

National Service

I had just finished my apprenticeship as a chef and had worked the summer at Faeroe Islands. It was a great trip and a wonderful working experience, and after it I knew that I wanted to travel the world as a chef. But the Navy was calling and I, like many young, fit and healthy men in Denmark, had to serve my nation. For me to do this meant I had to serve good hearty meals to the good men on torpedo boat Huitfeldt. And so began my nine month military career. So sit back and enjoy as I tell how it was to cook for a crew of 24-30 sailors at sea.

It was early spring and we were to take part in a large exercise with other NATO members, the good news was that the Americans were going to play the enemy, and torpedo boat Huitfeldt was to hunt down, sink and destroy some of their largest destroyers. We were to show no mercy towards the American vessels – I was comfortable with that. My thought on this issue was that if you had to go to war then you might as well practice against the strongest of nations. And if successful, then we would be heroes and maybe there would be a ticker-tape parade for us in the streets of Copenhagen when we got home. Who doesn't want to be a hero, eh? I was very excited with the job ahead even though my main job was not to sink American destroyers but to cook schnitzels, bake bread and peel potatoes, and feed the hungry sailors onboard. But, I like to think that without me there would be no torpedo boat Huitfeldt.

It was a three-week exercise, and it took a couple of weeks prior to get the ship ready to leave the moor at Holmen, the navy base in Copenhagen. Although I reported to my sergeant, he basically left me to organise my duties and myself. I had made a day by day menu where I tried to vary the food as much as possible to keep everyone on board happy. The menu included favourites such as roasts, steaks and mash, schnitzels, curries, spaghetti and meatballs and other traditional foods that everyone ate at home. The

Captain approved the menu and asked for a few changes because the officers and sergeants loved more exciting and exotic foods which was fine with me as some of the other dishes were a bit boring and tedious to cook.

I had a budget that I had to stick to but on a daily basis there was more than enough funds to cook good food for the crew. It was seen as one of the more important luxuries to feed the crew well on a ship at sea in the navy because everyone on board was required to work twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week. In other words, each sailor would steal a few hours of sleep whenever they could. There was not much fun on these tours so meals were a highlight of the day that everyone on board looked forward to.

The mess attendant and I were the first to get up at five o'clock in the morning and while I made fresh strong coffee for the men who had been on the bridge steering the ship during the evening, the mess attendant set the breakfast table for the officers and sergeants. Then, I baked rolls, cut cold meats and fried bacon and tomatoes, which I left in the ovens to keep everything warm. As crew arrived we served bacon and eggs, poured coffee and made sure cheeses and jams were served with fresh rolls. We filled up platters with cold meats when they ran low and filled up bowls with cereal and jugs with either milk or juice.

Between seven and eight o'clock, we started clearing the tables in the different mess areas and washed the dishes and generally cleaned up. Then it was straight into preparing lunch while the crew tackled their daily chores. Again, the tables were set and I cut more cold meats for the traditional Danish smorgasbord. I heated up liver pâtés and fried mushrooms to go with it. I made a warm dish that changed daily such as pork medallions with sautéed onions, or frikadeler with warm sweet and sour red cabbage.

Baskets were filled with heavy rye bread and multigrain loaves and condiments such as gherkins, beetroots, mustard dressing, fried onions, pickles, and boiled eggs. These were dished into serving dishes and put on the tables in all of the three mess rooms. As the mess attendant and I worked, calls over the speaker system from the bridge came through frequently so we were constantly running up to the bridge with fresh coffee and other drinks for the men.

We served lunch for an hour that started at noon. The constables and privates ate on a rotating shift because there was not enough space in their mess lounge for everyone to sit down at once. The boat couldn't have been any more cramped if it had of been a submarine; there was little space to manoeuvre. Then came the washing up and clearing the tables again before I had to start peeling potatoes and preparing the main course for the evening. This was the meal where the crew had the most appetite; their portion sizes were nearly twice that of what I would normally cook for adults. It definitely caught me by surprise the first couple of days on the ship, but I adapted and found a comfortable routine (I went overboard with the amounts and it turned out to be spot on). The crew's appetites were huge!

The first course was something like a large pot of cauliflower soup with cream. Then I cooked two large pots of potatoes, one large pot of gravy, steaks (each weighing 350 grams) – one for each man, and a few extra for good measure – and large bowls of mixed salad and heaps of garlic bread. Dessert was ice cream with fruit, or rice pudding with cherry sauce, or whatever the crew had indicated that they felt like. I had to prepare dinner during the afternoon, and break at around three o'clock so that I could serve coffee and cake, which was always well received. I would serve dinner at six o'clock.

At around eight o'clock the mess attendant and I finished cleaning up and set things out for breakfast the next morning. Then we fell into our beds. We took it in turns to get up at midnight to serve hotdogs and hot chocolate to the crew that were on duty during the night. This took about an hour and a half before we could head back to bed, don't forget – we had to get up at five o'clock in the morning to start it all over again. Admittedly, it took a couple of days to adjust to the hard work, but it became routine soon enough. And it felt good to cook again, and there was the thrill of visiting different harbours and cities even if this tour only covered Denmark, Norway and Germany.

My biggest problem for the first week was that I was constantly seasick. The seas were rough and this little warship was all over the place in the high seas of the North Sea, just off the west coast of Jutland. There was a system where I had to bolt down the pots on the stovetop – this made sense to me early into the trip, everything on the boat that was not secured properly was thrown to the ground and smashed. It was easy to sense panic from officers' worried faces when they explained a storm that we had moved into

would stick around for the next twenty-four hours or so, and that it was going to be one hell of a ride. But the majority of the crew was hardened to this sort of life; it didn't bother them like it did to us new cadets.

It didn't matter how seasick I felt, I still had to stand in my tiny kitchen and prepare meals for the ever-hungry sailors. On one occasion I found myself throwing up constantly into a bucket in the kitchen. When it eased off and I felt a little better I went to the bathroom and washed my face and hands, then I went back to continue cooking until the next siege of stomach cramps, and vomit fought its way up my throat. I have never felt so ill in my life as when we hit the North Sea in horrific weather, but I had a duty as the chef and there wasn't any other option – there was no one to take over – I had to endure it.

The crew was sympathetic with me, as well as the others who struggled with the seas, but they still wanted their dinner. If I didn't persevere then my status as a hardworking chef who always gave it his best would quickly diminish to the status of weak, lousy cook with the work ethic of an army or air force cadet. As long as I got the food on the table then they didn't care one bit if they saw me on my knees throwing up into a steel bucket in the kitchen. As long as their schnitzels and roast potatoes were ready at six o'clock then our relationship remained as one of respect and friendship. And once we reached the next harbour, we would have a beer and laugh over the scenario.

Luckily, it took only one week for me to get used to the waves and motion, after that it didn't affect me any more. That was a little weird – to adjust so quickly – but it was a relief. The first week had passed, unfortunately the bad weather conditions prevented our progress in the war games. Although we still had some tough weeks ahead, for now we headed to Norway and the beautiful town of Stavanger for two days leave.

We cleaned the ship and completed our chores, and before the Captain dismissed us he reminded us what would happen if anyone failed to be present at the hoist of the flag at five minutes to eight the next morning. He promised an even worse punishment would befall anyone who didn't behave in the manner that was expected of a Danish sailor, and that military police were ordered to patrol bars and the city streets. This was mostly due to the numerous countries' navy personnel that were planned to hit this harbour town.

There was no need to worry about me, all I was interested in was getting friendly with some of those Norwegian girls that I had seen in video clips with the famous Norwegian band A-HA, surely some of them lived here in Stavanger. They did and, with a couple of constables and another private, I sang Billy Joel's songs with these gorgeous girls at a piano bar.