William Davenport

Mr. Davenport

English II

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Autobiographical Narrative

In the late winter of 1991, somewhere in the cold and grey Northern Atlantic, I looked my own death square in the eye. I wasn’t alone that night; 149 men whom I regarded as friends, brothers, and mentors were all about to die with me. I looked at their faces, some frightened and others not, and in my mind, I saw the face of the woman back home I was sure I would never see again.

My ship was cruising just below the surface at 150 feet, headed south, back to friendly port in Scotland. After months under the waves, it was finally time to prepare for the turnover of the submarine to the Gold Crew, who would soon take her back out to sea for another strategic deterrent patrol. This was our job, and we knew it well - the Gulf War was over, and we had completed our small part of the mission. Spirits were high as we allowed ourselves to think about returning home. Unknown to us, there had been some kind of seismic disturbance under the ocean floor, probably hundreds of miles away and probably days before. This shift in the Earth’s plates caused a series of monstrous waves, and one of them was about to change our lives.

The Weapons Officer was in the control room. He ordered the Diving Officer to bring the ship to the surface, where he could climb up into the bridge and look around. The order was repeated back as the sub tilted upward, breaking the waves as “Surface, surface, surface!” crackled through the speakers throughout the boat, momentarily waking most the sailors sleeping in their bunks below. Although we hadn’t surfaced in weeks, I was oblivious to the sounds and movement as I lay in my rack and dreamed of walking the streets of my old neighborhood back home. It was a trick I had taught myself to help ease the homesickness that plagued me since we left the States three months before. I pictured the houses of my neighbors, family, and friends with near-perfect clarity. I heard the cars and barking dogs and smelled the scent of freshly mowed grass, clean laundry, and home-cooked meals as I strolled along the familiar avenues and sidewalks of Berwick, Pennsylvania, in my mind.

Suddenly, someone’s hand was on my shoulder. My curtain had been pulled back, and I was blinded by white light that had just moments before been darkness. Men were running past, and I heard two sounds that no man on a navy ship ever wants to hear: the shriek of the collision alarm and the roar of rushing water. I looked to my left and saw my young friend, a blonde, blue-eyed Sonarman Third Class named Jimmy, pulling on his sneakers in his upper bunk. He was at least ten years my junior and looked like he had just started shaving a week ago, but he was smart and knew every inch of that ship as well as anyone. He had to – it was a job requirement.

The aisle below us was crowded with our shipmates, in various stages of undress, as they scrambled aft. There was no room for us to jump out of bed and join them, as shouts of “Move it, move it!” and “On your feet, now!” blended with the sound of water splashing down the ladder into the berthing compartment. Water-tight doors were slamming shut above and behind us, and everything became slow-motion: all the shouting and banging, the alarm and the uproar became a vague and cloudy background.

I turned to the eyes looking at me from the open curtain across the passageway and said, “Well, Jimmy, I guess this is it, isn’t it?”

Jimmy smiled and replied, “If the water doesn’t kill us, the gas will.” He was referring to *phosgene gas*, odorless and colorless, produced when saltwater combines with the acid that filled the huge batteries beneath the length of the entire deck on which we slept. Right then hundreds, maybe thousands, of gallons of salt water were finding their way to the lowest point of the ship, where the batteries lay.

“It’s been a good run, hasn’t it?” he choked, and I could see that he was shaking. Feeling an intense calm, I wondered vaguely why *I* wasn’t scared.

“Yep, we did what we came here to do, Jim. Nobody can say we didn’t do our best.”

“Do you think they’ll know about this back home, Bill?”

“Sure, they will, eventually. It may take a while to find us out here, though. I don’t know if they’ll understand *why* we didn’t make it home. I’m not sure that *I* understand why we’re flooding. The Navy will have to try to piece it together for the newspapers when we don’t come back.”

The more I talked, the more calm and collected I felt. It was strange to me, even as it was happening, that I wasn’t afraid: I knew we were about to either drown or suffocate, but I was somehow at peace with it. I was satisfied that everything was being done that could be done. I trusted our training, and I trusted the men who were at this moment doing everything they could to save us and the boat. I didn’t believe that that would be enough, but if that was our fate, that was our fate, right? I was oddly *ready to go*, if that was the plan.

As I pulled my shoes on, I noticed that the aisle had cleared. Less than a minute had passed since the first alarm blared, but it felt like much longer, and time was everything. I heard the voices of the men aft of us as they called for mattresses to cover the battery well and stop the water from entering.

“It’s clear, Jim. Let’s see what we can do. If we don’t make it, it won’t be because we didn’t try.”

“Just in case, man,” Jimmy said as he extended his hand across the void. “It’s been a real privilege to know you.” I felt a sudden responsibility to Jimmy then, to be the adult, to be the voice of calm and reason, and to make his last moments meaningful.

“Me, too,” I said, shaking his hand. “Now, yank that mattress and follow me.”

Topside, the Weapons Officer had been washed down the hatch to the deck below by a rogue wave about 45 feet high. It carried him down the ladder like a toilet that had been unexpectedly flushed. His arm was broken, and he was bruised, but he climbed back up the ladder and, with the help of the other sailors in the control room, managed to dog the lower hatch shut. Unfortunately, quite a bit of the freezing Atlantic Ocean had already poured through the opening and was seeking the lowest level, where Jimmy and I were passing mattresses to the men above the battery well.

The boat was violently rocking side to side, which told us below that we were on the surface. The water we were sloshing through wasn’t ankle-deep yet, but I could see what looked like a river coming down the steps to my right. I figured that we were likely safe from sinking now, but I was watching the cold, green water passing us as we made our way to the next compartment, where there was no watertight door to seal and our shipmates were frantically throwing mattresses on the floor. As I ripped the sheets and blankets from the nearest bunk to grab the dry mattress beneath, someone shoved an EAB mask (Emergency Apparatus, Breathing) in my face and plugged its air hose into the oxygen supply above my head. I tightened the rubber straps and smelled the rush of cool, fresh air as it made its way to my lungs.

Almost as suddenly as it started, it was over. The water stopped, and we laid out the mattresses from the battery well to the stairs, to stop what more water might come. The Damage Control party was reporting through their headphone system that the area below decks was secure. I joined Jimmy at the ladder leading up to the control room, and he suddenly turned and threw his arm around my neck.

“Are we alright?” he shouted through his mask.

“Looks that way – disappointed?” I smiled at him through the fog of my visor.

“Naw, man. This is more excitement than I really needed, y’know?” His eyes welled up, he let go of me, and he sat down on the steps with his head in his hands. I stayed with him until we got the order to return to our stations.

The Damage Control Report concluded that we had taken on a few thousand gallons of sea water from the rogue wave, none of which made it into the battery well. The bilge pumps sent it all back into the Atlantic within a short time, and we were able to stay afloat, although not perfectly *level*, while the pumps did their work. Sure, we did some soaking up, mopping up, and drying up for a while, and I did have to repair some of the electronic gear that didn’t react well to sea water when I returned to my watch in the radio room.

I was going home, though. We all were. The Weps (Weapons Officer), with his fractured arm, was in a bit of pain in his makeshift sling, but we knew he would barely notice it when he saw his wife waiting for him at the airport in Connecticut. Jimmy had the best 21st birthday party anyone ever had when he got back, and I saw more than a few of my shipmates kiss the ground when we got off the plane. As for me, I got the greatest gift. I learned something vital, something that stayed with me. It’s important to put others above myself; to do what I must do, when I must do it; and to not think I’m anything special because I did. It’s important to not be afraid of dying - and if I’m not afraid of that, what is there to be afraid of?