The Aristocrat

Sketch Magazine*
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Abstract

DURING the past four years, as a midshipman in the N.R.O.T.C., I have taken courses in naval history, etiquette and leadership, and I have gone on three six-week cruises where my experiences have varied from cleaning the bilges of an LST to conning a heavy cruiser...
During the past four years, as a midshipman in the N.R.O.T.C., I have taken courses in naval history, etiquette and leadership, and I have gone on three six-week cruises where my experiences have varied from cleaning the bilges of an LST to conning a heavy cruiser. In June I will be commissioned an ensign. At that time I will be vested with the authority, privileges and duties of a junior officer. I know that most of these powers and privileges will be necessary in order to carry out my duties, but I also know that many will not be.

For example, on ship I will reside in a definite area known as "officer's country," into which no enlisted man dare venture except on duty. Officer's country comprises about one-eighth of the entire ship—don't you think this is large enough for one-fortieth of the ship's complement? If I should come across some poor sailor who looks out of place and doesn't have a reason for being in this restricted area I would be obligated to put him on report. If I failed to do so, I could be put on report for failure to comply with Navy Regulations.

In this sacrosanct portion of the ship will be located my stateroom, which I will share with from one to three fellow junior officers, depending on its size and the ship's size. If it is a two-man room it will be no smaller than ten feet by twelve. The floor will be carpeted, and the double bunk will be full size with innerspring mattresses. There will be sheets and a pillow. There will be two desks and chairs, and there will be ample closet room. There will be shelves for my books and room for my radio-phonograph. I can find a corner in which to lean my golf clubs and tennis racket for liberties. And best of all, a steward's mate will come around every morning and tidy up the room!

If I go back into one of the enlisted men's compartments, after giving them "carry on" when they snap to attention on my entry, I will find ninety men living in a space sixty feet by twenty-five. This stuffing entails triple and a few quadruple bunks, which can be "triced up," or folded back, dur-
ing the day. This tricing up is necessary in order to permit
a broom to pass under the bottom bunk and to allow the
sweeper elbow room, for the aisle is only a foot and a half
wide when the bunks are down. On this bunk I will see a
two-inch-thick cotton mattress, enclosed only in a mattress
cover. There are no sheets and no pillow, unless the occupant
happens to be trusting and prodigal, for the navy furnishes
no pillows to enlisted men.

I will see that the sailor must keep all his belongings in
a locker fifteen by fifteen by thirty inches, except for his pea-
coat, which he keeps in a large common locker. The cold steel
deck is his only chair. He can sit on his bunk, if he is only
eighteen inches high when sitting down or if he can contort
his neck to fit that space. If I should ask a sailor why he
doesn’t go up to the crew's lounge to read instead of sitting
on the deck, he would ask me if I want him to stand in line
an hour or two to get in. I would find that the lounge is only
fifteen or twenty feet square, and furnished by donations or
by “recreation dues” from the seamen. The fund set aside
by the navy for enlisted men's recreation goes about far
enough to buy a pair or two of boxing gloves, and maybe a
few fish lines a year.

If I go into the officer's wardroom after this tour of peas-
ant country, I will have eight or ten overstuffed chairs and a
sofa or two from which to choose. This sixty-by-forty-foot
compartment is provided by the navy as a dining hall and
lounge for its overworked fortieth. This compartment is
thickly carpeted, and on the tables are table cloths. A few
stewards are always around washing dishes or cooking or
maybe just fixing a snack for the night-watch standers who
happen to be officers. The navy provides lackeys to keep
the officers from doing work “unbecoming an officer and a
gentleman.”

As an officer I will be able to gig a sailor for having soiled
spots on his work whites, even though my own collar is filthy.
I will be able to put him on report for having unshined shoes,
when, compared to my own, his gleam. I will be able to make
him do extra duty if he has a button torn off his uniform,
when I am wearing a shirt with an elbow pushed out.

When standing many watches, I must not allow the en-
listed men to sit down, yet if I choose I can do so myself. When on certain watches, I can have coffee brought me from the wardroom, but yet do not dare offer even the man who fetched it one little sip. On no watch may I permit the men to read material other than that pertaining to the job they are on, even if they have no duty other than to stand.

If I were the Executive Officer or the Captain I would have an orderly who follows me like a puppy dog. As long as I remained in one place the orderly would have to stand at parade rest; if I were to take a two or three-hour nap and not tell the orderly to "take off" he would have to stand that time outside my cabin, in one spot! Even Procrustes was no crueler!

If I should somehow become possessed with a super-human will, I could remain humane in spite of the navy's medieval customs. But not possessing that will, I can scarcely hope to do more than keep my actions from becoming flagitious.

Recognizing the need to change the Navy Regulations and to abolish these unwritten customs which allow such a system of tyranny is all that I, as an officer, can do. I cannot compel the Navy Department to change. It will take nothing less than an act of Congress. As a naval officer I dare not even write such thoughts as these to my Congressman, much less go out and recruit followers! The only hope for your son or daughter to fight for democracy in a democratic military service is for you as a citizen to do the crusading.

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**Soliloquy**

I walk through the house in darkness.
My aunt asks, "Who is it?"
"Me, Flo," I reply.
But is it me or someone else who walks at night?
For who is me?
I do not know.