

## The Captain's Driver

By Luke Brown

In the summer of 1978, we sailed the tall ship Eagle under the Golden Gate Bridge past Alcatraz Island and docked at the historic Fisherman's Wharf. It was a beautiful sunny day and other than ferocious tide rips entering San Francisco Bay, the passage was uneventful. There was a big crowd to meet us and for the three or four days we were in port, there were huge crowds and I probably gave well over 2,000 people guided tours of the Eagle. And most memorably, I had two days to explore a city that was new to me. During one of visitor tours, a young college aged girl and her friend came aboard for a tour. They were out hanging in the city, saw the ship, and decided to check it out. We hit it off and made plans to meet later the next day when I was off duty.

In the meantime, a government sedan was loaned to the Eagle, courtesy of the local Coast Guard office, and I volunteered to be the captain's driver. My volunteering was neither an attempt to curry favor nor to be in proximity to the closest thing to God (our captain) that we knew for who needs that kind of pressure, but rather to learn the basic layout of San Francisco before my date the following day. My first call came when the captain had to go over to City Hall to greet local politicians. I went and retrieved the car which had a long bench seat in front and a similar bench seat in back. In order to drive the car, I had to rack the seat fully back and I thought to myself, even better since the Captain was a full six foot three and could certainly use the leg room.

It seems that I failed to understand military protocol once again. As I held the right front door open for the captain, all the while anticipating a pleasant conversation on tall ship sailing or perhaps sorting out our way to City Hall in a strange city, the captain's expression indicated something wrong. Rather than a friendly smile, the Captain barked, "Mr. Brown, the senior officer always, always sits in the right rear." Thinking quickly, I opened the right rear door for the captain and left him to crawl into the car while I raced around to the driver's seat with the intention of getting him to his destination soonest.

Quite innocently, I inadvertently compounded my errors. I hadn't held the door, nor closed it and I also failed to keep the car running thus depriving the captain of the air-conditioned comfort to which he was entitled. I was still crawling into the front seat when the captain discovered he had no legroom. That made him madder yet and he put his massive hands on the seat back and pushed forward with all of his might. I ended up with my knees around my ears and the steering wheel pressed into my belly. There was no way I could put on the blinker, let alone drive safely, but I dared not say a word. By some twist of fate, I managed to get the captain to City Hall without incident although I know not how and didn't take a single breath the entire way.

Thankfully some other cadet was assigned to pick him up several hours later. My one wish was someone had thought to warn me of protocol as I did for the relief driver. The only good result is that I was just smart enough to "get lost" driving back to the ship and familiarized myself with the layout of San Francisco. I met up with my date later the following morning and it was her turn to give me the tour. After all these years, I no longer remember her name nor what college she attended although I do remember it was on the East Coast. I had a grand time, she took me down the Embarcadero, up to the top of Telegraph Hill and winding down Lombard Street, known as the crookedest street in the world. We rode cable cars, watched street shows and then had dinner overlooking the bay with views all the way to Sausalito. While I am hardly conservative, my short hair and choice of college created some innate need in her to expand my horizons. So off we went to Castro Street, hub of gay nightlife of San Francisco. I have to give her credit; it was eye opening for the times and we were soon dancing next to leather clad tops and bare waisted bottoms. She educated me on the gay-to-gay communications of the

time such as earring location and dress. I think she enjoyed shocking me with the overt lifestyles that could only be found in San Francisco at the time.

The evening ended at her place, or rather her parent's place, who were out of town. The living room had spectacular wall-to-wall views of Alcatraz and the Golden Gate such that I could trace out on the window the exact route Eagle took to the dock. As anyone who has been to San Francisco knows, much of the city is built on steep hills and the house was simply amazing, there was no sense of city density since elevations drop so quickly and once inside the house, there was only a sense of openness. To this day, she remains one of kindest and fun people I have ever known, even if for 48 hours only, and I wish we had kept in touch. I suspect, or rather hope, that she might have the same memories of me.

The next afternoon, I was called to the captain's quarters. I feared some new terror. No doubt the captain was as glad to see me answering the call as I was happy to see him. But like true professionals, we put the past behind us and pressed forward. I was directed to pick up an evening gown that his wife had dropped off at the cleaners. I remember feeling so relieved; how could I possibly fuck up a simple errand. I located the dry cleaner, retrieved her dress and laid it out ever so carefully on the back seat and took the direct route back to the ship. Once there, I parked on the shoreward end of the wharf and carried the gown over my shoulder taking great care not wrinkle it. Some 100 yards later, I arrived at the ship's brow and in order to board the ship, transferred the gown from my shoulder to my arms. To my horror, I discovered I had dragged the hem behind me the entire length of the pier and there was an inch-wide streak of dirt upon it.

"Shit, I thought" and silently considered what few options were available to me; I didn't feel up to the walk home from San Francisco nor did suicide seem a viable option. I bravely boarded the ship, headed aft and knocked on the Captain's door. I stood tall and erect, delivered the gown to Mrs. Welling and then did my parade best about face and left with nary a word.

About a year later, Mrs. Welling told me at some Academy function that she noticed the dirt (how could she not) on her dress but chose not to tell her husband. Apparently, she knew the captain's temperament and did not want me to suffer his wrath. Mystery solved as to why I didn't spend the rest of the cruise at the masthead.