



The Seabag

There was a time when everything you owned had to fit in your sea bag. Remember those nasty rascals? Fully packed, one of the suckers weighed more than the poor devil hauling it. The damn things weighed a ton and some idiot with an off-center sense of humor sewed a carry handle on it to help you haul it. Hell, you could bolt a handle on a Greyhound bus but it wouldn't make the damn thing portable.

The Army, Marines and Air Force got footlockers and we got a big ole' canvas bag. After you warped your spine jackassing the goofy thing through a bus or train station, sat on it waiting for connecting transportation and made folks mad because it was too damn big to fit in any overhead rack on any bus, train and airplane ever made, the contents looked like hell. All your gear appeared to have come from bums who slept on park benches.

Traveling with a seabag was something left over from the "Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum" sailing ship days. Sailors used to sleep in hammocks. So you stowed your issue in a big canvas bag and lashed your hammock to it, hoisted it on your shoulder and in effect moved your entire home and complete inventory of earthly possessions from ship to ship. I wouldn't say you traveled light because with one strap it was a one-shoulder load that could torque your skeletal frame and bust your ankles. It was like hauling a dead linebacker.



They wasted a lot of time in boot camp telling you how to pack one of the suckers. There was an officially sanctioned method of organization that you forgot after ten minutes on the other side of the gate at Great Lakes or San Diego. You got rid of a lot of issue gear when you went to the SHIP. Did you ever know a tin-can sailor who had a raincoat? A flat hat? One of those nut hugger knit swimsuits?

How bout those roll your own neckerchiefs? The ones the girls in a good Naval tailor shop would cut down and sew into a 'greasy snake' for two bucks? Within six months, every fleet sailor was down to one set of dress blues, port and starboard undress blues and whites, a couple of whitehats, boots, shoes, assorted skivvies a peacoat and three sets of bleached out dungarees.

The rest of your original issue was either in the pea coat locker, lucky bag or had been reduced to wipe down rags in the engine room. Underway ships were not ships that allowed vast accumulation of private gear. Hobos who lived in discarded refrigerator crates could amass greater loads of pack rat crap than fleet sailors. The confines of a canvas back rack, side locker and a couple of bunk bags did not allow one to live a Donald Trump existence. Space and the going pay scale combined to make us envy the lifestyle of a mud hut Ethiopian.

We were the global equivalents of nomadic Mongols without ponies to haul our stuff. And after the rigid routine of boot camp we learned the skill of random compression packing, known by mother's World-Wide as 'cramming.' It is amazing what you can jam into a space no bigger than a breadbox if you pull a watch cap over a boot and push it in with your foot. Of course it looks kinda weird when you pull it out but they never hold fashion shows at sea and wrinkles added character to a salty appearance. There was a four-hundred mile gap between the images on recruiting posters and the actual appearance of sailors at sea. It was not without justifiable reason that we were called the tin-can Navy.

We operated on the premise that if 'Cleanliness was next to Godliness', we must be next to the other end of that spectrum. We looked like our clothing had been pressed with a waffle iron and packed by a bulldozer. But what in the hell did they expect from a bunch of jerks that lived in the crews hole of a 2250 Sumner Class can. After a while you got used to it. You got used to everything you owned picking up and retraining that instinctive aroma. You got used to old ladies on busses taking a couple of wrinkled nose sniffs of your peacoat then getting up and finding another seat.



Do they still issue seabags? Can you still make five bucks sitting up half the night drawing a ships picture on the side of one of the damn things with black and white marking pens that drive old master-at-arms into a 'rig for heart attack' frenzy? Make their faces red. The veins on their neck bulge out. And yell, "Jeezus H. Christ! What in god's name is that all over your seabag?"

"Artwork, Chief. It's like the work of Michelangelo. My ship. Great huh?"

"Looks like some goldamn comic book..."

Here was a man with cobras tattooed on his arms... A skull with a dagger through one eye and a ribbon reading 'DEATH BEFORE SHORE DUTY' on his shoulder. Crossed anchors with 'Subic Bay 1945' on the other shoulder. An eagle on his chest and a full blown Chinese dragon peeking out between the cheeks of his butt. If anyone was an authority on stuff that looked like a comic book, it had to be this E-8 sucker.

Sometimes I look at all the crap stacked in my garage, close my eyes and smile, remembering a time when everything I owned could be crammed into a canvas bag.

Maturity is hell.