

# **THE WATCH BELOW**

a play by

James B. Campbell

(C) 1986 and 2014 by James B. Campbell

## **CAST**

Ensign MIKE SOVIC, 24.....First Lieutenant  
BIRD, Stewards Mate second, 40s.....Wardroom Orderly  
CADE, Boatswains Mate first, 30s.....Master-at-Arms  
Ensign HAROLD CASPAR, 20s.....Engineering Officer  
Lt. (j.g.) ROGER SMYTHE, 20s.....Operations Officer  
Lt. (j.g.) GREG HARRIS, 40s.....Supply Officer  
Lt. FRED FARR, 30s.....Commanding Officer  
BERNICE HARTWELL, 38.....Asst. US Consul  
Ensign HARRY BARRY, 20s.....Asst. Engr. Officer  
DAHLIA WICKSTROM, 19.....Wife of Ens. BARRY  
LEWIS, Stewards Mate second.....Wardroom Orderly

(Fleet Week, New York City, early sixties. CADE, Boatswains Mate First Class, is standing in the light. He wears a white hat, duty belt, leggings and sidearm.)

#### CADE

The fleet's in, boys and girls. New York City. Yes sir, a million things a sailor can get into in New York City and there's 'bout a million sailors ashore right now lookin' for things they can get into. Hell I don't mind. It all counts on twenty, like they say. Gangway watch four to eight am. That's my favorite time in port. Lots of time to think, whatever. Some of the southern boys didn't want to come up this way. We were first supposed to go up to Boston and ol' Scratchy Bob Burton, the Gunner, he's from Alabama, He says, "Ain't nothing up there but cobble stones, codfish and cock suckers!" He makes me laugh. Strange things happen when we go south, though. I mean really south. Like Guantanamo, or Panama City, places like that. Our last op we were in Kingston, Jamaica. We were there supposedly for R&R but I believe it was because we were kicked out of Gitmo. Anyway, things happened and I had to shoot a guy and the ship hit a reef and the XO went crazy and these women come aboard. Like I say, it all counts on twenty...

(Area fade to black . CADE exits. Fade up.  
July fourth, 1960. Late afternoon. The officers' wardroom aboard the USS MECHANICA, (AOG-6), a small US Navy tanker at anchor in Kingston harbor, Jamaica. There is a watertight door (WTD) USL leading to the weather deck. It is open. There are port holes on the US bulkhead. They are also open. Another door, DSR, with a curtain drawn across the opening, leads to the officers' pantry, OFF R. A second watertight door, DSL, opens on to a corridor connecting with other compartments in the after part of the ship. The wardroom is equipped with an electronic intercom and speaker system called a "21-MC", a long table covered with a green cloth, a sideboard, SR, holding a hotplate, cups, a silex of coffee, etc. The reddening twilight is visible through the open port holes and the open weather door. The sound of the boatswain's pipe is heard with an announcement on the 21- MC.)

#### PA

"USS Mechanica, arriving."

(Ensign MIKE SOVIC enters. He is a young man, about twenty-four, tall, bearish in his movements. He drops his uniform cap on the table and pours himself some coffee from the silex on the sideboard. He is pale and sweating. He puts his cup down, crosses to the WTD USL and looks out. He turns and crosses to the pantry door. DR.)

SOVIC

Lewis? Lewis, are you there? Lewis? Bird?

(He returns to the table with his cup and sits. BIRD, stewards mate 2<sup>nd</sup>, appears at the pantry door. He is a slightly built black man, about 40 years old. He wears a white TEE shirt and white bell bottoms.)

BIRD

Yes sir, Mr Sovic, sir. What can I do for you-all?

SOVIC

Bird. Say, where the hell is Lewis? Ain't he supposed to be on tonight?

BIRD

No, sir. I mean, he is, but he ain't.

SOVIC

This coffee tastes like "bunker-C".

BIRD

Why Mr Sovic, I made that batch myself, less'n twenty minutes ago.

SOVIC

Honest injun? Twenty minutes?

BIRD

If I'm lyin', I'm dyin'.

SOVIC

Wish it had something in it.

BIRD

You want me to put something in it for you?

SOVIC

What you got? Anything good? Some of that stuff you guys drink?

BIRD

Stuff? We layin' at anchor in Kingston, Jamaica. Go ashore and stock up on some rum. No alcohol on board this ship. They ended the wine mess in this man's navy about a hundred years ago, in my granddaddy's time.

SOVIC

Your granddaddy was in the Navy?

BIRD

And my daddy. Granddaddy was on a battle frigate in Havana roadstead with a whole bunch of other ships and the word come out from the Secretary of the Navy – "Startin' t'morra, no more alcohol 'board US Navy ships." Well, sir, what do you think happened? – All these ships anchored out there together in that roadstead, got all that wine, brandy, beer, whatever on board, got twenty-four hours to get rid of it all. One big party. All night long them white officers goin' back and forth from ship to ship in their gigs and skiffs and dinghies and what all, trying to drink up all the wine and booze in the fleet before the sun comes up. Whole damn squadron were sick for a week. All I'm saying is, with today the fourth of July and all, you ought to put a little something in your coffee.

SOVIC

Yeah. Moonshine. In a fruit jar. You guys pick up a batch every time we hit any place south of Cape May. What do you think? Am I right?

BIRD

Couldn't rightly say, Mr Sovic. Lewis and me, we hang together and I ain't never seen him touch a drop. He is Abyssinian Baptist, dry all his life, and I'm swore off.

SOVIC

Bullshit.

(CADE, wearing a duty belt, helmet, pistol and leggings, appears at the DSL door. He knocks discretely. )

CADE

Mr Sovic, sir?

(BIRD exits into the pantry while SOVIC confers with CADE, DSL.)

SOVIC

Hi, Cade. How're we doing?

CADE

We're still looking for Lewis, Mr Sovic. Got no idea where that crazy nigger has got himself into.

SOVIC

Pipe down. I haven't reported this.

CADE

Shoot fire, you should have. Excuse me, sir, but you should have. Did he cut you?

SOVIC

No, I'm ok.

CADE

He tore your shirt.

SOVIC

I changed it.

CADE

He smashed his guitar.

SOVIC

I know that.

CADE

Smashed to bits 'cause Chambark and Rolff asked him to play "Ol' Man River".

SOVIC

I know that.

CADE

Called Chambark a "red neck asshole som'bitch" or some such shit and took after him with a carving knife.

SOVIC

When I saw it, it was a jack knife.

CADE

I didn't see it myself, sir. But Rolff said it looked like a carving knife to him.

SOVIC

Where is he now?

CADE

Rolff?

SOVIC

No, Lewis.

CADE

It's ok, sir. We'll find him.

(Ensign HAROLD CASPAR, the engineering officer, enters through the weather door. A "take charge" young man. CASPAR is followed by the operations officer, Lt. (j.g.) ROGER SMYTHE. CASPAR is carrying a message clipboard which he has apparently lifted from SMYTHE.)

CASPAR

Mike?

SOVIC

Yeah?

CASPAR

Stay. Captain's come aboard with the Assistant American Consul. Confidential meeting, all officers right here in five minutes.

SOVIC

Big meetin' hah? How come they got you runnin' around saying it. Why can't they make a pipe? PA busted?

CASPAR

You're supposed to be running around saying it. You're the Command Duty Officer today.

(SMYTHE reaches for the clipboard, CASPAR evades him.)

SMYTHE

I'm supposed to be running around saying it, I'm the Operations Officer every day. Dammit, Harold, give me that.

CASPAR (to SOVIC)

How come you weren't at the quarterdeck to greet the skipper?

SOVIC

Confidential meeting on this three hundred foot tanker shit bucket, who the hell are you kidding?

PA

"Liberty call. Section Two. Muster on the welldeck. Liberty expires oh-one-hundred. Liberty call."

(After several attempts, SMYTHE succeeds in snatching the clipboard away from CASPAR.)

SMYTHE

Liberty for all officers is cancelled.

SOVIC

Officers' liberty cancelled? (To CASPAR) Fuck you, Harold. I bet that was your idea.

CASPAR

You don't know how to talk to people, Mike. I know how to talk to people. I'm going places in this navy, not like you and Harry.

SOVIC

You're going to Davey Jones' locker one of these days. You and everyone else around here. Ever since Frank Marcus was taken off the ship in Gitmo you've been bucking for his job; Executive Officer, big deal.

SMYTHE

And, speaking of Marcus, I'll tell you something else. We received a limited access in code a little while ago from COMCARIBSEAFRONTIER.

(SMYTHE hands message board to SOVIC to read and sign.)

Chief Walker, as you know, is in sick bay. High fever. I decoded this all by myself.

CASPAR

Well, good for you.

SMYTHE

PENELOPE system in radio central twenty minutes, ADONIS/VENUS in crypto central for almost two hours. I'm really getting the hang of those machines.

CASPAR

Great. What's it say?

SMYTHE

Marcus won't be coming back.

CASPAR

What?

SOVIC (Reading.)

He went crazy.

CASPAR

Section eight?

SOVIC

Yep. That's why he was screaming and thrashing around that night on the fantail.

CASPAR

Command Duty Officer of a ship at anchor, sitting in the Captain's chair, supervising the ship's movie, drinking a cup of tea, and wham!

SMYTHE

He had a genuine psychotic episode.

SOVIC

Mondo pazzo. Flip City.

CASPAR

On his way to Portsmouth in a straight jacket.

SOVIC

Got a room at the Rubber Motel.

CASPAR

Fine thing to happen to a Naval officer. Jesus! Suppose it was something in his tea? He sent back to the wardroom for a cup of tea. He drinks the tea. And then he goes crazy. Maybe it was in the ship's water. We could all be drinking it. Chief Walker's in sick bay? He drinks water.

SMYTHE

Yeah, but he's not nuts. So far.

SOVIC

It wasn't the tea, it was the movie. That Randolph Scott shitkicker. Seen it myself nine times. Drive anybody crazy. Old Mucous Marcus seen it ten times. Maybe ten's the magic number. It's all my fault. I'm the entertainment officer. I should have swapped it with that destroyer in Gitmo like I wanted to. They had an Abbot and Costello and a submarine movie with John Wayne, not too bad. I couldn't exchange the movie without the Captain's permission. He loves Randolph Scott.

CASPAR

Will you shut the fuck up a minute? I have a theory. The tea was poisoned. A deliberate attack on a United States Naval officer by someone in the crew. Whoever poisoned that tea thought the Captain was at the movie. It was meant for the Captain. Frank got it by mistake.

SOVIC

Bullshit. Marcus was a flake anyway. He was long overdue. I don't miss the son of a bitch, I'll tell you that. I wouldn't have missed the goddam Captain "Fearless" Freddy Farr either.

(SMYTHE takes the board, moves to exit by the weather door.)

CASPAR

Whoa! Don't I get to initial that too?

SMYTHE

It says "limited access". Asshole. (Exits.)

CASPAR

You hear that? That's disrespect. My date of rank is one day senior to his.

(BIRD enters from the pantry, carrying folded table linens.)

CASPAR

This is a job for Naval Intelligence. Bird, make me some tea and toast.

BIRD

Yes sir. Tea and toast, Mr Caspar, comin' right up.

(He places the linens on the sideboard, turns to the pantry.)

CASPAR

Wait a minute. Were you on board when we were in Gitmo two weeks ago?

BIRD

No sir. I was stateside on emergency leave. My old lady took sick with the busted appendix and went to the hospital. No sooner she get in, the kids burn the house down.

CASPAR

Tea and toast.

BIRD

Yes, sir. Tea and toast. Comin' right up. (Exits.)

CASPAR

I'll bet that bastard never changes his shirt. When I make X.O., I'm going to make these guys wear white jackets. Fucking TEE shirts with holes in them ain't regulation.

(Lt. (j.g.) GREG HARRIS enters. He is the supply officer and a career man who has come up from the ranks. He is about forty years old, slightly overweight and easily the oldest officer on board.)

HARRIS

Well, here I am, Lieutenant junior grade Greg Harris, reporting for whatever, as ordered. Hope this doesn't take too long, I'm right in the middle of inventory.

CASPAR

You should have gone into business, Greg.

HARRIS

Someday I will. Damn near ran the biggest PX in Bremerhaven in '55. Big as any A&P. Get off this tub, I'm ready for the Great Lakes Supply Center, whole damn thing.

CASPAR

I don't think so, Greg. Not after what happened in Bremerhaven. That was quite a hash-up, you said so yourself.

HARRIS

What would you know about it, shavetail? Wasn't for me you'd be eating your goddamn shoelaces.

CASPAR

I remember we ran out of coffee last April, 100 miles west of the Azores.

HARRIS

I remember we ran out of coffee after the ship had been drifting around the Atlantic for two and a half days because your goddamn engineering department had been pumping sea water into the fuel oil sump and the main engines were running on salt water. The goddamn coffee was in Cadiz. It wasn't my fault we couldn't fucking get there.

SOVIC

Flushed your toilet, Harold.

(BIRD enters with a cup of tea, serves CASPAR.)

CASPAR

Where's my toast?

BIRD

Sorry, Mr Caspar, sir. But we just about to pipe down to supper this minute. We don't got but two toasters in the pantry, Mr Caspar. One of'm is bust, and the other we're usin' to make the croutons.

CASPAR

Croutons?

BIRD

Yes, sir. Word is, tonight is something special. Cap'n's got a special guest. Secretary of the Navy or some such.

(BIRD exits into pantry.)

CASPAR

What the hell does he mean, "croutons"?

HARRIS

Croutons. He's making croutons for the consomme tonight.

SOVIC

Forget the toast, Harold. Ask him to put something in your tea. What the hell, it's the Fourth of July.

CASPAR

Greg. You're his goddamn boss. Tell him I want my goddamn toast.

(The Commanding Officer, LT. FRED FARR enters through the weather door. Following FARR is a woman, about thirty-eight, wearing a blue seersucker suitdress with an American flag pin in the lapel. She carries an attache case.)

SOVIC

Attention in the wardroom!

(The officers stand at attention. Sound of the boatswains pipe on the PA.)

PA

"Now, sweepers, man your brooms. Clean sweepdown, fore and aft."

FARR

Gentlemen, I present to you Miss Bernice Hartwell of the American consulate here in Kingston. Miss Hartwell is here to share supper with us and to brief us all on the state of affairs here in Jamaica. Miss Hartwell, our ship's officers. You've already met Mr Smythe. Here is Ensign Harold Caspar, Engineering....

(During the introductions, BIRD enters with toast for CASPAR. He is about to set it down when HARRIS catches BIRD's eye and clearly wags his head, "No!" Without missing a beat, BIRD turns and exits into the pantry with the toast.)

...Ensign Michael Sovic, First lieutenant and Gunnery...and Lieutenant junior grade Harris, our Supply Officer. Mr Harris is not a line officer, like myself, but he is the only other officer on board who is regular Navy.

HARRIS

Regular Navy and proud of it Miss Hartwell.

HARTWELL

Mrs Hartwell, Mr Harris. It's "Mrs", everybody, please call me Mrs.

FARR

Is your husband in the Foreign Service also, Mrs Hartwell?

HARTWELL

He's deceased.

FARR

I had no idea. I'm sorry.

HARTWELL

It's alright. He's been gone eleven years now. He wasn't in the service, he was in the theatre. He died onstage, in fact.

HARRIS

He was an actor?

HARTWELL

Yes. He was in the USO. He was twenty years older than me. He died in Philadelphia. They were in a rehearsal phase, you know. It was a comedy.

CASPAR

A heart attack?

HARTWELL

No. He got hit with a sandbag. He never felt a thing. Mr Harris, may I ask you something?

HARRIS

Of course.

HARTWELL

Do you use MSG? In your soups, I mean.

HARRIS

MSG?

HARTWELL

It makes my head swell up.

PA

"Messgear, messgear. Clear the mess deck 'til pipedown."

(SMYTHE enters with clipboard, hands it to FARR.)

FARR

Herbert Hartwell. I remember him.

SMYTHE

I saw him in "The General Dies At Dawn."

HARTWELL

No. He wasn't in that.

CASPAR

"Blazing Yanks Over Chunking"?

FARR

We still don't all seem to be here. How's your assistant, Mr Caspar, our brand new ensign, Mr Barry?

SOVIC

Harry Barry.

FARR

That is his name, isn't it? How's he coming along in the engine room, Mr Caspar?

CASPAR

Well, he knows his battle station, and just yesterday Chief Bailey showed him the difference between the reefer compressor and the main engines.

FARR

Education proceeds apace. And where is Ensign Harry Barry now?

(Returns clipboard to SMYTHE.)

SMYTHE

He's ashore, sir.

SOVIC

Ashore?

SMYTHE

That's what I said, Mike. I sent him ashore to burn some confidential stuff at the consulate. In fact, he was supposed to get a ride back with Miss Hartwell.

FARR

Did you see him, Miss Hartwell?

HARTWELL

Mrs. Never laid eyes on him.