Mr. Ward and the Sea

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Abstract

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THE WIND threw icy, salt spray over the decks of the destroyer in surging clouds, and knocked the top off leaping waves. Lieutenant Ward's nail-hard face was turned out to sea as he watched the progress of a whaleboat inching through the sea toward the ship with a torpedo in tow. Few men were on the main deck.

A small unit of men stood shivering by the boat crane, waiting for the whaleboat to come alongside. "God, how'd you like to fall overboard today?" asked one. He tightened his hold on the lifeline and shivered again. The ship pitched and rolled in its effort to stay on top of the water, and the men moved rhythmically to counteract its motion.

"All right, you men," roared Lt. Ward above the howl of the wind. "Look alive when this boat comes alongside."

One of the men leaned over toward the man next to him. "Why the hell is Ward retrievin' torpedoes when it's below zero?"

"Mister Ward's always doin' something that's supposed to be impossible." The sailor waited while a gust of wind screamed, "he's always with us, though, no matter what he tries."

"I don't give a damn if he is. What's the sense in freezin' to death just for a lousy torpedo?"

"Listen, swabby," cut in their huge chief boatswain, "if you don't like it, tell Mister Ward."

There was no need to worry, no man could challenge him.

Lt. Ward grabbed the lifeline which surrounded the main deck and struggled through face-slapping salt spray and the wind to the crane winch. The boat was drawing up alongside now, and the destroyer had slowed down and both were swaying and bobbing from the wind and waves.

"Tell the bridge we're ready to start bringing the torpedo aboard," yelled the chief boatswain. Several of the men began to operate the winch, and the ice-caked hook slowly started to move downward from the top of the crane.

"Loosen up those frozen lines, men. They'll foul for
sure if they stay that stiff,” said Mr. Ward.

None of the men started to work. The heavy rolling of the ship kept the massive hook swinging like a huge pendulum in the whistling, spray-filled wind. The men were hanging on to the lifeline.

The boatswain worked his way over to the Lieutenant. “Mr. Ward, the men are afraid of bein' washed over the side.”

“I'm not afraid of a little heavy weather. I'll do it myself, chief.” Mr. Ward moved up the lifeline to the boat crane. He let go of the line with one hand and grabbed for the swaying cable as it swung toward the ship, but it was out of reach. Could he let go with both hands for an instant, in order to reach the extra few inches? Mr. Ward looked down at the angry, snarling sea. He would hate to quit the whole action just because of one fouled cable. He let go of the lifeline and stretched out over the side of the ship, but as he did, the ship leaned suddenly and he lost his balance. The chief boatswain and some men saw him start to topple, and moved as fast as they could. Just then a swell pyramid ed up and curled over the side, and the men held onto the lifeline. But when the wash and spray cleared, Mr. Ward was gone. It seemed as if the sea was waiting, daring him to make one mistake, so it could swallow him.

“All right, men, get a line out,” bellowed the chief. “You men in the whaleboat drop that fish and start searching. Messenger, tell the bridge we've a man overboard.” The big boatswain looked back out to sea. The wind made so much haze over the surface of the water, any visual searching would be hard. And anything on the surface, even the whaleboat, was oftentimes hidden behind one of the mounting, slashing swells.

Men were piling up behind portholes trying to see out, and the boat crew cautiously moved inboard out of the bitter blasts of the wind. The big boatswain stayed at the lifeline looking out for some glimpse of Mr. Ward on the vast sea. Mr. Ward had only been challenged by a man once as long as the chief had known him. It was by a cocky new seaman who was at least twenty pounds heavier. He hit Ward so many times his arms got tired from punching, but Mr. Ward
kept standing, and finally landed one good punch on the seaman.

The boatswain wondered if he could last now against the wind and sea. No human enemy had ever gained so much as a draw from him, but the sea——

"There he is!" cried out one of the sailors. But his head bobbed out of sight again as rapidly as it appeared. It almost looked as if a hole had opened in the wide ocean and pulled him from sight.

The men kept looking, thinking how cold it would be swimming in that frothing sea, the brutal, cold water soaking through already heavy clothes, the constant fight to stay afloat with the frosty wind chilling your face.

A couple of the men backed away from the sea to the superstructure deck. Were they afraid that the sea might try to get them?

The men in the boat had been searching, but half a man's head is a small thing to find on a wind-driven sea. Light was beginning to fade but the flat, freezing wind gave no sign of diminishing. The shivering whaleboat's crew knew they could not go far from the ship in the twilight, fighting the roughened sea. The twilight would be short this time of year.

Back on the deck, the chief boatswain knew the hunt could not last much longer. Men had a difficult time on the main deck during the day, and night action, in the spray-filled whistling wind on frozen decks, could easily cause many more casualties.

Behind the portholes, the groups of officers and men that were watching weren't eager to step on the weather deck. One of the hatches opened, and a bundled up crewman carefully walked across the deck to the boatswain. It was almost completely dark.

"Chief, the old man says to call back the whaleboat before total darkness."

"O.K., messenger." The chief signaled the bouncing whaleboat. They flashed their spotlight signalling they were turning back. Retrieving the whaleboat in that stormy dark would be a tough job without Mr. Ward.

_Dan Francescon, Sci. Sr._