

THE SAILOR, THE COWBOY AND THE STUDENT

What do these three contrasting types have in common? In most cases, just about nothing. But since you asked...

Let's start with the sailor, 19 years old, a Soundman Second Class (now they call it Sonar) on a 136-foot World War 2 wooden minesweeper in the Aleutian Islands. That describes me. As for the ship, it was too small for a name, so it just had a number: YMS (for Yard Mine Sweeper) 328. After spending a few years patrolling and sweeping mine fields in the fogbound waters around the Aleutians, my little YMS328 weathered a typhoon in the Gulf of Alaska, a brutal test of her seaworthiness. Carried to the top of 60-foot swells, with both screws out of the water, vibrating as if every nail in the wooden hull would pop, we would then crash down into the trough with ocean water blowing over the flying bridge. We prayed a lot. Survival was to be prayed for anyway. We were en route to Dutch Harbor to be outfitted for the planned invasion of Paramashiru. Other stops on that trip included anchoring off of uninhabited Montague Island, where we and the guys on a companion ship drew lots for a hunting party. We were told there were deer on the island. As it happened, I drew one of the lots. Avid hunters in the crew offered me as much as \$20 for it – real money in 1945 – but I declined. Growing up in the city, I never went hunting, and here was my chance. Well, we got into a dinghy and rowed ashore. We tracked the elusive deer all over the island. The guys from the other ship bagged a couple, and gave us one, but we came back empty. Well, not quite. When we got back on board, our shipmates exclaimed "Boy are we glad to see you!" They told how they watched us with binoculars and saw us beach our boat, and then saw a huge Kodiak bear sniff around our boat, and proceed to track US all over the island. Narrow escape #1. Then we moved on and anchored off another island called Amchitka where we were

scheduled to draw small stores. Around noon some of us were lined up outside a Quonset hut waiting for it to open after lunch so we could draw shoes. Suddenly every bell, every whistle, every Klaxon horn on every ship in the harbor sounded off. Nobody had to tell us why. We grabbed each other and jumped for joy. The war was over! That was August 14th, 1945. According to Navy policy, small minesweepers like ours were the first to go in on an invasion, to prepare the way for the landing craft. Statistics we heard figured the average life of a YMS at 80 mines. After you cut that many, by the law of averages you would probably hit one, and then it was Goodbye Charley. When the atom bomb ended WWII my ship had cut 78 mines. That was narrow escape #2, thanks to a great decision by Harry Truman. Of course, after that, the invasion was cancelled, and we sailed south through the glorious Inside Passage. Along the way we enjoyed what we were missing all those months in the Aleutians – fresh milk and vegetables. Female company too. The standard gag in the Aleutians was “A woman behind every tree.” And of course, no trees. Now there were Indian girls in Juneau, and fishermen’s wives in Petersburg, etc. Plenty of drinks too. But someone had to watch the lines where the ship was tied up at the dock. Those 30-foot tides made it necessary to slack the lines regularly, otherwise you could find your vessel totally out of the water, hanging off the dock. Alaska was still a territory then, and very much a frontier. We sensed the adventure and the easy-going courage of its citizens and we enjoyed our trip back to the states. Arriving in Bremerton, Washington, I got to go home, with 30 days Delayed Orders to report to the Naval Recruiting Office in Cincinnati. That was the last I saw of YMS 328.

Now comes the cowboy. Not just any cowboy, either. The all time champion cowboy hero of the movies. His real name Marion Morrison is long forgotten, because everyone knows him as John Wayne. When I worked in the studios, every stunt man dreamed of

becoming the kind of action star that “Duke” Wayne was, since he too started his film career as a stunt man, and before that a prop man. No, John Wayne never was a sailor. In fact the Naval Academy rejected him in 1925. The closest he came to the armed forces was starring in “Sands of Iwo Jima.” His movie career started when John Ford cast the young prop man in a bit part. Then came those Western classics – from “Stagecoach” to “True Grit” – and the familiar slow monotone expressing firm Americanism: “I won’t ask ‘em to play my favorite song because everyone would have to stand up.” It was 1962 when the super cowboy fulfilled his boyhood love of the sea by buying a yacht from a friend of his, a Seattle lumber tycoon, for \$110,000. It was a converted 1942 Navy minesweeper that had once weathered that Alaskan typhoon – my old ship. Wayne spent a good deal of money refitting it, raising the overheads (ceilings to you landlubbers) to accommodate his 6’4” and adding luxury features like a wood-burning fireplace and a wet bar. His biographer notes that he named his yacht The Wild Goose and sailed her to Europe to make a picture, that he spent as much time on board as he could in his later years, fighting cancer but taking comfort in ocean leisure, and shortly before his death he sold the yacht to a female attorney for \$750,000.

Now for the student. A junior in high school when he enters our story, he is my grandson Jeremy. We live some 3000 miles apart, but we keep in touch. One day his mother was in our house on a visit and asked me for some help with a school assignment Jeremy had: interviewing a World War II veteran. I gave her a chapter I wrote once about my Navy years, and she took it home with her. Jeremy completed his assignment, and I thought no more about it until I got a phone call from him. “Zaide,” he said, “do you know what happened to your ship after the war?” I had to admit that I never tried to find out. Then he told me about the Wild Goose. He discovered that the old minesweeper-turned-yacht now functions as

an excursion boat, taking corporate groups and private parties on short cruises out of Newport Beach. I called the cruise operator and inquired about chartering one of those trips. What a neat idea, I thought. We could have a family reunion on my old ship! The operator I spoke to said that the Wild Goose doesn't go out all the time but she could offer me a different ship. I said no, I was only interested in the Wild Goose. Why? I told her. She got excited, and took my phone number. "I'm going to tell the sales department about this. Maybe they'd like to host you." Well, they were not remotely interested in hosting us. They get upwards of \$20,000 for a charter trip on the Wild Goose. "Thanks for trying," I said. "When I sailed on her I doubt if the whole ship was worth \$20,000." Never mind how much John Wayne got for her.

So, courtesy of the student's research and the cowboy's investment, this old sailor now has two pictures on the wall: one of the YMS 328 circa 1943, and next to it the Wild Goose as she looks now. A truly interesting contrast.