

Paint it White

by: Vixxy Fox

Sometimes I feel a lot like Forest Gump. When you look back at your life, and think about all the people you've met... well... it's pretty incredible.

Way back in the late 1980's I had a barber who was most interesting. I can't remember his name, but he was old, and we had the sea in common. I'd been in the Coast Guard, and he'd been a merchant marine sailor during WWII. That's where he learned his trade as a barber, and he was good at it.

One day, he told me that his ship had been lucky so far in his career and not been sunk. They were in New York at the time, and were instructed to move to the navy yard. Once there, he said the yard workers began wrapping everything in asbestos insulation. 'Though they wouldn't say where we were going, because that was a secret, I realized things were going to be pretty cold; so, I opted out of that trip.' He smiled as he trimmed my sideburns, unlike the regular navy, the merchies were civilians under contract, and they had the option of declining trips.

It turned out his ship was to be a part of the infamous Murmansk convoy, where nearly every ship was sunk by the German navy. *(Wikipedia) In July 1942, convoy PQ 17 suffered the worst losses of any convoy in the Second World War. Under attack from German aircraft and U-boats, the convoy was ordered to scatter, following reports that a battle group, which included the battleship Tirpitz, had sailed to intercept the convoy (although the German group did not leave port until the following day, and was subsequently ordered to return to port). Only 11 of the 35 merchant ships in the convoy succeeded in running the gauntlet of U-boats and German bombers.*

Today, we've forgotten what it was like in those times. Death was something faced, and accepted. My neighbor, when I was a child, informed me he had been a part of the D-day invasion. I'll never forget what he told me when I asked him how he was able to do that.

"It was easy," Mr. Whaley said softly as he polished his motorcycle. "You simply made your mind up you were already dead and then it was OK."

War is a cruel and unforgiving mistress. All sides are faced with a larger picture than anyone who did not live it could possibly know. Germany had invaded Russia, and in the beginning were so successful, they'd destroyed nearly half of the Russian army. The Russians, desperate for equipment, pleaded with their allies to send anything they could. The first convoy was hugely successful: *Only 1 of the 103 ships which sailed in the first 12 convoys to Russia was lost and so huge numbers of supplies reached their destination, so much so that in the Battle of Moscow at the end of 1941 75% of the tanks used by the Russians were British made and had arrived via the*

convoys. As well as tanks the ships cargos included fighter planes, fuel, ammunition, raw materials, and food. – Dorinda Balchin - author

Convoy PQ17 was a total... well... the military has many expressions for this situation, and they are all far from polite. Though it is no excuse for leaving a convoy on its own, there were all sorts of conflicting reports, including that the German battleship Tirpitz was rapidly closing. The Admiralty being in charge of things ordered the convoy escorts home, and the convoy to scatter. They chose to leave the merchant ships on their own with no defenses at all.

Enter the hero and his crew. *Captain Gradwell was a volunteer sailor who had been a barrister before the war but was now in command of a **trawler** which had been converted with a couple of guns and depth charges, and whose crew was mainly fishermen. Gradwell decided that the order to abandon the convoy was so bad that he would disobey it and stay with the scattered merchant ships. He found 3 US merchantmen whose officers agreed to follow his trawler as he led them as far north as possible, intending to hide amongst the ice until the attack was over and then head for Archangel.*

They found ice, and sailed in it until they could go no further. They hid in it for three days by painting everything white and then covering the decks with white sheets and tablecloths. Ahem... no polka dots or cute bunnies on those; they were all white.

A note concerning sailing in pack ice: I was on a ship back around 1971, two hundred miles or so off of Greenland in the middle of the winter. You never really see the world as big as it is until something like this happens to you. Tell the story, and hardly anyone will believe it. All around the ship, all 360 degrees, there was nothing but white all the way to the horizon. This included the white of the sky. If your ship is moving, do not, under any circumstance, slow down. Our captain, his name was Bacon, and yes we had a lot of fun with that, decided the hull was taking too much punishment and tried slowing; we almost got stuck fast. As it was, there were two freighters following as we were breaking the ice. Our ship was an older vessel made of good steel and riveted, not welded, so she could take it. It took a considerable amount of back and forth with the props, but we got moving again.

Back to the story. They were brave fishermen led by a barrister. They had guts and little else, but they didn't give up, and they didn't let their little convoy down. After three days, they sailed back south, and made it to Archangel under the cover of a fog.

In your life, you will have met people like this... but you would never know it. The real heroes seldom talk about things they've been through. To stare death in the face, and then live to tell about it changes you.

My old neighbor flew the Douglas A-1 Skyraider in the Vietnam war. He would tell a few stories about it, but not much. He told me once that much of what he'd done was top secret... and that's

all he would say, really. After he passed, I found out he'd served seven tours in Vietnam, and another five at the Pentagon. I will smile here... when I knew him, Jim was a traffic court judge.

Always remember; in the darkest of times, paint it white. There are people around you who have done great things... but you are seldom ever aware of what they have done - unless you look for it, and ask them.