2016

ATLANTIS SHORT STORY CONTEST

WINNING STORY

Velvet Balls

By Jack Ratliff

Word Count: 2.490. Creative Non-Fiction.

Velvet Balls

In 1957 I was a brand new Navy ensign in flight training in Pensacola. I had finished a couple of months in the program when the Navy decided one day that its fliers had to sign on for an extra year of service or leave the program. I opted to go to the fleet and managed to get myself assigned to the *Samuel N. Moore*, a destroyer. My old friend and college roommate, Benjamin "Ben" West, was aboard the *Moore*.

A destroyer is among the smallest warships in the Navy. The "tin can" Navy was not exactly cushy duty and few officers preferred it, so it was easy to get the assignment. Destroyers were famous for their rough-cut and sometimes-scruffy salt-water sailors. They had a fierce outsider's pride in bobbing around on those tiny vessels and they felt superior to the country club denizens of the carrier and cruiser Navy.

After a stutter step journey by military air transport, with a delay in San Francisco for a series of inoculations, I joined the ship in Yokosuka, Japan. I became acquainted with the other officers in the wardroom and was introduced to the Captain and the Executive Officer.

The captain is, of course, in overall command of the ship. The Executive Officer "the Exec" on a ship is the second in command. Any officer in charge of a Naval ship is called the captain, regardless of rank. Our "captain" had the Navy rank of Commander. The person with the actual rank of captain in our little world was called the "Commodore." He was in command of a four-destroyer flotilla that included the *Moore* and he made his home on the Maddux, a sister ship.

On board ship the Exec is the Captain's enforcer, the taskmaster who whips the officers into line, something like the overseer on a slave plantation, though that comparison is going a bit too far. The Exec plays the hardass so the Captain can remain apart from controversy, the benevolent leader. At least that's the theory.

Our Exec was Manfred "Simp" Simpson, a reservist. After I had been on board for awhile, I was told that he had come back onto active duty after he went broke in the insurance business in Little Rock. He didn't so much seek out the Navy as he retreated into it. At least, that was the story. He was big, vain, fussy, bullying, sarcastic, and not very bright. He frowned a lot. He carried himself with his chin trust forward as if he were always looking for a fight. When he was under stress, which seemed to be most of the time, he would run his hand back and forth repeatedly over his graying crew cut.

One thing you had to say for him, though, he was always fastidious in his person, all spit and polish. Even on long stretches across the Pacific he managed to turn up in clean and crisp khakis every day, long after the rest of us had given in to the soggy damp look that comes with extended sea duty. As the ship had no laundry, his constant spiffiness was a mystery to us.

Simpson manifested that irritating combination of bullying and bellowing, which was oddly combined with his obvious need to make the officers like and respect him. Of course, he had no idea of how to do either. He was a poor seaman and a capricious superior. The Captain, a career man named Donnelly, was also capable of tantrums but, because he knew ships and, for the most part, knew his business, we gave him a grudging respect that we did not give to Mr. Simpson. But the captain was paranoid. He lived in fear that he would somehow fall short

in the eyes of his superiors. That combination--the Exec's ineptitude and the captain's obsession with his image—came very near to causing a tragedy on the *Moore*. And it probably would have had it not been for my friend, Ben West.

Maybe because of his military shortcomings, Simpson was quick to carp about small details, especially where cleanliness was concerned. Cleanliness was the one thing he understood. His favorite word was "titivate". "We're going to titivate the wardroom passageways today in case the Commodore visits while we're in port." The word always sounded a little lascivious to me, like something you might do in foreplay.

Simpson' stateroom was a tiny cubicle just a few feet off the wardroom, and he kept it meticulously clean and tidy. While we were docked in Long Beach, preparing for another Far East tour, Mrs. Simpson—I think her name was Agnes—came aboard and decorated the Simpson stateroom, adding fringed red velvet curtains at the single porthole and a tailored red velvet coverlet for the top of her husband's Navy issue metal chair. The coverlet had little velvet balls that hung down in a fringe along the back, giving his otherwise stark stateroom the feel of a seagoing bordello. Simpson beamed with pride when he showed the junior officers his new décor.

Lieutenant Junior Grade Dick Marcus was the communications officer. Dick was a quiet, retiring guy, who later became a college professor. But he had somehow triggered Simpson's malevolent side and he had become a particular target of his petty bullying. It did not subside as we made our way toward Japan.

“Mr. Marcus, I notice that the signal flag locker was not in the proper order again today. Untidy. It has not been titivated as I instructed. Please see to it, Mr. Marcus.”

Of course, given the way the military works, Dick had no choice but to say “Yes sir, I’ll see to it.”

After a week or so at sea, as we were en route to Yokosuka, Japan, Dick Marcus finally had enough. He resorted to passive-aggressive behavior. Maybe not so passive, come to think of it.

Dick got himself a small fingernail clipper and carried it in his pocket. In the evenings after the officers’ dinner, Simpson had to go up to the bridge to check the night cruising orders, leaving his stateroom unguarded. Dick would slip from the wardroom into the Simpson cabin a few feet away and snip off one of the little velvet balls hanging from the back of the chair. After a few of the balls disappeared Simpson noticed and began to suspect foul play. He interrogated the junior officers in the wardroom about who or what was serially amputating his décor. Nobody knew anything. The officers were the prime suspects because no sailors were allowed in the wardroom area except for the Filipino mess stewards, and they wouldn’t have dared do such a thing. That area was designated “officers’ country,” an area off limits to enlisted unless they had particular business there. But Simpson continued to fume and bellow and give us all the fisheye while, day after day, the little balls continued to disappear. Soon his chair back was completely emasculated. We all enjoyed this pathetic rebellion against authority.

There were a lot of other difficulties with the Exec but I tell this story to illustrate the contempt in which the junior officers held him. We were in the Navy, nevertheless. Our opinion of him didn't matter. He was in charge, the face of authority, and he outranked everyone but the Captain. We had no choice but to put up with his tantrums and follow his orders.

I had been on board for several months when the *Moore* was scheduled to take part in a refueling drill alongside a tanker. We were in a large detachment that included an aircraft carrier, the admiral's flagship, somewhere over the horizon.

We started refueling in the afternoon and before we could finish it began to get dark and a big storm blew in. It was bad.

Refueling at sea is dangerous under the best conditions. Two ships steam along side by side. Great care must be taken, especially in heavy seas, to be sure they don't crash into each other. Using davits and cables the tanker ship sends over to the destroyer two high-pressure hoses about a foot in diameter, one forward and one aft. After a lot of pulling and swearing the receiving crew clamps the hoses onto a pipe in the deck and the tanker shoots a high-pressure blast of diesel oil through the hoses into the destroyer's fuel tanks. It's like a giant fire hose squirting oil. It is dangerous because, at the end of each hose is a heavy brass collar, used to screw the hose onto the receiving pipe. If a hose comes loose the high pressure will cause it to flop around like an angry snake. It can smash into people with deadly force. The *Moore's* side rails—really just thin cables—were taken down during refueling so that the hoses could come

across. So that, if the ship lurches, there is no barrier to stop anyone from falling overboard. And the ship can't slow or turn because it is hitched to the tanker.

On this kind of a night, if you go overboard you are a dead man. The ship cannot disengage from the tanker and then turn fast enough to have any chance of finding you in the storm. We had no access to any kind of rescue helicopter.

So, on the day of refueling, the weather was very rough. My crew had finished their fueling operations on the after deck but my friend West's people were still on the open deck forward, still fighting the hoses and the storm.

It is important to know at this point that we didn't really need to refuel. We had plenty of fuel oil. But our paranoid captain wanted to look good for the admiral.

About this time, big killer waves started coming over the bow of the Moore. They would knock the sailors off their feet and make them skitter around the deck. Then a big wave smacked the ship so hard that the high-pressure hose popped loose and started banging around and spraying diesel oil everywhere. The sailors on the foredeck were sliding around like greased pigs. It was just a matter of time until somebody went overboard.

The tanker crew saw the situation and quickly shut off the oil. West's crew then reattached the hose, but everything forward was covered with diesel slime and the ship was still pitching and rolling.

I was with West on the quarterdeck, a sheltered area back from the ship's foredeck. He was on the headphones to the bridge, talking to Mr. Simpson. West told him that it was getting too dangerous to leave his men out on deck. No response.

It was then that West had his men join him in the shelter of the quarterdeck amidships. We were all just waiting for the word to come down to shut down the fueling. But then the command came over the squawk box: “First division resume your stations and continue fueling.” We couldn't believe our ears.

West called the bridge from his post on the quarterdeck and told the Exec that it was too dangerous. Simpson, obviously relaying the command of the Captain, told him to get his men back on deck. West tried to give our errant leaders a way to save face. Telling his men to stay put, he just kept repeating on the phones that it was too dangerous on deck. Of course, his crew, standing on the quarterdeck nearby, heard West’s end of the conversation. In less than a minute the Executive Officer, whom I have already identified as a nautically impaired, appeared on the quarterdeck. He was livid.

"Mr. West, why aren't those men on deck at their stations?"

"It's too dangerous out there, Sir."

"I order you to get those men back on deck. That's a direct order."

In the military when a superior tells you something is a direct order it is not only an order, it is a warning. It is serious business. You just do not refuse to carry out a direct order. The consequences can be dire, indeed. It is something hard to explain to someone who has not served in the military.

So now Lieutenant West had a dilemma.

He could follow orders and send his men back out and hope for the best. If things went bad he could always say he was just following orders. But if he did that there was a good chance somebody would go overboard. And, as I say, that meant almost certain death.

Or he could refuse and, in all likelihood, be court-martialed and perhaps dishonorably discharged. He might even have done some time in the brig.

By this time there was a big crowd on the quarterdeck. The Exec was right in West's face.

West said to him, "I won't give that order, Sir. If those men go back somebody is going to get hurt or killed. If you want them back up there you'll have to give the order yourself."

The quarterdeck turned deadly quiet. The sailors looked anxiously at the Exec.

What West had done was unthinkable. It was also calculated. At considerable risk to himself, he had prevented *anybody* from giving the order. The Exec couldn't give it because he had been warned in front of a bunch of witnesses. If anyone got hurt *he* would be responsible and *he* would be the one to get court-martialed. But, even if the Exec *had* given the order, after what West had said, I expect the sailors would have rebelled. By this time there was mutiny in

the air. West had confirmed what the sailors already knew—that they were being told to risk their lives for no good reason.

The Exec said nothing more, but glared red-faced for a moment, and then whirled around and went back up to the bridge. In a few minutes we heard over the squawk box: "Secure from refueling. Return to quarters." There was cheering all around. There would have been high fives but high fives hadn't been invented yet. Lieutenant West was the hero of the day.

Now I don't mean to equate this situation with combat. Combat heroes deserve the highest praise we can give them. This was a peacetime event, but it was nevertheless a very dangerous situation for the sailors involved.

Combat decorations are usually given for what is called courage in the face of the enemy. I think there ought to be another decoration for courage in the face of official stupidity.

After the Great Hose Incident we waited around for the next week or two as we steamed along, expecting at any time to see a carrier chopper bringing over West's court martial papers. But it never came. Neither the Captain nor the Exec ever mentioned the incident again.

So that's my sea story. It's one of the reasons my youngest son is named Benjamin.
