

Never Underestimate *the* Power *of the* Sun

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My first deployment as a LAMPS Mk-III pilot included many firsts, the most memorable being crossing the equator—that imaginary line dividing the northern and southern hemispheres.

“Crossing the line,” as the event is known, gives Sailors the opportunity to participate in one of maritime’s most famous—and oldest—traditions. During the passage, Sailors who never have crossed the equator go through a rite of passage administered by “crusty shellbacks”: those who have crossed the line and have been initiated into Davy Jones’ realm.

In jest, wogs and shellbacks are “enemies” until the rite of passage is completed, but a deadlier threat than being at the mercy of shellbacks looms for all participants on deck: the equatorial sun. It strikes unsuspecting Sailors and affects some more than others. For me, the after-effects of the shellback ceremony held under that blistering sun stuck with me for days: redness, blisters, and peeling on my head where hair once grew.

The sun has been my lifelong enemy. As a boy, I once resembled a lobster more than a child after spending a day on a Florida beach fishing with my dad and grandpa. As an exchange student in Costa Rica, I set a record for burning in the tropical sun in a mere 15 minutes, earning the dubious nickname “congrejo,” Spanish for crab.

While a midshipman on a summer cruise in Hawaii, I suffered perhaps my most severe sunburn. I knew my fair skin burned quickly, so I always applied ample sunscreen when doing anything in the sun, despite jeers from fellow beachgoers who ridiculed my efforts at lathering up.

I had kept the Hawaiian sun at bay until one day when I decided to learn to surf. Clad in swimming trunks and a T-shirt (worn because of fears of chest-hair and board-wax disagreements), I figured I was protected more than adequately from the blistering sun. Wearing the T-shirt, I figured I didn’t need to coat myself with lotion.

I learned quickly, though, surfing involves more paddling than actually riding waves, and

Photo by PH1 Brien Aho

my T-shirt began chafing—rather than protecting me—while I paddled back out to sea. I took off the T-shirt, thinking, “I’ll stay out just a little longer before I apply sunscreen.” I really was avoiding the long return to shore to get the lotion.

What seemed like 30 minutes to a novice surfer without a wristwatch quickly became a couple of hours. As the day wore on, my back turned dark shades of red, then began to blister. The pain climaxed days later on what would be the longest flight of my life. Too sore and blistered to lean back in my airline seat, I suffered through an eight-hour flight that seemed more like eight weeks. I promised myself I never again would go without sunscreen when the sun is high in the sky.

Why did I—with a history of sunburns—go unprotected at the equator, where the sun is most intense? I can’t blame it on hair loss because that has been going on for years. I’ve had my days of gingerly combing my thin hair after short peri-

ods of unexpected sun exposure. I can’t blame my equatorial sunburn on lack of sunscreen or the opportunity to apply it since I had SPF 30 in my stateroom, and the ship’s chief hospital corpsman even had offered sunscreen to crew members who wanted it. I fell victim to thinking, “We’ll only be out here for a short time and, besides, it’s cloudy.”

And did I pay for it! I endured days of, “What happened to you?” and, “Ouch, that looks like it hurts!” Cold showers replaced warm ones because any heat only aggravated my burns. But this time, I learned my lesson: A ballcap or sunscreen are always on standby should I have to cross paths with my nemesis, Mr. Sun.

I hope I’ll evade skin cancer, but, being fair-skinned and having had several significant sunburns, I’m sure my at-risk factor has increased. One thing is for sure: I no longer care what people say about my lack of a suntan; I always use sunscreen when participating in outdoor activities. ☺

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Photo by PH2 Michael D. Kennedy