at this time was a navy two-star admiral, and his scientific deputy commander happened to be my group leader, Gaelen Felt. These two men ran the show, one for the military and one for civilians. There were other deputy commanders, one for each of the armed services.

The Navy had present at this time in the Bikini lagoon a very large ship to look after aircraft, also commanded by an admiral. I believe it was the USS Curtiss.

It happened that J-15 was a pretty good crew, and at one time there were 15 of us in the group. So we had a group flag. It was of standard size, blue, and it had on it one white star (painted) for each of us. By coincidence of course, the flag looked a little bit like the Admiral's flag. His two stars were sewn on so surely there was no possibility of someone thinking that we had a 15 star admiral!

On the way to Bikini, we were flying our flag on the M-boat, as we almost always did. On our way to the dock, we sailed directly past the USS Curtiss. By the purest chance, I was the "ranking" person aboard the M-boat, since I had a PhD. My "simulated" military rank was that of Major. Everybody had to have a simulated rank for otherwise the military would not know how to treat us. But Majors were sufficiently plentiful and discredited during WWII that nobody with any standing has ever paid any attention to them.

Anyway, as we were drawing near--very close, actually--to the Curtiss, it was a most impressive sight. It towered many stories above us, and was huge! Further, we observed several officers on the bridge, way up there in the sky, observing us through their enormous binoculars. And as we drew closer, the number of men on the bridge increased. We scrounged up our one pair of binocs, and looked back (really, UP!). Sure enough, they were looking right at us. I confess that at this moment the thought of the flag being the problem had not yet occurred to me. But then the radio on our M-boat crackled with our call letters, coming from the H&N communications office near the dock. We were told that they had just received an order from the carrier for us to **STRIKE YOUR COLORS!**

Sure enough, our flag was flying, but by what stretch of the imagination could our stars possibly outrank the admiral's two? The M-boat operator hollered to me, "Do I have to take down the flag?" I thought hard, and for a time, too! My years of military training flashed before my eyes. The niceties of the situation were rare in precedent, requiring thought. My immediate boss was the deputy commander of the task force, and the situation was exactly the same for the admiral on the carrier, as his boss was another deputy commander! Also I knew Galen pretty well, and I had a hunch that he would not really see things the

same way as admirals did.

So-o-o, after a pause, I responded “No”. There is no exclamation mark here, for I was keenly aware that I was treading new territory. It turned out that the H&N’ers were absolutely delighted by my answer, and I was not given the opportunity to reconsider. The word NO was trumpeted, first to the harbor, then to the ship. They explained that the flag belonged to the “users”, over which H&N had no jurisdiction, so of course they were helpless. We sailed on, waiting for the sky to fall.

It never did! I became a trouble-making celebrity. Galen was delighted, and no doubt he and his admiral enjoyed the story over martinis. There were ramifications, however, as I was never invited to the Curtiss. (Actually, I would have been afraid to go!)

Sometime later, on Enewetak where I was in residence, I was lying on my bunk in a metal building immediately next to the building housing Gaelen and the commander. The metal window was open, as always except during a rain. There appeared a face in this window--a face belonging to a new navy commander who had just arrived on the island. He inquired about the 15-star flag flying on a pole at the door of our barracks. What was it? (Not “whose”!) We explained that it was our group flag. The commander suggested that it must be insulting to the task force Commander. (His flag was flying outside his quarters, immediately to the north.) We were surprised to hear this, and said surely not. He then asked us to take down the flag. Having survived this kind of irresponsible thinking before, I was much more confident. I politely told him that we would do so when ordered to do so by our boss, Dr. Galen Felt. We heard no more.