

Submarines

The Elite of the Fleet

Water pours from ports on the bottom of the Pickerel during an emergency surface. Crews filled ballast tanks with seawater to dive, Dunn said. During an emergency surface, they closed the ballast tank valves on the top of the submarine and forced air into the tanks, which pushed the water out the ports, causing the submarine to shoot to the surface.



Jim Dunn was scrubbing the deck of a seaplane tender at White Beach, Okinawa, when a submarine docked on the other side of the pier

Submariners were volunteers, he said. They received incentive pay, ate better than anyone else in the Navy, dressed in civilian clothes when they went on liberty and stayed out as late as they wanted.

It was 1958, and Dunn was 21 years old. When he had liberty it was "Cinderella liberty" - he had to wear his uniform and be back at midnight.

"I decided I was in the wrong Navy and volunteered to be a submariner."

He had to pass psychological tests, pressure tests and enter the bottom of a 100-foot diving tower and "blow and go" bubbles until he reached the top.

The air pressure at the bottom of the tank was 50 pounds per square inch, he said. The higher he went, the more the air expanded inside his lungs. Blowing bubbles kept them from bursting.

Deep water exerts a lot of pressure, he said. A line tied across the inside hull of a submarine will droop halfway to the floor when it dives to 1,000 feet. Submarines would implode if they went too deep.

The first submarine Dunn "rode" was the Gudgeon, a diesel, fast-attack submarine built after World War II.

It traveled 5 or 6 knots an hour at 400 feet, he said, had to come to periscope depth twice a day to vent exhaust, and it dripped hydraulic fluid onto the bunks. But he liked it because on a submarine, officers and enlisted men "were all the same."

"In the words of Admiral (Bruce) DeMars: 'We belonged to a very elite group,'" Dunn said.

Even the Soviet crews that they followed were considered brother submariners.

Dunn had to learn every job on the Gudgeon to qualify to be a submariner. It took him more than six months.

A submariner has to know everybody's job, Dunn said, because when something goes wrong, there usually are only seconds to respond.

Dunn also qualified for and served on four other subs during his 16 years as a submariner: the Tiru and Pickerel, diesel submarines built at the end of World War II; and the Flasher and Tautog, nuclear-powered submarines. Dunn served on the Tautog for more than five years.

Nuclear subs could travel 25 knots an hour at a depth of 1,000 feet and stay submerged for months at a time.

"As long as we had food - that was the big thing," Dunn said.

Dunn was a quartermaster, a term the Navy once used for a navigator.

On the Gudgeon, he had used maps, stars and the LORAN-A navigation system, which measured the time interval between three or more low-frequency, land-based radio transmitters to determine the position of a ship to within 10 to 15 miles.

By the time he was assigned to the Tautog, he was using satellite trackers.

Life on a nuclear sub was very, very secretive, Dunn said.

Crew members could never tell their family and friends what they were doing or where they had been.

And living inside a machine-filled, metal tube 1,000 feet below the surface of the ocean required some adjustments.

"When you worked on a submarine, you bathed before you left," Dunn said, "because fresh water was always in short supply."

Their water was distilled from sea water, he said. Even their oxygen was manufactured from sea water.

There were never enough bunks, Dunn said. Petty officers had their own bunks in the "mole hole," but the rest of the crew lived with "hot bunking." When one submariner was on watch, another slept in his bunk.

Dunn was assigned to the Tautog in December 1969 as lead quartermaster.

The Soviets had a submarine base at Petropavlovsk on the Kamchatka Peninsula in the North Pacific, he said.

"Between 1945 and 1991, there was always a U.S. submarine submerged off the coast of Petropavlovsk 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 365 days a year," Dunn said. "But no one would talk about it."

In June of 1970, the Tautog was two weeks into an eight-month-long West Pac (Western Pacific) tour when its crew discovered a new Soviet Echo II, K-class guided missile submarine about 14 miles west of Petropavlovsk.

The Tautog followed the Soviet sub for 1' days while it did its sea trials - moving back and forth, doing figure-eights, sharp turns and dives, with the Tautog right behind.

Suddenly, about 2 a.m. on June 24, the Tautog's sonar operators lost track of the Soviet sub.

Dunn had just finished his watch and was sleeping when he heard the sound of grinding metal and was thrown into the corner of his bunk.

Barefoot and half dressed, he scrambled up the ladder to his station in the control room. Broken coffee cups covered the floor. The captain was in his bathrobe.

Damage reports poured in: The Soviet sub had collided with the Tautog's sail (the part above the deck), ruptured the Tautog's top hatch and flooded the trunk of the sail.

If the Tautog stayed in the area, it would have been scuttled or forced to surface, Dunn said.

"There was only one thing to do."

The captain ordered the sub to drop to 1,000 feet and head south.

Dunn was calculating the track when he heard the sonar man say that it sounded like the Soviet

sub was breaking up. Dunn pushed the thought away; he had too much to do.

Later it hit him, Dunn said. The Soviet sub would have gone down with as many as 130 submariners on board.

"I felt horrible," Dunn said. "I had problems sleeping for years. I would try to go to sleep and have weird dreams that I was in a coffin, and someone was trying to push the lid down when I was trying to get out."

Several days later, the Tautog reached Pearl Harbor about 9 a.m., but was refused permission to surface until 1 a.m. the next day.

"They didn't want anyone to see the damage," Dunn said.

When the Tautog finally surfaced, the crew found a piece of the Echo II's propeller lodged in its sail.

The Tautog was docked between two destroyers, and tarps were wrapped around the sail to hide the damage. <>

Naval intelligence told the crew: "You know what happened: You hit an iceberg."

"Oh, OK."

"We couldn't tell anybody we'd been in a collision," Dunn said. "We had to keep strict silence."

Three weeks later, the sail was fixed, and the Tautog was on its way back to Petropavlovsk.

The Cold War was an interesting time, Dunn said. "We all did things, and if we had not done them we would have been in a lot of trouble. The thing that kept us from getting in trouble was that we were scared of each other."

Dunn retired from the Navy in 1975, earned a bachelor's degree, a master's degree and became a social worker.

For more than 30 years, he was bothered by the collision with the Soviet sub.

"But nobody would admit it," he said. "No one talked about it until I got a call from a shipmate 30 years later."

Rodney Capri, Dunn's striker (apprentice) on the Tautog, was contacting crew members to see if he could get them together.

The group began meeting once a year, calling themselves the Mini Pac Crew," because the Tautog's eight-month West Pac tour had been shortened to two weeks by the collision.

When the group met in Idaho in 2005, a reporter from the Coeur d'Alene Press asked them what their biggest concern had been.

"To a man, everyone said the same thing," Dunn said. "They didn't know if that submarine went down or not and that really bothered us. That bothered us more than anything else."

In May 2006, Dunn and his wife, Jean, attended the International Submariners Congress in Moscow. Dunn had told a Russian-American friend that he wanted to talk to anyone who knew what happened to that Soviet submarine.

"For 35 years we wanted to know: Did that boat go down?"

His friend introduced a high-ranking officer and university professor named Victor who had been a junior officer on the Echo II when it collided with the Tautog.

It had started to go down, Victor told Dunn, but the captain made an emergency surface. Everyone had survived, Victor said, and their biggest concern was whether the American sub survived.

"We were told you guys went down."

"We were both very lucky," Dunn told him.

Victor hugged Dunn and invited him to make a joint toast to all the submariners of the Pacific.

A few days later, the Dunns attended a memorial service in St. Petersburg for the crew of the Russian nuclear submarine Kursk, which went down in the Barents Sea in August 2000, killing all 118 crew members.

The Russian government was criticized for being slow to ask other nations for help.

"It's that top secret mindset," Dunn said.

But when another Russian sub was trapped on the bottom of the Pacific in August 2005, the Russians did ask for help, and a British rescue robot saved the crew.

"You were our enemies once," one of the Russian admirals told the Americans. "But we don't want to be your enemies anymore."

"We weren't enemies," Dunn said. "We were all just doing our job."

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