

SHIP SEARCH.

By James Collins.

The Navy destroyer was on its way back from the Mediterranean to Brooklyn, New York in 1955. The Navy was receiving pressure to prevent the importation of illegal weapons into the port of New York. Since the end of World War II, many sailors were bringing back souvenirs that they purchased on the black market. Automatic pistols were a priority item. The order to stop this illegal importation started in Washington D.C. and came down the chain of command for the U.S. Navy. The captain of this destroyer planned to follow the rules and ordered a lieutenant, who graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy to take a group of sailors and search the destroyer from bow to stern and collect all illegal weapons found

Walter Flynn, four years out of the Academy, was the lieutenant assigned this task. Initially, the captain made announcements over the intercom system advising all enlisted men on board that possessing an illegal weapon made them subject to a court-martial. There was an amnesty window when they could surrender any illegal weapons without any questions asked. Six automatic pistols appeared over a three-day period. Once the amnesty expired, Walter personally led four enlisted men in a detail search of the vessel fore and aft, top to bottom. They searched the bilge and ran rakes through the areas with four or 5 inches of water. They opened and physically examined every light fixture to see if it contained contraband. After three days, Lieutenant Walter reported to the captain that no illegal weapons were on board.

The day before the destroyer was due to pull into New York Harbor, a young boatswain's mate approached Lieutenant Flynn and asked him if he could speak to him privately. The lieutenant agreed, and they stepped into a compartment where they could converse. The boatswain's mate said, "Mr. Flynn, I need a really big favor. You're the only officer I trust, and what I am about to tell you could get me in a lot of trouble."

"Willie, we served together for three years. What you tell me will be held in confidence unless it threatens the safety of the ship."

"Mr. Flynn we're about to pull in to New York Harbor. The Shore Patrol searches all enlisted men as we leave the ship but the officers do not have to go through that process. I promised my brother that I would bring him a 9 mm Beretta automatic pistol, and I picked it up for him in Italy. I need an officer to take the gun ashore for me."

"You're telling me that even though I searched the ship from top to bottom, you managed to hide an automatic pistol that our search did not find."

"Yes sir that's correct."

"Willie I would have bet my life that there were no illegal weapons still on board. I have to know how you managed to hide the weapon from my search party. If you show me how you did it, I will take the weapon on shore for you."

"Sir, we have a bargain."

With that, Willie took Lieutenant Flynn down to the weapons locker and using his authorized key, opened the door and they walked in. Filling this large chamber were racks of rifles, machine guns, shotguns and pistols. Boxes of ammunition, flares and other munitions were stored along the walls and on the cabinets.

Willie walked over to the rack where the pistols were all stacked side by side with the handles pointing down. He reached into the middle of the two dozen pistols and extracted a 9 mm Beretta. He handed it over to Lieutenant Flynn and said, "Here it is, Lieutenant, hiding in plain sight."

"My God, that was ingenious. We never searched the gun locker because we expected to be full of authorized guns."

"That was the whole point of hiding the gun here. It fit right in with all the authorized weapons and I figured it would not be noticed. I was right. However, I forgot about the search required before you leave the ship. That's why I need your help."

The next day Lieutenant Flynn walked off the ship with the gun in his gear, and he returned it to the boatswain's mate once they left the Navy Yard. He felt he had learned an important lesson that would help him in his career in the future: Never assume anything and always double-check the obvious.

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