

"Diesel Boats"

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Join the Navy and see the world! That sounded challenging and so I thought I'd give it a try. I was 18 years old with absolutely no direction in my life. My assets were good physical and mental health with an ability to get along with people. The recruiter said that I would qualify for either aviation or submarine duty. I was terrified of heights and told them, with somewhat mixed emotions, that I would like to try that submarine deal; that sounded pretty good to me. I was fearful, but at the same time proud for having been accepted as a recruit in the United States Submarine Service. I had heard that it was tough duty. I would have to do my best.

I remember reporting to New London, Connecticut for Submarine School. It was in the dead of winter, 1965, and I felt terribly alone and afraid. I walked through the main gate and saw them; submarine after submarine -- they were all grunting and groaning and spewing out this putrid, black smoke which contaminated the clear wintry air. "I was going to spend four years in one of those sardine cans? What did I get myself into?" I learned later that the reason for all the noise and smoke was nothing more than a battery charge and the burning of fuel oil. It was an odor that I would learn to live with. Sometimes I would cuss its foul smell and other times it seemed to create autonomy and a sense of belonging with the submarine fleet. One could smell and identify a "DIESEL BOAT" or "PIG BOAT" sailor from a hundred yards!

Having completed my training, I reported to my duty assignment: U.S.S. Odax S.S.484, Naval Base, Charleston, South Carolina. There she sat, dead in the water, having just returned from assignment at Guantanamo Naval Base, Cuba. She was a beauty; dark, dingy and grey to protect her cover at night. Diesel boats charged their batteries, or steamed on the surface at night with hopes of running undetected. Her sail stood tall and proud with periscopes on the ready.

Diesel boats are very cramped and lacking space, hence the term "sardine can". It takes a special kind of sailor to adapt to a life on the "PIG BOATS." Crew members must be psychologically sound with an ability to get along with others. There is a certain bonding that takes place among the crew which forms an undeniable brotherhood. To have your own bed or "rack" was a luxury reserved for officers and n.c.o.'s. Due to the shortage of berthing space, the remaining crew would rotate the use of beds according to their watch stations. We referred to this as "hot-bunking". Locker space was at a premium. When planning deployments one had to be very resourceful and pack his clothes sparingly. Clothes could be stowed under one's rack and in hanging bunk bag. You couldn't fit a full size cat into one of our lockers. We had no facilities for washing clothes and hot water was unheard of. If one was caught wasting water, he was promptly put on a still watch, with temperatures in the engine room soaring as high as 120 degrees. Showers were reserved for the cooks and mess-cooks -- "submarine

showers" only! Wet down and turn the water off. Soap down and turn the water on using minimal amounts. With the absence of hot water, one rarely shaved and beards became the norm. After a period of a week or two at sea, one can understand why we were referred to as "pig boat sailors!"

Everything seemed to be at a premium after a time at sea; fresh milk, fruits and vegetables were long gone after a week or two due to a lack of refrigerated space. Fresh air was exhilarating when on the surface. When running submerged for an extended period the air would become foul and lack oxygen; headaches and short tempers became quite common under these conditions.

The "DIESEL BOAT" is gone today. The advent of nuclear power sent the old boats to mothballs and foreign Navies. I had the opportunity to explore the nuclear powered submarines back in 1969. What I saw was unbelievable. These boats had all the comforts and luxuries of home! I saw a library and a coke machine on board, big cozy racks to lie in, locker space for everyone and lounging areas! No-one had to stow their uniforms under their racks for storage. This sure looked like "The Life of Riley" to me!

They told me of oxygen generators. The air never got foul and harsh. They had no need to surface. They had no need to charge batteries -- they had nuclear power. With nuclear power and the oxygen generators they could stay submerged indefinitely! The only need to surface would be for medical emergencies and to replenish food supplies. They even had washing machines. The crew looked fresh and even smelled clean-- not at all like the "pig boat sailors" that I'd sailed, sweated, and toiled with for nearly four years.

This was a different Navy. They turned their noses up at the diesel odor emanating from our dungarees. These were a new breed of sailors. We had a name for these raw recruits --"nukie poohs!" These green-horns even lacked the ability to walk with a half-decent swagger!

Would the "pig boat sailor" be put into mothballs and forgotten as his submarine was? Even the nick-names were missing. Where were "CHOO-CHOO CHARLIE BROWN", "THE FLEA", "PIG PEN", "THE WOOPER", "TUBES AFT WEST", "FAST EDDIE", "CATFISH", "HOSS", and "HOGBODY"? I feel a great loss when I think of these past acquaintances. They and many other "bubble-heads" were my friends and comrades. When I allow myself to reminisce those Navy days, I realize that I wouldn't have traded the chance of meeting those special people for all the conveniences of the modern, nuclear Navy.