

DAVE HARDING

U.S. NAVY

Submarine USS Tecumseh 628 SSBN

Service Dates: 1975-1977



My family includes three generations of submariners – my dad, myself and my oldest son.

A lot of training and education was required in order to receive my Dolphins. Boot Camp in Orlando, Florida occurred during the hottest time of year, which was definitely a whole different experience. My next stop was Groton, Connecticut for Submarine School (Naval Submarine Base New London), where we studied submarine history as well as the newer submarine technologies. We were taught about hydraulic systems, electrical systems and other critical areas of the boat. One place where many men chose to leave training (for either medical or psychological reasons) was the atmospheric pressure chamber, due to the effect on the ears. Once we passed the chamber, it was off to the escape tower, where we learned real-time submarine escape processes. We got into an escape trunk with room for about six people and put on the Steinke hoods – these hoods are pulled over your head and have a clear plastic section in the front so that you can see to avoid debris in the water. Water was let into the escape trunk until it was over the hatch, leaving about two feet of air above our heads. This caused a few more men to leave the program. The next step was for an instructor to place air into the Steinke hood. Once it was in, we ducked under the hatch, held on and then let go. As we shot to the surface (about 50 ft), we had several other instructors slowing us down, and there was a diving bell to place people who were holding their air – since if they were not stopped, their lungs would burst (pulmonary overinflation syndrome involves having gas-filled spaces in your body expanding to the point where they rupture). Currently, the dive tower exercises are done at only 5-10 feet, so perhaps our 50-foot ascent was a bit too dangerous.



After passing Submarine School, I was off to San Diego, California, where difficult Radioman and Morse Code classes were completed. I also had a “top secret” class that was taken inside of a locked vault. I also went through a BI (Background Investigation) and SBI (Special Background Investigation) by the FBI.

After a short leave, I reported to Charleston, South Carolina to the crew of the Submarine USS Tecumseh 628 SSBN (Submersible Ship Ballistic Nuclear). After a month or so, the crew took flights to Heathrow, England, and then buses to Holy Loch, Scotland. It was surreal when I first saw the submarine next to the Sub Tender Holland, with Scotland in the background. The smell of diesel was in

the air (yes, we still use diesel engines) and the batteries on the boat (diesel-powered submarines use batteries to travel silently underwater).

For the first 5 days we were hot bunking with the other crew. The crew's quarters were so cramped that people on the lower bunks (including me) would have to peek their heads out from the curtains to avoid being hit when we were heading for our duty stations. The sleeping bunks were so small that one would never be able to sit up. Six people are in an area approximately 7' x 7' x 7'. We would have drills, and once a week we would take our green squares (sheets that clean residue from the air scrubbers) and clean the entire boat.

One of my jobs was to locate all of the secret material on the boat. I was also in charge of bringing in the communication wire before going to Periscope depth (about 60 feet below the surface) and letting the wire back – this was done from the Conning Tower (raised area from which the submarine was controlled - where the scope, sonar and tactical displays are located for use by the Officer of the Deck). The main job was keeping in communication with the outside world. We had to keep the teletype machines ready to record all transmissions and had to be ready whenever an EAM (Emergency Alert Message) came through. There were several different types of alarms for different types of emergencies.

Now for the "incident"... The Navy's Submarine Force is known as the "Silent Service," and I probably took that "silent service" part too far, since I didn't even tell my dad (who was a Master Chief) or my son (who was a Second Class Petty Officer) about this. My Chief and I were in the Radio Room when we heard yelling, which is not allowed since it will let others know where we are located if they are close enough. An officer left the Control Room to ascertain what was happening discovered that we were taking on water. We heard the officer yelling, "Surface the boat, surface the boat." At this stage I started cleaning out the paper shredder. The Chief (who always thought that he would die on the submarine) was trying to open the top secret Crypto Safe. It took him three tries to get the safe opened. I would open the secret safe when all of the top secret material was destroyed. We also had sledge hammers to destroy top secret equipment.

The protocol was for officer of the deck to make an announcement on the IMC (broadcasting system for all compartments of the submarine) saying, "Emergency Surface, Emergency Surface," sound the alarm to get everybody ready for their duty stations, then to blow a few thousand pounds of air to the ballast tanks. The reason for blowing the main ballast tanks was to decrease the water pressure coming in the boat. Water-tight hatches were closed so the water would not go into other compartments. I did tell my dad and son that on that patrol we had a problem with water coming in. They didn't know why, nor did they pressure me to learn the exact reason. The Navigator finds the shallowest area close to us in case we sink (since rescue subs can only go to a certain depth). People in the crew's quarters were throwing mattresses over the battery well to keep the salt water from contacting the batteries – chlorine gas results from this chemical reaction, and that gas is lethal if inhaled.

My Chief was placing the material on the counter and making sure everything was accounted for, and just as we were preparing to start destroying the material, we secured from the incident and were no longer in danger. My mind was on auto-pilot – I was doing what was needed without thinking that these might be my last few minutes to live. Clean-up took quite a long time, but there were no complaints. We were all just happy to have survived.

What I just described was an over-simplification of what actually happened. The entire crew was running to different areas of the boat. There is no way to express the fear and anxiety of experiencing what was happening at that time. Just like the Chief, I'm sure many were thinking that they were going to die but still did their job. One single person not doing what they were supposed to do could damage the boat and get everybody onboard killed. The drama that my Chief and I were going through to destroy top-secret material and equipment – multiply that situation by 130 and that would describe the stress level.

Yes, I still have nightmares about being on a flooding submarine, but not nearly as much as I used to have. I'm positive that most vets have had certain experiences that they re-live. There are people who have not served but have also suffered from certain experiences that keep coming back. I believe that the majority of people have PTSD because of their experiences.

These are the Dolphins that my dad wore during WWII, and I wore during the Vietnam war. My oldest son would have worn them during the Middle East War if I hadn't misplaced them. We are three generations of submariners – all for the love of country.



Captain pinning my dad's and my Dolphins on me while going under the Arctic Circle – in time to become a Royal Blue Nose.



Dad (Master Chief) and me, taken before heading to Scotland for a 2.5-month patrol underwater.