

April 12, 1945.

It was a foggy day at the Cheltenham Naval Advanced Radio School, located in Silver Spring, Maryland.

The class ahead of our group was leaving for their new assignments, which would take them to scattered Navy billets all over the world.

One knockout of a guy, John Mooney, radiating his Irish ancestry, was going to Pearl Harbor, and he was happy to be leaving. Although my appreciation of his sexual appeal was quietly subdued, I none the less, had a major crush on this All-American hunk.

So I joined several other of my classmates that morning to give the boys a good sendoff. After all, our country and its allies were still fighting a War on two battlefronts, Europe and the Pacific, so it was only fitting that we took time for the "good-byes".

John's last day on base was anything but joyous. He and another of his classmates had gotten into some innocent high jinks, and got caught. If memory serves me right, he and his buddy pulled some prank that taunted the stodgy demeanor of the school's director, Chief Crabb. The Chief was hypersensitive to any challenge to his authority, regardless how benign, and when he discovered the source of the issue, he doled out penance.

During their last day on base, John and his friend were given steel chisels and told to spend endless hours chiseling away the paint on the cement steps and landing at the school's entrance. Of course it was a tedious job, and to add to the culprits chagrin, their schoolmates could not miss the penalty and their embarrassment since we all passed through this entranceway several times during the class day.

John and pal left a most artistic memento for Chief Crabb. On the main landing, they had etched with their chisels a large crab. Yes, it was a work of art. Wish I had a copy, as it was well done...and it did leave an "in your face" salutation for their tormentor.

I never did hear anything as to how Chief Crabb reacted when he saw this Memorial. I would like to think that when he had a private moment, he must have cracked up with laughter.

And I never saw any of those departing classmates again, although I did often wonder if after the War, John returned to his hometown in Mansfield, Ohio. Ours was just a most casual passing of ships in the night, but I remember him more than just fondly.

Seems like a few years later I did try and make contact either by phone or letter, but got no follow-up, and filed the matter in a waste basket titled "point of no return".

However, the memory of that day extends far beyond the early morning farewells to the departing troops.

Late that afternoon, I was walking back to the brick barracks after a long day of advanced radio school classes to clean up and get ready for evening chow. It was then that one of the older salts (he was probably 30) greeted my group with the statement that would change history.

"The old man is gone. He died this morning."

Who was the "old man"? None other than Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had passed away while vacationing with his mistress at his beloved polio retreat in Warm Springs, Georgia.

The fog had dissipated long ago, and it was a warm Spring afternoon in this base located within 15 miles of Washington DC. I can still feel that warm sunshine, some 56 years ago, and poignancy of that moment will stay with me until my dying day.

I was barely out of my childhood, a youth of nineteen who had known no other President in my lifetime. Roosevelt came into office when I entered first grade, at a time when I was becoming aware of such things; his presidency dominated all of my grade and high school years. His reassuring "fireside chats" calmed a country in the throes of a major Depression, bordering on panic in a world where the Nazis and the Communists were festering anarchy and revolution. In other words he held the country intact in a time of great economic peril, going on to give us the courage and leadership to become a major factor in WWII. His unexpected departure was stultifying.

Ironically less than three weeks later, Adolf Hitler committed suicide as a tattered German war machine collapsed under relentless advances by the Americans, Brits, French and Russians. The world breathed a great collective sigh of relief as VE, Victory Europe, was declared May 8, a birthday gift for our new CEO, President Harry S Truman.

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