

CHRISTMAS AT SEA

John McCabe

Christmas Day often (for me at least) brings back memories of other Christmases spent in other times and places, when the world (or at least I) was much younger, and things did not seem as complicated as they are now. One of the more memorable times for me was the Christmas of 1965....

My ship was USS Ticonderoga (CVA-14), where I served as Fire Control Officer, in charge of the four remaining 5inch guns, which by then provided little more than ballast. My primary function was serving as Officer of the Deck, which, given my two prior years on a DDG, gave me (at least in the eyes of the C.O.) an advantage over the other OCS-bred J.O.s. This "celebrity" later worked to my disadvantage, as I shall explain.

We had been "on line" in the South China Sea for 40 days, before heading to Yokosuka, Japan in early December, to return to Yankee Station by the 20th. The prospect of cool weather and a break from constant flight ops gave all on board an opportunity to celebrate the season before Christmas actually arrived. Yokosuka was known then (in addition to certain other attractions) as the stereo system capital of the known universe. During our stay, I spent my time (and limited savings) acquiring the speakers, amps, and turntable necessary to turn our stateroom into J.O. Party Central. For the finishing touch, I snuck a live pine tree aboard, along with lights and decorations befitting the yuletide season, not to mention canned eggnog and sundry other libations of questionable legality.

By the time we arrived back on station however, it was clear that my plans for Christmas were somewhat optimistic. For one thing, our stateroom, being located immediately below the port steam catapult, maintained a semi-constant temperature of 105 degrees, thus making it difficult to sing "Winter Wonderland" with a straight face. Further, with flight ops going day and night, the cats would drill gouges in my "Christmas with Coniff" album, and convert "Rudolph the red nosed reindeer" into Ave Maria at the bat of an eye. By Christmas Eve, not a single needle was left on the tree (again thanks to the catapults).

Charlie Brown's tree was a thing of beauty by comparison. So much for the big Christmas party. . .

But all was not lost that Christmas. Ticonderoga had been chosen to host "The Bob Hope Show", and in due course they arrived, replete with band (Les Brown), women (Carroll Baker and Joey Heatherton), and sundry other show biz folk. I had already picked out my observation spot for the show near my five inch gun mount (they turned out to have some good uses after all) when the Captain's orderly invited me up to the Bridge. "Mac", says he, "I want you to be OOD during the show. These damn tin cans (referring to our screening destroyers), want to come in close aboard to watch the show, and I want someone I can trust not to run into them". Obviously the Captain wasn't planning to be on the Bridge during the show. "It's OK" he said, "We rigged up the landing cameras, so you can see it on the Bridge monitor". Mustering a (not so cheery) Aye Aye, I relieved the now smiling OOD of his duties. The show went off without a hitch, while I managed not to collide with any of the smaller ships. I got to watch the Bob Hope Special in glorious black and white (with no sound), and occasionally see the back of Bob Hope's head from 130 feet up. After I was relieved, I went down to my stateroom, turned on the lights on my "Christmas twig", and swilled a whole can of warm eggnog.

That was fifty years ago, and a lot of things have happened since to all of us. Still, I can't help but chuckle at the way things turned out on that particular Christmas. I was glad to have been there.

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