

The USS Grant and Me

by

Bob Salen, ETCM(SS) Retired

I reported aboard in November 1963 on a dark and stormy evening at the Electric Boat (EB) shipyard where the Grant was being constructed. Having served on two fleet boats and qualified SS, I had seen the sprawling shipyard at Norfolk. The experience at EB was completely different. EB was a much smaller place. We “lived” on a barge down near the docks where the Grant was in the water and completing construction. I arrived just after launching.

The living barge’s conditions were terrible (for me, at least) as I was living out of my seabag and either freezing or roasting. The grueling work schedule was difficult as well. I do confess to thinking on more than one occasion, “What the hell have I done to myself?” But we all plowed through the equipment testing, training, Naval Reactors exam, and various trials and tribulations that all submariners endure in “the yard” and managed to survive and even surge with pride as our ship came to life. I eventually split off into the Gold crew RC Division with the ship under Captain MacDonald, whom I regarded very highly during my entire tour.

During the year at EB I got an apartment over in New London, which I shared with fellow RC division mate Joe Lamble, who ended up on the Blue crew. Somewhere during our wild and drunken parties and wanderings, we both met and married our wives – Ann for Joe, and Carole Legler, of Norwich, CT for me.

Some memories stand out for sure. I remember standing out on the pier at EB as Grant flooded tanks to heel over to port a bit. The purpose was to test-fire one of our missile tubes with a sabot, launching it up and out into the Thames River with the gas generators. Our Captains and several dignitaries crowded up on the sail for the prime view, while we lesser folk lined the water’s edge at sea level. The Coasties had set up a restricted area where the sabot was supposed to land. Finally the moment came when the sabot and about a zillion gallons of seawater were blasted out the missile tube and up into a lovely, blue spring sky. The booming roar of the event startled everyone – wow! The sabot arced to what seemed a hundred feet or so into the air and splashed down into the river at just about the predicted spot. The huge water column however, reaching roughly the same altitude as the sabot, departed company with it as a puff of wind pushed it back toward the shore line. We could all see it coming – the thousands of gallons of seawater so loudly blown out of the missile tube now descended directly onto the sail, drowning the Captains and dignitaries jammed into the tiny bridge. With no place to run or hide, they simply cringed and took their dousing. The crew and yardbirds were literally rolling on the pier with laughter. That was damn funny.

I can't speak for the Blue boys, but the Gold crew was a great one. Our sea trials were perfect. We pulled back into port with our hull number painted in gold and no tugboat (a true feat of seamanship for a submarine that big). Our Captain "CAK" was in his prime back then. I know Captain From (Blue Captain) was not pleased with the Goldies bragging so much.

Our trip to the cape to test fire missiles (one per crew) was also a lot of fun. In those days we drank like fish, hit all the titty-bars in Cocoa Beach and in general gave the locals and NASA guards a lot to fret about. I got to ride a tin can out for the Blue crew's launch and I will say that was one helluva show. That missile came out of the water with a sustained BANG! I've never seen anything accelerate so fast. That sucker was up and out of sight within about 5 seconds. Wow! I even took a home movie of it. It was here that one of our A-Gangers was caught spray painting our hull number on the NASA water tower. Another ate a live toad on a bet. We lowered Charlie Nobel down the hatch with a winch one night. An officer brought a hooker to his stateroom. We had the 2 A.M. repel boarders drill when one of our sister boats tried to swim over to Grant and paint their hull number on our rudder. Just good, clean, missile sub fun in general.

Then came the orders for Hawaii. I was thrilled and worried at the same time. As we all recall, our pay in those days was below poverty level and now I had a pregnant wife to worry about as



well. The logistics of the move were huge – 250 families, all their household goods, cars, etc. to move 6,000 miles westward in one huge migration. A lot of chaos, the final delivery of our cars at the port at Newark, NJ... and then us Goldies took the ship to Charleston to load our birds, then through the Panama Canal and off to Oahu. Meanwhile, the Blue crew shepherded the family moves and set up a fine welcoming party for our arrival at Pearl Harbor.

Our families had been installed in temporary condo facilities in Honolulu. We were receiving TLA (Temporary Living Allowance) money to pay for it until we could find our own housing as the base had at least a one-year waiting list and that was some pretty crappy barracks-like quarters. Now it was the Blue crew's turn to take the ship to Guam, our forward operating base, while the rest of us settled in. My wife and I found a nice house up on the mountains near Kahaluu, on the windward side of the island. It was while we were preparing to make our move to our new place that the great Alaskan earthquake occurred.

On the evening of March 27, 1964 a magnitude 9.2 earthquake, one of the largest in history, leveled Anchorage and the surrounding area. It also spawned a tsunami (tidal wave) warning all

around the Pacific ring. In fact 119 people were killed as far away as California. It was mid-afternoon in Hawaii and the entire coast was evacuated for fear of the Tsunamis that might come crashing in the aftermath. Like the rest of the population, we evacuated inland and ended up with a houseful of navy families at our new place in Kahaluu. We partied far into the night and the tidal wave, of course, never materialized. It did strike me as hilarious that there were people actually sitting on Waikiki beach, waiting to see their very first Tsunami!

Our patrols out of Guam were quite routine, swapping with our Blue counterparts every three months. During off-crew we did our studying, schools, and tried to live our lives on enlisted pay – that part was not easy. My daughter Lisa was born at Tripler Army Hospital. After four patrols, I did reenlist in December, 1967 and got shipped off to New London for instructor duty at sub school. By that Time I'd made first class, ET1 (SS).

I truly enjoyed my tour on the Grant and have never seen a tighter crew or better-kept ship. My last glimpse of her was on June 12, 1992, when she arrived at New London for decommissioning. The ceremony at Sheppard of the Sea was very odd. The crew was lined up around the entire perimeter of the church, with officers and dignitaries in the pulpit area. The captain gave a very strained, short speech and appeared to be suffering from acute embarrassment. Nevertheless, a boot pistol belonging to President U.S. Grant was presented to the U.S. Grant Historical Society (it used to hang on the wardroom wall, if my memory is correct). As to the "audience," there were only four people present, all plank owners, in that huge space: Myself, Ken Barber, Carl Hochstettler, and one other whose name escapes me. Like I said... very odd.

And we got a goodbye tour of the boat. So, almost thirty years after I first saw her, I once again descended down the capsule loading hatch and into the smells and gloom of AMR1 and the missile compartment. You could tell she was tired and worn out. A lot of equipment was now shut down for good. The MCC and launcher panels were dead, and there was a general, sad pall even in the attitude of the crew. But they were very respectful to us and the ship, possibly trying to imagine what she and these four old guys looked like thirty years ago. Of course, I made sure the bug-juice and ice-cream machines were working properly before I left. But they scrapped her the following year in Bremerton, WA. She was gone.



As I age, now a respectable 69 years-old, I occasionally run into an old plank owner, hear about yet another death. Bob Whiteman, my former chief, was the last plank owner I saw and now he has finally married and moved off to Florida with his new wife. My old pal Dave Scruggs is dead, as is John Chiarella. I went to

the 2009 Seattle reunion/cruise in May of last year – had a blast. Even old Captain CAK was there. Chief Nault and Wags were there too.

I got divorced in 1977 and remarried in 1980. By that time I had two daughters (Lisa and Kim, and picked up four stepchildren (Sue, Terry, Jeff and Dave). My wife Dot and I now live in Gales Ferry, CT and have 10 grandchildren at present.

Once in a while I think about joining sub vets. But by nature I tend to look to the future and the past does have some memories I'd rather not think about. I still do contract work in the nuclear power industry and I'm an adjunct Professor at a local community college (Nuclear Energy, English). But I won't forget my past 631 Gold experiences.

I hope you all have memories of the USS Grant that are as positive as mine. Great ship. Better crew.

Take Care.

Bob Salen

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