

## Somewhere off the coast of

By Donald Jordan

The morning was another in a chain of perfect mornings under the warm Caribbean sun. We had been running on the surface charging batteries all night long en route to "Gitmo" Guantanamo Bay. Uncle had scheduled us to work with U.S. Naval ASW (anti-submarine warfare) aircraft even as we were underway to our next assignment, thereby assuring maximum "bang for the buck" for the U.S. taxpayer.

This morning, the exercise would start before breakfast was secured.

In the world of diesel-electric drive submarines, after running the diesels all night, a trim dive was necessary to compensate for the weight differential between diesel fuel and salt water, which is located in the saddle tanks that surround the outside of the submarine hull. Some saddle tanks contain just air; other tanks are filled with fuel oil, which are opened to sea on the bottom allowing the sea water to maintain a constant pressure and at the same time containing the fuel in the tanks. Inside the sub is located a control station that allows the operator to shift water and fuel fore and aft and from starboard to port to balance the sub. This is all necessary because underwater a submarine needs to swim with neutral buoyancy after it dives. It also allows the sub to literally "fly" underwater, using the bow planes to control the depth and the stern planes to control the angle. The port and starboard movement of the sub is controlled by the helm located in the topmost part of the sub referred to as the Conning Tower with a backup position below in the Control Room aka... (dive control central). Just before a dive the Captain would request a radar sweep to verify if there were any other surface ships in the area. On this morning, Captain Robert Brady confirmed he had no contacts within a twenty-five mile radius, so we dove to make our trim dive and balance out the sub.

After we completed the trimming operation, we notified the aircraft that we were ready to commence the operation. Then we went silent, diving to the deep depth required by the operational plan for training both the ASW aircraft crew and the sub crew. We were operating within a box with a minimum depth and maximum depth. We were also limited to a general easterly direction with a limitation of so many degrees to port or to starboard.

The ASW airplane would fly around with the MAD gear on board (Magnetic - Anomaly - Detection). This would measure and detect the earth's normal lines of magnetic force and if it flew over a sub in the ocean the metal in the sub would interfere with these lines of force. The instrument in the plane would make a zig on the recording paper. The aircrew would yell out "Mad, Mad, Mad" over the combat net and drop a dye color marker and hand grenade into the water. The sub hearing this would let out a bubble from the depths giving the aircrew a way to measure their effectiveness by measuring the closeness of the dye marker to the bubble. The sub crew will hear the sound of the pounding of the explosion against the hull to encourage the sub crew to work harder to avoid detection. The hand grenade simulates the effect of a depth charge. The force of the explosion would make a sound like the sound of a hammer striking the hull.

A submarine hull is made up of 7/8" thick of the finest quality steel. The round submarine hull which is 311 feet 10 inches in length and shaped like a cigar. This hull has a barrel shaped object on top (Conning Tower) and they are connected to the hull by a tube. All this is surrounded by a covering to add a streamlining effect to also hide the tanks and large piping required to supply air to the crew and engines when on the surface. All of this piping was sealed on both ends. When the sub dives both ends of these tubes are sealed. This tube is known as the main induction and is 36" in diameter that feeds the crew spaces with air, from this tube there are two other 18" pipes that feed the diesels with air for running on the surface. The USS Chopper was originally built in 1945 and then modified in a major modification to convert it to a faster quieter sub with snorkel and greater listening (SONAR) capability. We were also given new and more powerful (RADAR) with other (ECM) electronic countermeasures and other navigation equipment to allow us to acquire potential targets at further ranges than ever before. This improved communication equipment to allow us to venture further and further from our home base on operations.

Our assignment off "Gitmo" Guantanamo Bay, Cuba was to act as an enemy target sub for surface craft mainly US Naval destroyers and sometimes Coast Guard Cutters and NATO ships. We always looked forward to it because gave us the ability to see how good we were after all the training we had been through. All US Naval ships had to pass this ORI (Ordinance Readiness Inspection) or the Captain will be replaced. Only ships that do exceptional are rewarded with "E" for Excellence. The USS Chopper was one of the few awarded the "E." This award is proudly painted on the side of the Conning Tower of the sub where the world can see how good you are. Needless to say I'm proud to say they knew in "Gitmo" when the USS Chopper was the target ship. We held the record for the number of ships we "sank" over a three year period.

The submarine "Snorkel" modification was partially taken from an original WWII German design giving the sub the ability to run two diesel engines while partially submerged. This tricky operation required experienced bow and stern planes men to keep the top 18" of an 18" diameter tube above the waves while moving through the water. The tube had special three electrodes located equally spaced around the tube which when the salt water reached them would cause a cap to close down automatically thereby preventing salt water from drowning the diesels. If the bow and stern men were sharp they would be able to bring the snorkel head up high enough for the water to not touch the electrodes and the head

would stay open. The diesels would be operating all this time drawing the air the sub needed. If we dipped the head below the electrodes in the water, engines would take air from inside the boat creating a vacuum and popping ears of the crew. If the situation was not corrected quickly, the diesels would pull a vacuum in the boat which would at a set inches of vacuum shut down the engines. You really didn't want to piss off the engineman by doing this! When the engines were shut down while snorkeling, it would fill the boat with acrid smell of diesel exhaust. Now you would think, no problem, just keeps the snorkel high enough and smooth sailing. I think I should mention that running on snorkel was to preserve energy stored in your batteries or to charge batteries with as small as target presented to radar as possible. The diving officer's job was to maintain a minimum exposure at all times. If the watch was set with a planes man that wasn't experienced, everyone was interested to see he was learning his job as quickly as possible. The Captain and his second in command also known as the Executive Officer (the Exec, or XO for short) would determine who needed training and how much. You can also bet that the Chief of The Boat (Chief Bass) would be the one individual that was the most instrumental in your qualification program, COB Bass was your Mother, Father, Pastor, Teacher and God all rolled up in one! On a submarine, the COB is where it stops. In a close family everyone knew who needed training and every opportunity was given to allow that crew member to get practice. It was well known that the quicker all new members of the crew were qualified in all phases of their training, the more we could accomplish in emergency situations.

Minutes after we dove deeper to operational depth on this fine day, we experienced a loud thud - rocking the boat feeling like we ran into something. This as you might think, gained our full undivided attention. The thoughts started racing through my mind what the hell could we have run into down here in thousands of feet of water. Then to make matters worse, the bow of the sub starts pitching down at a sharper and sharper angle. I was in the Control Room looking at the depth gauge, and without giving away any information which I was sworn to keep secret, I watched helplessly as the deep depth gauge indicated depths past the depth we were told was the test depth to which we were not supposed to exceed. We immediately were called to battle stations and the engine rooms were reporting that they were taking salt water through the closed engine induction piping valve. The water was spraying under the tremendous pressure from the depths we were experiencing.

I might explain at this point, since we were at battle stations each compartment was connected to a sound powered phone network that ran throughout the submarine. During battle stations each compartment has someone assigned to be the telephone talker. This network allows instant communications to for the Captain and Diving Officer to determine the immediate status in each compartment. Strict discipline is observed on this net to allow critical information to be passed to the Captain in any emergency. I can see now, how all the practice and repetition of all Emergency Drills over and over saved our lives. I remember how there was no panic, only very calm deliberate activity going on with the intense concentration of the task at hand.

I thought to myself, I hope those engineers at Electric Boat who designed this wonderful submarine, paid attention and got good marks in class, when they were at college. No one asked what happened - everyone just paid the utmost attention to their job. I've heard there are no atheists in a foxhole. I would say the same thing at a time like this. As I think of it now, if this was my going to be my final resting place, I was in very good company.

By this time in my naval career, I was a senior petty officer in the electrical gang as an IC2(SS). I was asked to get a relief at my station in the Control Room and report back from the engine rooms to determine the extent of the electrical damage. I took great pride in getting this important assignment, and it prevented me from any more thoughts about the next life. Again as I relive this experience, the thing that is burned into my memory was the calm in the ship even though all hell was breaking loose.

I can still hear the groans the Chopper was making as I made my way back aft climbing up hill due to the sharp down angle. I continued through the After Battery compartment and into the Forward Engine Room. The extreme pressure exerted against the hull of the submarine as it dropped out of control into the depths of the ocean caused the hull to moan and groan. These sounds and all the combination of alarms going off, is telling you that: "everything is going to shit."

The crew under the excellent command of Captain Robert Brady, Lt. Commander, U.S.N., had been drilled and trained to react to any and all emergencies, as if emergencies happened all the time. It is to the crew, and all the wonderful designers and builders at Electric Boat in Groton, Ct., the workers during the fleet modifications in Portsmouth, N.H. I salute. They are the reason I am alive today, for which, I am eternally grateful.

The Engine Rooms: we were taking on water through the engine air induction piping, which meant the watertight integrity of the piping was lost. The pipes were supposed to be dry, but these tubes, outside the hull, as it turns out were full of water. The tremendous pressure caused by the depth was now forcing the water through these closed valves spraying saltwater all over the engine rooms like a giant shower head. If this was the case, as we later calculated, would add 19 ton of water to the neutral buoyancy of the sub underwater which we just minutes before had just adjusted. The salt water in the engine rooms was spraying everywhere. This is an electrician's worst nightmare to have salt water spraying all over your electrical equipment causing multiple fires in the control units and fuse boxes.

I can remember hearing the Collision Alarm which meant all the watertight doors in each compartment were closed isolating each compartment from the next. As the hatches were slammed shut the isolation was complete. Your

shipmates were counting on your expertise. I reported the damage assessment to the Captain thru the engine room phone talker. Surveying the damage I returned to my station in the Control Room to report a damage assessment. The sub by now was responding to the command "All Back Emergency" where in the Maneuvering Room the other senior electricians were the controllers. I remember the detailed procedures we knew by heart the drill but did not practice this on a regular basis. The reason being was that you had to pull the power for the motors completely off the battery, then take the battery out of parallel and put the batteries into series and by carefully selecting the levers apply the power to the motors building the power to maximum, which were 11,200 Amps of brute electrical power.

As the screws reversed themselves and started to bite into the cold salt water outside the hull it started sending two columns of water forward along the length of the sub. As the screws turned faster and faster, the thundering sound and violence of the turbulence shaking against the hull increased as the sub continued down. Rarely is this maneuver done with the benefit of a full battery charge. I'm sure, as I look back at it now with the full benefit of understanding Physics, how good fortune and the "Hands of God" decided it was not time for this crew to meet Our Maker. It was one of those times when time as we know it – "stood still." In the after section of the sub the violent shaking kept increasing past the point none of us ever experienced. The senior controllers on watch in the Maneuvering Room were insuring every ounce of power they could pour into those motors was applied.

I'm reminded of how the enginemen on watch used to stand under the engine air induction vents while we were underway on the surface. This gave them some relief to the heat from the engines. Now the engine air induction vents were spritzing salt water as if you were standing under a fine shower head in a room full of electric motor controllers for lube oil pumps, evaporators, air conditioning units, and most important of all the heart of the diesel electric boats - our main power generators. Salt water is to generators is what cholesterol is to the human heart. — **ALL STOP!!**

Before I hinted how we were dropping in depth. Going back forward to the control room I could feel the sub starting to vibrate and actually shake with a pounding coming from outside of the hull. They didn't prepare us for this in sub school. This was a new experience. I wondered "what the hell was going on." The groaning from the pressures exerted on the hull was continuing and in all my life I've never, ever felt the cold chills this sound brought to my body. The memory of the rumbling sound added to the groaning all you could think of was: What's next? The look on the faces of my crewmates was one of concern, not one of panic. There seemed to be a supreme feeling of confidence that our leaders would get us thru this emergency. The experiences of our intense training over and over again, for each and every multiple emergency caused us to react as we had worked it out in training. In each compartment there is a check-off listing on the bulkhead framed for each and every emergency. Adjacent to that is a sealed box of flashlights which is frequently checked to insure that they all have fresh batteries. If all the lights failed, these could be used for any emergency.

The senior chief our (C.O.B.) Chief of the Boat George Bass was at his station during "battle/emergency" conditions, the Main Ballast Manifold in the Control Room. He controlled the blowing/flooding of all Ballast Tanks to surface the sub or flood the tanks to dive the sub. He also has control of the Main Induction Valve and control of the "Christmas Tree" which indicated whether the valves are opened or closed. Red indicates open, Green indicates closed. The Safety Tank, which is a tank equal in volume to the volume of the conning tower, was blowing to give us more help stopping our descent and getting us to the surface. COB Bass was also the first person to say "have Maneuvering go all back full." And almost immediately the Commanding Officer told Maneuvering to go "all back full." This one command no doubt saved our lives.

So far we were now still sinking, but not as quickly. The tremendous power of the fully charged battery was starting to have an effect against the thousands of pounds of the induction piping full of salt water weighting us down. Apply this weight against our neutral buoyancy at the beginning of the implosion and now you have an appreciation of what's happening. Even though the forward ballast tanks were blowing as you are descending into the depths it takes time for the volume of water to be driven out by the high pressure 3000 lb air tanks through the flood ports.

The enginemen were joined by members of the electric gang to lend a hand wherever necessary in the engine rooms. Someone manned the sound powered phones to relieve an engineman who was needed outboard the engines. The crewmates were doing anything they could do to help. We had always worked together as a team to provide propulsion and electricity to the boat. We were facing the most supreme test submariners could experience.

Reports of the amount of salt water in the bilges in the engine rooms were communicated to the Control Room. Both forward and after batteries reported no salt water entry. Thank God, this would have been our worst nightmare. Salt water and battery acid together create Chlorine gas which is a deadly gas. There was a quiet determination to attend to the tasks at hand on the part of the crew. In the Galley, the cooks and others were securing the ovens and tables and seats into their locked positions, the MIV (Main Induction Valve) was secured by the Executive Chef A. Minnitelli, CS1(SS).

"Minni" was an experienced submariner who was respected for his cooking talents and his ability to get more great food for less money because he didn't always use the government warehouses to supply his food requirements.

## **What's the "E" for on the Sail over the 342?**

Again we owe a great deal to the massive amount of emergency drills we practiced over and over for the silence and sense of dedication coming from the crew. We were confident our leaders would do the right thing and we would do all that was required of us, without a question! The Squadron "E" on the Conning Tower was not a gift or an indication that the boat was "Chicken Shit, it was earned by outstanding performance of a well trained crew when tested and compared to US Navy benchmarks." The Chopper was a great place to live and work.

We had the only Titty Pink colored Maneuvering Room with a Black Crinkle Painted Meter panel board. One Engine Room was a light Pastel Green and the other was light Sea Foam Blue. The colors were picked out by the crew in each department. The compartments used to compete for the cleanest and best looking. The morale was sky high. This also was reflected by more people studying for advancement in rating in their off time. We were family and we took care of one another at all times.

What we later come to admire was the crazy notion the Captain had in his mind. Come up on as shallow an angle as possible. Only later to appreciate, it was because the engine room bilges were full of salt water, he didn't want the water gathering at the after bulkhead and possibly getting into the main power generators.

The electricians in the engine room spaces were pulling fuses to motors and controllers to eliminate possibility of fire as much as possible.

The forward motion of the sub was finally stopped and the bow slowly started to come up. The Captain and the Engineering Officer who was the Diving Officer were working with the bow and stern planes men to insure the bow came up very slowly at a small angle en route to the surface. They were both immediately on the same page. The lower decks in the Engine rooms were full of salt water.

Gradually the sub finally overcame the laws of gravity and finally started its slow ascent to the surface of the Caribbean within the radar contact of the Isle De Pintos off the South Coast of Cuba. Chopper was now sitting quietly in the warm waters waiting patiently for the crew to bring her out of her "Coma."

## **The things they never taught in Electronics School**

The quick thinking of the Captain and COB Bass paid off. The Big Main Propulsion Generators always had a slight air pressure inside them to keep all the dust outside and they were always immaculate inside. They even had a light bulb inside to inspect every hour while underway. All of the generators were fine. Great news !!

The generators were fine but all of the motors and controllers were affected by the salt water that was spraying all over the place when we were under water. Without all of these we could not start any of the diesels.

All of the Electric Motors in the engine rooms to run salt water pumps, lube oil pumps, air conditioner compressors, evaporators to make fresh water, fuel oil pumps and a host of others, due to their size, needed an additional box to hold their starter circuitry. To run the diesel engines we had to get rid of all the salt water that was sprayed on the motors and starter panels.

The electrical gang reviewed the damage and came up with a plan. They tested it on one controller. When it tested successful, they broke into teams and went to work.

Pull all the fuses and remove all the covers. Hook up a hose to the hot water and spray hot water under pressure directly on the coils to wash the salt from any part of the controller and the motor. Yes, spray the hot water directly into each controller and motor after you take your megger readings!

The next job then was to spray carbon tetrachloride "dry cleaning solution" to eliminate as much of the left over water as possible, after you blew the item as dry as you could with clean 225# air. Take more megger readings to make sure the windings weren't grounded. If the reading on the megger went up to a given safe level, replace the fuses and run a small amount of electricity over the coils only. This would allow the coils to heat up and evaporate any remaining water.

One at a time, the motors and controllers were nursed back to health and allowed us to get one engine on line at a time to get us underway and charge the batteries.

We worked for forty eight hours straight to get all four engines on line as our orders were to immediately return to base at Key West.

During the time we were deep submerged, the guys in the Maneuvering Room, where the Electrical Propulsion Motors were located around each shaft, monitored the additional flow salt water that had been coming through the packing seal around the shafts where they go through the hull. They used a bucket and rags to dry it up as fast as it came in and dump it into the sanitary tank in the after torpedo room. This action insured that the bilges were dry and no water came close to the main motor housings.

All during this time the both battery compartments were constantly checked for any water entry at fifteen minute intervals. This was always a constant worry. The thought of having salt water in the battery compartments. Salt water plus sulphuric acid gives a toxic chlorine gas, not a good thing.

### **What does it look like topside, chief?**

COB Bass with the Gunnery Officer and the Engineering Officer went up topside to look for damage and worked for about an hour and a half making temporary repairs and came back down. Nobody was talking. The Main Induction had imploded and COB Bass said he could put his head and shoulders into the opening.

### **Surfaced at trolling speed**

After a very slow ascent to the surface we were able to maintain headway at about three knots on battery power. We needed to get an engine on line quickly because the batteries were no longer at full charge and we were not too far from the Bermuda triangle. Sailors are "knot" superstitious, but we don't mess with Mother Nature either.

### **What the hell happened to Chopper?**

Not everyone was able to go topside in order to see, what the hell the cause of all this horseshit was. The black gang engineers, electricians, auxiliary men, were working like crazy men all this time. The torpedo men from the forward and after torpedo rooms were running food and drinks for the guys working in the engine rooms. The faster we worked the worse the working conditions became. The more engines we got working the hotter and noisier it became. Finally with a great amount of relief we got all four engines and all their support equipment working.

We had worked for 48 continuous hours getting all diesel engines one-at-a-time up and running. In this fashion, we were able to get warm meals and make water for showers for all those heading for a warm clean bunk. Contrary to most belief, sub sailors like to keep clean bodies especially where we were all working in this really dirty environment. In the great tradition of the Chopper, we were able to finally return to port in Key West unescorted under our own power with all four engines working.

As we made the 180 degree turn around the jetty and slowly headed for our pier, we noticed the tender crew was all up on deck manning the side rails and the word was piped below the Chopper was back in port. They evidently wanted to see the damage to the Chopper. We didn't appear to have any apparent visible damage from their vantage point.

Meanwhile, below decks on Chopper. all the single guys had the duty and the married guys were in their whites with their dirty laundry over their shoulder and their shoes sparkling getting ready to see their families.

As soon as we tied up to our pier, the diving barge pulled up alongside with a crane. Yard birds from the shipyard came crawling all over the sub and a skinny black limo full of brass pulled up at the head of the pier. In less than an hour after we tied up, a twenty foot section of our decking and superstructure was cut with power saws and welding torches and hoisted in the air by the crane. It was removed in one piece from just aft of the sail and placed on our pier.

Wow were we shocked at what we saw! The crew with the was amazed to find a Twenty-Four inch long hole by Eighteen Inches in the Engine Air Induction Piping. I would have liked to listen to the initial conversation between the brass in the wardroom. Knowing that the Navy way is to place blame as soon as possible.

In a conversation I had a few years ago with John "Little John" Courmier, EN2, living in New Orleans. I learned that it was confirmed that the cause of failure was not neglect, but metal fatigue from the many stresses of diving and surfacing. There was a 24" length long of the 18" diameter stainless steel piping that had imploded, thereby flooding the entire Main and Engine induction piping system.

### **My Personal Comment:**

I have always felt very strongly that the Chopper crew got short changed for whatever reason at that time. I feel the crew, were not properly recognized for all the work they put in bringing the Chopper back to the surface and back to port. It was an outstanding performance and yet it was over shadowed by the Navy Incident Investigation trying to find someone to blame. I feel this is an example where a Unit Citation could have been awarded. COB Bass for his leadership during this entire process certainly needed to be recognized.

Before the trip I had thought about those WW2 movies we loved to watch in Sub School. Like the movie "Run Silent Run Deep." They had a picture of Betty Grable, which everyone patted for luck, when they passed by. Chopper didn't have a Betty Grable picture. We needed something in Maneuvering Room. In the Indian Shop, I passed by a table with a bunch of carvings and he smiled at me as I passed. I walked around the table a couple of times to make sure it was what I wanted. He kept smiling at me. "The Happy Buddha" had me hooked. We were meant to become shipmates. I purchased it and brought it back on board Chopper. I approached William "Nellie" Nelson, a mountain of a man, at the time an EM1(SS), the lead main power electrician. Nellie and COB Bass were the two exercising sailors on board. Every day they were lifting hand weights, doing pushups, chinning and if in port running miles along the waterfront. COB Bass was also the golf champion of the USS Chopper and probably any other submarine you want to name. COB

Bass was a natural gifted athletic. He was one of the best fast softball pitchers the military had and pitched in the World Series of Softball.

“Nellie”, I said, “we really need a lucky charm for the maneuvering room. What do you think of a **Happy Buddha** and we can mount it in the middle of the island for luck?”

“You’re telling me you want to punch a hole in our new top on the island to mount some damn Buddha for luck?” he responded. I pressed on, not knowing at the time, he loved the idea. He wanted to see the Buddha. I got it from my locker to show him and he just sat it up by the pole that went through the front of the table on the island. By a stroke of luck, someone disappeared the Buddha during overnight watch. Nellie really got pissed that someone took **his Electrician gang’s Buddha**.

I previously had felt I was about halfway to getting permission to have it installed in the Maneuvering Room and then this happened. Two days later, the Buddha mysteriously reappeared again as if by magic. When “Nellie” saw the Buddha, he took a big lag screw and ran it right up thru the Buddha to mount it in the middle of the island. After he mounted it, he asked Captain Brady and COB Bass to come back to Maneuvering to see our new addition.

The Captain laughed and said we probably needed it, and it was fine, as far as he was concerned... “Ya just gotta love Captain Brady”.

There it stayed, I understand, till Chopper was in Charleston for the last time. There the Chopper was stripped of all useful equipment before its ultimate transition from the present to “Eternal Patrol.” I have always felt my money was well spent on the Buddha. As long as Buddha was aboard, Chopper made as many surfaces as we did dives. As I am typing this I have tears in my eyes recalling the demise of a dear friend.

### **Is that anyway to treat a Lady?**

Chopper had the last laugh, though... It was about 1:00 am at the Kings Bay, Georgia reunion where a few former Chopper shipmates retold the story of just what happened to Chopper when it was declared scrap with the final sub designation IXSS-342.

The story came out that this beautiful lady, Chopper, was being towed as a partially submerged target. Another friendly sub Spadefish (SSN-668) was setup by the Navy to have the Chopper for target practice. Before the sub had a firing solution, Chopper somehow quietly slipped her tow line and eased down to her own self destruction in thousands of feet of water off Cape Hatteras July 21, 1976 just 32 years old.

I laughed when they told me this “just happened,” that Chopper just “somehow” slipped the tow lines off by herself. I said, “You gotta be shitting me,” but they held fast to their story.

I now think of how she must have felt after straining her guts out, enduring excruciating pains from the pressures of at least two extraordinary deep dives crushing against her skin as she still helped us return her to the surface.

I thought she might have thought something like this, “Screw you Navy, I served you well and deserve to be treated better than this.” To you gentlemen and shipmates who agreed with Lady Chopper aboard the towing sub, I salute you and God Bless You! Even though no one would admit it, I think anyone who ever sailed aboard the Chopper would do anything in their power to prevent her from being torpedoed.

Once out of Submarine School in New London, I reported for duty at the receiving station only to find my boat the USS Chopper would be out to sea for another three weeks or so. The chief asked me that fateful question: “Can you drive a stick shift?” “Yes Chief,” I answered. “Fine,” he said and he arranged for a ride for me to the base hospital. He gave me a slip of paper to give to yet another Chief. The Chief greeted me warmly and I noticed the Dolphins on his chest.

I was the new duty ambulance driver for the next three weeks or whenever the Chopper returned to base. I was on duty for twelve hours and off twelve hours. I thought to myself, why do they have a 24 hour ambulance service? Isn’t this just a small island? That is really good coverage for such a small island. The US Navy must really care.

### **The Love Taxi !**

I discovered that at least half the islands women must be pregnant at all times. I really learned my way around the islands quickly. I either traveled with a Corpsman or a Navy Nurse. More than once I learned the old naval expression “You have to be there for the laying of the keel but, you do not have to be there for the launching.” Many times the father was at sea when his children were born.

Once a woman, who was all alone in labor, had a death grip on my sleeve saying: “Don’t you leave me sailor.”

I was forced to stay with her during the entire delivery process. I was going to be a sub sailor and her husband was on a sub at sea, I was going in there with her and it was her call. The Navy didn’t clash with Navy wives in the Delivery Room. I scrubbed up and put on the smock they gave me. I stayed right with her till the baby was born. This

was one case that the parents or the in-laws hadn't arrived in Key West. This occurred more than once. In one instance, the lady who was all alone gave her son my first name (Donald) for her son's middle name.

I was at a very tender eighteen years old with a pension for turning beet red when I was embarrassed. My ears and my cheeks were beet red for hours on end during this assignment. I learned at this early age that the birth experience was very special. There is nothing as wonderful as the birth of children. I found myself floating on a cloud when I saw the babies looking back at me.

The pain of the birthing process with all the salty language from the mothers-to-be was soon forgotten. When the mothers held their children you can see the love in their eyes between mother and child. At the time, it was uncommon for husbands to accompany their wives into the delivery room. Yet we were dragged into the delivery room again and again. I was indeed fortunate because all the babies born on my shift were healthy. I was very glad I learned to drive stick shift delivery truck before I enlisted.

A few days after reporting aboard the Chopper, I was asked to report to the Captain's cabin immediately. I knocked on the bulkhead and reported as requested to Captain From. He had my service record open on his desk and within minutes had read me the riot act, because I had not made significant progress on my qualification project. He said he would not tolerate any slacking off on my part. Getting qualified quickly was going to be my top priority. Did I completely understand?

Oh boy, was I already looked at as a screw up? I discovered that the qualification process normally took about nine months. I already knew this was to be done on my own time, not during my normal working hours. I immediately replied that I planned to be fully prepared for final Qualification testing in six months. In order to accomplish this task, I knew I wouldn't be spending too much time ashore. I would later take married guys duty for them in return for them taking my duty at a later time. I spent a great deal of time studying and working on the sketches in my notebook spending all this time aboard. I barely qualified in the six month period I allotted to myself. Even though I worked on my preparation constantly with each compartment senior petty officer, it just took a long time to trace all the piping systems out and memorize all facts and procedures. I spent time with the torpedo men, auxiliary gang, and enginemen when they were overhauling or charging their torpedoes. I did the same in the engine rooms. I wanted to be super qualified. I was driven to show I was not a slacker. I went through the boat with the Chief of the Boat and the Engineering Officer, I passed in flying colors. I did it! I met my original commitment.

All during this time aboard the Chopper that I was qualifying, I wasn't spending much money. I earned my seaman stripes and my third class petty officer stripes. From time to time, I was asked by crewmates to lend them money. They always wanted it in twenty dollars amounts; I was then paid back twenty-one dollars on payday. This became the going rate, \$20.00 for \$21.00 on payday. I remember donating \$500.00 to the new Navy – Marine Memorial Monument fund from the slush fund, after some gentle prodding from the COB and the chief Electrician. Recently, I even found my old "who owes me, and how much notebook." I guess you could say over twenty four months, I just about broke even. Besides – COB Bass was ever present and made sure that no one individual took advantage of any of his sailors.

I don't know if you remember, but we used to get paid in cash by a pistol packing paymaster. He had lots of Two Dollar Bills, they said it was easier to carry and took less time to count than singles. The paymaster always setup shop in the Crews mess. (Close to the coffee pot).

I always setup shop on payday in the control room by the IC switchboard to collect money owed the slush fund. It was a path that everyone had to pass by after they were paid. I was also a soft touch for gifts for new babies to crew members. I grew up an orphan at the time I was fifteen, with a built-in love of babies.

God, these were great times with outstanding officers and enlisted men with whom, I had the privilege to serve. It was a total of thirty-nine months of wonderful memories aboard Chopper.

### **Are they out of their friggin' minds?**

It was the 20<sup>th</sup> of September 1957 at 9 degrees West Latitude, we were patrolling on the surface charging batteries running radar picket duty against the possibility of a southward incursion by a Northern Fleet thru the Faeroe Straights just off the coast of Iceland and Greenland. This I didn't know till later, but what I did know we had the Forward Torpedo Room hatch open on deck and the After Torpedo Room hatch open on deck. The two engines were sucking Arctic Air thru the entire ship from both directions. The temperature must have dropped forty degrees in less than a minute's time. It was about 11:05 pm. We were just getting up out of nice warm bunks to relive the midnight to four watch. We were in our underwear and couldn't get warm fast enough, let alone get our clothes on fast enough. The announcement was made that we were crossing the Arctic Circle and we are getting a blast of Arctic Air to qualify us to be called "Blue Noses" as per naval tradition.

The word was passed that we were allowed to come to the bridge to see the Northern Lights for a short amount of time. This rolling color show in the sky was absolutely fascinating. We were all inducted into the Realm of the Arctic Circle.

## **Davy Crockett wanttabees-(should have asked first) !**

It was cold and raining when we pulled into Portsmouth, U.K. at 0500 for a little R&R. I had a partial day to see the sights. We meandered around town till lunchtime and checked out a tearoom for something to eat. I decided to be a little adventuresome and have a rabbit sandwich like old Davy Crockett. No, they had it spelled correctly Donald. It was a "rarebit sandwich," which to you non believers is fancy-schmancy for a bare toasted bread and thickly melted sliced cheese sandwich. I quietly ate it and said nothing to verify my ignorance. After being in the cold rain, we were looking forward to a good cup of coffee. Needless to say, the English prepare their coffee with a whole lot of milk and tons of sugar, a little weaker than what we were expecting. We joked to ourselves that the same coffee grounds were used twice before because the coffee tasted so weak. The town people were very friendly and we did nothing, nor said anything to express our disappointment with our meal. Back onboard Chopper, our cook was surprised when we complimented everything he did. The American dollar was worth a lot more then and we did our Christmas shopping early for the first time. We went to the summer resort of Weymouth and really got to understand what an organized vacation in the summer is all about. You really get a lot of bang for your buck. There was activity for every minute.

There was an African-American seaman from Washington, DC aboard the Chopper. I can't remember his name. He and I decided to go ashore together and check out the carnival. At the carnival, we were very successful at the shooting gallery. They had bottles of Champagne with white clay pipes stuck in the corks. The bowels were pointing up. The object was to shoot the stem of the clay pipe and the bottle was yours. Well we shot ten clay pipes each and were returning home with our prizes. A gentleman rode by on a bicycle shouting "Yankees go home." I have never been anywhere in the world that anyone ever said that to me.

I couldn't understand his politics, at the time. I thought it was a strange way to treat someone whose country had men and women fight and die to save their country twice in the past forty years.

I was also asked why I was so friendly with my black sailor friend. I didn't understand their comment until I saw their newspapers the next day. Governor Faubus of Arkansas was pictured standing in the doorway of the local high school in Little Rock preventing young blacks from entering "his" white high schools. Here I was being friendly with a black man, the paper said we white people in the USA all hated black men, seeing the two of us together confused them all.

The submarine pens were massive. Direct hits from 500 lb. bombs didn't do any damage to the outsides. The pens were so massive you sail the sub inside, close the locks, and drain the water. The sub was on a very large cradle on a rail track which could be moved around inside for additional work. There was a large machine shop inside to completely overhaul anything that was needed. One stop submarine overhaul and repair shop. The Germans built it and it is a masterpiece of construction. I saw it recently in the movie "Das Boat." Small wonder there was no love lost between the Germans and the French still today.

## **Sub Sailors will be Sub Sailors**

Some of the guys met up with guys from the French Sub and they celebrated being Sub Sailors. The French invited the guys to have a meal with them and we returned the courtesy. The French have wine with their meals while US naval ships are alcohol-free (except of course for medical purposes). No politics, just good food and companionship. Hats were exchanged between some as a sign of friendship. The food was outstanding.

**"See Paris before you die"** as our High School teachers used to say.

We left Lorient, France and traveled to Brest, France. The opportunity came up and some of us took advantage to ride the train to Paris. We sure did expand our limited horizons. In those days, the American Dollar was very strong and it went a long way. We certainly were good Americans with our mandated tolerance and patience. Never could figure out why the French were at times so rude to us. A young European tourist we met on the train laughed and said, "French treat everyone that way, some worst than others." Over all, we had a pretty good time visiting many of the historic sites with the help of our English tour guide who was studying art and supplementing his income. We all bought ample supplies of excellent perfumes. I used mine for gifts for every occasion for years.

## **Gibraltar - Monkeys and all**

We had to change out some synchro motors underway and we used our only spares to do that. While in the Port of Gibraltar, we wandered over to the English Navy motor repair shop on their Naval Base at Gibraltar with our burned out motors. A five gallon can of American Coffee is worth as much as solid gold in naval repair facilities worldwide, thanks to some good old fashioned horse-trading, they were able to repair these burned out motors as good as new and were happy to do it in return for the coffee. When the motors tested so well, steaks were thrown in as an extra thank you. We were a lot more effective ambassadors than the State Department could ever be.

We were treated to a tour of the "Rock" insides and out. Their secret sonar station was really impressive. The monkeys who live on the "Rock" were the hit of the day running all around the "Rock" making monkeys out of us and the tourists.

The town of Gibraltar was a very interesting place to see the interplay of military from all over the world mixing with tourist. I was told the tailor shops have fabric from all over the world to make you custom tailored suits or shirts in any style you wish. Each of the shops had hawkers to draw in the customers. The hawkers had just minutes to look at your clothes and shoes and determine where you came from then speak to you in your language with his pitch. They were so good they had about a sixty percent rate of success in drawing customers into the stores who bought something. They were the superstars of the streets.

### **Hey we are getting pretty damn good, aren't we ?**

When you have been to sea for a while with everyone on board, things start clicking. The engines are clicking along without significant problems. Our electrical systems are all functioning well and the emergency drills are better than ever. We make more hand dives than ever. Those planes men are getting pretty muscular. The chiefs are thinking of all kinds of drills to run to make sure we know our stuff. The britework is all shinning and we are all trying our best to outshine each other.

We were outstanding on all our encounters with the "enemy targets" from other NATO nations. We kept getting better. But there was no letup. Drill, drill, drill. The Captain kept insisting we can and must do better.

We did, the reputation of the Chopper was noted in a final report of the entire NATO exercise.

### **Earn \$2.50 an hour painting the USS Balao SS-285 - - - "Pink"**

The call went out in Key West along the docks among the sub sailors. We couldn't believe it. They were going to paint the Balao pink!

There was a movie company on the base for the next month. The excitement started to spread when the actors arrived. Cary Grant, Tony Curtis, Janet Leigh, and others we recognized, but couldn't remember their names. They cut a hole in the roof of the overhaul shack on the end of the pier, then rebuilt it with an attachment underneath. Later they had a plane from the airport painted like a Jap Zero fly over and drop a bomb. The bomb bounced off the roof. They picked up the bomb put it away and had lunch. After lunch, the roof was blown up where they cut the hole. Then there was a series of shots where they spray painted black paint all around the hole. The next scene was shot with propane tanks hidden inside the shack piped to jets under the roof shooting fire thru the hole in the roof. A half a day's work for about five seconds of movie. Everywhere you went people were having their pictures taken with one of the actors.

The Dailies (whatever film was shot that day) were shown everyday in the local movie house in town.

Everyone had a story. The laundry truck that did our laundry, Columbia Laundry driver was well known by all the sailors. He was telling us how small Janet Leigh's waist was with his hands. The cashier in the PX has a photo of herself and Cary Grant. The bartenders all knew what drinks they liked and bragged how much they tipped.

Tony Curtis said he was a former submariner, but was for the most part generally ignored by the sailors. COB Bass and Tony Curtis were both stationed in Pearl Harbor at the end of WWII. Tony was on board one of the submarines that would go to that remote Island where the Atomic bomb was dropped on a fleet of Navy ships. However, Tony Curtis got out of the Navy before his submarine left for Bikini Atoll.

Also COB Moon of the Balao and COB Bass were close friends and rival soft ball pitchers. COB Bass got all those movie stars to visit the Chopper and pose for photographs. Tony Curtis was always hanging around the two COB's, and also talking to COB Bass about their Pearl Harbor Days.

### **Friday Night before payday in Key West or how many will fit in the trunk**

Do you remember the state tax in Florida? We always had lots of change in our locker drawers in the barracks. This is the time when we counted every penny after having piled them all together and separated out money for two tickets for the Islander Drive In. The rest of the change bought as much beer as we could from the E club on base by someone who was twenty one. Five of us would take off in a car for the Islander Drive In. Once outside the gate, three of us would squeeze into the trunk. I was one who was always in the trunk because of my size. We always waited till the movie was just about to start at twilight before going up to the ticket window. Remember beer and three sailors in a trunk with two cases of cold beer in paper bags was no small feat. Talk about stress of getting caught before you got thru the gate. We headed into a section where no one would care if the hood opened and the clown act began. We all got out of the trunk and into the seats where we stayed. One time, we had a few beers each while waiting for twilight. We got into the trunk before relieving ourselves, a major mistake. While we were at the gate, someone farted and we were hysterical trying not to laugh out loud, because our kidneys were really full. This took a tremendous amount of self control. When we were finally able to open the trunk, the three of us popped out of the trunk in seconds running for the bushes, the head was too far to run !!

It was usually worth all the pain, because we laughed our asses off for weeks afterwards. They showed a total of five movies at one time. No one ever lasted through all five movies, we usually fell asleep and woke up halfway through the last show. If the movies were boring we told jokes and laughed our asses off. There were not a lot of things to do if you were under twenty one and had no money. This was a great exercise in bonding, laughing and crying all night long.

Key West was a dream for submarine sailors. My life was formed by men such as COB Bass. Not only did he impart all of my submarine knowledge to me over time. But he also invited me into his home; took me skin diving in the Florida Keys. Showed me how to respect sharks and barracudas and be able to swim in the same ocean with them. Most every weekend, COB Bass had a house full of sailors from his submarine. To this day, I pride myself on being like COB. Athletic, friendly, and most important – fair. It was always the one thing a submarine sailor dreaded – having to face the COB because of a violation of the rules and regulations.

If you deliberately did wrong then you could expect the “hammer” to fall. However, if there were circumstances leading up to the violation then that was another matter. Most submarine sailors would rather face their Commanding Officer than their Chief of the Boat.

But COB Bass was absolutely fair. And I know, many young men living in today’s world learned most of the important lessons of life from men such as COB Bass.

I loved submarines – I loved the atmosphere; the smell of diesel; the sound of the klaxon. To have earned submarine dolphins to show that I was considered qualified in submarines by my shipmates is one of the greatest events that ever has happened in my life.