

4 Sailors, A Gun, And a Bad Attitude



By Ens. David Smithers,
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“How did I get here?” was the only thought running through my head as I watched my friend stare down the wrong end of a .38-caliber revolver. Not more than three feet in front of him stood an angry, young kid.

Everyone froze. Only the idiot who instigated this mess spoke, “Man, that’s not a real gun,” he said. But, it was very real. Then we all watched in horror as the young kid pulled the trigger, and my friend went down.

Now—14 years later—I try to explain to my blueshirts (sometimes in vain) just how fast things can get out of control when we are on liberty. I preach the buddy system and ORM before every port visit and every holiday. I’m just thankful none of my Sailors have found themselves in my earlier shoes.

I was stationed at NATTC Millington, Tenn., at the time, attending Avionics “A” School. One weekend, a few of us headed to Hot Springs,

Ark., to blow off some steam. We were looking for girls, of course, and, in no time, the four of us were talking to a couple of local beauties in a town restaurant. Because there were four of us and only two of them, we decided to split up. Two friends headed back out on the strip, while Ed and I stayed to chat with these girls.

After supposedly getting one girl’s telephone number (it more likely was the number to a pizza parlor), Ed and I returned to the strip, looking for our friend’s Thunderbird. We were walking along the main drag when an old Ford LTD pulled up to the two of us, and out jumped four guys, who were looking for nothing but a fight. I tried to keep walking, but Ed insisted on provoking them further. When a cop drove by, the punks scurried away in their rusty ol’ “tank.”

We finally met up with our friends and told them about our encounter. We all were content to let it go until Ed piped up, “There they are!” We

made a U-turn and pulled into a parking lot, with Ed screaming, “That’s them!” However, the only car in the lot was a black Chevy truck.

I asked Ed, “What the h\$## are you talking about? Those aren’t the guys.”

He wouldn’t listen to me, though. We all subsequently piled out of the Thunderbird, and Ed started in on one innocent guy standing by the Chevy. This guy gave it right back to Ed, and that’s when Kevin, a massive Sailor who could knock a man through a bulkhead, got between them. Seconds later, the man Ed had cornered brandished the pistol and pointed it right at Kevin’s forehead.

I couldn’t believe Ed was insisting the pistol wasn’t real. When it went off, and Kevin hit the ground, the two men jumped in their truck and sped away. A sigh of relief swept over us when Kevin rose to his feet. His face was covered with specks of blood—signs of powder burns. Luckily, the man had fired a blank, and, although Kevin was hurt, he was far from dead.

So how did I get myself in this situation? I assure you alcohol wasn’t a factor. The problem was that I didn’t keep Ed in check. I failed to admit that, like the guys in the Ford LTD, he, too, was looking for a fight. I lacked the courage and commitment to keep him on a leash.

We often wish our Sailors had a little more appreciation for the buddy system. If I had to do it all over again, Ed never would have come with us. He was in a self-destructive mood, and he didn’t care whom he took down with him. Sometimes we have to come to terms with Sailors like Ed; it’s either them or us—that’s the cold, hard truth. Trying to empower our junior Sailors to get help for this type of shipmate is a constant battle. Encouraging them to be more selective about the company they keep also is difficult.

We have to take the first step in the buddy program and ask ourselves, “Is this my buddy? Can I trust him?” I know that now. I’m just glad it didn’t take the loss of a friend’s life for me to learn that lesson. ➤

Hiking Submariner Survives 300-Foot Fall

By JOC(SW/AW) David Rush,
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On Dec. 23, YN2 Ben Warren of USS *Chicago* (SSN-721) and three friends set out to climb the ridge of Oahu’s Pali Lookout. He had no idea that his life was about to change.

The foursome headed out from their barracks on board Naval Station, Pearl Harbor, with a few backpacks carrying clothes, water, sandwiches, and a cell phone. After arriving at the lookout and scaling a relatively easy section, two of Warren’s friends decided they had climbed high enough—the steep terrain that towered above them seemed too difficult.

The athletic, 6-foot, 220-pound, 23-year-old Warren, however, along with another Sailor, continued the treacherous, nearly vertical free climb, with no ropes or hiking gear. About 20 feet away

from the summit, they said to each other, “This is crazy; we shouldn’t have done this. How are we going to get back down?” [*With ORM, you’re not left up a cliff without a rope. Use these principles before you engage in any on- or off-duty ventures.—Ed.*]

They decided to abort the remainder of the climb and go back down the steep mountainside. Warren was above his friend, gripping onto a rock while contemplating his next move, when, suddenly, the rock he was clinging to gave way. He began freefalling hopelessly, nearly taking his friend with him on the way down. With nothing to slow him, he picked up speed until, about 100 feet into his fall, he hit a small tree, which he split in two with his hip. He continued his harrowing descent, all the while with his life flashing before him.