

## UNVARNISHED TRUTH

At the old Grebe shipyard on the Chicago river, Captain Dutch taught me how to varnish. On the second floor of a boat storage building was a room devoted to varnishing boat parts: teak handrails, steering wheels, cabinetry, and handmade flag staffs that Dutch sold to boaters. Assorted work benches, saw horses, stools, and upended old milk bottle crates, were covered with fine mahogany and teak boat parts waiting for glistening coats of marine spar varnish with not a drip or run to be seen.

The “Varnish Room,” contained an old dining room table and chairs, ancient refrigerator, hot plate, and a bathroom with a stainless-steel shower made by shipyard welders. While workers did all major painting, captains were allowed to varnish bright work on their owners’ yachts.

Captain Dutch was not Dutch at all, but a German who fled the Nazis before the war broke out. Dutch became a fixture at Grebe, the elder statesman for the half dozen or so yacht captains still retained by owners. When I was hired as a boat salesman, he was the first to come into my office and introduce himself. In

his sixties, still barrel chested with a leathery face from 30 years on commercial ships and Chicago yachts, he could have modeled for those wooden miniature sea captains wearing foul weather hats you see in gift stores. Dutch never wore his captain's hat in the off season, proudly showing a full head of dark gray hair that neither thinned nor turned white, matching the wisps of smoke from cheap cigarillos he chain-smoked.

Dutch taught me how to varnish fine wood to look like amber glass with the wood grain showing through. He drilled into me the "three P's" of varnishing: "Preparation, Patience, and more Preparation." He complained so bitterly about the varnish work of shipyard painters, he was given special permission to do all the varnishing on his owner's boat, the ROBERT ALLAN, a 36' cabin cruiser built by Grebe's in 1936. Every year Dutch added another coat from the deck up: the mahogany deck house, cockpit seats and coamings, etc., and every third or fourth year the inside of the cabin. Everything removable, like window frames, handrails, and trim pieces, he carried to the varnish room. Larger flat surfaces, moldings, and toe rails attached permanently to the boat he coated in place inside the wooden storage shed---a museum really---reserved for Grebe built wooden boats.

In late fall as soon as the ROBERT ALLAN was lifted out of the Chicago River and moved on 1920's vintage rails into its winter home, Dutch began sanding every morning always by hand and never wearing gloves. "You can't feel smoothness through gloves," he sneered to anyone foolish enough to ask why. To prevent blistering, he cut strips of masking tape and wrapped the ends of his fingers. By mid-morning the tape wore through to bare skin, signaling break time. Dutch then came to my office for coffee looking like a school boy after an eraser fight and spun yarns about his war experiences in the South Pacific, always prefaced by his hatred for FDR for drafting and sending him there.

"The day after I got my U.S. citizenship papers that son of a bitch sent me as far away from Germany as you could get, worried I might desert to the Nazis. That was the first and last time I voted for a Democrat," Dutch said repeatedly.

"We were assigned to supply ships that moved in after the third or fourth wave of Marines. At Iwo Jima while our troops fought into the island interior shooting and burning everything in sight, us suspicious Kraut heads, were ordered ashore to pick up enemy weapons and ammo to destroy. Well that was the Brass's idea; mine was to find jewelry or daggers or fancy china, stuff like that to sell. You got to understand thousands of sailors on supply ships weren't allowed

to go ashore but wanted souvenirs, especially battle flags. They were nuts about taking battle flags home.”

“So, you found Japanese battle flags?”

“Found ‘em? No chance. Any Jap flags were grabbed by the officers right off. I made my own. I got the idea in one of the caves full of fabric and sewing machines---not exactly war souvenir stuff, so the Marines left them alone. Well, I knew how to sew, so I got this idea to make the one thing those nutty guys on the ships would pay a whole lot for: battle flags. Sewing the Jap rising sun onto fabric was easy; it was the writing that was hard. I didn’t know any Japanese. We were taught to kill the bastards, not speak to them. So, I grabbed empty tin cans of food, soap boxes, stuff like that and copied real nice Jap writing using indelible ink from the ship’s laundry, so it wouldn’t run if some hick farm boy got it wet and figured out he had a fake flag. After finishing it, I would drag it through some mud, maybe singe it a little, then hang it on a tree and fire a pistol at it. On my first flag I used a goddamn machine gun and tore the thing to pieces.”

“And you sold them to guys on the ships?”

“Couldn’t make them fast enough. Guys from small towns who saved every damn dime of their pay wanted to go home as big shots with a Jap flag, so they

paid big. Can you imagine those rubes with fake battle flags hanging in their houses telling bullshit war stories, when some guest or college kid who knew Japanese translated, 'Tide's In, Dirt's Out,' or some other dumb slogan? Jesus, if any of those boys ever finds me, I'm a dead Dutchman."

By late March the ROBERT ALLAN'S bright work was sanded in Dutch's phrase, "smooth as a baby's powdered ass," ready for varnishing. Only then would he invite me topside to demonstrate his fine art. After making sure no paint work was scheduled on other boats in the shed that might float dust onto his fresh varnish, he shop vacuumed our clothes like a barber, checked his marine radio for the weather report on any wind that might blow dust, then hung a NO ADMITTANCE sign on the door. He opened a box of tack cloths, sticky cheesecloth with beeswax imbedded in the fabric, and showed me how to wipe down, not once but twice, always with the grain, every square inch of wood to remove any sanding dust his shop vac missed. And just to make sure not one dust particle remained, he wiped each square foot again just before dipping his expensive beaver tail brush. Only then would he lay on the varnish.

"Thin layers," he instructed me, "thin as a pair of French panties." He showed me how to lay the brush flat on its side and then lay on the varnish thin to

prevent runs. When I brushed too fast or with too much pressure, he grabbed my hand holding the brush and guided it, letting me feel the rhythm of his follow-through strokes. "Tight and smooth, tight and smooth."

Being German Dutch loved classical music and kept a portable radio onboard, so he could varnish to Mozart or Beethoven. He admired Stradivari violins knowing that their unique sound derives from a secret varnish recipe never duplicated.

At times he waxed philosophical about varnishing. The phrase, "unvarnished truth," irritated him no end. One bitter afternoon below zero and too cold to work, he took me to a working man's bar, dark and exuding thick odors of stale booze and cigarettes, a bar that could have been the set for O'Neil's *The Ice Man Cometh*. Dutch was three sheets to the wind when another Grebe captain on the next stool made fun of barflies buying lottery tickets. When Dutch argued that state lotteries were a tax on the poor, the other captain agreed. "Of course, they're a tax on the poor . . . about time the lazy bastards paid for something," adding, "That's the unvarnished truth!"

Dutch's face turned cheap wine red as he poked the captain's ribs hard. "Truth is never unvarnished; it's covered in layers that reveal and bring it to the

surface.” When the captain angrily punched back, I dragged Dutch out of there before they started a bar fight and walked him back to the shipyard’s always heated varnish room where Dutch stashed an army cot just for such occasions. After coffee the next morning he gave me (no charge) a mahogany flagstaff for my sailboat, hand lathed in the carpentry shop and gleaming with at least five coats of varnish.

Long after Dutch died and Grebe’s was sold for riverfront condos, I still fly it every time I sail my 23 foot sailboat, whose mahogany bench seats, coamings, handrails and cutty cabin doors, I sand and varnish every two or three seasons.

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