

Submarine Dreams

by Ed Miracle

“Going to sea is going to prison, with a chance at drowning besides.”

Samuel Johnson, who coined this truism, knew wooden ships, powered by cotton sails. He never dreamed of “sailing” a nuclear submarine. But mythic vessels and haunted sailors, these he would have understood. He would have known that a ship can inhabit her crew, as much as they inhabit her. Sometimes, more.

Ten years after leaving the Navy, I awoke one morning to realize what had not occurred. For over month, I had not dreamed of being back out there, doing that.

They're not what you think, my submarine dreams. They're not about danger or derring-do. They're not about separation from family, or land, or daylight. And they certainly are not about winning some war or protecting democracy. There is no rah-rah in a submarine dream.

In 1970, we were steely-eyed killers of the deep: we killed lots and lots of deep. In fact, we nearly killed ourselves, more than once, but that is not the heart of the matter. When you live in a submarine, nightmares are too simple, too ordinary, to compete with the enduring wallop of sharing a two-hundred-foot steel tube with one hundred fifteen of your very best friends. You took LSD in college? We took stranger trips, did weirder stuff, without the chemicals, without even our trusty bandoleers of Budweiser.

Forget every submarine movie you've ever seen. Periscopes are detectable; we used them as little as possible. Once the ship submerges, there is no view, no picture of the sea or conditions outside, for anyone. You scan your instruments; you adjust your controls; you gaze at your proximate cocoon. Going deeper, someone plots the contacts that Sonarmen hear: Sierra One, bearing 283. But you never see a damned thing.

The ship is an elevator, stuffed with stuff. The doors shut and they don't open again for weeks or months. The elevator goes down then up, down then up, changing floors. You stand fifty or sixty watches, and when the doors re-open, you're in Hong Kong, Tokyo or Pusan. Maybe back at Papa Hotel (Pearl Harbor). It's the same feeling: You never left the building, you're just on a different floor.

Time is nowhere more an illusion than on a submarine in transit. You sail to a schedule, and pop antennas to catch preordained transmissions. Somebody tracks whatever time the world thinks they are having, back in reality. But everyone aboard lives and works around a strange, eighteen-hour routine that does not vary. No matter which time zones you cross, nor what brilliance or darkness prevails on the roof, you proceed six-hours-on and twelve-hours-off, around the irrelevant clock, circadian rhythms be damned.

Thus severed from the images, the news, and especially from the chronometers of "reality," you slip into a netherworld both hard and gauzy, perilous but routine. You are a twenty-three-year-old petty officer, already a five-year veteran, and a qualified submariner. You are also a Nuke, a nuclear power plant operator, trained for a year beyond your technical specialty, and you stand watches in the eight-by-ten-foot cubicle called Maneuvering, the command post of the engine room. With you, two other petty officers and the Engineering Officer of the Watch lounge in swivel chairs. You face panels crowded with dials and gauges, indicators and controls. The wall behind you is paneled with alarm annunciators, microphones, and speakers.

Whatever happens, you will be here six hours, tending the reactor, tweaking the turbine generators and throttling the main engines. You may answer a few bells to change speed, though probably not. Between drills and frequent bouts of log keeping, you are allowed to read only the Webster's dictionary or the twenty-four-volume Reactor Plant Manual. Usually, you blow smoke and tell lies.

This is the best it gets.

When you go off watch, you eat something before going back to work. You do maintenance and training, repair broken gear, or get sucked into drills that last for an hour or more. Non-quals study for checkouts that always begin, "Draw the system." If time remains, you shower and hit the rack. Days cease to exist; nights never come; only watches, work, and sleep, six-on, twelve-off. If your quals are current and your work is done, you can stay up for the movie. If your section lacks qualified men, you may stand "port-and-starboard" watches: six-on, six-off, Zombie style, for the duration. Until a sharper reality slaps you.

In June of 1970, near Petropavlovsk, we collided with six thousand tons of Soviet guided missile submarine, the Black Lila. I was half-asleep when the impact jammed me forward in my bunk and pitched me to starboard. Stunned but uninjured, I held on and listened. Voices murmured, clothes rustled. No cold sprays or piercing jets, no smoke and no alarms. Guys were moving in the dark, so I bailed over Lee Miller's hairy back, pulled on my boots and dropped down the diesel room hatch. In the sudden light, I blinked at our hulking Fairbanks-Morse, squinted at suspect bulkheads, and donned the sound-powered phones.

"Send a bucket and a sponge to the control room," was what I heard. No bedlam shouts or terrible noises. "Diesel room on the line," I reported. "No damage, no leaks." Watchstanders told me later this was their first indication that we hadn't lost the entire bow compartment. We were at 900 feet, and I was in my underwear.

Black Lila struck the front of our sail, crushing our snorkel, both periscopes and the tiny bridge deck used only on the surface. Lila hobbled away, one of her twin screws mangled, one shaft possibly broken off inside her hull, which at this depth would be fatal. It was hard to tell from the clatter we recorded. We limped 3,000 miles back to Hawaii on a ten-degree list, the damage acting as an unwanted fin.

We signed papers swearing never to reveal what happened, and we didn't. For 28 years, most of

us thought a hundred Russian sailors died that day. Until one Sunday night, Mike Wallace interviewed the Black Lila's captain on 60 Minutes. They showed the world a chunk of our ship, Boris Bagdasaryan's souvenir.

But submarine dreams are not about collisions or secret rah-rah, that Hollywood stuff. Yes, we took some trips we can't talk about, but the dreams are different. As with night vision, you have to approach them indirectly, out the corner of your eye. They begin with memories.

Pale tendrils snake through a vent from the crew's second shower, the one filled with potatoes. (You smell them.) Beneath the torpedo room deck, in a space barely two-feet high, you lie atop 126 softly gurgling battery cells, a scruffy nurse taking temperatures and hygrometer readings. The acid eats little holes in your sleeves. Back in the engine room, you crank a chrome-plated throttle, sending 15,000 horsepower to the screw, and the ship surges forward. When you answer a flank bell, you jump to your feet, switch to high-speed pumps, and the stern of the ship throbs in a compulsive corkscrew rhythm. Yee-Hawwww!

Halfway from Pearl Harbor to Bremerton, Washington, you strain to remember the verses to the Twelve Days of Christmas, because the log sheet tells you it's December 24. Meanwhile, deep in the ship's coffee pot, a sponge and a rubber glove, from the last time the mess cooks cleaned it, lie waiting to be discovered. And somebody holds you by the ankles while you squirm upside down, on your back, to change a light bulb in the bilge. Don't let go, man. Sometimes you just stand at a workbench, watching Frank Klein rig a wooden rudder for a duck's ass.

Touchstones like these pop in and out, until they spawn a vision that blends the real with the never-happened, the true with the felt. And it pulls you down.

Men and machines jostle and crowd, they smoke and snore and give you their sailor's guff, but you are alone in your dream. You float among them, helping them, avoiding them, glad of the turbine warmth as you tread a slender catwalk, looking for something. A tool? A part? You duck through water-

tight doors, into compartments and passageways as familiar as your hand, still looking for what you can't remember.

It does not matter. There is nothing to do but this. And nowhere to go. You plumb the narrow spaces, gathering sensations—one for every moment you recall—that draw you deeper and deeper into her dream. Her existence becomes your existence, and there is nothing more. She rolls you left and rolls you right, soothing.

Wait a minute, why are we on the surface? We're not, they say. We're at 300 feet, and there's a typhoon, topside.

Oh.

You have fallen captive to the chain of decisions that put you here: your decisions. Years of work and study to make the grade, to qualify in submarines, to qualify nuclear, so the ship will finally accept you as worthy of tending her moods and complexities. In gracious reward, she absorbs you and gives you dreams. Even though you left her. For ten years she beckons—where are you?—until the dreams fade at last.

I hated the Navy, with its endless petty tyrannies, but I loved that ship. She was for me a physical incarnation of will and intellect, of mind over matter. She was humanity beating back the uncaring universe, and of this I was most proud: to have been a tiny part of her. While she inhabited me, "reality" was that craziness we left behind: Vietnam, flower power and Richard Nixon, up there on the roof. I would love to ride her again, with those guys, one more time. But she no longer exists, and barely do we. Her name was Tautog, Algonquian for blackfish, and all that remains of her are submarine dreams, still out there, doing that.