

Hanging with James

It was midsummer in 1976 and I was miserable. The Coast Guard Academy class of 1980 (my class and incidentally the first class with women) was halfway through swab summer, the Academy's version of boot camp. It was dawning on me that I was not a natural fit for a military routine and especially not for 5:30 am reveille, early morning calisthenics, and running in the Connecticut dawn. Our class was divided into 12 platoons of about 30 cadets each. Cadets were assigned to platoons in the order of arrival on campus. I was among the last to show up in New London and consequently assigned to Zulu-2, the last platoon formed. Zulu-3 was reserved for cadets that failed an English writing test and over the next two days its ranks were filled by transfers from Whiskey-1 through Zulu-2.

The summer involved a lot of mindless activities designed to develop discipline; shining shoes to a mirror finish, making the rack or bed so tightly that quarters would bounce (this isn't your mother's house, Mr. Brown), stripping and reassembling rifles (too slow, Mr. Brown), marching in ranks (get in step, Mr. Brown), wearing uniforms correctly (tighten that reef, Mr. Brown), keeping rooms neat and tidy (is that dust? Mr. Brown), and memorizing facts about the Coast Guard history and traditions (you're not in kindergarten, Mr. Brown). We had to be prepared for an upperclassman asking for the day's lunch menu or something arcane like, "How's the cow" to which there was one acceptable answer:

"Sir, she walks, she talks, she's full of chalk. The lacteal fluid extracted from the female of the bovine species is highly prolific to the nth degree!"

Or perhaps I might be asked "Mr. Brown, how long have you been in the Coast Guard?" to which the mandatory response was:

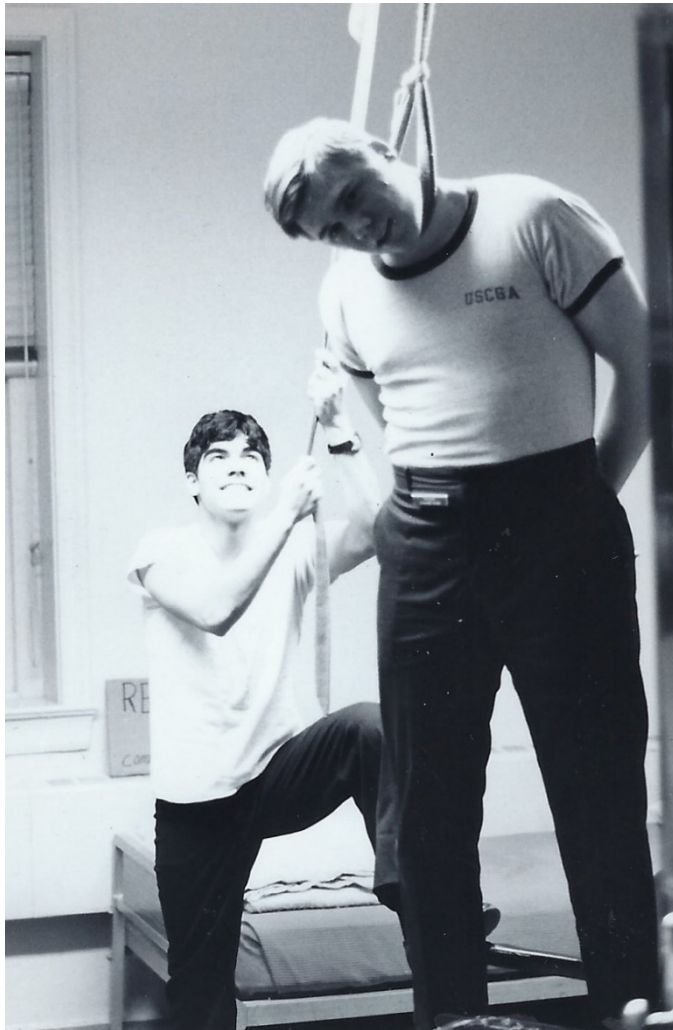
*"All me bloomin' life!
Me father was King Neptune,
me mother was a mermaid,
I was born on the crest of a wave,
and rocked in the cradle of the deep.
Me eyes are stars, me teeth are spars,
Me hair is hemp and seaweed..."*

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*and when I spits, I spits tar,
I's tough I is, I am, I are!"*

Failure to answer correctly meant 25 pushups, not only for me, but for every member of the platoon. I tried like hell, but no matter my efforts, my shirt was never tucked in properly and my shoes were always smudged. I did, and was the cause of, many pushups that summer.

Second class (third year) cadets were in charge of each platoon, ostensibly for development of



James Pays Back Luke, Chase Hall 1976

their own leadership skills. They were known as cadre and seemed to be all-knowing and only capable of communicating by yelling. One day they announced we were having a shoeshine contest against Zulu 3. The cadre was confident; after all poor English skills surely translated to poor polishing skills. But our cadre forgot to consider that Luke Brown was in their charge. At the designated hour, we were marched from our wing in Chase Hall to the Zulu 3 wing. I couldn't see any particular individual as we had to keep our eyes straight ahead of us "in the boat." We were halted and executed a left face so that we were each face-to-face with an individual opponent.

I was opposite James Maes and I didn't let the oddsmakers down as I quickly lost the

shine-off to James. Without having exchanged a word, I made a mental note to remember him for two reasons. One, he projected amusement at the whole shoeshine contest thing and might be a kindred spirit and, second, I was thinking ahead to the dinghy sailing season and the smaller-

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framed James Maes would be perfect crew. The only problem was he did not strike me as the sailor type. I would later learn he hailed from the desert town of Pueblo, Colorado, hardly a boating paradise.

At the end of swab summer, the training platoons were disbanded and we were assigned to academic year companies containing cadets from all four classes. I was assigned to Echo company and found that James Maes, my shoeshine foe, was also assigned to Echo. The fall sailing season started and I recruited the smallest willing cadet I could find, the 155 pound Jack Gunther. The arrangement was not going to work; we were simply too heavy to compete at the highest levels.

I came up with a scheme to get James interested. I waited for a windy day and asked him to take a quick test sail with me. We power-reached back and forth across the Thames River a couple of times, hiking out, planing on the waves, and getting blasted with spray. James loved it. We headed back to the dock after only twenty minutes and before James could get cold. I forgot to tell him that most days were not that thrilling and in fact the life of a dinghy sailor was mostly wet and miserable and often without wind. With that hook set, I had my crew, and it turns out, a friend for life.

Fourth classmen, as freshman cadets were known, were given liberty on Saturdays and Sundays. Saturday liberty hours included off campus privileges until midnight. Liberty was controlled by

the



Coast Guard Academy Campus Map

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honor system augmented by sign-in logs and multiple daily formations at which attendance was taken. On one of our first liberties, James, Mike Aholt, Jay Melott and I went to Conn College, located kitty corner to the Academy, for a keg party. The Cinderella hour approached, and we headed back to our social prison. We were cutting the time close, and I proposed taking the quickest route back to Chase Hall, which meant jumping the North Gate, something strictly forbidden by Academy rules. James, Mike and Jay had not yet developed my knack for disregarding the rules and chose the safe route. They continued walking toward the main gate almost half a mile away. I hopped over the gate and strolled to Chase Hall, where I signed in just before midnight. I looked out the window to check on their progress. I saw them opposite Chase Hall and was surprised to see the three of them preparing to climb over the wrought iron and brick fence. Time had run out and they had decided to follow my lead. Bad move. Unlike the shadowy and remote North Gate, they were bathed by flood lights in plain view of the watch commander at Chase Hall.

I watched in fascination as James went first. Swinging over the fence, he snagged his pants at the crotch and fell, ripping his trousers clear down the inseam stopping abruptly at the cuff, leaving himself hanging upside down by a single leg. James was stuck, no doubt silently cussing out Arnold the Tailor for his professional workmanship, and unable to lever upward to a position in which he could set himself free. Worse yet, he was on the Academy side of the fence and Jay and Mike were on the street side. Fully lit by the spotlights, they tried to free James from that side but could not help him. They scaled the fence and then managed to boost James high enough to free him. It was better entertainment than any Three Stooges show.

Were they busted? Absolutely. Liberty expired while James was hanging upside down. The officer on duty stepped outside to look for stragglers and he couldn't help but see the brightly illuminated trio. James was awarded a Class II offense and probably a few more for being out of uniform. It was enough demerits to see him marching the quadrangle after class for the next couple weeks. In an ironic twist of fate, seven years after graduation James would go back to the Academy as a lieutenant where he was responsible for cadet discipline. No small irony there.

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The following Spring, I was chosen to represent the Academy in a Shields Regatta at the Naval Academy. It was a welcome change from dinghy sailing and an honor to be selected as a lowly freshman. I chose James and two second classmen as my crew. We were given a government car, spending money, and the weekend off (a sailing team perk) to compete. The regatta did not go well. James and the other guys simply lacked experience with spinnakers. Each race we were in first or second place after the first leg and managed to fumble our way to the bottom of the fleet through spinnaker twists, dropped halyards, and lost sheets. I was unable to control my temper and stamped on the floorboards in frustration. My foot went right through it, leaving me with one arm for the tiller, one arm for balance, one leg upon which to stand, and one leg waving in the air with the floorboard stuck at the ankle as I cried for James to “get this goddamn thing off me.”

When the day’s racing thankfully concluded, we sailed back to the dock thoroughly dejected. The Shields were moored stern-to the pier with the bow secured to a piling 45 feet off the pier.



30 Foot Shields One Design

Mooring the 30-foot Shields was not difficult but could be challenging in stronger breezes blowing parallel to the pier, exactly the wind we had that day.

I had Bill Vieth drop the sails on the approach to the wharf since the sails would have remained full once we pivoted into mooring position. I spun the Shields around, taking care to leave room for the long

stern to clear the pier but get close enough for Dan Whiting to step off with the stern line in hand

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to check any excess speed. James was to wait at the bow, grab the piling, and then secure the mooring line to complete the maneuver.

We were looking every bit the expert boat handlers as things were going exactly to plan. Dan was on the pier with the stern line and up forward James grabbed hold of the piling. The boat came to a full stop in perfect position. James then discovered that he forgot the mooring line as the cross wind began to push the boat away from the piling. James was being stretched between the piling and the bow. Moments later his feet lost contact with the boat and he found himself



Luke and James at another Regatta, Fall 1979

alone, arms and legs wrapped around the piling and no deck below him. Less than a minute had passed when James began a slow-motion slide down the slick piling. He fought bravely, slowly conceding to the inevitable result foot by foot, until he was swallowed by the Chesapeake Bay. The audience had grown to 100 people or more and their only help was to cheer as we pulled the

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soaking wet and shivering James from the water. The perfect docking was suddenly a public disaster. Our humiliation was complete.

Years later when James and I were both stationed in Washington, DC, he would serve as my best man. At the traditional toast he recalled an early spring practice on the Thames. We had capsized during a tack. The dinghy was quickly righted, and I was back in position, ready to go, when I noticed that James was not yet back aboard. He was barely hanging on to the transom overcome with hyperthermia. With strength fueled by irritation, I grabbed his life jacket and hoisted him aboard with one arm and dropped him into the bilges. James looked up at me with gratitude for, as he put it, "his new lease on life." He was quickly brought back to reality by my unceremonious response, "Bail, Bitch."