

Tom in Navy



Tom, in center, circa 1928.

Tom Sr. said...

“...and before going in the Navy I went to see Mr. Lutz with my share of the cotton money and ordered a new suit (because I had a 48 inch chest and a 32 inch waist and regular store-bought clothes didn’t fit). I figured the suit would get me noticed and I’d be put in charge of the other recruits on the train trip from Charlotte to the naval training station in Norfolk, not only to tell them what to do but to be responsible for the meal money on the way so that if nobody asked when we arrived (which they didn’t) I could keep what was left over (which I did).”

“... and I was walking down a street in San Diego with a girl on each arm. A third girl who was with us tipped my cap back on my head at a cocky angle when two shore police came up and one pointed his night stick in my face and yelled, “Sailor straighten up that damn hat”. I laughed and he swung at me with the night stick. I pulled my left arm loose from the girl on that side and he hit it and damn it hurt but I got a right hook in his face and blood flew everywhere over him and me. Somebody grabbed me from behind and I spun around and hit him on the chin before seeing who it was and he went down. When I saw, oh damn, it was a Junior Lieutenant I apologized and helped him get up but they took me to jail anyway.”

“... and when we were docked in New York I saw the old man sneak a woman into his cabin. I didn’t say anything to anybody but I made sure that he knew I knew.”

“...and I was walking down an off-limits street in Panama with Jim and Ski wearing civilian clothes without permission without papers looking for three of our guys who had not come back from shore leave. We were all scared because it was a bad place where you had to watch out for robbers and the police. Finally we found some teenagers who spoke English who told us that three sailors in uniform were down the street in a house. After some discussion I got stuck with seeing what was going on while Jim and Ski

stayed behind. I told them if I didn't show up I would be in jail and to get Mister Mason and come back with the 700 dollars I had hidden in my locker. And sure enough it was our guys drunk and arguing with a whore about 100 dollars one of them said she stole and I told them lets get the hell out of here. Then the stupid sonofabitch hit her and you could have heard her yelling all over town and four Panama cops showed up. I managed to knock one of them down before they swarmed over me. I spent the weekend in the Panama jail until Mr. Mason could bail me out. I would have gotten in real trouble if I had not seen that woman with the old man in New York."

"... and we were on the way back from Manila when the typhoon caught us. We were in it for three days. There was so much water in the air that you hardly knew where the ocean stopped and the sky started. Every now and then the ship would hang on a wave with the screw out of the water shaking so bad I thought we would fall apart. In the end, everybody was sick below except for me and the old man and we took turns at the wheel. The old man told me, Tom you are best sailor there is."

"... and I was coming home to Tijuana from a card game late one night in a cab with some guys I didn't know. The one in the front seat reached around with a gun and said to give him my money so I picked up a tire iron which was on the floorboard in the back and hit him on the head. I made the driver who might have been in on it drag the man behind some bushes on the side of the road. "

"... and after I got out of the Navy I stayed in Tijuana six months with Rose and Little Tommy and Little Rose. I made a lot of money gambling and from that man and woman who called me over to their big car one day and told me I was a perfect physical specimen and would I get her pregnant because he couldn't do it. (I remembered watching bulls and cows on the farm and figured what the hell.) But after that night in the cab, I had to leave so I gave Rose all the money, 10,000 dollars, and told her I would be back. I went to Shelby for a few months and then to Detroit to work in the Dodge plant. After a year I came back to Tijuana but Rose and the children had left to be with her family deep in the Mexico mountains where I had only been once and couldn't find again."

He sat on the porch, rocking back and forth, drinking coffee that he had brought in the insulated pot, looking at nothing, smiling a little.

"You did try."

"I got lost. I kept the directions in a shoe box with pictures and other things from down there and somebody stole it on the train to Detroit."