

Opinion

My Turn: John M. Boehnert: A drink from the Squadron Bottle

By John M. Boehnert

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Shortly before I first traveled to San Francisco as a young lawyer, my father made a suggestion. I should have a drink at the Top of the Mark, the iconic bar on the 19th floor of the Mark Hopkins Hotel.

Whenever he was in San Francisco during World War II, he went to the Top of the Mark for a martini with his army buddies.

I took his advice and drank a martini while taking in a splendid view of San Francisco and the Bay from the heights of Nob Hill. Ever since that trip, perhaps 40 years ago, I have never been in San Francisco without having a martini at the Top of the Mark and thinking about my father.

There was something special about going to the other side of the country and having the same drink at the same bar that my father did when he was in town as an Army sergeant.

When I was back in San Francisco this summer, I discovered a new tradition.

On my first night in town I met my daughter and son-in-law for drinks at the Top of the Mark. While enjoying my martini, I learned about the Squadron Bottle.

During World War II, servicemen heading to and from the war in the Pacific frequented the Top of the Mark. So much so that servicemen began buying a bottle, enjoying a few drinks, and marking the remainder for their unit, branch of service or other servicemen. That way, other servicemen passing through could enjoy a complimentary drink from the "Squadron Bottle." However, if he got the last drink from the bottle, he was obligated to replace it for his squadron.

The tradition continued during the war and thereafter, until the mid-'90s. Then, legend holds, a serviceman enjoyed the last drink from the Squadron Bottle but failed to replace it. The tradition withered.

In 2009, a young naval officer persuaded the Top of the Mark to re-institute it.

These days, the Squadron Bottle can be from a broad array of liquor purchased by or for servicemen. Anyone is entitled to buy a bottle for servicemen and veterans, with or without dedicating it to a unit.

Of course, the one who gets the last shot from the bottle has to replace it.

ID cards are required to verify military service. Fortunately, I had my Veterans Department ID, which I use to access health care for service-connected disabilities. I had an excellent Irish whiskey.

The next evening, we convened at the Top of the Mark, joined by my son, an active-duty Army officer, and my daughter-in-law. I explained to my son that I now had two traditions at the Top of the Mark: I first would have a martini in honor of my dad. Then I would have an Irish whiskey from the Squadron Bottle. I dedicated that drink to those with whom I served two tours in Vietnam, first with the 9th Infantry Division and then as an infantry adviser to a Vietnamese infantry battalion. A hardbound "log" is presented to inscribe such dedications.

I introduced my son to the tradition. He enjoyed a bourbon on the rocks from the Squadron Bottle.

When we were ready to move on to dinner, I bought a bottle of Irish whiskey for my son's unit. I hope current and former members of his unit will enjoy a drink when in San Francisco.

I just trust that whoever gets the last drink will buy a new bottle.

Some traditions are worth preserving.

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