Sandbank

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The most intense assignment I had in the early ‘70s was teaching aboard the USS Canopus, a ship that was moored off the west coast of Scotland. It was the mother ship for the Polaris submarine fleet which patrolled the North Atlantic and North Sea. Nuclear-powered submarines could enter the loch -- Holy Loch -- at ocean depth and surface alongside the Canopus for repair and for R & R for the crews. It was a spooky sight to see four or five submarines surfaced on either side of the ship, which towered above them.

The long pier to catch the boat to get to the ship was set into a tiny community called Sandbank, where I lived. The weather in Sandbank changed dozens of times a day because of the way that the loch fit in between the mountain ranges. Winds rushed down two valleys to meet over the loch in wild confusion. It rained up your nose or in your ears, hardly ever down.

From late October on, it was dark as I approached the ship to teach my class and pitch dark leaving the ship. Rain and fog and winds alternated or came all at once. The protocol was to wait at the guardhouse at the Sandbank end of the pier for the shore patrol to phone someone on the ship to guarantee my identity. After the OK came through, I would proceed several steps on to another checkpoint with a Scottish guard for another phone call. Then I walked down a long pier to wait at the end for the boat to arrive. The ride to the ship only took five minutes. Then began the adventure of boarding the ship.

Getting off the boat I often cracked my head against a metal bar I never saw. I was staring at my feet, navigating a metal scored plank, to arrive at the floating floors, pieces of

metal at various levels and angles with dark gaps of water between them. I tried to keep up with the sailors. The floating floors led to the first ramp, corrugated metal with chain hand supports. The chains were fastened to the top of the ramp, so if you had to keep hold of them, as I did, you were bent double at the top. On either side, the pitching water.

Then came the clamoring over a pile of chains, up three steps and down two, more chains and then onto the main ramp. The incline was not as steep as the first ramp, but the surface was long and slick, with soggy hand ropes to pull on. I wrote a description to my parents of “people waiting for the moment to leap from one lurching float to another, colliding with others who’d slipped in a chain reaction down the metal ramp.” I added that the challenge built an esprit de corps, “everyone against the elements.”

Where the ramp met the ship came the final challenge, a wet metal ladder. I was often carrying books. As I got toward the top, the Marine guards might reach over from the deck and help me, taking my satchel or extending a gloved hand.

Heavy fogs of deep winter meant that sailors couldn’t get shore leave, since only a boat with radar could make it to the ship, and that was the officers’ motorboat, the OMB. Sometimes I was the only passenger, and in those cases the OMB pilot helped me over to the base of the ramp.

That transit to the ship was a liminal space, a rite of passage. Hierarchies got simplified. It was beautiful in good weather, and I bought stationery with the picture of the ship, calm on a blue loch – but how rare were those quiet skies! Usually the approach was so challenging that the classes I met on the ship – escorted to them by a Marine, down many a ladder – were far more meaningful than classes on land.