

Who Painted That '76' On The Bridge?

Most people seem to crave recognition as if it was one of the cornerstones of happiness. By an unseen motivation, they have resorted to many different recognition tactics to ensure that their existence among the mass of humanity does not go unrecorded. Cavemen in France exploited the idea in their subterranean dwellings. Nubian kings ensured they were remembered through their massive pointed tombs. Some form of body customization such as bright hair color, tattoos, and skin piercing objects also seems to temporarily qualify. The following is an account of a gallant attempt at recognition for the passing of the Fort Schuyler Maritime College's class of 1976.

"Cadet William C. Skye report to the regimental office," the public address system reverberated through the acoustically dead passageways, providing access to rooms in the New York Maritime College dormitories. Those exact words were not an uncommon method of exercising the system. The announcement usually generated a flurry of interest among those in an otherwise largely indifferent lifestyle of a military academy. Comments like, "I wonder what he did now.", "They'll never pin it on him.", and "I wasn't in on this one." floated as wisps, waking the rumor mill machinery.

You would think that a military academy has the upper hand in disciplining its cadets, but those administrators standing as the Officer of the Day (OOD) were burdened by the sheer weight of the regulations book. There were so many rules that breaking them became very common place, even sport. By the time one made it to being a first class cadet or senior, he was a master in the skill of generating lightning fast excuses that defeated most any obscure rule.

He stood before the OOD who was doing his best to maintain a stern disciplinary countenance. Bill was not at attention but not as ease either. "What happened to the door?" the officer demanded probably wondering why he was given the task of this investigation and dreading the answer from the one who certainly knows but may not make it easy. "Oh, this is about the missing door to the new dorms. I don't now where it is, but if I was looking for a door, I'd look in storage room A-15 in the new dorm basement."

With mission accomplished, the OOD considered the disciplinary actions available to him and realized the trouble wouldn't be worth it. Bill had already calculated during the walk to the office that a quick truthful answer was the best course for the very reason that the easy success would divert the emotional need to retaliate with discipline. His favorite tactic of fencing with the OOD and the truth was much more fun, but not worth the minor diversion as afforded by a missing door.

The point was made that they shouldn't cross Bill when he tries the civilized method of making a situational change in the daily life of the cadets. The large solid wooden door was irrationally placed between the new dorms and the mess deck area near the post boxes. Keeping the door unlocked made sense because it avoided a cold or hot walk around the building that included a strut through the mess deck garbage pit so cadets could attend to their mail and the mess deck cafeteria. Bill's earlier request did not make a good enough impression on those who could change the habits of security and maintenance officials, who probably had some reason for locking the door, which I'm sure involved a measure of laziness. The door was returned and remained unlocked. We all knew to thank the group of door raiders.

Other challenges to the class of 1976 were more important than personal convenience. One such challenge was the large painted 71 that stared in our faces for years as we traversed the path from the dorms to the classrooms in the Fort. The Fort was part of a defensive string of structures built in the 1800's to protect the nation against mal-intended intruders, and in its obsolescence, was converted to classrooms and offices in support of the College, part of the SUNY system.

We had mixed emotions about the 71 painted on the anchorage block of concrete that held the Throgs Neck bridge suspension wires. It included pride that our fore-cadets were bold enough to make such a move, but it also included disappointment that our class had not done anything on the same scale other than painting the class number on the campus water tower, which is not regularly visible. Every day, we would be irritated by the specter of the grand accomplishment and vowed to do one better. Most people do much vowing with no action. The 76ers were more doers than vowers.

Our group of guys were still relatively unaffected by the positive influences that female cadets brought to the campus, since they had only been there less than two years. We were still harboring the mind-set that entertainment involved some measure of daring or good-natured violence, not that of impressing women.

The best example of this was our Birthday parties. The common practice of giving someone a pink belly for their birthday was improved upon by our group who extended the concept to include, stripping naked and throwing in the snow. But the most invasive practice evolved into body art using magic markers that left a memorable impression for weeks. Most were adept at hiding the date of their birthday, opting to forgo the annual right of passage ritual.

The years of being irritated by the painted 71 caused individuals to consider how to do it better, if only for the few moments while walking past the icon to the former cadets. Several months before graduation, we planned the grandest honor to the class of 1976 we could think about, painting a larger 76 on a higher part of the bridge.

The Throgs Neck Bridge was constructed in the decade before we arrived at the Fort Schuyler Maritime College, being finished in 1961. One of the two huge concrete anchorages holding the suspension cables severely altered the character of the campus with its massive block planted near the Fort. The bridge was in a class of large New York suspension bridges that included the Whitestone and Tri-boro, which connected the Bronx to the boroughs of Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan. These sisters were outclassed in New York only by the massive Verrazano Bridge whose engineers had to calculate the curvature of the Earth to make the bridge components connect correctly. The Throgs Neck Bridge is 360 feet above mean high water at the top of the towers, the middle clears mean high water at 142 feet, and it spans 13,400 feet with its approaches. The suspended span is 2,910 feet. It's a wonderful canvas to express school spirit in shades of red lead.

There were eight of us who, one night, made a concerted effort to plan the attack on the north tower. The picture below is of that night we did the planning. Jim Polcari is farthest left and is a great guy who was always willing to help; his major was straight deck, meaning that he was taking classes for a Marine Transportation degree resulting in an unlimited Third Mate's License allowing him to become a ship's Deck officer. I'm next, Gene Magee; I was an M&O major interested in meteorology and oceanography and also received a Third's Mate's License, although after one exam part retake. Then there is Al Novak, another straight deck major; he is a classy guy who was always needed to make us look good. After Al is Jim Schoenamen, a day student that was not in a license program in the 1970's. Then there is Bob Febos, a straight deck guy who could always be found contributing to the group's adventures. Kevin Jirak anchored the right side; he was our straight deck anchor man, being called when there was a particularly difficult task to accomplish. Tom Clark is seated on the left; he was a good friend to all our classmates who excelled on all levels of the straight deck curriculum. Seated on the right is Bill Skye, no introduction necessary except he may have redefined the straight deck character.



Being deck cadets, one of our best skills was painting, which we learned to do in volume while on the three cruises we attended on the Training Ship EMPIRE STATE. So, finding the necessary equipment and supplies on the ship berthed at the school was a trivial endeavor. The ship's watch consisted of underclassmen who would not balk at the onslaught of 1st class cadets on a focused mission while boarding the vessel and would not question the removal of 5 gallon paint cans and rollers with long handles called man-helpers. The supplies were planned.

The next item was transportation. Again, this was fairly easy since we had heard it was easy to borrow a monomoy for the 200 yard row over to the base of the north tower. The monomoy is basically an old-time lifeboat, the kind you see lashed upside down on the mid-deck of a sailing ship in the movies. The boat held eight rowers and a coxswain and was rather swift and maneuverable for an oar propelled vessel. Our earlier cadet days provided much training in the boat's operation, practicing for lifeboatmen endorsements and occasional races. It was designed in a time where it was important to be able to row a great distance. Today, lifeboats are designed to wait for a rescue. The only problem we saw was in avoiding Chief Hughes' campus patrol, since borrowing boats was not a formally endorsed process.

The operation itself was planned with a focus on safety. We had heard of others who borrowed boats and climbed the tower just for the view, so we knew that there would be access to a familiar water-tight door and ladder that made its way to the upper levels of the tower. There would be eight in the group

who would be paired to ensure dangers were encountered with the knowledge of another. This buddy-system is a proven safety technique.

The only thing remaining was to pick a date. We decided to wait for some good weather and keep loose on the date. The next few days we consulted with others guys in our group of friends that didn't make the planning meeting, who I'm sure helped to refine the basic plan. I always considered Gary Jones to be the central hub in our network of friends. He seemed to know what to say to make us feel accepted when emotions strayed out of line. The fact that he was Bill's roommate and was able to put up with various experiments like not doing laundry for a month or two moved our impression of him toward sainthood.

Others were consulted like Carl Lofberg and Jeff Parker, but they were too much in love at the time to add anything substantive. The gang was being infiltrated by a force stronger than our comradery that broke the focus on important events such as bridge painting. Dick Sadler was usually in on everything but dropped out of sight every once in a while, mostly during sailing season. Curtis Baumann could always be counted on to provide a critical suggestion and Roger Marion was probably only waiting for when we were done, so he could plan the celebration.

One wonders what it may be that drives young men to consider acting boldly. Maybe it was only recognition that set in motion the plans and actions to paint the bridge; however, it may also have been simple wonder, wondering if it could be done. Maybe it was that we were just young enough and missed but were influenced by the Vietnam War protests. At some point in life, young men are faced with wanting to follow an adventurous life style where they forsake comforts for constantly new experiences. These feelings usually give way to building a home with a partner. In the turmoil of personal character building, it's more likely that each prospective painter had his own reason.

While making the final preparations, a group of classmates had jumped the gun on us. We later heard from some of our engineer cadet buddies that they saw a group of guys make the assault on the bridge tower, resulting in a huge painted 76. The engineers were often found in the Tiv or Student Activities Building into the early morning hours where they purchased cups of golden liquid to study fluid dynamics. The spectacle even made the newspapers with comments like, "it doesn't look very professional" and "they shimmied up the wires with spray cans". One account is misdated as January 5, 1976. It really happened in April of 1976. Another even misspelled Throgs with two g's.

Luckily we were able to find the culprits and get the true story. Their true identities are hidden, but their nick names can be used. There were eight of them: Pole Cat, Fogman, Vacuum, Daisy, Tough Nick, Smokey, Top Cat, and Dirt Bags. The thing about successful nick names is that they must be easily convertible to one syllable, so we can use the working terms of Pole, Fog, Vac, Daisy (ee syllables don't

count), Nick, Smokey, Cat, and Dirt. These names were earned in various ways that connected to a particular personality characteristic or an especially memorable event.

A segment of the team made an early thrust into the ship to garner the appropriate supplies. The evening watch on the ship happened to be comprised of some underclassmen that were sufficiently tainted by the class of '76 and were easily influenced to not report the removal of paint and rollers. Nick and Smokey made their way into the paint locker while Daisy and Cat looked for the paint applying equipment. One five-gallon can of brown lead and painting implements were stashed away on the ship's pier for later use. Brown lead is the darker companion to red lead, a more common primer for painting steel surfaces. It was darker just to keep track of areas that had a second coat of primer, but it still had a reddish tint.

Well after darkness fell on the moonless night, the group began to assemble. It was very likely that Mr. Hughes' patrol officers were settled-in for an evening of relaxation and wouldn't notice the activity. It was well after midnight when the group grabbed the paint and rollers off the pier and headed toward the boat lifts. There were six monomoys arranged side-by-side under a covered roof holding the attachment points for the block and tackle that lowered and retrieved the boats. The manila rope falls were removed from their coiled storage while one of the group hopped in the boat to secure the boat plug. The boat's weight made its lowering an easy task. Soon, seven rowers were pushing the boat out of its coral and setting the oars, still watching for a patrol car and remembering having sea legs in the waves that slapped at the boat from the brisk wind on the star-filled clear night. The Coxswain manned the sweep oar and stood on the stern thwart to get the necessary leverage to head into the wind and current.

The excitement of quickly lowering the boat, evading campus patrol, and approaching the bridge tower added to the rhythm of pounding hearts eager to pull on the oars. The intoxication of the adventure was in full stride as the boat approached the tower's fendering system that protected the structure from poorly navigated tug-barges and ships. All clamored up the fender whales and stood on the fender structure, except for one. Nick stayed behind to hand-up the rollers and paint. It was realized then what the term "lead" meant as a component of brown lead paint. No one would disagree that lead is heavy, and that the five gallons were only slightly diluted with oxidized pigment and volatile vehicle. The damp wooden fenders begged to cast anyone into the water by a misplaced foot as they muscled the laden can up on the structure.

The boat was left floating to the elements with the painter tied securely, while the group approached the tower entrance, assuming the boat would be there upon returning. It was then that the elevator was noticed; however, it was also noticed that a large lock was blocking its use. There were no tools available for that contingency, so another metal door was checked and found it lead to a series of ladders. The ladders were similar to those found on ships, having metal rungs welded to straps of steel that ran straight up for about ten feet to platforms that could accommodate about three people.

Being the most muscular, Nick and Smokey decided it was their lot to heave the heavy paint incrementally to each platform. After the first lift, their cries of anguish made all realize that arriving at the destination about 300 feet away straight up was going to take more time than anticipated. Of course, compassion is not one of the better developed concepts in the minds of young men, so help only arrived in the form of ample flashlights to help them see the rungs in the complete darkness. The long vertical trek eventually ended with Nick and Smokey being completely exhausted and behind in the exploration of the large room inside the tower.

The last ladder opened to the tower room that was described as not looking much different than the cargo hold of a ship, but it was lighted by two small windows showing a view of the roadway far below. The high overhead gave the space a strange depth and there were structures jutting in various directions. On one side, there was another ladder leading farther up to a hatch. Each one in the group eventually scaled the height to find it lead to the roof. Pushing over the hatch revealed a flood of red light.

It must have been exciting to climb through the hatch to the tower's roof. Ship-knowing people would call it the weather deck and it must have been weathery that night. They were surprised on the size of the aircraft light near the hatch by the edge. Some say it is 4 feet high and others say it's 6 feet high, so it's probably 5 feet high. A five foot red light is an impressive companion on top of a bridge tower as the wind beckons you to the edge. The urge to fly from that height is irrational but amazingly strong, being just one step. Luckily, there is a railing around the top edge, preventing someone from experiencing the 360 foot drop to the water.

Dirt had been calculating how to draw the biggest 76 possible before the paint arrived and decided to outline the figures on the inside of the tower before attempting the outside drawing. His fear was only in not making the figures big enough to be easily seen. Luckily, rivets penetrating the steel on both sides made for excellent reference points. Mug knives were ever-present equipment for a deck cadet and the fold-out screwdrivers went to work on the machine screws that held-in the window frames.

Dirt was only mildly challenged by the prospect of hanging out of the window to outline the figures, but the rest of the group insisted that his legs be held securely. At first, there were three people on each leg, but getting in each other's way made two per leg the better choice. About 600 pounds of holders sufficiently anchored the painter.

The paint was opened and stirred. A 25 foot man-helper was attached to a roller, which was dipped in paint. The dripping paint roller was fed through the window opening and, after the long man-helper handle, Dirt squeezed his shoulders through the opening just big enough to allow him to pass. Resting

his stomach on the sill was painful so a jacket was used for cushioning. By that point, the leg holders were locked-on with a grip that would not fail.

It's well known that New York City never sleeps, so the group was not alone on the bridge in those early morning hours. There were probably a few drivers who were startled by a glob of paint dropping on their windshield. However, there were no reports of traffic trouble while the painting was ongoing. All were not focused on the painting and had time to wonder if the act of painting was noticeable. Although most of New York was asleep, those on painting break were concerned about the possibility that some insomniac bridge gazer would make a phone call. Policemen on the night shift may also happen across the developing brown figures. Police boats would make short work of the distance to the bridge tower. The group was probably safe in assuming that New Yorkers have seen it all and never think to lift their eyes to the bridge structure when pursuing their business.

Dirt complained, not about the discomfort, but about not being out far enough to draw a good outline. The leg holders reluctantly fed his body out farther, so the sill was resting just below his belt-line. The outline bottom for the "6" was first, which took some time. Dirt was pulled in to rest his stomach muscles for a few minutes, but he insisted on returning right away, this time with his back down so the top of the "6" could be completed. He was able to finish the outline and paint-out some of the space between before he was too stressed. The rest of the team painted out the remaining space between the lines in similar fashion. Each was amazed at the pain of body weight pressing on that narrow sill and glad to have the heavy grip on his legs.

Almost rested, Dirt worked on the design for the "7" on the inside and took note of the relevant rivets. The same routine occurred as before with his making an outline and the team filling in the rest, except for their being a few more rest periods. Dirt made his final inspection and touch-up to ensure an acceptable presentation.

The whole operation took much more time than the group anticipated and they began to be concerned on what may happen when the sun rose. The new realization of their amazing luck to finish without being detected and the potentially rising sun caused them to hurry, leaving the paint can and rollers in place. However, the windows were replaced; screwing-in was easier than breaking them free.

There was a mild scramble down the set of ladders to the waiting boat, which was still floating with oars impatient to be manned, but it had dropped to a lower level with the outgoing tide. The group dropped aboard and made their way back to the boat lift and secured the falls. Clamoring up the ladder was academic for the young emergency-charged bodies. One major task remained before the call for dispersing the group was made, which was to raise the boat back to its perch. Unfortunately, there is no way to do this without making a spectacle of the process.

Manning both hauling parts of the manila rope falls at the same time required four people to a rope. The group stretched out along an open area of the access to the ship's pier and simultaneously dug in with tired legs that answered the call. The boat raised with more noise than was wanted and the act became easily recognizable against the sound of wind and water. A patrol car occupant would have no difficulty noticing the aberration from a great distance.

Luck was with them as the boat was secured, and the group headed back to the dorms. They faded into the early morning campus life, which consisted of a few cadets probably going to and from watch duties.

As dawn began to break, the true size of the accomplishment amazed the group of painters, who had expected it to be visible but not so extremely noticeable. As the papers later explained, it truly was a giant "76". The class of 71 had not only been surpassed, but had been completely outclassed!

The group expected to be caught in a thorough hand inspection, which was certain to be made at morning formation, unless of course, the cadet corps officers, OOD and other administrators didn't think to look. Often, as an emergent event unfolds, management doesn't think clearly enough to take the most basic correct steps. The best managers realize this and hold a quick brainstorming session to try covering the natural tendency. Luck was with the bridge painters again as the morning formation of cadets in rows and columns broke to begin the day with breakfast. The contemplated impending disciplinary actions never came to pass.

Bill Skye was taking-in the view of the huge 76, expecting his name to be called over the address system, but it never came. He felt it was a shame that he didn't get to fence with the OOD on the finer points of bridge painting. He felt lucky too because of some paint that stained his hands from a previous painting engagement.

The newspaper report recorded the only official response from the school administration when they offered to have the students paint over the two figures. One can only assume that they didn't really want that to happen by suggesting something that is ripe for injury claim law suites. Maybe they were human after all; maybe they were proud to finally realize that the critically important school spirit passion that they believed to be so necessary to an education was thriving in the hearts of the student body. They just didn't know where to look for it among the personalities that would some day be directing the world's largest and fastest seagoing vessels over the oceans.

These cadets were not among those who could be easily whipped-up by an important sporting event or by the academic challenges they faced. They required greater challenges and responded to strong

leadership where political concerns are swept aside. They were among a group of goal-oriented Americans who knew how to get things done. "Acta non verba," is a maritime-entrenched saying recognized by the Federal Maritime Academy.

The Bridge and Tunnel Authority had the task of painting over the school's icon of spirit and some city bureaucrat was motivated enough to make it happen within a few weeks. Before that happened, the days walking to class at the Fort were done with many smiling eyes looking upward. Soon, the brown lead was covered with the normal bluish-gray color of the bridge such that passing motorists and bridge admirers from afar would not be clued to the celebration for the class of 76. However, the shadow of freshly painted new pigment was not completely able to cover the darker brown lead, which was still visible to the informed eye.

The Bridge and Tunnel Authority, no doubt, felt that the crisis was over, but they made one critical mistake. They did their painting before graduation. The gauntlet was cast down. Another great opportunity to meet the new challenge was before the class of 76.

The challenge was met in similar fashion, counting on the steely-eyed watchfulness of the campus patrol. This time, the paint was lowered to a waiting boat on the off-shore side of the training ship. The boat too was different, being smaller and having a particularly difficult boat plug that constantly leaked. It was borrowed from the sailing team, again without a formal rental agreement. The painting crew was not exactly the same as the original one, showing a willingness to share the glory.

The honor of our class spirit was defended, but by the time graduation was over, I'm sure that the school, the city and maybe even the State of New York was exhausted in dealing with the 76ers.