

RENDEZVOUS

C. S. Forester

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C. S. Forester

Actually this story is fiction, but it lies so close to fact that it had to be shown to the Navy censor. Certain technical details were scissored out, but the essential story remains—and it is a record of dogged heroism, by one of our great writers of sea stories

Neither the Fleet oiler, at anchor in the bay, nor her warrant bosun, could be called good looking. Ships of war generally have a functional beauty, resulting from the wholehearted efforts of their designers to make them fighting vessels, and nothing other than fighting vessels, but this ship was only a self-propelled oil tank, and the guns she carried had the appearance of being stuck on as an afterthought—as indeed they were. Furthermore, she was disfigured by great cliffs of cargo on her cargo deck amidships, stacks and stacks of

cardboard boxes, wooden boxes, steel boxes.

The curious eye which read the labels on those boxes would be mildly surprised to see what they contained: the candy bars which the American public were learning to do without; peanuts and canned fruit; evaporated vegetables; and along with these packages were others of deadly weapons, of clothing, of tools, seemingly higgledy-piggledy, but actually laid out on the deck in a definite scheme which had cost the supply officer a good deal of thought, and which had cost the crew much labor to execute.

The crew and the warrant bosun were at ease now, reaping the reward of a day of severe toil. A few were on watch, manning those guns and telephones which even in a protected anchorage are never left unmanned by day or night. A few were sleeping; but all the rest were gathered in the darkened mess hall.

Across the center of the hall hung a screen, and on this screen was being projected a motion picture; half the men had to see the picture back to front, because they had to look at it from the back of the screen, but nobody minded that very much. A motion picture was a luxury from any point of view.

The warrant bosun put a fresh stick of chewing gum into his mouth and prepared to enjoy himself. He was on the right side of the screen, he had an excellent day's work behind him, and in two minutes' time he would hear Bing Crosby sing. After that would come a whole night in bed and an easy day tomorrow. All was right with the world.

Yet while the warrant bosun was unwrapping that piece of gum, a light on shore suddenly trained itself upon the ship and began to wink and flash in a staccato Morse code.

A signalman upon the bridge recorded the message and slid down the ladder with it to the captain.

In the mess hall, an opened door let in a shaft of light which blotted out the motion picture, and a voice came bellowing in to drown Bing Crosby's: "Go to your stations, all special sea details."

Switches clicked, and light flooded the mess hall. Bing Crosby's song came to an inglorious end.

"Hell!" said the warrant bosun, getting to his feet along with everyone else.

The bosun's mate who had brought the message caught sight of him, blinking in the light.

"Cap'n says to prepare the ship for fueling at sea."

"Hell!" said the warrant bosun again. He pushed out through the mob in the alleyway into his cabin and switched on the light there. On the bulkhead at the foot of his bed were stuck a couple of pictures of nude women; on his desk stood a photograph of his wife. He reached for his sheepskin coat, struggled into it, plunged out of his cabin onto the cargo deck and made his way forward along the catwalk.

Darkness was closing in; the wind was cold, causing the warrant bosun to turn up the collar of his big sheepskin coat as

he took his post on the exposed forecastle. The light was still flashing from the shore station, and while the anchor was actually being hove in, a motor whaleboat ran alongside, and an officer, the gold cord of the staff around his shoulder, handed a final packet of orders to the captain.

Clearly, something out of the ordinary was in the wind, some important strategic move, but the warrant bosun did not care about that. Strategy was something for captains to worry about, and admirals, and the staff at Washington. His own affair, now that the anchor was in and the ship was heading out into the bay, was to prepare for fueling at sea.

There can be gunnery specialists and radio specialists, engineers and torpedo-men, but they are newcomers to the sea, while the boatswain traces his descent straight back to Noah. Everything that makes a ship a ship is in his department; it is not his concern whether she is a fighting machine or not, but it is his business to make sure that she is efficient for sea. All ropework and cordage are in his province, all blocks and tackle, cables and anchors. Your skilled specialist rating may go all his life at sea without having to tie any knot except in his shoelaces, but the bosun has to be able to knot and splice, to be familiar with the foibles of Manila line, to know how to reeve a block, just as did his predecessor in the days of Paul Jones.

The warrant bosun took his station under the break of the forecastle while the pipes went squealing through the ship.

"Rig all fueling at sea gear. Rig all fueling at sea gear."

Men came scrambling through the darkness to take up their

stations and, as they did so, the ship reached the open water outside the bay and made her first plunge into the rollers that awaited her. Her tank deck was no more than six feet above the surface, with nothing more than a wire string along stanchions for additional protection. Dense spray came splashing through the darkness, and then, with a hiss and a roar, a wave top came slapping over the tank deck, surging across from one side to the other, drenching every man at his station. Even on the catwalk overhead, the spray was sufficiently dense to wet thoroughly any man taking the short walk from the midships superstructure to the forecastle. And that first wave top was only the precursor of an infinite number of others, leaping on board with monotonous regularity, sousing the men at work on the tank deck, and promising to go on sousing them with the same monotonous regularity for as long as they should stay there, eight hours or twenty-eight hours as their duty should dictate.

With the sublime impartiality of any natural force, the sea soused the warrant bosun as well as the men working under him, and the brisk breeze set up by the ship's progress through the night chilled him, too. In idle moments, he dug his hands deep into his side pockets and cursed fittingly with the same monotonous regularity as the waves came aboard and the wind blew.

But the idle moments were few, for there was an infinity of things to be done. Booms had to be rigged. Hose had to be coupled up. Seven men, working as a team, could just manhandle each length of hose into position so as to couple it to its fellows, stumbling along in the darkness over the valves and pipes which at irregular and irritating intervals interrupted

the smooth expanse of the tank deck. Other teams, meanwhile, were getting out the lines from the forepeak—the five-inch Manila ropes which lay there, stowed and tagged under the bosun's supervision, ready for just this emergency, so that in the dark they could be got out and taken back to where they were needed, with the least confusion and delay.

It had to be in the dark; that was imperative. Not the smallest glimmer of light could be allowed to disclose the ship's position as she plunged through the night. Anywhere there might be submarines lying in ambush, awaiting just such an immensely profitable target as the Fleet oiler. At any moment, a torpedo might come hurtling against the side, to transform the ship into a pillar of flame. The warrant bosun's men must find their way about the deck, must lay their hands with certainty upon any item of their infinitely varied equipment, without the assistance even of a momentary flash from a pocket lamp.

In the dark, they had to reeve their tackle, tie their rolling hitches and their clove hitches, rig the booms, and, in the dark, the warrant bosun had to make his way around the deck, giving orders and assistance, feeling with his hands like a blind man to make sure that the work was properly done, correcting mistakes and correlating the efforts of the twenty different teams of men all laboring frantically together, whipped by the wind and soused by the sea.

The towline had to be got out and faked down on the deck ready for use as smoothly as any skein of yarn, for, if given the opportunity, it will kink and twist, so that in use it will jump off the niggerhead and take half a dozen lives and—possibly

more important—delay the fueling of the Fleet.

In his twenty years at sea, the warrant bosun had seen all kinds of mishaps, and now in the darkness he was guarding against them all, as well as against all the unexpected and unforeseen possibilities that can arise with a sea running and a wind blowing and dead-weight masses of forty thousand tons maneuvering in close proximity. He had a willing lot of men working for him, and even the recruits among them had acquired plenty of experience during the hectic weeks of their service, but none of them had his own vast experience and enormous wisdom.

When it comes to ropes and tackle and heading off the forces of nature, there can be no short cut as good as twenty years of work at sea. It takes that long to learn to be able to tell by touch whether a boom is properly rigged so that it can be relied upon to bear the weight of a many-ton hose in a rough sea.

After hours of pitch-darkness and rough seas, the warrant bosun could confidently report to the first lieutenant that the ship was prepared. He peered at the face of his watch—for the first time since starting work—and he felt a flow of modest pride at what he had been able to do.

"Just as well," was all the first lieutenant said. "We're starting oiling now."

A tanker is only a tanker, but a Fleet oiler is something very different. It is the existence of the Fleet oiler which has changed the whole complexion of naval strategy. She has the

equipment which enables her to supply the Fleet with fuel without it becoming necessary to return to a base. Speed and equipment are essential to the Fleet oiler, but it is equally essential that she should have the men to make use of them, whose skill makes possible the delicate operation of fueling a fleet at sea. A destroyer operating at high speed can consume the whole of her fuel in a few days. She would be helpless then without the aid of the Fleet oiler, and if the destroyer were absent, the battleship would be endangered. In the vast distances of the Pacific, it would be impossible to sweep the seas were it not for the Fleet oilers and the men who man them. It is dangerous work that they do, and there is small enough honor or glory about it in the eyes of the public.

"We're starting oiling now," said the first lieutenant.

The warrant bosun went up to the spray-swept forecastle. It was still too dark for anything to be seen, on either side, but right ahead, by straining his eyes, he could just make out the tiniest glimmer of a light; ahead of them, a battleship was showing that light directly astern, shaded so that any prowling Japanese submarine could take no advantage of it. It is hard for a submarine to stalk her prey from anywhere except forward of the beam.

The light grew gradually closer, and the warrant bosun knew that on the bridge the captain was steering the Fleet oiler so as to pass as close to the light as possible. Then the light disappeared from the warrant bosun's gaze, as the nearing of the two ships took him out of the beam. Peering through the spray and balancing himself on the plunging forecastle, he could at last make out the huge bulk of the battleship, an

immense deep shadow in the surrounding dark. A dead weight of forty thousand tons, driving through the sea as fast as any whale, it was bound to set up fantastic eddies and suction currents all around it.

The warrant bosun knew enough about those conditions to appreciate the skill and nerve of the Fleet oiler's captain, who was having to steer his ship through those eddies close enough to the battleship for a line to be thrown across the gap, and yet not so close as to touch. Forty thousand tons dead weight, heaving and plunging in a rough sea, will deal a blow that would crush in the side of a stouter vessel than a floating oil tank.

Slowly the Fleet oiler overtook the huge black shadow. Bow overlapped stern, and the warrant bosun could now see the battleship in vague profile, the immense turrets and the colossal guns, the staggered upper works, and then the unmistakable profile of the bow. The two ships were in such close proximity to each other that the sound of the waves leaping and crashing in the narrow space between them was clearly audible over the wind.

"Let's have it!" said the warrant bosun to the shadowy men at his side; and he did not say "it;" he substituted a dirty noun for the pronoun, as unnecessarily as ever. He took the heaving line in his hands, deftly seized half a dozen coils in his right hand while his left loosely held the remainder, and whirled the weight with the full strength of his arm. The weight soared off

into the darkness, and the line ran smoothly out from his left hand.

Had it been daylight, the warrant bosun would have fired a line out of a gun, but in darkness that would mean a revealing flash. Human muscle and skill had to take the place of a gun, and if the line were badly thrown, if it fell short and had to be re-coiled and re-thrown, five minutes would be wasted, and, with many ships to fuel, a similar mistake at each would make a total of many minutes lost, and in so many minutes...

The warrant bosun did not know that Nelson had once said that at sea five minutes can make the difference between victory and defeat, but he felt that truth in his bones after twenty years in the Navy.

The weight shot off into the darkness, trailing the line behind it, and the warrant bosun uttered a grunt of morose satisfaction at feeling the line catch and hold. Someone on the battleship's forecastle had seized it. Megaphones shouted orders over the wind, and the heaving line ran steadily out to the battleship. There was a two-inch messenger line attached to the heaving line—the warrant bosun was responsible for the vital knot which joined them—and, by the time the two-inch line was being hauled into the battleship, the warrant bosun was ready to follow it with a 3½-inch line, and that was followed by a five-inch line, and that was strong enough to have entrusted to it the immense Manila towline on which the rest of the operation depended.

From other parts of the ship, other heaving lines had been thrown, other messengers passed, now that the two ships were riding together more or less comfortably harnessed together with the heavy Manila. The warrant bosun stood by the niggerhead, as the ships surged and plunged over the waves. It was up to him to ease the strain or take it up, keeping the ships at a constant distance apart without allowing the towline to break under the continual jerks to which the waves subjected it. If that line should part, everything else, including the precious hoses which the booms were beginning to swing out over the gap would be torn asunder.

On the bridges, the captains were fighting with screw and rudder against the other tendency of the ships to crash together, although the possible damage from that could be minimized now by the nests of fenders—clusters of three fenders together, each cluster weighing a quarter of a ton—which the warrant bosun had hung over the side at strategic points.

The warrant bosun left his place beside the towline long enough to hurry aft and supervise the swinging out of the booms which were pushing the hoses out toward the battleship. It was only a matter of faith that they were doing that; it was too dark to see them. A loftier wave than usual squeezed into the narrow passage between the ships, came slapping over the deck and soused the warrant bosun even more thoroughly than before, and he said the same words over again; it was not a very extensive vocabulary that he had. But with the booms functioning properly, he still had other matters to attend to. It was not merely oil which the battleship needed; the Fleet oiler was a sort of fairy godmother to the whole task force, which had only to express a Cinderella wish to find it instantly

granted.

One of the first things the messenger lines had taken over to the battleship had been a telephone, and now eager officers in the battleship were pouring out their desires and their needs into the sympathetic ear of the supply officer. Mail, of course, was the most important thing in everyone's mind, and the Fleet oiler carried two weeks' mail for the two thousand men in the battleship—thirty thousand letters or so at a conservative estimate. The sacks of mail were all conveniently handy for transfer, but when it came to the other supplies demanded, it was a test of the foresight of the supply officer.

Fresh food, the battleship wanted; bread; cylinders of oxygen for the battleship's plane pilots; peanuts and candy; drums of lubricating oil; and all these miscellaneous stores had to be transferred to the battleship across an open space of tossing sea, and that was the warrant bosun's job. He had to supervise the whips secured to the king post. Two aerial ropeways were stretched across to the battleship, and running on each rope was a block, and suspended from the blocks were immense buckets of stout canvas. From each bucket ran two ropes, one to the battleship and one to the oiler, and by pulling on one or the other, the bucket and its contents could be sent back and forth across the water. The men had to work fast, with the water swirling round their knees. All those stores must be transferred by the time the battleship was fueled. Five minutes might make the difference between victory and defeat, and already the quick-release valves had been clamped down upon the battleship's flanges, and the pumps were filling the thirsty tanks.

The warrant bosun saw to it that his whips were properly rigged, manned and working, and then he hurried forward again to have another look at that precious Manila towline. Everything was all right there. An ignorant person might expect a breathing space for the warrant bosun now, but he would have to be a very ignorant person.

"When the hell is daylight coming?" said the warrant bosun to himself. For the first time, he had taken a false step and fallen headlong over a valve on the deck, the presence of which he had momentarily forgotten. He swore at the valve and he swore at himself, at the darkness of the night and at the roughness of the sea, as he plunged on round the decks like a squirrel in a cage. With every man and every rope in the ship hard at work, his attention was needed at all points at once.

Daylight was at hand, however. The sky to the east was growing pale, and the ships wallowing along, like drunken men hand in hand, were becoming more and more visible—the massive, solid beauty of the battleship and the grim, harsh ugliness of the Fleet oiler. Faces could be made out in one ship from the next, and friends could recognize one another. The task force had spent not days, but weeks at sea, plowing monotonously through the gray water in unceasing watch, and this brief interval spent alongside a new arrival was a blessed respite, a cupful of the water of variety in the thirsty desert of hateful monotony. On the battleship, there were men with leisure to enjoy it, men with time to stop and grin and wave their arms, but in the Fleet oiler every man was busy, and their

recent life had not been monotonous.

The growing daylight revealed more and more of the task force, so that an observer could form some notion of the elaborate staff work needed for fueling at sea. It was a fighting formation, as it had to be, even while at the same time it was performing a peaceful evolution, and those precious minutes had to be saved. The moment one ship had completed her fueling, another had to be ready to take her place, leaving her fighting station in ample time while another ship filled the gap in the screen.

The warrant bosun hurried across to look after the business of casting off, and the battleship drew slowly ahead under the impulse of the quickened beat of her propellers, her crew waving farewell. An aircraft carrier was awaiting attention, but the warrant bosun might at least have spared time for a friendly wave of the arm if his eye had not caught sight of the searchlight winking at the flagship's signal bridge. "Expedite," said those dots and dashes. The warrant bosun spelled them out for himself.

"Expedite!" said the warrant bosun. "Expedite..." He went on to say all the things he had said before, in practically the same order, dirt and blasphemy intermixed. Expedite, indeed!

The warrant bosun had not sat down since Bing Crosby's song had been interrupted yesterday, and he saw no possibility of sitting down until tomorrow. He was wet and hungry and

weary but the Fleet oiler was moving up alongside the carrier, and the warrant bosun had to leave off swearing. Those messenger lines had to be passed, and he could save five minutes if he made quite sure that they went over at the first attempt.

Minutes are always of importance in war, and today they were of more importance than ever, although the warrant bosun did not know it. Away over the horizon were two factors that the warrant bosun knew nothing of: There was a storm approaching, and there was a Japanese force steaming across the task force's front.

To intercept and destroy that convoy, the task force must steam fast and far, and must be fully fueled. If that storm were to arrive in time to interrupt the fueling, the Japs would escape, and not merely escape, but would land their reinforcements on one of those dots on the map, the strategic importance of which has only become clear to us since 1941. Ultimate victory, the final triumph of the United Nations, perhaps did not hinge on destroying that convoy, but much depended on it, all the same: the lives of many Americans, the possible duration of the war, and, along with that, the future of American citizens yet unborn. It was enough to justify the admiral's impatience when he hoisted the signal which made the warrant bosun swear.

The aircraft carrier needed gasoline as well as fuel oil, and as the boom swung the hose across the gap, the bosun's mates hurried through the Fleet oiler, shrilling on their pipes.

"The smoking lamp is out throughout the ship," they called, which is the way the Navy says "No smoking." The warrant

bosun said his words over again, every one of them. He had not had time even to light a cigarette, and the order annoyed him just as much as did the admiral's "Expedite."

There were a couple of sick men to transfer, ratings with broken bones who were in need of the comfort of the Fleet oiler's big sick bay, the diagnosis possible with the Fleet oiler's X-ray apparatus, and the ultimate transfer to a hospital. The warrant bosun made it his special business to supervise the work—helpless men strapped into immobility on their wire stretchers but stolidly fatalistic during their dizzy passage along the rope. The sea was working up with the approaching storm; it needed nice judgment to get the men down onto the deck without a jar, and the warrant bosun only had just time to hand them over to the doctor before running forward again over the swirling decks to look after his towlines.

Battleships and destroyers and cruisers; one by one they came up alongside the Fleet oiler and drank thirstily from her hoses, like little pigs coming up to the mother sow, all through that long, weary day of wet and cold and increasing fatigue. It was twelve hours of hard work, but what the warrant bosun did not fully appreciate was the fact that it was also twelve hours of advance toward the enemy, twelve hours of movement to intercept that Japanese convoy. The ability to fuel at sea in any weather short of a gale extended the radius of action of the task force by hundreds—thousands—of miles, and that ability turned on how well the warrant bosun had kept his cordage in condition, how well he had maintained his gear and how well he handled it when the time came.

It was the Fleet oiler and her warrant bosun that made victory possible. Those enormous battleships over there, imposing with their turrets and fire-control towers, were no whit more important than this homely oil tanker.

It might even be expressed more forcibly still: The admiral at the battleship's bridge, the admiral with the broad gold on his sleeve, irascibly signaling "Expedite," was at that particular moment a less important person than the warrant bosun, wet through, worn out, and yet still swinging out the boom and hose with all the accurate judgment of twenty years of experience.

The work had begun before daylight; and night was about to fall when the last line was cast off and faked down. The warrant bosun had intercepted the "Expedite" signal, but chance did not bring to his attention the "Well done" signal which the admiral sent over—the highest compliment which it was in the admiral's power to pay.

The warrant bosun was too busy getting his gear secured, ready for the storm which was upon them. It did just pass through his mind that they had finished in the nick of time, that if the heaving lines had not been properly thrown, if a single line had parted at any time during the day, if an hour had been lost, whether in one single catastrophe or in dribs and drabs through the day, they would never have completed the fueling

before the storm, but he did not know enough about the strategical situation to make any further deduction.

All he knew was that he was wet and tired, and the gear had to be secured, lines made up and stowed, and the axes put away, which all day long had lain ready on the deck to cut the ships free in the event of an attack. The Fleet had vanished into the unknown darkness, and the oiler was then heading for the bay again.

He finished his work; the gale was upon them now, the sea breaking green over the tank deck, and even over the catwalk, while the ship, her tanks empty, rolled fantastically over the heavy sea. The warrant bosun clawed his way aft through the roaring wet dark, guided by experience to the door into the after superstructure. He heaved himself over the coaming, and down the alleyway with its faint red light. He switched on the light in his cabin and stood there, the water streaming from his clothes onto the steel deck. The light shone on the photograph of his wife and the two nude pictures. It was twenty-eight hours since he had last laid his eyes on them.

"Hell!" said the warrant bosun to himself; that was the only word of the many which he said to himself which can be reproduced.

He began to peel off his wet clothes. This was a month with thirty-one days in it, so that his pay for a day amounted to ten dollars and six cents, with another dollar fifty-one for the extra four hours. So that, from the time of leaving his cabin to the time of re-entering it, he had earned \$11.57, and, during that time, he had perhaps shortened by a couple of months a war

costing ten million a day.

THE END

[The end of *Rendezvous* by C. S. Forester]