

Once upon a time in New London

Does everyone know the difference between a sea story and a fairy tale? Well sadly in this polite company I won't be able to tell you – but any of our Coast Guard friends who are here with us today can tell you later. But in part a fairy tale begins with the words “Once upon a time” and a sea story begins with something else. (Larned note: A sea story begins with “This is no shit!”)

So my story today begins with Once upon a time-

There was a group of young men with stout hearts and alert minds.

They would ultimately develop a liking for the sea and its lore but that would come with time- in between we had some learning to do and some experiences to share. It would be 4 long but powerful years.

My story is about the eternal battle between good and evil, the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors. My perspective is from that of the under dogs – the good guys so to speak – and of course if you have good guys you must also have the bad guys.

As you all know by now at the Coast Guard Academy you start off as the lowest of the low, a swab and in the beginning the bad guys are the upper class. The full treatment takes place over the course of the first year but to some extent you are never out from under the thumb of the upper class until your own second class or junior year when lo and behold a transformation takes place.

You suddenly become the upper class – then a funny thing also happens. Yes, you now have great power over the new swabs – but very quickly the old bad guys are replaced by new bad guys- that is; the academy administration- and here is where my story really begins.

There is a long tradition of tales of old like Robin Hood, Stalag 17, Cool Hand Luke and King Rat with the theme of the noble underdog holding his own against the entrenched establishment. Later we had TV shows like McHale's Navy and Hogan's Heroes. And just like McHale had Captain Binghamton, (Cool Hand Luke had the Boss) and Hogan had Colonel Klink, in our time and place we had Commander Danielson sometimes known as Dan often known as the Tuna.

And if you follow where this is going we also had our McHale, our Hogan and our Luke – and this unassuming hero was none other than the guy we celebrate here today our beloved Bobby Vail.

If this were a period piece movie – now would be the time for me to bring in the sound track with a little Motown – maybe the Temps, maybe the 4 Tops. Then we'd follow that with Dion and The Belmonts or Elvis and if we could go back in time these tunes would come from a massive trunk filled with musical treasures. If it was Craig Lacey's music it would have been the Beatles' Rubber Soul album – the only record he owned.

And now our story can begin-

We spent hours and days hanging out together commiserating on how we could put something over on the powers that be.

A typical meeting in the Mole's Hole would go something like this:

I might say –“Can you believe this stuff? They’ve cancelled Wednesday afternoon Libbo for 1st class because too many guys bagged the football game last week!”

Mole would take a long drag on a Marlborough and say: “Yeah this is really starting to piss me off – There’s no question that this is a Danielson trick. That miserable so and so...”

Someone else might chip in: “But hey, we can’t let that stop us – they’re going to have highlights of the Mohamed Ali fight on Thursday – let’s take that in at Huey’s.” (which was a local bar and grill kind of hang out)

Inevitably someone would say: “But, hey how about the Tuna?”

Then Mole, voice of reason and leadership that he was, would say- “Oh not to worry, Danielson never comes around on Thursdays and besides we’ll have Gary Beck keep a lookout for us and if there’s any trouble he can call us- and we’ll get back in a flash – piece of cake!”

On one such adventure we piled into Mole’s pathetic Orange Kharmen Ghia sports coupe- and merrily off we went to Huey’s – As we always did everyone was having a great time and suddenly word gets out to us we’ve got to get back to the Academy in a hurry. We go to leave and of course the Karman Ghia wouldn’t start.

Quickly we called a cab but we’re getting very nervous. Now one of our crew who should remain nameless in case he’s here today was in a cast and on crutches. ([Lardass note here: we’re talking about Craig Leisy!!](#)) He was kind of a clumsy guy and he was always in a cast or suffering from some kind of physical ailment or another.

When the cab came, we all piled in or at least so we thought – Bobby in a near panic by this time tells the cab driver we're in a hurry – “Can you get us to the back gate of the Coast Guard Academy ASAP”- as the cab pulls away we hear the clatter of someone's crutch falling into the street and the cracking of a plaster cast- then a voice cries out –“ Hey Hold up, stop! Wait! I can't get my foot in the door.” It was our buddy in the cast – not quite ready for take off.

Well I guess we made it back and lived to tell the tale!

If the adventure was a success Mole would chalk up one more notch in his shield.

If the adventure failed as they sometimes did we'd be down in front of Commander Dan the next day- receiving our demerits and tour hours.

I think of those days often and the diverse characters who were part of that experience and I can only smile –wish we could do it again!

And so it was that on the day after we got the word of Bob's passing I made calls to my closest classmates. Somehow the spirit moved me and an inner voice prodded me to call Admiral Danielson – believe it or not!? Now I can just hear the Mole over there in his little ammo box saying – “Oh that Lardass! What a brown noser!” In any event when I passed the word old Admiral Danielson knew immediately who I was talking about. We chatted about old times and his relationship with the class of '72. He too mourns the passing of a worth adversary and wishes us all well!

Yes we had a lot of laughs in those days – hard to believe that 33 years have gone by since then. As tough as it is, I have no doubt that Bobby’s words to us today would be – “Let’s look to the future and not the past.” For me this untimely passing has an important message. I think Bob would say to us. “Treasure your family and friends, make the most of every minute! – this life is precious while you’re here and profit from everything to the max but be ready to let go of it when the time comes because what lies beyond is much more important.”

God bless Bob and Mickey, God bless you all!