

Under the Sea

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I served in the submarine service with the Navy. For my initial interview, I was directed to a large, open room and questioned by several officers in a relaxed atmosphere. Once past the preliminary meeting, I was sent down the hall for interrogation in a room much different from the first. I was a single young man, barely out of high school.

In this tiny room with a low ceiling, the interrogating officer was a psychiatrist studying my reactions as I sat in the only chair. The interrogator's questions were very pointed to see if I had claustrophobia or whatever might prevent me from being comfortable on a submarine.

After six months of submarine training in New London, Connecticut, and a blackboard class that taught electrical components, water lines and which valves to turn, I had learned not only the role I was expected to perform, but everything else about the boat to be qualified and wear the twin dolphin symbol of a submariner.

If you were trapped in any given compartment, you had to be able to know what that compartment contained and how to operate it. You had to learn the whole boat.

As well as learning the boat, trainees practiced escapes in a 100-foot dive tank that looked more like 1,000 feet!

Instead of the scuba gear used in modern times, we wore a small, square "lung" that hung on our chests. Sitting in a pressurization chamber next to the dive tank, we waited for the pressure to equal that of the dive tank.



One by one, we were fed into the dive tank to ascend, lung mouthpieces now in our mouths to allow us to breathe.

Ascending a rope knotted every 10 feet to indicate safety stops to acclimate our lungs, trainees were circled by instructors observing our technique.

I recall that we automatically held our breath even though we had a lung. The instructor would pop us on the head to remind us to breathe.

The purpose of the exercise escaped me. It was ridiculous because we probably would never get out.

I told my folks if they ever got a missing-in-action letter, to forget it, because there's no such thing as missing in action on a submarine!

Finally assigned to a submarine, the crew performed shakedown cruises to become accustomed to our boat and each particular station. Because everyone was assigned various duties, I was not just the radioman I'd originally trained to be, but was also assigned to sonar gear and torpedo data computer gear.

The boat I was on, Flying Fish, served first in the Pacific, then in the Atlantic hunting down German Wolf Packs.

I remember the German subs were just blowing the heck out of our Liberty ships. Hardly any of the Liberty ships made it to their destination because there were so many of the German submarines and so few of us.

But when fortunes of war finally reversed and numbers of German subs decreased, Americans began fighting subs with subs to force the enemy to the surface. And that's what we'd be doing, hunting them for a while.

None of the submarines were equipped with wakeless torpedoes until the end of the war. A torpedo fired by the Flying Fish streaked out up to a half mile, leaving an unmistakable wake its entire path. But then it turned toward its target, and by the time an enemy ship noticed the torpedo headed its way, its crew had no way to detect where it originated.

They'd think the sub was off in one direction. By the time they figured it out, we'd be in the opposite direction.

Although the Flying Fish never experienced a close call, I once received a radio message from New London directing the sub to dive to avoid an American convoy headed in our direction.

Our black sub had no markings, and we maintained radio silence. The destroyers escorting the convoy could easily have mistaken us for a German sub and depth-charged us without question.

It took almost half a day for that big convoy to go by. All the while, hunkered on the bottom of the ocean, the crew listened to the ships passing overhead, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk.

If a depth charge came down and exploded on top of the sub, the most damage it would do was wreck the deck. But if a depth charge ever got under the

sub, that's another story. It would split the seams open. That's why we would go as low as we could so nothing could get below us.

Funny thing. When they would show a depth charge in the movies, they'd show the glass breaking on the gauges. The subs didn't have glass because it would put your eyes out. The gauges had Plexiglas covers and they would just crack, not break. Pipes would burst, though.

The subs had patrols that ran for 30 days, then we would come back in, usually to Oahu. Sometimes we'd go out for our 30-day patrol and see nothing, absolutely nothing. One boat, called *The Sturgeon*, went out many times before it finally sank something. They sent a message, "The virgin *Sturgeon* is a virgin no more!"

Life aboard the sub was different and took some getting used to.

If we weren't submerged, the odor of diesel fuel got into everything—our food, clothes, hair—everything. But, when we were submerged the air was recirculated and we were running on motors that didn't give off any fumes. I guess we were luckier than most boats because we could submerge to get away from that diesel fuel.

We showered "Navy" style, limited to just a couple of minutes, with saltwater and special saltwater soap. There were no "Hollywood" showers for us where we could just let the water run.

Beds were stacked in three tiers with only enough for half the crew. We didn't have our own bed. Half the crew was usually on duty while the other half slept.

All the food was as fresh as we could get. Strawberries, lots of ice cream, soda pop and steaks all the time. Some of the crew got tired of steaks. Nobody got tired of the cakes and pies, though.

Near the end of the war, we fired on a "sampan," which is like a boat about 40 feet with a sail and a motor. Sampans were used for spying. Rather than wasting torpedoes on a sampan, we'd just surface and with a five-inch deck gun, we'd fire at it. Or we'd use our 20mm guns.

We knew when the war was almost over because there was nothing out there. If it weren't for the war, the Navy was a great service to be in. The competition between the different boats was as strong as the camaraderie was close between the individual crews on each boat.