

Birthdays are just another opportunity for practical jokes aboard Providence

By ROBERT A. HAMILTON
Day Staff Writer

Aboard the USS Providence — The afternoon Chief Electronics Technician Michael Simmons turned 35 years old, he went to his bed and tried to lift up the mattress to get to the storage space underneath, but could barely move it.

DISPATCHES AT SEA
Editor's Note: Day reporter Robert Hamilton and photographer Tim Cook are aboard a Navy sub covering the war.

Wrapped in his blankets he found a big, heavy valve from the machinery spaces in his bunk. He figured it was the A-gang jokers at work, the men of the auxiliary equipment division trying to convince him he was getting too old to lift his own rack.

"I knew something was up, because people been whispering and chuckling whenever I was around," Simmons said.

He went to bed relieved that he had escaped relatively unscathed, figuring that the crew took it easy because he's only assigned temporarily to the Providence from his own boat, the USS Scranton.

The next morning when he pulled up his "poopie suit," the blue coveralls that serve as the work uniform under-way, he realized they were very snug.

There was his name embroidered above his Scranton patch. The pencils and the Chapstick he had left in his pockets the night before were still there.

But the garment tag showed the coveralls were three sizes smaller than they should have been.

"They got me," Simmons said with a grudging laugh. "I think it's funnier than heck. I figured they were probably going to do something, but my poopie suit? I hid it in my rack, and checked it before I put it on."

Even in a war zone, the pranksters aboard the Providence crank up for birthdays.

"This is how we kill time," said Machinist Mate 2nd Class Craig R. Forehand, who only smiles cryptically when he is asked whether he was in on the joke. "Our policy is, 'no birthday goes unpunished.'"

Practical jokes are one way to deal with some of the stress of submarining, being away from home for months at a time, often out of communication with your family, and birthdays bring out particular creativity.

Each submariner has a light in his bunk, with a plastic cover held on by two nuts. One recent birthday boy got into his rack to find the reading lamp was out. When he unbolted the cover and pulled it off to check the bulb, he discovered that someone had filled it with the little paper circles produced by a three-hole punch.

"So he's laying there and it starts raining dit-dots all over his rack," Forehand said. "He gets out, cussing up a storm, but he knew what it was all about."

For another chief, who stands about 6 foot, 5 inches tall, and weighs about 350 pounds, the crew started shaving off the end of his cloth belt every day, until on his birthday he could no longer make the ends meet.

And there are the classic, non-birthday type pranks, such as placing a full glass of water upside down on a Nau-

gahyde tablecloth. The water and the rim of the glass form a perfect seal, so if you don't let any bubbles in to spoil the effect it looks like an empty glass.

But when you turn it over to pour a drink, you get 16 ounces of water in your lap.

Word of the joke usually circulates widely even before it is executed — there is nearly as much fun in planning the prank as in carrying it out.

Senior Chief Electronics Technician Wayne Gilbert, for instance, ran into Simmons carrying the doctored coveralls through a passageway and asked with as innocent a face as he could muster, "What happened chief? Something happen? You gain a little weight overnight?"

Machinist Mate 1st Class Curtis R. Hormel said the jokes can't be malicious and can't leave any lasting damage, can't cross the line into hazing or harassment, and it can only be one crewman to another. Once ashore, the submariners would not stand for anyone outside the "family" pulling any kind of prank on one of their own.

And the same crewmen who pull the jokes often help the targets recover. Minutes after Simmons admitted he'd been had, the A-gang had hauled out its sewing machine to put his real poopie suit back into inspection-ready condition.

But submariners are known for their ingenuity, for the ability to do makeshift repairs to complicated machinery at sea with limited tools and no spare parts, and that same spirit of innovation often fuels the practical joke process.

"It's how we entertain ourselves," Forehand.
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U.S. troops in Iraq get first mail delivery since they left Kuwait

By CHRIS TOMLINSON
Associated Press Writer

Near Karbala, Iraq — The magic words first came on the battalion's radio network: "Mail is ready for pickup."

"Is that mail to go out, or mail coming in?" asked an incredulous 1st Lt. Eric Hooper of A Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry Regiment.

"Why don't you go over and find out," answered Capt. Chris Carter, the company commander, from Watkinsville, Ga. Soon the lieutenant's Humvee pulled up, bringing mail from home.

Overstuffed letters, carefully taped boxes, all with U.S. Postal Service markings.

The surprise delivery, brought from Kuwait by cargo truck, sparked excitement around the unit, and a few happy tears.

Spc. Luke Edwards of Raleigh, N.C., inhaled deeply the perfumed scent of an envelope holding a letter from his wife. Then he ripped into it with an ear-to-ear grin.

"She joined a gym behind my mom's work, she got a better job," said Edwards, 22, as he voraciously read the letter. "Nothing could be better right now. This is the closest thing to going home."

In the desert, miles from any village or city, anything other than green or tan stands out — especially a pink love letter.

Spc. Shaun Urwiler, 26, received letters from both his fiancée and his parents in Tampa, Fla., filled with snapshots from home. His fiancée, Emily McFarland, sent him photos of his cocker spaniel, Sparky, and a new armoire she'd bought for their future home.

"I didn't expect to get mail for a couple of months," Urwiler said, disappointed that he couldn't write back right now because mail hasn't yet begun to be shipped to the rear. "I keep a diary, so I can tell them about it when I get home."

There were also packages of snacks and letter-writing materials sent to "Any Soldier" from supporters back home — everything made more precious because it was unexpected.

"You look around and you're in the middle of Iraq," said Sgt. Paul Ingram of Athens, Ohio. "You don't expect to get mail."

Carter received several back issues of Sport Illustrated. He offered the other troops a chance to read them first, and they leaped from the lowered ramps on the back of their Bradley fighting vehicles to get the first whiff of the pristine glossy paper.

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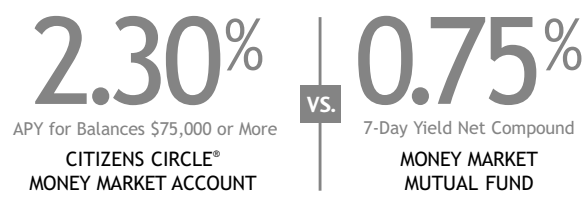
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