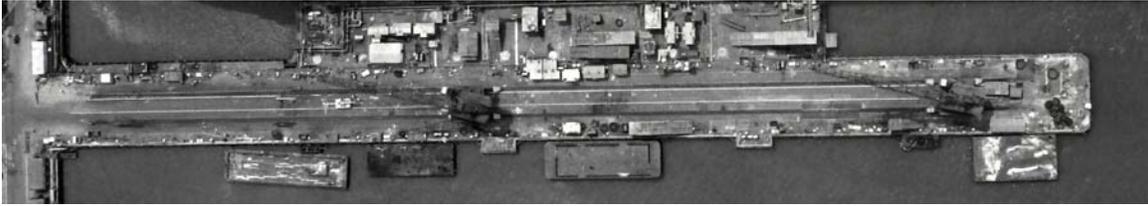


The Battle of Pier 2



Apprentice Alumnus Outmaneuvers Pompous PCO

by Bill Lee (EDA, 1959)

~ Introduction ~

Thirty-plus years have somewhat dimmed my memory of some details of this 'classic' sea story. Numerous retellings may have resulted in a few embellishments. Wouldn't be the first time... But this incident really did occur, although it probably took less time to happen than to tell about. The illustrations I have included are merely representative; there were no photographers around. Hopefully, this word-picture, created in November 2007, will suffice as a suitable substitute.

It was a dark (and soon to be stormy) night in late February 1975. The NIMITZ (CVN 68) was nearing completion at NNS; moored bow-in on the south side of Pier 2 (originally Pier 8; renumbered in 1970). One of the very last things that had to be completed before this nuclear-powered navy vessel could go on sea trials was a 'Fast Cruise'.

That may not be a familiar term to all readers, so I'll elaborate. A Fast Cruise is when everyone except the navy crew leaves the ship, all shore support systems are disconnected (after the ship's systems are self-sustaining) and the crew simulates being at sea for a period of time; typically 48 hours. The intended purpose of a Fast Cruise is to confirm the readiness of ship and crew, through a series of drills, before actually going to sea. Fast Cruise also provides the crew an opportunity to detect problems and identify them to the shipbuilder.

Accordingly, NIMITZ never left its Pier 2 berth during her Fast Cruise; all mooring lines were kept securely place. But the gangways were removed, and all communications with the ship were accomplished by radio, over navy channels. Her main propulsion machinery could only be run at very low RPM during Fast Cruise, and even then only one shaft at a time could be turned over (otherwise, the ship would have tried to go downtown!). Naturally, it was not possible for catapult or recovery operations to be conducted, but lots of drills were run, and simulated emergency situations were created to test the crew's skills...around the clock.

Any problems identified that would require shipbuilder attention were periodically collected, added to a list and transmitted from the ship to the local Supervisor of Shipbuilding office. NNS was given copies of these messages so that we could evaluate, prepare troubleshooting tests and/or provide fixes, once access to the ship was available again.

And therein lies the rub...

NIMITZ' Fast Cruise was completed about 8 PM. S/y riggers simulated tying the ship up, actually reconnected shore power, telephone and water lines, etc. Numerous shipyard officials and engineering staff (including yours truly), a few Naval Reactors' representatives and local Supervisor of Shipbuilding (SOS) staff crowded around the bottom of a two-story high, pier-mounted platform. Once a narrow gangway was put back in place, that platform would provide access to the forward most sponson on Hangar Deck level, port side.



We were all eager to go into what had always proved in the past to be a lengthy debriefing and to receive additional details from the crew so that we could take appropriate actions to make sure sea trials (only a few days away) could proceed on schedule. A meeting for this purpose had been scheduled to start ASAP in the 'dirty shirt' wardroom on Gallery Deck, forward.

Dozens of shipyard workers crowded around two larger, pier-mounted platforms further aft, where two much wider gangways were to be placed, to provide a path for men and materials across the port side aircraft elevator. That elevator had been lowered to the Hangar Deck level to facilitate this access, and a crowd of 'white hats' gathered there, impatient to go on Liberty.

None of this was new or novel; we had seen it all before when working on other carriers. But apparently one marine sentry onboard the NIMITZ didn't understand the procedure, or get 'the word'. Or, perhaps he was simply doing what he had been ordered to do...

When the forward gangway was put in place, and even before all the crane's rigging lines could be removed, the shipyard's Construction Manager for CVAN's (and Apprentice School Alumnus) **Walter Beadles "Miff" Miffleton, Jr.** (HDR – 1953) and the head of SOS (a Rear Admiral) hurried across to the edge of the sponson. The rest of us crowded forward, and I was close enough to witness a rare, albeit unrecorded moment in naval history...that is, until now.

Before I continue, permit me to interject that no one in the shipyard, to my knowledge, ever called Miff by his given name. Some childhood friends called this Newport News native W. B., but almost universally, and throughout a long career at NNS, he was just good old, normally easy-going Miff.

The marine sentry smartly saluted the Admiral, but with his rifle at the ready, blocked Miff's path, forcing him to stop short of the sponson; still on the gangway. The sentry said something to the effect that all civilians were required to use the aft brow, and nothing Miff or the Admiral could say made the slightest bit of difference to him. He just kept repeating something like "Captain's Orders".

The Admiral yelled at a young officer (I assume the JOOD, who was trying to remain inconspicuous as he envisioned his brief navy career sinking alongside a shipyard pier) to call the Captain and get the situation reconciled. Actually, I think he uttered the navy version of PDQ – which is PFQ. Use your imagination...

A hurried telephone call was made to bridge by the JOOD, and the totally unexpected response – passed back through who knows how many people - was that the Captain was too busy to take the call! I guess no one thought to tell him the call was made on behalf of his superior.

For those readers unaware of the contractual niceties involved, before NIMITZ was completed, it was the shipyard's responsibility to take care of it, and systematically turn systems over to the navy crew for operation. But SOS was the government's contractual authority, and up to the ship's departure from NNS, the ship's pre-commissioning crew was under the authority of SOS. And the ship's captain, at that point, was officially only the Prospective Commanding Officer (although, as a courtesy, everyone called him "Captain").

Amongst other things...and especially that evening.

Traditionally, the PCO of a new carrier is a senior naval aviator-turned-ship-driver, so the niceties of the black shoe navy sometimes are lost on such individuals. More than one PCO has let his assumed authority go to his head, and become testy in his daily dealings with yard officials. This was certainly the case with the first skipper of NIMITZ, as many who were there can attest.

As I recall, the Admiral said he'd go to the bridge and get things straightened out. Now, as you can imagine, the yard's well-seasoned, CVAN Construction Manager didn't get put in charge of a major NNS program by being shy or docilely accepting insults from anyone. Normally easy-going, when provoked Miff sometimes exhibited a flaming temper that matched his red hair. In other words, at that point, and as we like to say in nuclear circles, Miff went prompt-critical.

He told the good Admiral to go right ahead, and then Miff retreated to the platform on the pier, causing most of us that had been close behind him to 'domino down' the steps in pretty helter-skelter fashion. I do wish I could recall his exact words (I think they would have rivaled "I've yet begun to fight").

In any case, he loudly ordered the riggers, standing nearby and waiting to remove the gangway lifting cables, to instead prepare to lift that gangway off the ship! Miff also told startled Admiral that the gangway would be removed, unless the Captain got his \$*^&^%\$ butt down there and personally apologized.

The Rigger boss, with a big grin, quickly reattached the crane to the rigging harness still in place on the gangway. In addition, further aft, all efforts to land and secure the other gangways ended abruptly.

After trying to reason with our hero for a couple of minutes the Admiral headed off to confront the PCO (as the JOOD made another frantic call...).



And so, there we stood, some on the platform, and some on the stairs; but all suppressing snickers. Well, most of us did; some laughed out loud. It took a little longer than you might expect, under the circumstances, for the PCO to appear on the sponson. This did nothing to cool off Miff, if that was the PCO's intent. With his tailhook tucked out of sight, the PCO attempted to placate Miff, albeit at a distance – the PCO didn't venture out onto that unsecured gangway.

But, unfortunately for him, the PCO had been unwise in the wording of some of his prior written reports; very critical of the shipyard in general, and of Miff's performance, in particular. So, our hero accused the PCO, loudly and colorfully, and over a distance I estimate was fifty feet or so, of deliberately insulting the world's best shipbuilders (I do clearly remember that phrase being used, along with a lot of adjectives that start with the sixth letter in the alphabet).

Miff concluded his tirade by saying that an apology better be forthcoming quickly, or he was going to remove that gangway and send everyone on the pier home for the night. Meanwhile, back aft, the group of sailors, standing on the aircraft elevator and waiting to go on Liberty could be heard loudly complaining. The seeds of the first nuclear-powered mutiny in history, perhaps...

Clearly outmaneuvered, the PCO reluctantly muttered what I assume was an apology, although its sincerity was probably suspect. Satisfied, but still simmering, Miff had the gangway secured and we scurried across and climbed up three levels of inclined ladders to the delayed meeting.

The Admiral opened the meeting, and, as I recall, addressed or referred to the NIMITZ' skipper-to-be as the Prospective Commanding Officer, with enough emphasis on the first word of that title to make it abundantly clear to everyone present that taking command of the NIMITZ was not necessarily automatic. I don't know what official censure, if any, the PCO received. But he was 'icy pleasant' to every shipyard employee from then on, through two sets of sea trials and for the several weeks between NIMITZ' departure from NNS and her commissioning in May.

I rode the ship between delivery and commissioning (delayed, so that President Ford could be present), acting in the capacity of propulsion plant guarantee engineer. Because of the excellent job the world's greatest shipbuilders had done, I had precious little to do. So I spent a lot of time on the Admiral's bridge, watching in awe as navy test pilots 'qualified' the flight deck.



The PCO was extremely nice to me during that period of time, and asked me – as a personal favor to him - to look at a problem outside the propulsion plant area and give him some 'off-the-record' advice from an engineering standpoint.

We even had lunch together on the bridge a couple of times; his treat.

But we never discussed the incident that I fondly remember as: **“The Battle of Pier 2”**.

~ Postscript ~

I wish I had a photo of Miff from the 1975 timeframe to help illustrate this story. Alas, I don't. But thanks to the Apprentice Alumni Association web site, I can include the following photos. The one on the left is his senior class photo in the 1953 Binnacle. The one on the right was taken at the 2003 Apprentice Alumni Banquet, when Miff's class was honored on their 50th anniversary.



Unexpectedly, Miff passed away shortly after that celebration - on May 9, 2003 at age 75.