What life was like in 1984 at a World War II ship yard as it was going through the labor pains of an impending renaissance – from the point of view of somebody who got to tag along with some scuba divers and work there a couple times. Since then, much of the city's blight has been replaced with new businesses, upscale apartment buildings and condominiums, and safe places to berth yachts.

DOWN AT THE SHIP YARD

Part One of Two

© by Andrea Sharp

1984

SATURDAY

Take it any way you want to when I say that scuba diving for a living has its ups and downs. It must be the dirtiest, most tiring, and sometimes the most humiliating job I've ever had.

Yet I like it. Nobody, but nobody, can bug you when you're down there. And it's so quiet except for the soothing rhythm of breathing and bubbles. Supported on all sides by water, steadily sucking in air and blowing it out again, is a sensation of protected weightlessness that must be a lot like those primordial nine months in Mom's belly.

Most of the time I work at yacht harbors, scrubbing the bottoms of sailboats, fastening pieces of zinc onto propeller shafts, and fetching precious things for people from the bottom of San Francisco Bay--boring kid stuff compared to what most professional scuba divers do. But every once in a while, a job comes along that's, you might say, bigger than usual. Working at a ship yard, for instance.

Ship yards are nothing like colorful marinas where pretty rows of sailboats look like they're posing for a dazzling seascape in an oil painting. A ship yard is one of those places where it seems like people just don't belong. The north pole. The moon. Even man-made wonders like airplane runways where, as you gaze out of that tiny window during take-off and landing, you feel like a modern-day Gulliver watching efficient Lilliputians race around in toy jeeps. You get the same feeling at ship yards, except that you're the one who's six inches tall.

I went to one for the first time with a guy named Dan John, the Dan of Dan's Diving Services in Richmond, California. He'd mentioned he'd be needing a hand at one some time soon and I willingly, even enthusiastically, offered him mine. A few days later, I was on my way, suited up as usual in a foul-smelling wet suit that clung intimately to every inch of me and made something as simple as sitting upright an uncomfortable effort.

As we approached the yard, we passed a building I wouldn't have noticed if it hadn't been for the sign that blared,

SEAMAN'S CENTER--APOSTLESHIP OF THE SEA

A place for God-fearing sailors to unload sins and stock up on due blessings before shoving off into the perils of the deep, I thought at first. Then it occurred to me that sailors aren't the only ones who challenge that deep water--and I didn't know the first thing about praying.

We turned right, to a gate in the chain link fence that surrounded the yard, where a small hut that housed a security guard, a table, and a telephone stood. Three or four men were gathered there, one of whom gave us a friendly smile and waved. Another, a stiff, uniformed man, gestured to Dan to stop so that he could copy his license plate number onto a piece of paper that was fastened to a clip board. This was a ritual, I learned in later visits, we'd go through every time we went there.

A formidable sign made of a piece of plywood painted white with bright red stenciled letters hung from the woven wire in front of us. It said,

WARNING

AUTOMOBILES PARKED IN THIS AREA ARE SUBJECT TO
PAINT OVER SPRAY AND SAND BLASTING.

PARK AT YOUR OWN RISK.

YARD SECURITY.

I read it, obediently intimidated, as a foreboding exchange went on between Dan and the guard.

"How's it going?"

"O.K."

"Where you going?"

"The gate."

"The gate?"

"Yeah. The gate."

The guard wrote down our names and watched us as we drove on.

I immediately felt out of place. When it came to boats and scuba diving, I was accustomed to human proportions where narrow, wobbly docks are built for human feet, where I dived no deeper than four or five meters, where marinas featured all the luxuries of cozy yacht clubs. But here, the dimensions were not on a human scale, and my eyes kept moving in search of something soft to rest on. Except for the sky, which was bright blue that day, the only colors were the whites, blacks, and grays of concrete and steel that made everything seem flatter, more angular, more empty, and, always, less human than the rest of the world.

But Dan, unlike me, was sanguine. He'd been diving I professionally for ten years and, a veteran of the United States Navy, he acted like he knew the territory. He drove us across a wide expanse of concrete where pieces of machinery, large tools, and automobiles were scattered. To the right was an enormous building that looked like a warehouse. Stark, tall letters announced it was the PLATE AND ANGLE SHOP. About forty years ago, war ships were assembled there.

We made our way toward a cluster of gray metal buildings where a group of men stood wearing heavy boots, coarse clothing, and hard hats. They seemed cheerful and spirited, even on a Saturday. I'd have guessed the ages of all but one of them to be between 25 and 40--post World War II baby boomers. It wasn't unlikely that they were children of men and women who, forty years ago, migrated to work at the ship yards as these men were working today.

I had to stretch my imagination to picture what Richmond and the ship yard had been like in those days. In 1940, it was a country town on the marshy north side of San Francisco Bay with a population of 16,850. Three years later, after President Roosevelt gave 35 percent of the country's ship-building contracts to Kaiser Industries, the village was a budding city sparkling like an oasis in the desert for over 100,000 people. Trading their homes, farms, and the depression for the promise of a better life, they flooded the sleepy burg with a torrent of human flesh that, in regimented assembly lines, would sire the controlled metamorphosis of tons of steel into hundreds of ships. For four years, as many as 60,000 people worked full time, launching ship after ship into San Francisco Bay like paper into a wastebasket. Today, of the 2,751 American liberty ships built during the Second World War, one, a floating museum, is in operating condition.

Prosperity in Richmond is history now. Two previous attempts to waken the ship yard from peace-time hibernation were brief and unsuccessful. In Richmond itself, it's not hard to find patches of city that look like a ghost town that had been courted in the thirties, conquered in the forties, and abandoned in the fifties. You see decrepit buildings bandaged with salvaged plywood; empty, gaping storefronts; theater doors that stand locked under a blank marquee. Automobiles there are sparse. Pedestrians who seem to float by without a

destination evoke an eerie ambience of aimlessness. In Richmond *(ed. note: in 1985 when this piece was written),* 12.2 percent of the population is without work while the national unemployment rate is 8.3 percent.

We arrived at lunch time. Spotting Dan's van, the oldest man in the group ambled over to us carrying what looked like a ham sandwich. A plastic label on the crest of his hard hat identified him as R.G. Britto, Dockmaster. Dan said, "This is Rudy," and, pointing a thumb at me, explained, "New diver." Rudy and I exchanged nods, our curiosity about each other an even match. I, a woman scuba diver, was something to wonder at no doubt, almost intrusively out of place in this ship yard universe of his. He'd been the dockmaster there since it reopened a year before, gladly giving it his nights, his weekends, and his life as he probably had many times in the past. He loved the ships--war ships, to be precise--and always knew exactly what needed to be done, who could do it, and how long it could wait. Rudy was a tough example of efficiency itself.

Dan told him that one more diver, Ed Muller, would arrive soon. Rudy said he'd meet the three of us at the gate in fifteen minutes.

Ahead of us, concrete platforms 50 feet wide and 600 feet long extended into the bay. My companion turned the van casually on to one of them and stopped about 30 feet from the end. On either side of the platform was a dry dock, an enormous gorge where ships are tended to. I glanced at the one to the right. It was full of water and looked as ordinary as the bay itself--merely a square inlet into the land. But when I walked over to the one on the left, the one we would be working on, I remembered the first time I leaned out on a cliff to take a look at the Grand Canyon. I was startled. It looked like an immense concrete grave--again something too big for human beings: about 800 feet long, 90 feet wide, and 100 feet deep. But stairways with bent, rusted handrails that protruded from both sides of the pit proved that creatures my size had something to do with the place.

Then I saw the gate. More properly called a caisson, it was a massive black steel wall, about ten feet wide, standing at the bay end of the dry dock. Two walkways ran along the top, one above the other, and were joined together by steep metal steps. This was what, with the help of pumps, stood up against thousands of pounds of pressure from the bay and kept the dry dock empty, though not completely dry: a small but steady stream of water, which was leaking through two square flood gates at the bottom of the caisson, slid into the gorge about 20 feet. It then disappeared behind rusty iron grates that covered what looked like huge sewer drains lined up side by side across the bottom of the dry dock.

Caissons are movable and can be drained of the water that keeps them from floating. After a ship comes in, the empty caisson is floated to the end of the dry dock and filled with water to secure it into position. Pumps, which operate

either automatically for water that leaks in or manually when the dry dock is emptied, send water back out to the bay through the drains at the bottom. By opening two square flood gates at the bottom of the caisson, the dock can be filled again in about five hours.

Behind us was a crane--a "whirly." It arched about 30 feet at its lowest point and 45 at its highest where red letters boasted its strength, "59 TONS." The operator of the crane, looking through a pane of glass that stretched across the middle of the towering contraption, moved the machine toward us.

Rudy and Ed had arrived by this time. The four of us gathered on the platform as Rudy pulled a piece of chalk from the pocket of his windbreaker and drew a diagram on the concrete. His precision was remarkable even if what he was telling us was simple. Two airplane tires that were used as fenders on the outside of the caisson had fallen to the bottom of the bay. With the help of the crane, Dan and Ed would retrieve them. I would help them this time by tossing stuff down, helping them climb out, or running back and forth to the van for equipment. I would also get familiar with the place for future dives by watching what went on from the lower walkway of the caisson.

A ladder was fetched, tied to some railings, and left to hang in the water so Dan and Ed could get out.

Dan plunged in first, taking with him a floater--an empty bleach bottle tied to a piece of twine to mark his find. By the time Ed jumped in, Dan had tied the twine to one of the tires and resurfaced, the floater bobbing near him. Now he needed some help. Rudy provided it standing above me on the upper walkway. I could see neither the crane nor the crane operator, but he responded instantly to Rudy's sign language and shout, "Bring 'er over!"

A metal hook, five feet long and three feet wide, appeared dangling from a looped coil of rope an inch and a half thick. Unlike rope made from hemp which drops into a straight line when it hangs, this metal stuff was stiff and uncannily bent as if immune to the force of gravity. The hook and the rope passed by, descending slowly, until four rusted, heavy chains came into view. On the end of them were shackles: U-shaped connectors the size of a big man's fist or bigger. The open end of the U was crossed by a bar as thick as a man's forefinger and fastened on with hefty butterfly nuts, about two inches wide. The metal coil hung from one of the four chains.

After Dan had gone down again to tend to the hook, Rudy said, "He's got 35 feet of line not counting the hook. Should be enough."

"How do you figure?" I asked.

Rudy explained, "Well, it's 30 feet deep. The rope to the chain is 30 feet and we gave him about five feet of chain too."

Just then, Dan appeared. "Take 'er up about five feet." he called. "You put 'er in the mud." As he disappeared again, Rudy relayed the message to the operator of the crane who responded as promptly as if his hands were attached to Rudy's arms. Rudy counted each foot of chain one by one as it emerged from the surface of the water. When he got to five, he gave an abrupt wave and called, "O.K., hold it right there." The chains stopped moving before Rudy closed his mouth.

As we waited for Dan, Rudy told me that during the war, those 60,000 ship yard employees turned out a liberty ship in less than five days. His eyes then fell on Dan who was saying, “in 15 seconds, take 'er up slow. It's just a little slack and I gotta fasten it to the lip." Then he vanished.

Rudy looked at his watch with eyelids lowered, lips pursed, and a nonchalant expression on his face. "I'll give him 20 seconds." He turned to the crane and communicated, "O.K. Just a touch."

It took only seconds for the 30 feet of rope to ascend, but they passed slowly. At last, the surface of the water swelled like an enormous bubble and then broke into a white, barnacle-covered round thing. It was the top of the tire and it kept emerging and emerging, growing wider and wider, displacing a small flood of water until I could see half of it. Its diameter was at least five feet and I was surprised once again by size. Water dripped from it as it swung in an arc out to the bay and then back to the platform out of sight.

I almost forgot about Ed who had found the second tire and confirmed what was already assumed. "It's stuck beneath the caisson and the ground," he reported, indicating the angle of the tire with his hands.

We got ready for a repeat performance. The hook made its entrance as if on cue to a stage. After showing Rudy where to drop the hook, Ed disappeared to fasten it to the tire. I helped Dan climb back up to the caisson and, as soon as Ed resurfaced, gave him a hand too. Rudy came down to the lower walkway of the caisson with us and we began to talk, about what I no longer remember, forgetting about the hook, the rope, the chains, the shackles, and the crane operator.

We didn't notice that, this time, the chains weren't moving steadily upward. They were stretching, tighter and tighter, as the crane operator commanded the crane to pull. But the tire didn't budge. There was a grinding noise and even more tension on the rope and chains. We continued to talk. The crane operator continued to pull. The chain became even stiffer. The crane operator kept right on lifting. We kept right on talking.

Then it snapped. At the sound of the loud crack, everybody ducked but me. Foolishly, I turned to see what it was. With the sudden release of pressure from a broken shackle, the rope slapped to the bottom of the bay and the chains flew straight up, then dropped, flailing wildly in every direction like a rubberband breaking in slow motion.

No one was hurt. Nobody panicked. A decision was merely made about what to do next. Somebody suggested using a choker--30 feet of metal rope tied in a slip knot. It could be curled around the tire to yank on it again.

Dan went down to investigate and returned to call up, "There's no way we're gonna get that thing outa here like this. The hook is straightened out completely and the cord's snapped back."

The caisson would have to be moved before the tire could be retrieved. But when? A ship--a sonar--was coming in on Monday. Rudy needed divers to make sure it was properly aligned with the keel blocks on the bottom of the dry dock so no damage would be done to instrumentation on the bottom of the ship when the dock was drained. The tire could be freed from under the caisson then so we could take care of both jobs on the same day.

Just as I remembered that Ed didn't dive on weekdays Dan shot me a friendly glance and said, "Looks like you're working Monday."

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