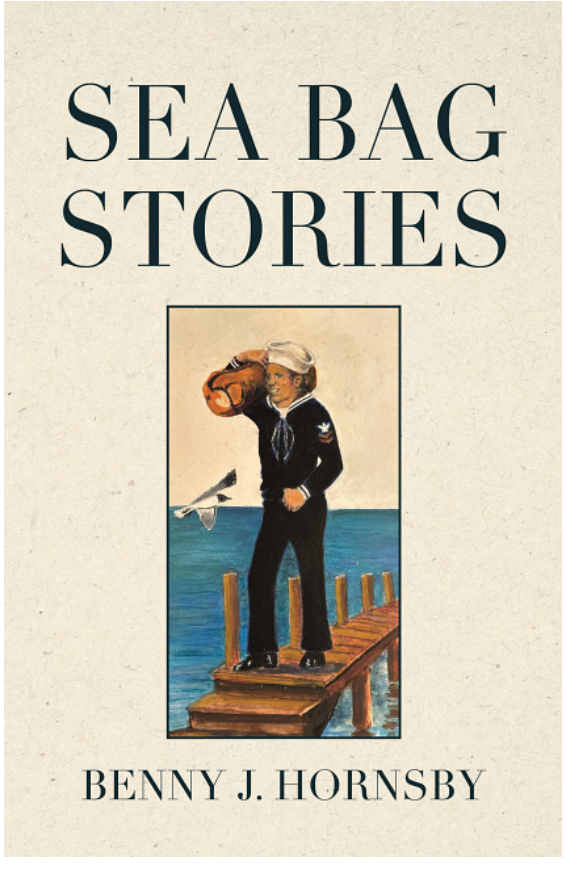

A collection of the author's "The View From the Back Row" newspaper column for the years 2022-2024.

Sea Bag Stories

By Benny J. Hornsby

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SEA BAG STORIES

BENNY J. HORNSBY

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The characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

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PRAISE FOR SEABAG STORIES

Great article! Kids need to hear those traditions. Keep teaching these things.

I'm reminded of Antoine de Saint-Exupery who said, "If you want to build a ship, don't herd people together to collect wood and don't assign them tasks and work, but rather teach them to long for the endless immensity of the sea." That's why I always appreciate your stories. You don't just share the facts; you communicate a vision. Thanks for another lesson.

Another good article about life at sea. I imagine you have experienced your share of rough sea conditions. I have and those that haven't surely can't understand. I've been in some bad ones in the North Atlantic, and you probably have, too, on that destroyer escort. Makes one wonder if those "tin cans" are going to hold together. I've ridden some submarines, and their doctrine is to take her to 500 feet and watch movies.

I just read your column. It popped up in my newsfeed on Facebook. I wanted to let you know how much I appreciated your story. Thank you for sharing and thank you for your service. God bless America.

This week's column was especially enjoyable to me as I liked the literary references and the personal journey remarks. Keep sharing your unique writing skill with all of us fans and admirers.

Just wanted to leave you a quick note that I really enjoyed your recent article in the PineBeltNews. Your story was inspiring, and I

enjoyed watching your bio on your website. Thank you for your service and God bless.

I really enjoy reading your stories. They awake my memories. Keep them coming!

Thank you for your columns. I look forward to them with great anticipation. Thanks for sharing stories of your life and your perspectives on it.

A link to your column was included in the Western Gulf Maritime Association daily news update. This is just a quick note to tell you how much I enjoyed it. On a merchant ship, it was always better to have Christmas at sea instead of in port which are very busy times.

You've been there. So have I. Loved your column. Brings back old memories. My shipmates and I had a saying: "Being onboard a Navy ship is like being in jail, with the extra hazard of drowning.

I seek your column and am disappointed on weeks it doesn't run. I appreciate your insight and smile at your purposeful humility. Fascinating. You have a gift to share, and I say, "Thank you."

Enjoyed your article. At 85 years of age, I remember most of it. Thanks for the memories.

Also by Benny J. Hornsby

A Consolidated Training Manual for Chaplains of the U.S. Pacific Fleet, Volumes 1-3, U.S. Government Printing Office, San Diego, CA, 1980, 1982.

A Navy Chaplain's Devotions for Afloat and Ashore, Cross Books, Bloomington, IN, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-4627-1480.

A Sailor Remembers: A Collection of Newspaper Articles, 2010-2015, BookLocker, Bradenton, FL, 2016. ISBN: 978-1-63491-512-0.

The View from the Back Row. BookLocker, Trenton, GA, 2022. ISBN: 979-8-88531-057-4

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I. At Sea

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THE INVISIBLE MAN

I was invisible until I was seventeen years old. I was apparently born that way. No one ever saw me – just an empty seat, a face in the crowd, a shadow on the wall, a footprint in the sand.

I could have been on another planet, or in a parallel universe, as far as the world was concerned. I was anonymous, a late arrival, a vacant lot, a dusty mailbox, the forgotten winter coat hanging on a summer nail. Looking back, I don't think it bothered me at the time. I was probably the only person in history who spent twelve years in the Lumberton public school system without leaving a trace: no gold stars in grammar school, no disciplinary record, no club memberships, no athletic letters in sports, no initials carved on a desk, no honors, and graduating dead last in a class of 52. If there had been such a distinction for the class of 1959, I would have been voted "Least Likely to Succeed in Life," that is, if anyone remembered who I was. A kind person who did remember me later summed up my years there as "He sat on the back row and looked out the window a lot."

It all changed when I joined the Navy a few days after graduation. I caught the Greyhound bus to the Receiving Station in Jackson and never looked back. For someone who was inured to being overlooked, ignored, cut-loose, doubted, suspected, and relegated to the back of the line, it was an eye-opening experience to be introduced to the neutral world of meritocracy. I sat down with around fifty other young men to take my first Navy test, the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude

Battery (ASVAB), little knowing that my score would launch me on a successful career reaching over 36 years, 7 ships, 20 years at sea, and more than 100 countries. There was nothing "unique" about me, either. I could name at least a dozen men of my ability who were much more successful than I ever was.

What was different, what I soon realized, was that the Navy provided the proverbial "level playing field," where ability and hard work were recognized and rewarded. It didn't matter who you were kin to, what side of the tracks you lived on, what color you were (the Navy was the first branch of the U.S. military to integrate in 1948), or how popular you were. What mattered was how well you performed your job. If you took care of your business as you should, everything else would usually fall into place. I was the same person I'd always been, standing around with my hands in my pockets, but it was a different worldview, a different approach, a different philosophy.

Of course, I didn't know all of this when my contingent of recruits left Jackson for boot camp in San Diego. All I knew was that it was my first time on an airplane and, since I had made the highest score on the ASVAB, the Receiving Station authorities, the recruiters, had put me in charge. Not only did I have to keep up with everyone on the trip to California, but I had a big bag full of all their paperwork to carry.

When we were mustered into a recruit company, the drill instructor picked me as his Recruit Chief Petty Officer, (RCPO), the man in charge. I didn't realize that it was just a setup, but after a few days of my regime he made a big scene and publicly fired me - replacing me with a huge, hulking, intimidating fellow from Vinita, Oklahoma, the guy he had wanted all along. I was demoted to the job of Company Mailman but, in the cloistered world of boot camp where mail is probably the most important thing, the guy who controls it controls morale, so I ended up with a kind of "soft" power that was much less stressful. I was once on a ship where the Old Man got the not so bright idea of withholding mail call for a few days because of

what he called "operational tempo." He changed his mind quick when he realized that he almost had a mutiny on his hands.

The new RCPO, meanwhile, who had been a plumber's assistant back in Oklahoma and who had enlisted to be a Damage Controlman (a Navy plumber also responsible for keeping the ship from sinking), turned out to have a "time" problem and was unable to get us to meals or class on time. He was a great guy, but he never got in a hurry. Exasperated, the drill instructor made me the plumber's "eminence grise," responsible for keeping him on schedule. Many years later, when the Navy sent me to the University of Oklahoma, Norman, for a graduate degree in clinical psychology, I looked him up. Civilian life had been good to him: he had his own business, a nice family, and was living the dream. I was still wandering the earth.

When I graduated bootcamp, I won the academic award for the highest test average in my training cycle, and I did very well in my follow-on electronics school. When I got to my first ship, however, I realized that it wasn't me doing great things, but that it was how the system was set up. If you did what you were supposed to do – showed up, paid attention, asked questions, and did your best, it was hard not to be successful. The Navy in the late 1950s was a very positive world. Every time you turned around, someone was bragging on you. "Hornsby, your shoes are really shined today (which made you spit shine them even harder for tomorrow's inspection), or "I noticed that you came on the midwatch thirty minutes early"(which made you show up 45 minutes early the next time); or "I notice you always volunteer for working parties" (My hand would go up). I knew I was being conned, in a sense, but I couldn't help it. Finally, somebody was paying attention to me and bragging on me for my work.

If you've ever visited in the home of a military retiree, there's a good chance you saw their "Me Wall," their collection of medals, awards, plaques, certificates, and other memorabilia that they collected over their careers. I don't have one, as such, in my current home, having chosen to build myself a library instead, but I have

dozens of similar items tucked away all over my house. They were important to me then, but I guess they are only fire hazards now. Let me give some examples, however, from an "Around the World" cruise I took in 1972, a small snapshot of my collection. I was a chaplain by then, assigned to Destroyer Squadron Twenty (DESRON 20) out of Newport, Rhode Island, and we got underway on 14 June and returned on 19 December. We had six ships in the squadron: Dewey (DLG-14), Davis (DD-937), William R. Rush (DD-714), Charles H. Roan (DD-853), Joseph Hewes (DE-1078), and Warrington (DD-843). but we only took the Dewey, the Warrington, the Joseph Hewes, and the Davis with us. I think the other two ships went on a regular six-month Mediterranean cruise. As the squadron chaplain, I was based on the Dewey, the flag ship, but I moved from ship to ship routinely, as some said, "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." As such, I was responsible for the spiritual lives of around 1200 men of various, little, or no faiths. I liked to think of it as a moveable congregation, a floating parish.

About a week after we got underway, while onboard the Warrington, I received my certificate designating me as a member of the "Order of the Locks" for having successful transited the Panama Canal. Since I had already been in the Navy twelve years, it was about my fourth time, but the first certificate I'd received recognizing me as one of the few "pearl hunters, pirates, melon gazers, tropical bushwhackers, grave looters, pacific sun-risers and other preying Creatures of the Way" who had accomplished such a feat.

On the 25th of June, now onboard the Davis, "Home of Champions," as the Executive Officer of that ship liked to boast, everyone was welcomed into the "Domain of the Golden Dragon" for having passed over the International Dateline. My certificate notifies "all sea serpents, crabs, mutineers, pirates of the yellow seas, and other derelicts of far eastern seas" that, since your "Renowned vessel has crossed the 180th meridian at latitude 20.30.N, you have been found worthy and duly initiated into the silent occult mysteries of the Far East."

It wasn't until we were on the way home, on November 25, that we received the certificate everyone was looking for, or dreading, depending on your situation. This was, of course, for "crossing the Equator," where the slimy pollywogs became initiated into bold shellbacks. This "ceremony" needs some explanation. Supposedly dating back to the Vikings, by the time I was initiated in the early 1960s, it had turned into something to be endured – an often violent hazing, involving being beaten with rubber hoses, crawling around the ship on your hands and knees, eating garbage, kissing the belly of the royal baby (the fattest guy on the ship), and other distasteful acts. I've been across on cruise ships where you just put on your bathing suit and the crew wets you down with a fire hose, and I understand that in today's "woke" Navy, it is about the same, and you can decide whether to participate. But, back in the day, they would come and get you if you tried to hide.

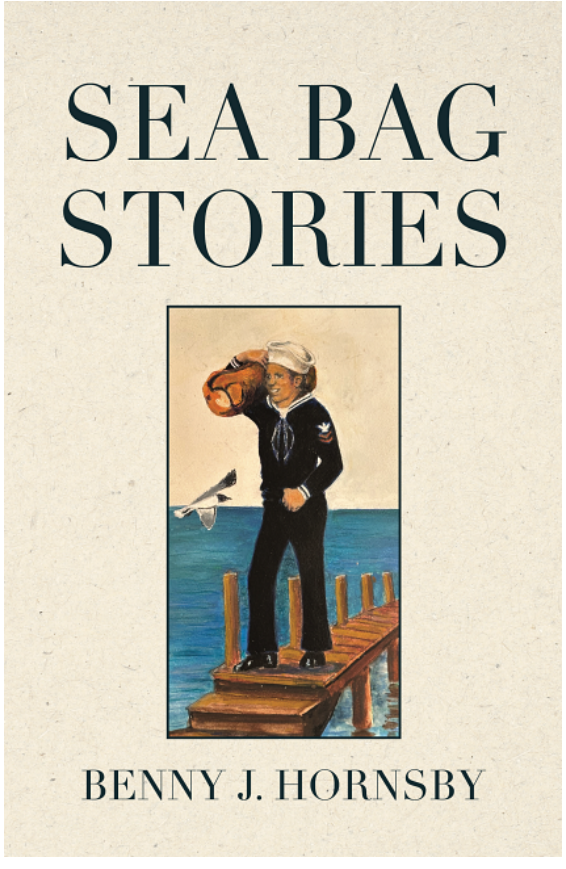
I was riding the Joseph Hewes then, and since I had long been a shellback, and knew what to expect, I asked the captain, who was a pollywog, if I could organize and oversee the evolution. He agreed, and I made sure that it was traditional, exhausting, and very nasty, but that no one got hurt. We started saving garbage when we outchopped (left) the war zone. It filled up two rubber life rafts that the pollywogs had to crawl through. Some did get sick before the day was over, but no blood was shed.

According to my "Around the World" certificate, which was issued by the Dewey on the 17th of December, we had port calls in Rodman, Canal Zone; Pearl Harbor, Guam, Okinawa, Subic Bay, Republic of the Philippines; Bahrain, Mombasa, Kenya; Recife, Brazil; Hong Kong, Singapore, Sasebo, Japan; Danang, South Vietnam; and Trinidad. While in Vietnamese waters, the Warrington managed to run into one of our own floating sea mines and had to be dry-docked in Subic, and the Davis was the only ship during the war that was attacked by North Vietnamese MIG jet fighter airplanes. Somehow, I managed to be onboard both ships for their exciting events. I didn't have a battle station, so I hid under the wardroom table

during the airplane attack. I was in my place because the table functions as the operating table in medical emergencies, and that's where the chaplain should be. It still sounds funny.

I may be wrong, but I don't think sailors in today's Navy get to see as many foreign ports as we did in the old days. We have so few ships and so many bases to cover all over the world that the adage certainly rings true today: "sailors belong on ships, and ships belong at sea." For example, Since the Kitty Hawk (CV-63) was decommissioned in 2009, we are down to only eleven aircraft carriers, all nuclear-powered, and their crews are lucky to get ashore five or six times in a seven-month deployment.

Over the years, I heard some of my shipmates say that they disliked the military life and were getting out of the Navy because they felt like they had lost their individuality, that they were only a number, a cog in an endless wheel going nowhere. They couldn't wait to get out and "do their own thing." A few times, I had the opportunity to visit with some of these individuals after their discharge, usually visiting one of my ships on a port visit, and, almost to a man, they told me that, based on their subsequent experiences in the "real" world, they would rejoin the Navy in a heartbeat, even at a lower rank, if given the opportunity. Their reasons always ran along the same line: "The Navy treated me fair, and I had the opportunity to better myself." Later this summer, I'm the keynote speaker for what will probably the last ship's company reunion of the first ship I was assigned to – a cruiser in the Mediterranean. If I hear it once, I bet I will hear it a dozen times: "I wish I had stayed in the Navy for a career. It made me a man and was the highlight of my life. I was 'somebody.'"



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