

“Fitting In” in a submarine

Contrary to popular belief there was no psychological or physical testing required for being a submarine sailor. Those that had real psychological or physical issues that would preclude being assigned to submarine duty would be weeded out in the normal Navy training prior to the first assignment to a submarine. But that didn't mean that life aboard would not be difficult, nor did it mean that some wouldn't make it and require transfer. That being said, the submarine force was a volunteer duty station; you had to want to ride submarines in order to be assigned to submarines.

There were also no “advice and counsel” mechanisms in place; you just had to know that being assigned to a submarine was OK with you. My “knowing” came early in my time in the Navy. In boot-camp I learned that the Navy was very afraid of two things; first and foremost they were afraid of fire, and second they were afraid of submarines. They spent an inordinate amount of time in boot camp teaching you how to fight both entities. Personally I could not see myself fighting fires, but after the training I sure wanted to know about the fear they had of submarines. Never-the-less I didn't get assigned to submarines right off the bat. It took awhile for me to get that assignment, but that is another story.

Most people after asking about claustrophobia will ask about “getting along” on a submarine. So to quickly deal with the claustrophobia issue – I only suffered from that fear twice in my six years associated with submarines; and those are separate stories. But for those that think they might be claustrophobic, I can tell you that the fear could be real from those two experiences, although you would probably know this before volunteering and hence would not, volunteer that is. So that brings us to “fitting in”.

Fitting in depended first on the type of submarine; either diesel or Nuclear powered. Diesel submarines had one crew, nuclear powered submarines had two. And I'm not talking about the actual two crews (blue and gold) of the Fleet Ballistic Missile Submarines; I'm talking about what I call the Frame 57 separation. Submarines are sectioned off by frames, a classified distance apart (that has to do with the depth they can go to). Frame 57 is the demarcation frame of a nuclear submarine. Everything aft of frame 57 has to do with the nuclear power plant and propulsion systems; everything forward of frame 57 is the “operations” compartment. Crew – wise, Frame 57 also separated the crew into two parts. Those that were trained in all the nuances of nuclear power, and those that were assigned to the boat's operations. Everybody always referred to those people aft of frame 57 after the slang for the boat – they were Nukes. We, in the operations group, on the other hand were called Pukes. So getting along on a Nuke depended on whether or not you were a Nuke or a Puke.

And yet there was a third category – the one I was a member of. I was referred to as a “rider”. I was not permanent ship's company. Meaning that I was assigned to the submarine temporarily, and not a part of the permanent crew. This made fitting in a little more difficult, because I wasn't a “part of them”. Very much the opposite as a matter of fact. I was bad news. When I arrived on board a submarine; it meant they were going to be going away for awhile – a long while. Away from their homes, their wives, their families and their normal human life. When I arrived on board – they were leaving all this behind and were going to spend the next four to eight months away. It wasn't my

fault – it was the assignment for the boat, its whole purpose in life, but that didn't keep the crew from associated long deployments to me.

Be it a diesel or a Nuke, I was not typically immediately thrust onto a boat. There was a little – lead-in time. About a week or two. As not only was I coming on board temporarily, a lot of equipment was coming on board, temporarily as well. Equipment that was only used during the actual mission. It took about a week or two to get all this stuff first loaded onto the submarine, and then installed, and finally fully checked out. AND before this I was busy at my shop getting all this equipment ready, for as much time as I had to prepare. Sometimes my prep time was 6 to 8 months. In my little group, we knew which submarines were going where and when for up to 18 months before they actually left. It was all on one huge schedule. But this subject is a whole other story, which will wait – I'll get back to the typical “two week prep time” and “fitting in”.

The only other person that knew that they were going to be going away for awhile was the captain. Sometimes the captain would inform the crew as soon as he knew, but that usually created a reduction of moral. So the crew started to learn of their impending deployment at the “install conference”.

The “Install Conference” is when my boss and the install team would go down to the boat and hold a meeting with the officers of the boat. Not the men (crew), just the officers. The meeting was a closed door, classified meeting where our team told the Captain and the officers in detail about their upcoming mission. Up until that point the Captain's order only read:

“On or about DD/MM/YY you will commence deployment to XXXXX Ocean and conduct operations in accordance with the Chief of Naval Operation's directives.” The XXXXX would be filled in pretty generically – Northern Pacific, Mediterranean, North Atlantic; they were all valid descriptions of where they were going. The details of this operation were provided at the install conference, and officially presented at the beginning of the meeting with the submarines more detailed orders.

As I said, the crew was not a party to this meeting. But they were smart people and when they saw our contingent arrive for the meeting the more senior crew members knew what was up, because they had been there before. If you were a new crew member, permanently assigned to the boat – you found out as the rumor spread. All of this “mystery” of bad news again got associated to me (or whoever the “rider” was going to be) and it added to the burden of “fitting in”.

However, the Captain now knew which “rider” he was going to get, he had the biography, and he told the XO (Executive Officer) and he told the COB (Chief of the boat – The most senior enlisted person on board). All three knew they had to accommodate me. AND this is where the “fitting in” really kicked in. But first an explanation of the real duties of these three people.

The Captain (CO) of a submarine did nothing more than set the mood of the boat. He established “his” boat. Of course he was responsible for carrying out his mission, but the success of the mission very much depended on the ability of the boat and its crew. He set the attitude of the boat towards those goals. He did this by laying out his “rules” on how things would be done. Then it was up to the Executive Officer (XO) to make sure this happened, truly the XO served “at the pleasure” of the CO. The XO's right hand man was the COB, the Chief of the Boat (COB) made sure all the details were taken care of by the crew. The COB controlled everything. For a “rider” the COB was an all

important guy. At the close of the install conference, if I was the rider, my first tactic in “fitting in” would be to approach the COB; and - - -

At the very first initial contact, *the hand shake*, before I would introduce myself, I would ask, “When are you loading stores?” The loading of stores is yet another story, but suffice it to say here that it is perhaps the most horrific task any submariner goes through. All of the food and consumables that are going to be used for the next X number of months had to be loaded onto the submarine and stowed away. This was a massive undertaking and would last for hours as each box weighing in at about 80 to 100 pounds had to be hand loaded from the delivery trucks on the pier, down into the submarine. This was a task that almost everybody with any respect for their body would avoid at all costs. By my asking the COB, “When are you loading stores?” that was his first indication that he had a new “worker” on board, that was not afraid of the most horrible of tasks.

After the COB answered that question, you would say, “Good, I’ll be there, and if you don’t mind, I’ll take a position on the ladder. I’m tall as you can see, and I think I can best be used there.” Again, if loading stores wasn’t horrific enough, being in the middle of the ladder as stuff was being loaded down into the boat was not only the most stressful position, but it was the most precarious as well. Again – the not afraid characteristic was portrayed.

Finally before the hand shake would stop. I would say, “Please let me know when you are making up the watch stations. In addition to my own work, I am pretty sure I can help you out there as well.” That would seal the deal. The COB would typically be overwhelmed at that point.

All the “Chiefs” were quartered together in the “Chief’s Quarters” typically about 9 of them. The COB was of course the most senior person of the group and my little introduction’s impression would at one point in time become a topic of discussion and in that way the word would spread. All I had to do was follow through = which I would always do.

When the time came to load stores, I would be there – on the ladder, un-asked and un-stopped. When the rest of the junior people saw this – they would be impressed. Only the most junior of men worked the loading of stores. More senior people would avoid this task at all costs. Some even scheduling their physicals during the time frame when stores were loaded. I knew one guy that decided to have a tooth extracted and scheduled it’s removal during the loading of stores.

Although this whole routine was a quick and cut to the chase tactic to “getting along”. It was not complete. I was, after all, still a rider. I was going to be coming on board *their* boat, eating *their* food, breathing *their* air, taking up *their* seats at meal times and movies, AND because of my job – I would have my own bed and I would not be subject to “hot-racking”. Not only that, but my bed would be in perhaps the most convenient of locations – one of the prime locations as my status; being the only one of my kind on board was – on call. AND on call by the CO or the XO which further made my sleeping location one of the best enlisted locations on board, typically reserved for one of the best “guys” on the boat. So when the COB met with me to discuss my sleeping location I would take the worst one of the locations offered.

The rest of my time during the two week install time, when I was on board, I would always take a subservient position. That akin to a court jester, in a king's court. I would treat everyone with the respect of knight-hood and me being a lowly peasant. By the time we were to get underway – I was accepted as a necessary evil, but a good one.

Now back to the type of boat. On the Diesel boats this tactic of mine had to apply to the entire crew. On top of that I had to prove to them that I was a “roll in the mud” type of guy. I had to prove to them I was not afraid of getting dirty, and that the functioning of the boat was all important even above one's own health and well-being. At every opportunity this was something that I had to demonstrate. I had to prove to them that I could be counted on in time of an emergency. And this had to be proven to the biggest and strongest of torpedo men and machinist mates, not just the more cerebral.

On the Nukes with their Frame 57 issue the task was a little easier. Half the crew were Nukes and I was lumped in with the forward Pukes. So I really had to only prove myself to the Pukes, as I was more one of them than one of the Nukes. Also, on the Nukes the crew tended to be more cerebral than those on the Diesel boats. Virtually everything on board a Nuke was done with high technology, whereas on the Diesel boats things were almost always done with brut force – and the nature of the crew reflected that. I heard this expressed by another guy; on the Nukes things were done with finesse, where on diesel boats it was done with guile and deceit.

The general initial tactic worked only to set the stage. The humble attitude and what I call “the perfect guest” behavior had to be constantly enforced. You couldn't just lounge around and put you feet up. It wasn't your home, it was their home. This was their zone and you were an intruder, and an intruder that brought along an adversity for them to deal with.

You never got to pick the movie of the night; you watched what they wanted to. You never ate first, you took your place. If there was ever, just one left – you didn't take it. You never discussed politics or sports or religion. You never suggested anything, you did what they wanted to do, and you followed their direction and lead to the letter. If you constantly held these thoughts in your mind – you would have no issues.

One final aspect on “getting along”. Don't put yourself in a position where you reveal a weakness. There is an activity that submariners, all submariners participate in and that is called “pinging”. “Pinging” is taken from the active sonar practice of putting an active very loud audio tone into the water for the purpose of identification of contacts. To a submariner the real practice of pinging by surface ship sonar is a huge aggravation. The fact that this is the only capability a surface ship has of finding a submarine – they do it relentlessly – and it will drive a submariner to distraction.

“Pinging” a shipmate by the relentless teasing of a weakness is a very bad situation to get yourself into. As soon as a submariner finds a weakness that you are sensitive to – the pinging will commence. And it is relentless and pervasive. It will spread through the entire crew very very quickly and you will become a focal point. The only way out of this is to buck up and deal with it, becoming hardened to it and shedding yourself of that sensitivity as quickly as possible. Laugh about it, but after they do. Don't commence a laugh about it, just go with the flow and maintain your cool. Reaction of any kind good or bad is what they are after. They want to see how you handle stress. The best thing to do is become a submarine yourself, be quiet, be low, be stealthy and sneak away.

Submarines and submariners are always under pressure of every conceivable kind, both natural and human induced; and they have to perform their jobs perfectly – non-stop, all the time. And every member of the crew has to be counted on without question – because that's what the free people of the world are asking them to do.