

HOW I BECAME A YACHT DESIGNER, PART TWO

CHUCK PAINE

By the end of the summer I was home in the United States. I was 21 years old, way beyond broke with college loans that would take the next ten years of my life to pay off, and desperately looking for a job. The dream of becoming a yacht designer had to be deferred as starvation loomed. I took a drafting job at a textile winding machinery company in Rhode Island and lived in an apartment in Providence. I loved drawing for a living. I continued to draw boats in my spare time and as my savings increased so did my yearning to get moving toward what I believed was my destiny.

A year and a half into that job I learned that the placement departments at Brown and MIT had reciprocal agreements. As a Brown alum I had access to MIT, and they taught Naval Architecture so they must know companies that needed nautical draftsmen. On a whim one day I drove up there just for a look-see. I walked in and introduced myself to a tall, beautiful young woman a little too tall and a lot too beautiful to be a romantic prospect for the likes of me. But I'll always remember her name for the simple reason that it was unforgettable—Amy Blue.

Amy Blue took me on as a project. After an hour on the phone she had gotten me two jobs which, combined, would enable me to move to Boston. When she asked me, "Do you think you can get a security clearance?" I realized that one of my employers would be none other than our esteemed CIA, despite the bogus moniker that appeared on my paychecks. The other was a famous professor of Naval Architecture who needed an extra body coding data for one of his research papers. Encouraged, I took a shot- "I know you've got a towing tank here. Any chance of a job with them?" She got me that one too.

A few months later I was hunched over my desk in Dr. Kerwin's office when a fellow named Jerry Cashman came in to see my boss as he'd done numerous times before. Jerry worked for a famous consulting company in downtown Boston that designed nuclear power plants for naval ships' propulsion. He'd obviously spoken with Dr. Kerwin before he sidled over to my desk and said, "Mr. Paine?" "You mean me?" I answered. "How'd you like a REAL job?" he said.

J. E. Bowker Associates was indeed a real job. They paid me \$7200 a year to start- more money in 1968 than most men earned at the end of their working lives. I wore a jacket and tie to work every day. And the work was fascinating. Mostly I wrote computer programs in FORTRAN and designed pressure vessels using a computer program called "Seal-Shell 2". But in helping to design ships I was getting closer to designing yachts and that was all I cared about. They had a huge drafting pool with twenty or thirty men drawing in ink on linen to

the exacting standards that the U.S. Navy insisted upon. Every line weight, every line type had to be perfect, and there was no erasing when you drew on linen.

I was the low man on the totem pole. All the work was "classified" since in those days there was a Commie behind every tree. Those were the days when computers lived in air conditioned rooms on floors that floated on springs and if you needed a powerful one there were only a few in the entire country. We'd run stress analyses and thermal transients and I'd be the poor schlep who'd fly out to Barberton, Ohio with a briefcase full of punch cards and then back the next day with a stack of green and white computer fanfold in the seat beside me. Once back in the office I would have to swear an oath that I had not taken my eyes off the stack even to take a pee at the back of the plane lest some Russkie might have photographed it with a wristwatch camera.

The Vietnam War was heating up and the morality of colonial powers imposing their will upon poor countries halfway around the world was being violently debated in the streets of American cities. No matter how I parsed it I couldn't escape the fact that the things I was designing weren't yachts, they were war machines. I pasted a peace decal on my rear bumper and came to the conclusion I had no choice but to quit the best job I'd ever had.

In the spring of 1969, at the age of 25, I made my decision. The idea of joining the Peace Corps had been floating around in the back of my conscience for awhile. I'd been the beneficiary of immense good fortune. I'd been exempted from military service on a technicality (I'd had asthma as a child). I'd been given, almost free of charge, an education that no amount of mere money could buy. I'd found work that was both fascinating and lucrative. John Kennedy's words gnawed at me; "Ask not what your country can do for you, Ask what you can do for your country." It was time to do something for someone other than myself for a change.

When I got my letter of acceptance they told me I'd be going to a place called Iran. I literally had no idea where on earth it was and had to look it up in an atlas. The Peace Corps had a place on their application where you could request three potential countries of service. I had put down Malaysia, Jamaica and Fiji because I'd be close to the ocean. You could reject an offer and when another placement came up they'd send it to you. But in a way I figured that was against the spirit of voluntarism. If they needed me in a place called Iran, that's where I'd go.

The Peace Corps flew me to Denver where a bus assembled a bunch of equally naïve kids, most younger than me, and drove us to a decrepit old CCC camp in the foothills of the Rockies. We stepped down from the bus and a darkish skinned person smiled at us and said,

“Salaam a- leh comb”. Eventually someone got what was happening and responded with something that sounded vaguely similar, in reaction to which the greeter smiled broadly. The Peace Corps had the best language training in the world, for the simple reason that once you stepped off that bus you spoke farsi, wrote farsi, and began to dream in farsi. We stood in line for injections, sometimes one in an arm and one in a cheek per pass- through. And to put the timing of that summer into context, they set up a television outdoors between our barracks one day and we all watched Neil Armstrong step backwards off a ladder and stamp his footprint onto the moon.



My barracks in the CCC camp in Morrison Colorado. It still looks like this 40 years later!

I had joined the Peace Corps with the hope of digging wells in some bucolic tropical Paradise. Instead they sent me to Tehran, the largest city I would ever inhabit in my life, in the middle of a desert. The Peace Corps Volunteers in Iran had a name for Tehran. They called it the a-----e of the universe—I’m sure you can substitute the appropriate body part. But they needed computer programmers at a government ministry called the Plan Organization. I’d have to quickly learn COBOL, another computer language. Would I do it? I had come this far—I figured there was no turning back.



Students and teachers, the day before flying to Iran.



Tehran — not famous for its architecture in 1969.

First though, the Peace Corps had “in-country training”. They wanted to make sure your farsi was good enough to survive, and that you wouldn’t freak out with what they termed “culture shock”. If you were going to wash out they wanted you to do it before you started your actual job, and quite a few did. I had no problem with the language- I was fluent after three months of training. To verify your cultural malleability they had one little test you had to pass before going to your job placement. You were given enough rials for bus fare and rudimentary sustenance and told not to show your face in Tehran for the next two weeks.

I decided to go to the sea, which I was already beginning to crave. Iran is a huge country and there were virtually no paved roads in those days, but it was just possible to get to the Persian Gulf and back in the allotted time. I passed through Isfahan, one of the most beautiful cities on Earth. The Persians say of it, because it rhymes, “Isfahan, nesfeh jahan” – Isfahan is half of the world. I saw little villages hundreds of miles from electricity or telephones where one young squirt, for example, came up to me and seeing my light skin and blond hair asked where I was from. “Amrika”, I proudly answered. “Ru mah, chetowr bood?” he asked. What was it like on the moon?

Six dusty days and a thousand mile dirt track later I arrived at Bandar Abbas, the most romantic place I have ever been. I felt that I had truly left home for the first time in my life. The houses had huge mud brick chimney-like towers called “bahd geer” or “wind gatherers” that conducted even the lightest zephyr down into a central room where the residents would endure during the heat of the day. There were dhows that were built in ways that have not changed in a thousand years except now they had engines. There was oppressive heat and drenching humidity and earthy smells that I’d give anything to relive today. There was a fish market that materialized on the beach every morning and melted away an hour after sunrise. In one of the most fortunate hasty decisions I ever made in my life I had bought a small camera in Tehran, which is why you have not only these words to describe what it was like to live in Iran forty years ago, but pictures as well.

I'd learned there was an even more remote place I could go. There wasn't a ferry or anything, but if you went down to the long pier lined with dhows in the morning and began to talk with their captains, eventually you might find one that was delivering freight to the island of Queshm, in the middle of the Persian Gulf. My dhow was small and smoky and slow, but by the end of the day it was approaching the island. I was living out of a small backpack with a thin sleeping bag rolled up at the bottom.

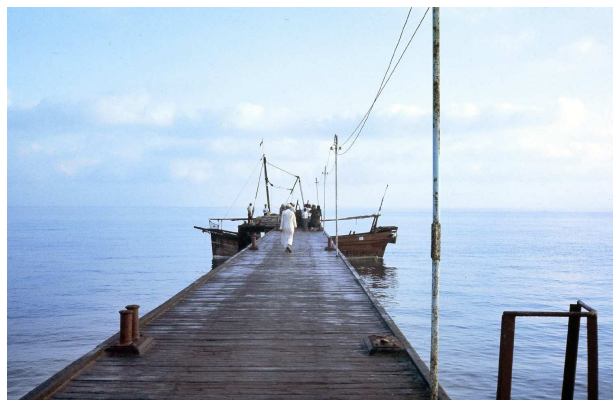


The dhow I took to Queshm.

I had a bag of pistachio nuts and a can of Canada Dry for dinner. I knew there were no hotels or guest houses or restaurants anywhere on Queshm. My plan was to sleep on the beach.

I stepped off the pier onto the sandy beach. There was nothing else there. If you went straight, —inland— there were a few mud-brick structures that looked like beehives. These were houses, by a remote stretch. There was no electricity except on the pier and at the teahouse, which had their own generators. All I had to care about in life was to choose, left or right? I went right- that is, west. The sun was just setting and with no source of light for reading or writing in a few minutes I'd be turning in.

Along the way—a recurring nuisance in Iran—I'd acquired a follower. Kids there were fascinated with foreigners and if they were lucky they'd get one that spoke English. Invariably they'd come up to you and pronounce the only two words they'd actually mastered... "hello meester". I would respond in pretty good farsi, "I speak farsi. What would you like?" This was usually enough to stimulate a brief conversation about the kid's village and the fact that he loved America and had an uncle who lived in Los Angeles. Then they'd leave you alone.



The pier at Queshm.

But this kid was more curious than most and he trailed along close behind. When I knelt down and unrolled my sleeping bag he became visibly agitated.

"Na kon Agha", he said. *Don't do that, sir.*

"Chera na?" I asked.

"Khatarnogh ast" he said. I didn't know the word "khatarnogh", but I did know that the word "khatar" meant *danger*.

"Chera khatarnogh eh, batcheh?" I asked. At this point he was jumping up and down with excitement.

"Mahr miod", he exclaimed. I knew that "miod" meant that something was coming, might come, had come or often came- they don't have as many verb tenses in farsi as we have in English. But I didn't know what "mahr" meant. We were at an impasse. I looked down at him and he looked up at me. I didn't want this punk kid telling me I couldn't sleep on his beach. But I saw that he was truly concerned. This kid was smart, though. You could just sense his little brain working.

He ran into the scrub at the edge of the beach and found a stick. With it he traced in the sand a long sinuous squiggle. "Shit!" I thought. SNAKE!

He led me to the local teahouse, and in about an hour they turned off the generator and the few patrons, all men of course, went home. They piled up a few Persian carpets on one of the tables for me to sleep on. I offered to pay them anything, and they took a few rials- perhaps three cents. Not a bad price for maybe saving my life.

Years later I stumbled upon an issue of National Geographic with the article on "The World's Ten Most Venomous Creatures." And there it was, *Enhydryna schitos*, whose venom is eight times more deadly than a cobra's.



*Shabnazeh Sheesh, the street where I lived. Yes, those are three camels
The balloon seller is staring at.*

I worked in Tehran for two years. Two years in Iran went by like twenty years at home! But I got to travel all over the Middle East, three times to Afghanistan and Turkey and to every corner of Iran. Tehran was a tough place to live, but Iran was fascinating and romantic and beautiful, and the Iranians were as good and kind as people are anywhere. And, being in the Peace Corps was an experience that I wouldn't trade for anything. I'd do it again in a minute if I had the health and strength I had when I was young.



The rooftop of my apartment in Tehran. At the left you can see the boat model I carved while I was there. Even in the middle of a desert, I couldn't stop thinking about boats.

As I neared the end of my tour of duty I began to think about my future. I'd continued to sketch boats, even went down to the bazaar and bought tools and wood and made a model of a little yacht I hoped to design and build when I returned. I'd seen the world, survived a difficult posting and a hundred intestinal diseases in Tehran, was becoming a good engineer, knew a lot about computers, and realized if I didn't do it now at age 27—right away when I returned to America—I'd end up just like Chick Street... working for money for the rest of my life.

And that's exactly what I did. I returned to Boston in October of 1971 via a wonderful overland backpacking tour of Turkey, Greece and much of Europe. I slept for three whole days on my brother's floor in Marblehead. I ate rare hamburger and bought things without bargaining and had solid stools. Then I got out the Boston yellow pages and looked up Naval Architects. There were four. Two that did only yachts... Dick Carter in Nahant and John Alden downtown. Two others who specialized in fish-boats and military craft. Nahant was closest to Marblehead and Dick Carter was famous. I knew I'd never get a job with him, given who he was, but I had to start somewhere, and I had months, years if necessary, because I simply wasn't going to give up on my dream, ever.

I remember it was a Friday. I drove my brother's Volkswagen van to Dick's office, parking it where I hoped he wouldn't see it. Art was into his countercultural phase at that point and his van was embellished with an all-over psychedelic paint job in day glow colors, with a smokestack sticking out the top. Not exactly the sort of vehicle one of the world's most famous racing yacht designers might expect a prospective employee to drive.

I walked in and met Dick Carter. He was not in a good mood.

Seems his number one guy, Jim Hartvig Anderson, the only person who knew how to run the time-shared computer, had just given his notice. I showed Dick my drawing portfolio. He asked a few questions. Money was important, of course—I was once again broke after working without pay for two years. I formed an idea of how much I would ask him for if it ever got that far. He didn't ask. He said, "I'll offer you such and such a salary." (It was a lot more than I was going to ask for). Then he says, "Can you start on Monday?"