

HARBOR PATROL

Nora R. Hobbs



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Harbor Patrol

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Cover photo courtesy of Wikipedia article on Motor Life Boats built for the U.S. Coast Guard. This photo is of a Model 44 MLB, built between 1962 and 1972.

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A Day in the Life

Bryce was doing what he loved to do best. He was piloting the 47 MLB Coast Guard Lifeboat at near full throttle out across the ocean, feeling the power of its engine and listening to it bounce along across the top of the water, making a large wake.

The forty-seven-foot motor lifeboat was designed as a first response rescue resource in high seas, surf & heavy weather environments. They were built to withstand the most severe conditions at sea and were capable of affecting a rescue, even under the most difficult circumstances. They were self-bailing, self-righting, almost unsinkable, and had a long cruising radius for their size. If overturned, the vessel would return to an upright position in eight seconds or less.

The Coast Guard had received a distress call from a trawler that had lost its engines and was dead in the water six miles off shore, and the “Sand Dollar” was en route.

“Hey, Bryce,” his Boatswain Mate moved slightly, standing beside him. He had his binoculars to his eyes,

scanning the horizon before them. “You going to the Base Admiral’s Fourth of July party?”

Bryson W. Jacobs was in his mid-twenties with rugged sun-tanned features, and had just received his promotion to Lieutenant. His light brown hair was bleached a little from the sun and danced around in the wind coming around the pilot’s loft. He wore a swimsuit with the Coast Guard emblem on the right leg, a life vest and white deck shoes. This was standard dress. The small silver anchor on a chain around his neck was nestled in his almost blond chest hair. He looked over at his friend with intense hazel eyes and gave him a slightly twisted grin. “I have to go, Gary. I’m a Lieutenant, now, and that means high ranking officers’ parties are mandatory, if you are invited.”

Gary T. Garner, two years the younger man, returned Bryce’s grin and chuckled. “I bet you’re just loving that part.” Gary was a good-looking man with black hair, a thin mustache and a permanent crease between his green eyes. He said it was caused by the glare off the water, but it never went away.

“What can I do?” Bryce shrugged. “There are drawbacks for the bucks.”

“Ah, the life of an officer,” Jimmy Mac grinned and winked. Jimmy Macmann was Machinery Tech for the boat and quite the kidder. He had dark hair that was slightly curly and hazel eyes under rather bushy eyebrows. He said he got his curls and eyebrows from electrical shocks while fixing an engine.

“Yeah, it won’t be like rubbing elbows with the guys over at DJ’s bar,” Gary returned.

“Nope, strictly spit and polish,” Bryce informed. “And I’m not looking forward to it, but if I don’t show, the Admiral will have my pants hung out to dry and me in them.”

“There it is, Bryce,” Gary pointed, but he didn’t have to, for Bryce has already spotted the sixty foot fishing

trawler by the sun reflecting off the windows.”

A man in jeans, a shirt open down the front and wearing a cap was waving from the bow of the boat. Bryce cranked back on the throttle, and as the lifeboat slid up beside the trawler, Jimmy Mac tossed over the towing line. The man caught it and secured it to the bow of his trawler.

Bryce and Jimmy Mac jumped over onto the trawler. “Hello, sir, Bryson Jacobs,” he held out his hand.

The man took it and grinned through a growth of beard. “Jerry Averloc. Sure glad to see you guys.” The man’s shirt was grimy and it matched the dirt on his slightly protruding belly. He spoke with a slight accent and his jeans were wet up to his knees.

“My mechanic here,” Bryce pointed at Jimmy Mac with his thumb, “will take a look at your engine.”

“I’m a fair mechanic myself,” the man squinted at Bryce. “There ain’t no helping that motor. That’s why I called you guys.”

Bryce nodded and said, “It’s just standard procedure, sir. We have to verify that.”

The man frowned and nodded. Bryce was not sure whether the guy didn’t like the thought that they didn’t trust his mechanical ability or he didn’t like Jimmy Mac looking at the engine. Jimmy Mac was gone only a short time and he came back. “Lieutenant, will you come have a look?”

“Sure,” Bryce nodded, and followed Jimmy Mac down into the hold where the motor was located. Averloc followed and stood staring down at them.

“One thing is this air filter. It’s nasty,” Jimmy Mac reported. “It has something sticky on it. Air can’t get through it. But the motor seems to be frozen up. We’ll have to tow.”

Bryce drew his finger across the filter, smeared the sticky substance between his fingers, and then smelled of it. It had a pungent odor.

“I sprayed some cleaning fluid in the carburetor to try and get it to start. Might have slung some of that on there,”

Averloc reasoned from his lofty height.

Bryce and Jimmy Mac came up out of the hold and Jimmy Mac closed the door. "Where is your crew, Mr. Averloc?" Bryce asked the man, studying his expression. He shifted his weight and looked at the hold where Jimmy Mac was securing the door. There was a very strong body odor on the ship. Bryce had smelled it before on captured smuggler ships with Haitians stuffed on it like sardines.

"Don't have none today, just me."

"Why is that?"

The man looked back at Bryce and sighed. "The motor has been missing for the last few times we went out. I took the motor apart, cleaned it and put it back together. I was just giving her a try out when she went dead on me."

"What kind of fishing do you do when it is running, Mr. Averloc.

"What ever is running ...salmon, sole, crab. You name it, and we catch it."

"Where is your fishing equipment?"

"Weren't going fishing, it's back at the marina. During tour season, I charter fishing trips and take people down to Mexico and back."

Bryce nodded, "We'll tow you into the base. They will probably hold your boat for you until you can get the motor fixed."

"Can't you just pull me into the marina? I have a slip there."

"No, sir, we have to take her to the base. You will have to make arrangements to move her if you want to get her to the marina."

Averloc sighed deeply. "Okay, this is causing me a lot of trouble."

"Sorry, sir," Bryce shrugged.

As they towed the boat, Jimmy Mac said, "This doesn't add up, Bryce."

"I know. They can go over the boat better back at base."

“Did you pick up the smell?”

“Yes, but there was no one on board but the captain.”

“That’s what Jimmy Mac is getting at, Bryce.” Gary injected. “Where are those people he was carrying?”

“Call it in and get a chopper out here. If he dumped them, some might still be alive,” Bryce ordered and Gary made the call. Bryce was hoping they were wrong, but that had been done before. The smugglers don’t care if the passengers get to the USA or not, they get their money up front. And that sticky substance on the filter was peculiar, maybe the technicians at base could figure it out.

Bryce watched a dark line appear between the water and sky. They were coming up on the Pensacola Coast Guard Base.

After thirty minutes, Bryce dropped the rescue report in the basket on the desk where the Desk Sergeant was busy on the phone. She gave Bryce a nod and wiggled her fingers at him. She was cute and Bryce had dated her a time or two. Her long auburn hair was pulled back in a French braid and her large hazel eyes sparkled at him. He smiled and tweaked her chin and she returned his smile with a slight tilt of her head.

Out again on patrol, they came across some skiers just inside the swim only buoys and Bryce called to them on the speaker and told them to get back outside the buoys or they would be fined. Then they sat and watch one young skier climb aboard the boat as he gave them the finger. “You want that served to you in a basket?” Bryce barked into the microphone. The boat turned and headed out into open water. “Damn kids have no respect these days,” he growled.

“Probably some rich guy’s kid,” Gary muttered.

Two hours later, a girl signaled frantically from behind a small motorboat just on this side of the marina perimeter. Bryce brought the lifeboat to a stop a short distance away. “Do you have a problem, ma’am?” he asked over the speaker.

“Oh, yes, please help me!” she called back in panic. “I’ve been caught in this fish net for hours.”

Bryce coasted the lifeboat up near the woman and he could see she was white and shaking. There were no signs that she was in trouble. It simply looked like she had stopped the boat and was swimming. “Take it easy ma’am,” Bryce called. “We’ll get you out.” Then he said to Gary and Jimmy Mac, “Go see if you can cut her loose.”

Taking off their deck shoes and life vests, they took out snorkels and masks from the railing seat bench storage. With one life vest for the woman, they dove off the side into the water. Bryce watched them help the girl into the vest. “I’m all tangled up in a stupid fish net and I can’t get loose. I have tried and tried,” she was telling tearfully as she kept pointing at the water.

“We’ll get you free lady, don’t kick or struggle any more. The vest will hold you out of the water. Let us do the work, okay?” Gary soothed. Bryce saw the young woman nod and watched Gary and Jimmy Mac disappear beneath the surface of the water. Bryce was starting to get nervous before they came to the surface.

“Boy, you sure are tangled,” Jimmy Mac said. “We need some more equipment.” At that, the look on the woman’s face turned to horror and Jimmy Mac swam back to the lifeboat where Bryce helped him aboard. “We have a real problem out there. The net is hung in the propeller of the boat and twisted around the woman’s leg. It has cut the circulation off. It’ll take forever to cut it loose from her leg and if we do the pain will be excruciating as the circulation starts again ...if it does ...that’s the problem. It’s really swollen and she might even lose that leg.”

“Hmmm,” Bryce twisted his mouth in thought. “Okay, the medics can take care of the leg. I’ll call out the chopper and you guys just cut the net loose from the propeller.”

“Can’t do that, either,” Jimmy Mac said with a sigh. “Her leg is too close to it. We try to cut that loose and it

will relieve the pressure on her leg and..."

"Got the picture," Bryce grunted. "Can you get the propeller off the motor?"

"That was my thought."

"Okay, get after it. I'll call base and get a chopper here, so they can get the basket dropped and be ready for her as soon as you have her loose."

"Right," he nodded.

Bryce made the call and watched the guys go back under. Jimmy Mac had a wrench to remove the propeller. One would work while the other caught his breath and then they would exchange places. Time and time again, they went down and the woman was shaking and crying all the time. There was no hiding the seriousness of the situation from her. Nothing needed to be said. She just knew she was in a bad way, especially when the chopper arrived and began to lower the basket.

One hour after reaching the scene, the woman, fish net and propeller were airlifted to the hospital. Bryce and crew towed in the motorboat and were off again. There was one drawback to this job: A lot of times, you never found out the results of a rescue. If you did, you had to pursue it on your own time.

They received a call about a man riding a ski bike in the restricted area where surfers and people were swimming. It didn't take long for them to find him from the rooster-tail he was leaving in the air. He was zigzagging around at high speed with no thought at all about how dangerous it was for the people in the water. Bryce hit the siren and started toward him. He looked back and never made an effort to stop. He just headed out into deeper water.

"He thinks he can get away, Bryce," Jimmy Mac said in disgust. "Get him."

"Yeah," Gary spit. "He is being a smart-ass."

"Don't worry. I'll get him!"

Then he throttled up the engine and took off after

him. Of course, there was no way the guy could outrun the Sand Dollar. The only thing that worried Bryce was the fact that he kept looking back at them and wasn't paying too much attention to where he was going. This was his undoing. Bryce saw it coming, but there was nothing he could do about it. The guy ran smack into a water buoy. The bike went one way and the rider the other.

Bryce quickly pulled back on the throttle to bring the boat to stop. Jimmy Mac ran to the side of the lower deck and looked out into the water, while Gary grabbed the binoculars. Bryce scanned the surface of the water, looking for the man as the lifeboat was skimming to a stop, and then he felt a thud on the keel of the boat. Bryce winced and closed his eyes. He sure hoped that wasn't the man. He knew it wasn't the ski bike, because he could see it bobbing in the water some ways off to his left in front of him.

"Shit!" Jimmy Mac gritted out and ran to the back of the lifeboat with Gary hot on his heels.

The boat slowly came to a stop and sat bouncing in the water. Bryce's heart was in his throat and tight fingers of fear gripped his lungs. Surely he didn't run over the man. He didn't see him in front of them. Yet, what else could it be? He could have surfaced right in front of them. His only consolation was the man had a life vest on, but that didn't mean a whole lot. This was Bryce's worst nightmare, that somehow, some way, he would take someone's life.

He knew his job was a dangerous one and he expected that, someday, he might have to put someone down, but he always thought it would be a bad guy, someone who needed to be killed, anyway. He never thought it would be this way. This was an accident, but that didn't make him feel any better. It was the most frightening thought he could ever imagined.

He joined the others at the back of the boat and Gary pointed, "There he is!" He lowered the binoculars and

pointed. There, bobbing in the water was the orange life vest and all that could be seen was the back of the man's head as he bobbed up and down in the wake the Sand Dollar had left.

"He's hurt," Jimmy Mac yelled, as though Bryce couldn't see the blood slick forming around him.

"Make the call," Bryce called as he dove into the water off of the back of the boat and swam as hard as he could. With every stroke, he prayed, "*Please don't let this man die. Don't let his blood be on my hands.*"

It seemed like the harder he swam, the further away the man was. The poor man was hurt and bleeding and as if that was not bad enough, Bryce had to reach him before he drowned. Finally, he was close enough to grab onto the life vest. Suddenly, Jimmy Mac was at his side, helping him flip the man over on his back. The vest was torn where it went over his shoulder and there was a deep laceration on his collarbone. The white bone could be seen even through the bleeding.

"Man, I didn't mean for you to get him this way," Jimmy Mac said, and got a mouthful of water. Bryce was in no mood for Jimmy Mac's wisecracking. They needed to get this man back on the boat and stop the bleeding. Bryce gave Jimmy Mac a hard look as he spit the water out and started swimming with the man. Jimmy Mac grabbed his life vest on the other side and began to help.

Gary helped pull the man aboard the boat and informed Bryce that he had made the call and an ambulance was waiting at the dock. Gary stripped the life vest away quickly and saw that the man was not breathing, so he began resuscitation while Bryce retrieved a towel, rolled it up and put it against the man's wounded shoulder and the deck. Then he began to put pressure on the back of his shoulder. Bryce was confident that if they could revive him, he would not die of his wound. The lifeboat lunged forward in the water as Jimmy Mac revved the engine and turned for the base.

When Gary grew tired of working on the man, Bryce took his place and Gary put pressure on the wound. "Come on, fellow, breathe, dammit," Bryce pleaded. One, two, three, push, one, two, three, push. A stream of water ran out of the man's mouth onto the deck. At least he was getting some of the water out of his lungs. That was a good sign, but the man had been in the water for long time. He just had to live, "Don't die on me, dammit! Breathe!"

"Let me take over Bryce, I think the bleeding has stopped." Bryce knew his determination for the man to live was actually doing more harm than good, because he was using more pressure than necessary. So, he moved aside for Gary to take over. He watched a minute and then went to the emergency kit in the stow, brought out a resuscitation bag and came back, laying it beside Gary. It would be needed, if he started to breathe.

There are times in a person's life when they have to reach out and grasp hope, and grasping that hope comes in many forms. That bag was Bryce reaching out in hope for the life of the man lying on the deck. It pained him to watch Gary working on the man. It was the most awful feeling he had felt in his life.

A slight wheezing sound came from the man. "That's right, fellow, come on, breathe," Gary urged, continuing the pressure on his back. It was a very weak sound, but it was a sign of life. That little wheeze was the most wonderful sound Bryce had ever heard.

With another gush of water, the man began to cough, moan and move about. He helped Gary turn the man over on his back. The towel fell away from the shoulder to reveal an ugly wound. The flesh was torn away from the collarbone, but he was alive. Bryce took up the resuscitation bag and began to squeeze it. The man would make it, and Bryce felt as light as a feather.

It was a terrible accident. The man would go home with only stitches and Bryce would go home with relief. The way he looked at it, he didn't see the man, and there

was nothing he could do about what happened. He was just thankful that it turned out as well as it did.

When the ambulance rolled away from the dock, it was time to celebrate. “The beer is on me tonight,” Bryce crooned, and put one arm around each of his companions.

“What a waste of beer,” Jimmy Mac groaned. They all laughed and returned to the boat to finish the watch.

It was about time for them to head in for the day when Gary spotted a boat making erratic maneuvers. “What is that person’s problem?” he pointed at a large motorboat.

“Beats me! Let’s find out.” Bryce said, and Gary flipped on the siren while Bryce turned toward the boat. The closer they got, the faster the boat went. Bryce grabbed the microphone and shouted. “US Coast Guard! Shut your engine off.”

The driver ignored him and Bryce throttled up and was soon skimming along beside the man sitting behind the wheel. It was a very dangerous place as erratic as this guy was driving. He could cut right into the side of the lifeboat. “Grab the microphone and tell that fellow to stop.” Bryce instructed Gary. Gary did and finally the man waved and brought his craft to a stop. He then stood up, waving and smiling broadly. Bryce brought the lifeboat alongside and Jimmy Mac jumped over on the other boat.

“Llo,” the man slurred, still grinning.

“Drunk!” Gary muttered.

“Sir, you’ve had too much to drink to operate your boat in a safe manner,” Gary informed. “I’m afraid we are going to have to take charge of your boat.”

“Kay,” the guy said in a good-natured tone. “Can I ride on your boat, then?”

“Sure,” Bryce called over to them, “come on aboard.”

So, Jimmy Mac and Gary helped the intoxicated man into the lifeboat. He staggered forward and took a seat on the end of the railing bench near the control. He was in his late twenties and besides reeking of alcohol, he wore a beard of several days’ growth and a business suit.

“Sir, is that your boat?” Bryce asked.

“Na, yest bor’wed it.”

“With permission?” Bryce pressed him.

The guy shrugged, reached out and began to flip switches on the control panel. “Hey,” Jimmy Mac caught his hand, “don’t touch anything.” As soon as Gary had the towline secured, Bryce started off toward the base.

“What is your name?” Bryce asked.

“Wal’er D. D ...dushe,” he fumbled and reached out for another switch. Jimmy Mac slapped his hand back away from it and he pouted, rubbing his hand. “You ...r mean!”

“Yes, sir, when I have to be,” Jimmy Mac warned him. “Don’t touch the switches.”

Bryce looked around at Gary, who had joined them, and grinned, then chuckled softly to himself. Mr. Dushe was turned over to the Shore Patrol, a check was made on the boat, and the owner notified. Then Jimmy Mac, Gary and Bryce went their way, for by then, their shift was over.