

# CAPTAIN ATCH

**L**T. ELMER ATCHISON WAS one of the truly unique human beings I've known. I named one of my sons after him, Thomas Atchison Cramer; that's what he meant to me. He was a natural leader. He was captain of his ship but ruled without an authoritarian air. All of us worked our butts off because we liked him. He was fair and respectful; he complimented those who had done well. I learned a great deal about leadership from him. He made all of us young reserve officers feel like we were in charge. He gave us a sense of responsibility, and there was mutual respect.

Captain Atch was married to a Korean-American who had been his best friend's wife. When his friend, a fellow submariner, was killed in World War II, Captain Atch married his widow because he didn't want her to remain alone. She was very loving, meticulous in her cleanliness. I had dinner with them periodically, and they served kimchee, a classic, highly odiferous Korean dish of pickled cabbage. We used to be able to tell when we were near a Korean ship before we saw it by the smell in the air, particularly if we were downwind. Once I made the mistake of telling Captain Atch's wife that I liked kimchee, and she then sent over a bucket of it for us. The captain and I were the only ones who ate it. After all, kimchee isn't very compatible with your stomach on a ship that's pitching and rolling and slamming the surf.

One of any captain's jobs is to conduct a court-martial when a

## BULLISH ON LIFE

sailor breaks Navy rules. The executive officer must act the part of the prosecuting attorney. At the court-martial, the executive officer would report something like this: "Captain, he violated U.S. Code of Naval Justice Doc. 174 by coming back drunk and disorderly. Brought back by the Shore Patrol. He violated U.S. Naval Justice Code 716 by being AWOL." Of course, the sailor would be scared silly because he was facing the captain. At these times, Captain Atch would sway from one foot to the other and say, "Why'd you do it? Why'd you do it?" He was probably thinking back on how many times he had done the same thing. The sailor would then promise never to do it again "until the next time." And Captain Atch would dismiss the charges.

I heard from him once in a while after I returned to civilian life. He had left the ship before I did and gone on one more assignment. Then he retired from the Navy and lived in Hilo, Hawaii, working in the port.

Twenty years after I left the Navy, I went through Hawaii en route to the Orient. I found Captain Atch's name in the phone book, but every time I called, the line was busy. I called and called. Finally, that evening his wife answered the phone, and she told me he had just died and they had had his funeral that day, casting his ashes out to sea.

I had been so close to being with my captain one more time. He was a father symbol and a great human being. He was self-made. Very few sailors become officers, and the fact that Captain Atch accomplished this meant he was someone very special. To me he will always be someone special.

### *O Captain! My Captain!*

O captain! My captain! Our fearful trip is done,  
The ship has weather'd every rack, the prize we sought is won,  
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting.  
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring  
But o' heart! Heart! Heart!  
O the bleeding drops of red!  
Where on the deck my captain lies,  
Fallen cold and dead.

— Walt Whitman