

The Mail Buoy

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Practical Jokes at Sea



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During my many years aboard ship in the US Navy, boredom often inspired sailors to pull pranks on newly arrived crewmembers for the sake of amusement. There was a fairly standard list of gags which never seemed to get old; like sending the new arrivals to find assorted imaginary items, such as a bucket of steam or a left handed monkey wrench.

Another standing joke involved sending a sailor down to the boiler room to retrieve a fictitious tool called the "BT punch". As BT was the abbreviation for Boiler Technician; going to the boiler room and asking for a BT punch usually ended up with the requestor getting a punch in the arm. Usually the more people who were in on these jokes, the funnier they seemed.

One day my supervisor (Allen) decided to send the newest member of our group (Scott) down for a punch, and began by pretending he was having a problem with his desk drawer. He eventually said "You know what I need to fix this....a BT punch. We all immediately knew what he was up to and had a real hard time trying not to laugh. Another one of the "old timers" jumped right in and took a look at the imaginary problem, and concurred that a BT punch would certainly do the trick. Someone else chimed in saying "I think the guys down in the boiler room have one". Somehow, managing to keep a straight face; Allen turned to the Scott and asked him to go down to the boiler room and get him the punch. It got even funnier when Scott began to inquire what the tool looked like, and Allen began to describe it in detail. "Well, it kind of has a shaft that slides inside a barrel, and there are two metal rings at the end."

By this point, I was pretending to check the maintenance schedule on the wall of my shop to hide my face; I was holding my breath to keep from laughing, and tears were beginning to leak from my eyes. I had all I could do to contain myself until Scott departed on his superfluous mission. As soon as it was assumed he was far enough off we all burst out laughing. Allen called down to the boiler room to let them know he was on his way, and they replied that they would take care of him.

The timing for this joke had been ironically perfect. The Engineers (BTs) were holding a group meeting in the boiler room when Scott arrived. As they all turned their attention to him, he naively shouted his request over the thrum of the boilers; "My boss sent me down here to get a BT punch". The crowd of larger and burlier than normal sailors broke into knowing smiles, as the smallest member of the group stepped forward and lightly tapped Scott in the arm with his fist. The BTs all had a good laugh before sending Scott on his way.

When Scott returned to the shop, he burst through the door looking like he had run half the length of the ship and up the four flights of stairs to get there. He was laughing as he jumped into the room shouting "You guys are assholes", we all laughed in return, and laughed even more as Scott recounted his embarrassing moment below. It was hard not to fall for tricks when you were new on board, and several "more knowing" individuals conspired against you. But as funny as the BT punch gag was, nothing compare to the mail buoy watch. It was just as good; if not better; than any episode of MTV's "Punked"

The mail buoy was an imaginary buoy, from which the mail would be plucked as the ship sailed by it; similar to the way mail was snatched from posts by passing steam trains in the past. This was funny right from the start, because we were on a helicopter carrier; and anyone who had been aboard for any length of time, knew our mail arrived by air.

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What really made the mail buoy gag the ultimate prank, was that the whole ship was in on it. The prank even began with an official announcement from the ship's PA system. "Now hear this! Now hear this! Set the mail buoy watch! All department representatives report to the mail buoy petty officer on the bridge." This was one of only two practical jokes that accorded such honor. The other was the announcement of the hours of the bowling alley and pool hall, occasionally delivered when we took on a fresh compliment of Marines. Obviously you can't bowl or play pool on a rocking ship.

All about the ship, similar verbal exchanges took place in various departments; "I had the mail buoy watch last time", "I had it the time before that", and then; as if a light bulb illuminated over the next person who spoke; "Get the new guy to do it". To which everyone instantly agreed, "Yes, let the new guy do it". This came as no surprise to the newer sailors, as it was common for them to receive the "shit" jobs.

Eventually, a small group would begin to assemble at the bridge, and the Mail Buoy Petty Officer would corral them together near enough to hear the Executive Officer's instructions. The Petty Officer would then report to the XO and inform him the group was ready. The XO then informed the Petty Officer that this was an especially important mail pick-up, because he was expecting some critical documents he needed to sign for a house closing or something of similar importance. The Petty Officer would promise the XO that his crew would not let him down.

After the bogus speech on the bridge, the Mail Buoy Petty Officer would then take the men assigned to him back down to the hangar deck to "suit up". Down on the hangar deck the new sailors; filled with the urgency of the task at hand; were outfitted with every manner of accessory available. They were given helmets, gas masks, life jackets, 20 ft long poles, 200 feet of rope, and anything else that could be heaped on them. Once fully outfitted, they would climb back up six flights of stairs to the signal bridge; where they would stand in look-out for the approaching buoy.

When a reasonable amount of time passed, an announcement was made that the buoy was coming up along the starboard side of the ship, and that the mail buoy detail needed to stand by to retrieve the mail. Covered in "mail retrieval gear"; the mail buoy watches ran down the four flights of stairs from the signal bridge to the flight deck, and then to the starboard side. While looking futilely off the side of the 40 foot high ship with their 20 foot poles, another announcement was made that the buoy had gone down the port side of the ship. The detail was then quickly hurried across the flight deck to the port side, only to hear another stern announcement that the mail buoy had been missed, and that the mail buoy petty officer should report to the bridge.

Hauling the crew back upstairs; and again positioning them within earshot, the mail buoy petty officer stepped back onto the bridge to receive a royal lambasting from the Executive Officer. After taking the brunt of the XO's verbal abuse, the petty officer returned to the detail looking somewhat forlorn. With slumped shoulders and his head down; in a subdued voice; he informed the team that they had done their best, and that the ship would pass another buoy in a day or two, and not to worry about it.

On one occasion, the poor guy in our department returned to our berthing area, and sat somewhat dejectedly after having just disappointed the ship's second in command; on what was probably his second or third day on the ship. Adding insult to injury; several crew members walked past the prank's victim; acting as if they had no idea they knew what he had just been through; and shouted their displeasure with the fact that they wouldn't be getting any mail. They shouted things like "Oh, I can't believe some jerk missed the mail buoy, I was expecting a letter from my girlfriend", or "I was waiting for a check".

As the poor prank victim reached the point of tears, a compassionate sailor approached him and placed his hand on his shoulder, and said "It's ok, it's just a joke, there's no mail buoy". The young

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sailor was not at all happy to find out he had been tricked, and he got angry for a short time, but eventually like every victim of the mail buoy prank, he came to appreciate the great amount of teamwork required to pull off such a stunt. He also received a round of conciliatory handshakes and pats on the back for being a good sport. Though the mail buoy prank might be viewed by gentler folk as being a bit cruel, that was never its intention. It was simply a way to pass some time, have some fun, and say âWelcome Aboardâ .

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