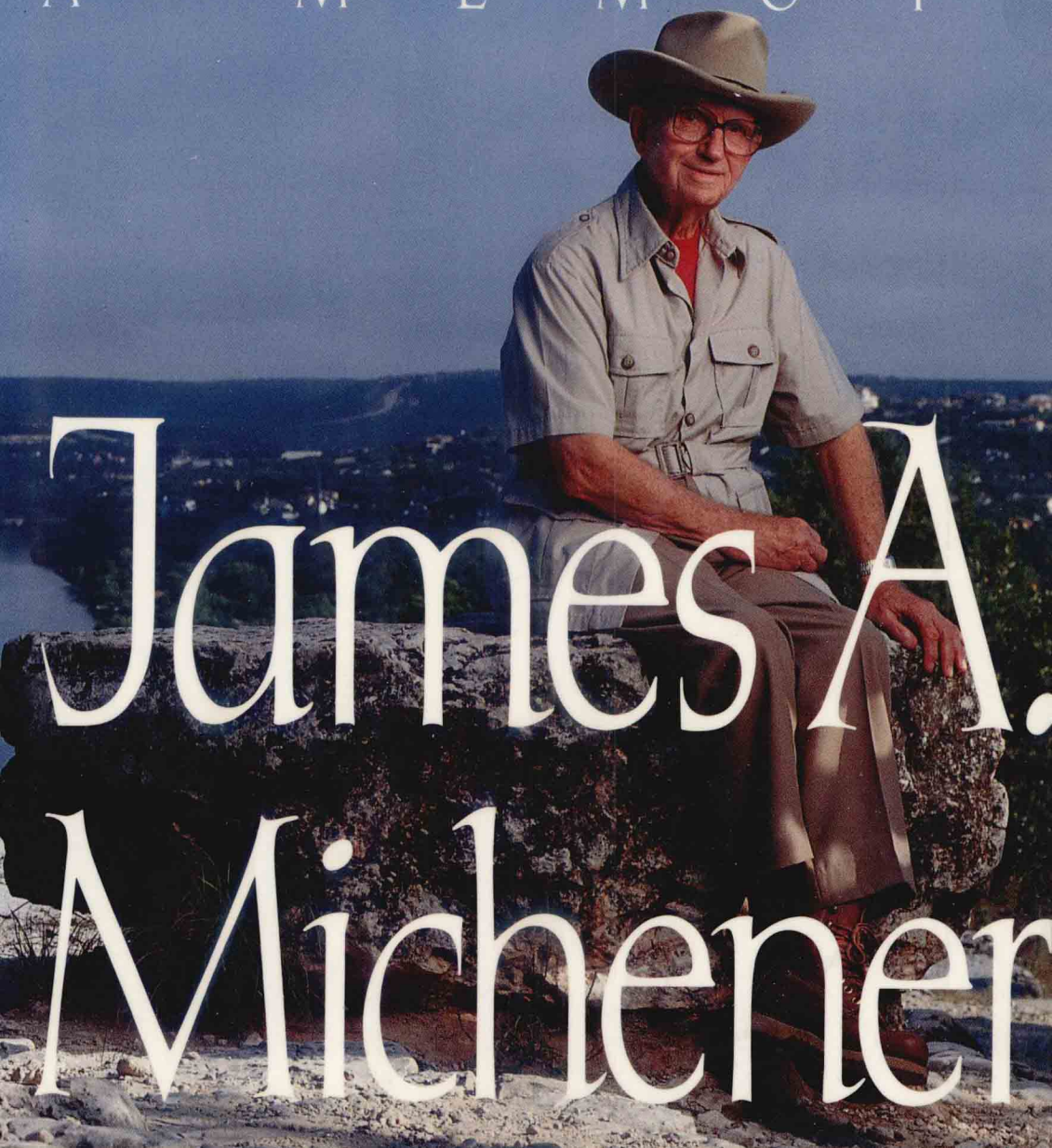


THE WORLD IS MY HOME

A M E M O I R



James A.
Michener

*The
World Is
My Home:
A Memoir*

James A.
Michener



RANDOM HOUSE
NEW YORK

The names and identifying details of a few individuals
and some place names have been changed to protect
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The World Is My Home: A Memoir

I

Mutiny

THIS WILL BE a strange kind of autobiography because I shall offer the first seven chapters as if I had never written a book, the last seven as if that were all I had done.

I segregate the material in this way for two reasons: I want the reader to see in careful detail the kind of ordinary human being who becomes a writer and then to see the complex and contradictory motivations that enable him to remain one.

I have been impelled to attempt this project because of an experience that occurred eighty years ago when I was a country lad of five, and was of such powerful import that the memory of it has never left me. The farmer living at the end of our lane had an aging apple tree that had once been abundantly productive but had now lost its energy and ability to bear any fruit at all. The farmer, on an early spring day I still remember, hammered eight nails, long and rusty, into the trunk of the tree. Four were knocked in close to the ground on four different sides of the trunk, four higher up and well spaced about the circumference.

That autumn a miracle happened. The tired old tree, having been goaded back to life, produced a bumper crop of juicy red apples, bigger and better than we had seen before. When I asked how this

had happened, the farmer explained: 'Hammerin' in the rusty nails gave it a shock to remind it that its job is to produce apples.'

'Was it important that the nails were rusty?'

'Maybe it made the mineral in the nail easier to digest.'

'Was eight important?'

'If you're goin' to send a message, be sure it's heard.'

'Could you do the same next year?'

'A substantial jolt lasts about ten years.'

'Will you knock in more nails then?'

'By that time we both may be finished,' he said, but I was unable to verify this prediction, for by that time our family had moved away from the lane.

In the 1980s, when I was nearly eighty years old, I had some fairly large rusty nails hammered into my trunk—a quintuple bypass heart surgery, a new left hip, a dental rebuilding, an attack of permanent vertigo—and, like a sensible apple tree, I resolved to resume bearing fruit. But before I started my concentrated effort I needed both a rationalization and a guide for the arduous work I planned to do.

As had happened so frequently in my lifetime, I found the intellectual and emotional guidance I needed not in the Bible, into which I dipped regularly, but rather in the great English poems on which I had been reared and many of which I had memorized. I was particularly impressed by the relevancy of the opening lines of that splendid sonnet which young John Keats had penned when he feared, with good cause as events proved, that he might die prematurely, which he did, at age twenty-six:

When I have fears that I may cease to be
Before my pen has gleaned my teeming brain,
Before high-pilèd books, in charactery,
Hold like rich garners the full-ripened grain . . .

How apt those words seemed because there was such a wealth of enticing subjects about which I wanted to write that my brain, too, could justly be termed teeming. But I was almost eighty years old; much of what I would like to do would have to be left unfinished. Since it took me about three years to write a long work, if I had thirty viable subjects the task would require ninety years. That would make me one hundred and seventy when I finished, and I could not recall any writers who continued working so long, not even the doughty ancients in the Old Testament.

I knew what my ambitions were, but I was doubtful about my capacity to fulfill them. Fortunately, I had in my teens memorized those powerful lines composed by John Milton when, in midlife, he was struck blind. I had recited them to myself a thousand times, and now they rushed back to give me the kind of strength that he had found:

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one Talent which is death to hide,
Lodged with me useless, though my Soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present,
My true account, lest he returning chide . . .

That ringing challenge, that determination to 'present my true account,' had defined the goal of my writing, so firmly grounded that it had become a permanent ambition. At Kent State I endeavored to render an unbiased account of the tragic killings, in South Africa an honest report of the racial injustices, in Israel the deadly duel between religions, in Hungary the unembellished facts about the revolution, and in Poland a factual account of that nation's long struggle.

Any explanation for my prolific output these last four years thus relies upon the precept of Keats, whom I think of as a gifted friend pondering his future, and upon the stern admonition of Milton, whom I regard as a mentor, encouraging me to give 'a true account.' Much of what I am about to say will sound improbable or even preposterous, but it is true. It can best be considered a hesitant *apologia pro vita mea*, and I hope it will be so received.

Between the years 1986 and 1991 I would write eleven books, publish seven of them, including two very long ones, and have the other three completed in their third revisions and awaiting publication. It was an almost indecent display of frenzied industry, but it was carried out slowly, carefully, each morning at the typewriter and each afternoon at research or quiet reflection.

This piling up of manuscripts was not entirely my fault and certainly was not engineered by me. My longtime and trusted editor in New York faced health problems that necessitated postponing work on one of my long books; uncertainties in the publishing business caused other delays; and my own confusion as to what I ought to do next added to the problems. But that I did this prodigious amount of work, keeping all things in order, there can be no doubt. There the manuscripts are, and this one was the most persistent. I wrote it in three different offices in

three different states, on three different typewriters assisted by three different secretaries with their word processors, and three new editors with keen skills. This is a book that almost forced itself to be written.

One nagging question remains. Did the old tree get back to work producing apples only because the shock of the rusty nails reminded it of death? By analogy, did I labor so diligently because of my age and the approach of a time when I could work no more? Was I, like Keats at twenty-six, apprehensive of work-ending death?

I think not. I write at eighty-five for the same reasons that impelled me to write at forty-five: I was born with a passionate desire to communicate, to organize experience, to tell tales that dramatize the adventures which readers might have had. I have been that ancient man who sat by the campfire at night and regaled the hunters with imaginative recitations about their prowess. The job of an apple tree is to bear apples. The job of a storyteller is to tell stories, and I have concentrated on that obligation.

Because the Pacific Ocean would play such a dominant role in both my life and my writing, I will feel most at ease if I explain how I became intimately involved with that part of the world. I discovered it late, never venturing on it until the middle stages of World War II, when I was sent as a Navy lieutenant to the battle zone in the Solomon Islands northwest of Guadalcanal. As a Quaker I was exempt from actual military service but had declined to use my religion as an excuse to avoid the conflict because as a college professor of history I knew all too well that Hitler and Japan posed major threats to world civilization. I volunteered for the Navy.

But I must not cloak myself in glory. My draft board had decided to grab me for the Army, as one of the oldest men to be so taken, because the unsavory chairman of my local board despised me and saw a chance to do me in. I outsmarted him. Two days before he ordered me to report to Fort Dix I took refuge in the Navy on the principle that I would rather sail to war than march. Actually, I had served for some years in Europe as an ordinary seaman (honorary) in the English merchant fleet in the Mediterranean, a sea I knew intimately, and the Navy was glad to get me for that theater of war, but by the time I was in uniform it was obvious that we had our war in the Mediterranean well in hand, so I was shipped out to the Pacific.

A large group of us civilians who happened to be in Navy uniforms were placed aboard a battered troop transport of the Cape class, and

since it was one of the sorriest ships in service it had been given one of the sorriest names, *Cape Horn*, that bleak and forbidding rocky tip at the far end of South America that terrifies mariners.

As a lieutenant who had been an enlisted man not long ago, I was berthed in an improvised cubbyhole on deck with two fellow would-be officers also fresh from civilian life. Bill Collins was a tall, rangy, relaxed bond salesman from Merrill Lynch's Los Angeles office who joined us with an openly stated objective of getting through the war as painlessly as possible. He had smuggled aboard six bottles of Southern Comfort, which he shared with his friends as if he were a Mississippi riverboat gambler softening them up for a scam. He was witty with an easygoing drawl, irreverent as to military custom, and delightful to be with, for his stories were never tedious or needlessly prolonged.

Our third member was a businessman from Detroit, Jay Hammen, a small, nervous fellow marked by an exceptional desire to please and a willingness always to do more than his share of any unpleasant task. His experience in the Michigan area had been wide and he had acquired a commonsense approach to life that was more serious and subdued than that of Collins. I liked both my mates, but what they thought of me I would never know.

Because the ships (such as destroyers and cruisers) that would normally protect a troop transport were in short supply, the *Cape Horn* was being dispatched to the far end of the Pacific totally alone, in a condition known with remarkable accuracy as bare-ass. We were very slow, an awkward ship that would be unable to adopt evasive tactics, and we had as our protection only one small, poorly manned and generally ineffective gun forward. Any determined Japanese submarine that latched onto our tail as we moved slowly westward could have had us for the picking.

We defended ourselves with two tactics. At unpredictable moments we would suddenly turn in some totally random direction, run a short distance, then turn again, and maybe even repeat the performance in less than half an hour. As Collins said in approving the tactics: 'We're still ducks but not sitting ducks.' And each evening, as soon as mere darkness had turned into total blackness, we threw overboard in one gigantic lump sum all the garbage collected during the previous twenty-four hours. A ship's officer on the bullhorn explained: 'We do this in a lump so that if a Jap submarine finds it tomorrow morning, it will not be able to deduce as it would from a strung-out trail the direction we were heading in. And we do it at sunset so we'll be as far away as possible by morning.'

He peppered us with instructions on his bullhorn, so that the most

common sound on our long, dreary trip west was his stern command: 'Now hear this!' blasting at us ten or fifteen times each day. I remember vividly two of his early directives: 'In order not to leave a detectable trail floating on the sea for a Jap submarine to latch onto and track us down, you will throw nothing, I repeat nothing, overboard, night or day. If you are caught doing so, it's into the brig on bread and water. And if it looks to us as if you had been doing it on purpose to leave such a trail, you will be shot.' He also warned: 'Most of you have never before been on a ship. Do not, I repeat do not, sit on the protective railing that goes around the ship or act up when in its vicinity. Because I promise you that if you fall overboard our captain has orders to continue on course and not stop dead in the water so that a Jap submarine could pop us. I repeat, we will not stop or double back to pick you up.'

Well, a clown whom the three of us in our cubbyhole had spotted as a loudmouthed sailor did perch on the railing and did fall off. As warned, we sailed straight ahead, and as his anguished screams grew faint we felt that the war had overtaken us and was grappling for us with clammy hands.

The following descriptions of men aboard the *Cape Horn* are so preposterous that I hope someone who participated in the mutiny will step forward to substantiate what I am about to say; lacking that verification I can only affirm that what I state is sober truth, downplayed if anything, and with only the names invented.

Our ship was under the command of a Captain Bossard, an elderly man who so far as I knew had served many years in the merchant fleet. I have to be vague on the matter because during our entire trip of about a month, no one saw him, or heard him speak, or had any kind of communication with him. He remained in his cabin forward the whole time, and word passed, on what authority no one could say, that he was perpetually drunk. For this I cannot vouch.

It seems ridiculous for me to say that the Army colonel in charge of us was practically the same as the captain, but that is true. We saw him once and heard him only then, in a slurred series of seven or eight sentences warning us on how to behave aboard the *Cape Horn*, and then we never again saw him. The natural suspicion that he too was permanently drunk in companionship with the captain was easy to accept.

Gradually, in bits and pieces picked up from members of the disconsolate crew or from the four Marines manning the gun, we learned that the *Cape Horn*, always manned by these same two officers and staffed by the same crew, had made numerous trips like ours back and forth across the Pacific: 'A month out, a month back, that's six round trips

a year, boring as hell.' Clearly the *Cape Horn* was not a happy ship, and Bill Collins who'd had broad experience in work conditions, predicted: 'In a mess like this, you can expect something bad to happen.'

The reader must remember that I had served happily in the British merchant fleet and had been an ipso facto member of the seamen's union. Also in my teaching I had always presented unionism in a favorable light, for I knew that in the early 1930s unions were necessary in America. But now I was to find myself facing one of its uglier aspects.

If we did not see anything of our two commanders, we saw more than enough of their unfriendly crew. They occupied a large, improvised deck cabin directly across from ours, and they were a surly lot, merchant mariners with many voyages under their belts before the war began, and bored beyond reason by having civilians like us in their way and asking stupid questions. I remember them as unkempt, dirty, mean-mouthed and slovenly in all they did; they were a difficult lot to like and I did not like them, nor did any of the other officers I knew or any of the enlisted men with whom we worked.

The reasons for our displeasure were palpable and ever-present. Four still rankle when I remember them. Because transport ships like the *Cape Horn* did sometimes have to sail into war zones where fighting was heavy, although most of them never came close, these civilian sailors received extremely large risk bonuses amounting, we were told, to something like \$850 a month; in contrast our ordinary enlisted men, who took the same risks but had been sworn into military service, received only \$21 a month. This outrageous discrepancy could never be ignored: 'If you volunteer to fight for your country, you get twenty-one dollars. If you dodge the draft and find a job on a ship you get eleven hundred fifty.' This last figure came from an authenticated case, and it became the standard comparison, but perhaps not a legitimate one, since unusual bonuses might have inflated it. But that the gross difference was a slap in the face of patriotism no one could deny.

The next two discrepancies were particularly blatant because they were thrown in our faces every day, especially in the faces of the three of us who lived opposite the civilians. They had their own mess with their own cooks and a larder of the best possible foodstuffs; this was their union's demand, which was strictly enforced by having one member aboard who reported on the meals, and he could create trouble if his men were not fed according to his demands. Our own food was an incredible swill such as Iowa farmers customarily feed their pigs. I have

always been remarkably uncritical about my food; if there's enough of it I'm content and friends have described me as 'always a gourmand, never a gourmet.' But even I found the food that was being thrown at us totally unacceptable. At some meals not even the soggy bread was edible, and both Collins and Hammen, being more fastidious than I, refused even to report for meals; they would not go through that indignity. They preferred staying in our cubbyhole drinking Southern Comfort. Once when I asked Collins how he had been able to acquire so much of this drink when alcohol was so extremely scarce that it had to be jealously rationed, he explained: 'You must realize that the South won the Civil War. They're smarter than we are. They put so much sugar in the drink they succeeded in getting it classified as a dessert, not a whiskey.'

So there we were, underpaid volunteers and overpaid merchant sailors, sharing the same deck, our quarters not far apart, with us in uniform eating slops and them in civilian clothes eating steaks and chops and fresh vegetables. And not only did they eat such meals, they did so in quarters into which we could peek if we wished, and they cooked them in such a way that the aromas drifted over to us, whether we were peeking or not.

If Collins and Hammen were more or less indifferent to the food problem, they were even more outraged than I by another discrepancy. Because there were so many of us naval bodies aboard the *Cape Horn* and space for the storage of water was so limited, not only was the taking of showers prohibited, there being no way to pipe sea water into the system, but the available supply of drinking water was also restricted. We could actually go thirsty for a day at a time, and I could justify this because of the exigencies of wartime; besides, none of us was in any danger from prolonged thirst. If you were willing to stand in line long enough, you did get something to drink, and at meals there was coffee.

But here a new union rule came into play to protect the civilian sailor: he was guaranteed a certain number of showers a week and with fresh water. So a new indignity confronted us: while we thirsted for water we could not get, the men across the way were taking noisy showers, and lots of them. It was so infuriating that I still bristle when I think of it.

But what was most enraging was the fact that whereas we military personnel had to be extremely careful about showing any light in the darkness, not even the flash of a cigarette lighter, lest a prowling submarine spot us, the civilian sailors seemed not to be bound by this rule. They smoked as they wished, were careless about masking their port-holes, and almost constantly provided illumination for any Japanese enemy to spot, even from a great distance. What was worse, the door

of the big area across from us was often left wide open so that it was not a fragment of light that escaped but an immense shaft illuminating the entire deck.

‘Ask them to close the door,’ Collins called to me once when I was outside our quarters and he inside, so I crossed the deck and called in politely: ‘Fellows, will you please watch the light?’ It was the first time I had spoken to any of the civilians. It was an unpleasant experience because one of them snarled: ‘Mind your own affairs, Boy Scout,’ but he did slam the door shut.

Now I must digress briefly to explain why the light gave me such distress. When I was a student at a university in Scotland, I had shipped aboard a British merchant ship carrying coal to the Mediterranean and bringing oranges back to Scotland for the making of marmalade, and in long voyages, when I had what might be called honorary papers in the British merchant fleet—salary of one shilling for nine weeks’ work—I learned a great deal about the sea. Because of the intense way I had studied my job I probably knew more about navigation than most of the civilian sailors on the *Cape Horn*, but what pertained directly to the present situation was that during the years when Great Britain was at war and the United States wasn’t, several of my former shipmates had written to inform me of their adventures: ‘The ship we sailed on together was lost to U-boats off Malta’ and ‘Our Captain Ried has had three ships sunk under him and survived every time. They’re giving him a medal’ and ‘A lot of our boys have gone down. The German subs are dreadful.’ Sea warfare had been painfully brought home to me in those letters.

Furthermore, among my duties prior to coming to the Pacific had been the task of being custodian of secret and highly restricted battle reports from various theaters of war—bombing runs by our planes based in Europe on targets like the Ploesti oil fields in Rumania and the heavy-water plants at Peenemünde in Germany and our naval battles at Coral Sea and Midway—so that I knew rather more about the horrors of war than most, and I took the conflict more seriously. I knew how many British and American ships had been lost to enemy submarines, German and Japanese alike, so I was not at all satisfied when the men across the way refused to darken their door immediately, and did so with ill grace when they finally did. My serious disaffection began at that point.

In the dark and gloomy dungeon that served as our mess deck, where hundreds of unwashed sailors collected three times a day to see what garbage would be served, I had for some reason I could not have

explained taken notice of a Navy lieutenant somewhat younger than I—I was thirty-six, one of the oldest civilians drafted in World War II—a man who, in every action, seemed to command attention. He looked exactly like Lieutenant Colonel Oliver North, and as I came to know him, I fell completely under his spell.

I knew him only as Richmond, the city from which he came. He had been, I believe, the head of a construction company and, as such, was accustomed to giving orders and being obeyed. He had adapted easily to Navy life, which he seemed to enjoy, and he held himself and others to high standards of deportment. When, in the first days, there was crowding at the spots where drinking water was made available, he assumed command: 'All right, you men. Shape up. Form a line starting at that door. You, Lieutenant J. G., post yourself at the door and don't allow any more to crowd in until these men thin out.' I was impressed by the way Richmond handled himself and by his obvious desire to see anything with which he might be involved move forward in an orderly way.

The first words he ever spoke to me—I would not have intruded on him—were memorable: 'Lieutenant, who in hell is running this tub?' When I told him that rumor said there was a captain of the ship and a commander of troops, but that each stayed drunk in the captain's cabin, he growled: 'I can believe it.'

At a later meal he asked: 'Lieutenant, is this food as god-awful as I think it is?' and I said: 'Worse,' and together we made a quick verbal summary of the miserable swill we were being fed, with him designating certain abominations that he held to be indefensible: 'To serve what might be decent bacon, if handled properly, in big greasy chunks that look as if they had been cut into cubes by a bayonet is downright disgraceful. Coffee should be hot, no reason to serve it cold. Let me make the pancakes, I'll turn them out edible. And that slop they serve as stew with stuff you can't identify or chew, how in hell do they make it?'

On the evening after his first outburst, which covered many more complaints than those I now remember, he thanked Collins for the swig of Southern Comfort Bill allowed him, then joined us at supper, and by chance we were served that night some of the most dreadful stuff so far. No one could detect what it was, although some kind of meat scraps did surface through the rancid grease, and there were potatoes that were supposed to have been mashed, but beyond that it was anybody's guess. None of us could eat anything but the bread, which itself had been baked without salt and had no flavor.

We four left the table like all the others, hungry and outraged, but the ultimate insult hit when we reached the deck, for from the quarters of the civilian sailors came the infuriating odor of steak properly grilling and hot coffee properly brewed. In addition, the door to their quarters was wide open and casting a brilliant light out to sea.

Richmond was so infuriated that he whipped out his revolver, banged his way into the quarters where the steak was cooking and cried: 'Darken this door or I will shoot out that light!' And the civilians, seeing that he was the kind of loose cannon who would do exactly what he said, obeyed.

That spontaneous act launched the work that Richmond and I did together in our exploration of the ship. While Bill Collins and Jay Hammen started to collect, mentally, a list of grievances that our Navy men had to suffer, and they were real and numerous, the kind of offenses that any good captain would correct in a hurry or any commander of troops would insist be corrected, Richmond and I prowled all corners of the *Cape Horn* and satisfied ourselves on various points as he ticked them off: 'There is a captain in that cabin up there, but no one ever sees him. And there is an Army colonel in charge of us, but I've never seen him either. It's probable that they're both drunk all the time. And there is a set of four lockers below containing what has to be food supplies that can't be too putrid when they leave the refrigeration.' Then he had a sharp idea: 'Let's see what happens to the good food when it hits the galley,' and with his .45 moved into visible position and mine still well hidden, we went to where the cooks performed their indecencies. When we saw the disorder, the misuse of equipment and the visible uncleanness, Richmond exploded: 'How can self-respecting Navy cooks tolerate this?'

It was a question that, in the phrase popular at the time 'opened up a whole new can of worms,' for the chief cook, or the fat, greasy man who claimed to fill that role, told us an amazing thing: 'We're not Navy. We belong to the ship. Have for years.'

Richmond dropped his voice and his challenging arrogance: 'Let's see if I have this straight. You're hired by the shipping company, not the Navy?'

'That's right.'

'But who selects the food in those lockers? Who pays for it?'

'What is this? Who in hell are you?'

Richmond's question seemed to me so appropriate that I thought the cooks might resist our inquiries, but Richmond had an effective answer: 'An officer of the United States Navy checking on what's been going on