

Tiger Cruise....
A Day and Night aboard the
USS Cheyenne SSN 773

By Ken Norian

PEARL HARBOR, February 2008 – From time to time, surface ships of the US Navy conduct “Tiger Cruises”.... an opportunity for family members or close friends of sailors to spend time underway on a US Navy vessel. For a host of security and logistical reasons, these opportunities are less common for submarines. When there is such an opportunity, only a small number of men (there are only male berthing and bathroom accommodations on a submarine) are able to participate.

When I found out that there would be such an opportunity on my son’s sub, I jumped at it immediately. Pearl Harbor is a long, expensive journey from Long Island, NY. But knowing that there would not be another opportunity like this with my son for at least a few years, if ever, I made plans for the trip with excitement about becoming one of the very, very small number of civilians to spend a day and night on board a US Navy nuclear submarine as it was put through its paces underway – and underwater.

My son, MM3(SS) Norian, Paul K is a Petty Officer Third Class who recently earned his Dolphins, or submarine warfare qualification and serves as a Machinist Mate on the Cheyenne. As a MM, his responsibilities include auxiliary systems such as potable water generation, atmosphere control (removal of undesirable gasses and generation of oxygen), refrigeration, hydraulics, and the emergency diesel power plant. As he was underway in the weeks leading up to the Tiger Cruise, my only source of contact was the very brief and sporadic email that he would be able to send from the sub. I was told a rough timeframe, and that my POC would be contacting me with details about the BSP when I arrived in Hawaii. A bit of Googling and I learning the POC is my Point Of Contact and that a BSP is a Brief Stop for Personnel.

Navigating a submarine into Pearl Harbor is a time consuming and expensive undertaking, so the submarine maneuvers close to the harbor, and the Tigers would be shuttled to the sub and transfer to it from a small vessel.

Excitement had been building for this trip for weeks. The day before, I spent the whole day visiting the Arizona Memorial, the Bowfin (a WWII submarine known as the Pearl Harbor Avenger, for its success in sinking enemy ships), the USS Missouri, and the Naval Aviators Museum. I went to sleep steeped in the history of what the Navy suffered in Pearl Harbor, and the role that it played in bringing about an end to WWII. When I awoke the morning of the cruise, I just passed

the time until 14:00 hours (2 p.m.) when my POC had told me to meet him at the NEX (Navy Exchange) in Pearl Harbor.

About a dozen men were transported through security to the submarine piers in Pearl Harbor. We each had a small knapsack and little information about what was about to transpire. The small vessel (regularly used to recover training torpedos) left the dock and moved into Pearl Harbor. Almost immediately, I saw the Arizona Memorial and USS Missouri which I just visited the day before. Before long, I was able to make out the shape of a half submerged black cylinder with a number of sailors standing atop it.

In the 17 months since Paul joined the Navy I've read and watched every bit of information I could about submarines. And, here I was about to board one of 46 Los Angeles class nuclear powered fast attack submarines in the United States Navy. As we pulled alongside I realized that, already, I was seeing something that very few people do, and that was only the beginning. We made our way from the tug onto the Cheyenne and were directed to a hole on the deck. Looking down there was a looong vertical ladder. As I descended, the air that rushed out at me had a distinctive, but not unpleasant smell. I was later told that smell was "amines". In a closed environment like a submarine amines are used to scrub the air of toxic gasses. I was quickly accustomed to the smell – though when I left the sub a day later the smell of fresh air was something that I could almost taste – and never appreciated as much.

The Tigers gathered in the crew's mess. It's the biggest room on the sub. Even so, it can only accommodate thirty something people... and that very snugly. For the first time in almost a year, I came face to face with my son, Paul. Given the situation, a firm handshake was the only expression of affection! We were greeted by the captain, Commander M.J. Tesar, who introduced his Executive Officer, LCDR Axel Spens, the Chief of the Boat, FTCS(SS) Victor Smith and others. We were given some basic directions about what not to touch. We were told the schedule for the rest of the day, night, and the next day. We were also given Honorary Submariner Qualification Cards. "Qual Cards" are something that those in training to become submariners fill out over a period of months in their training.

Even just moving around the sub was an experience. The passageways, hatches, and ladders (I first called them stairs and was corrected!) are very narrow. When using a ladder one would yell out "up ladder" or "down ladder" to let others know that they were using it. I was constantly turning sideways in the passageways as others did the same so we could pass each other.

Submariners are some of the most highly trained and skilled people in the Navy. The training is very technical and every member of the crew has to be able to operate, maintain, and repair every system and piece of equipment on the boat. Even though everyone has a specialty everyone has to know how everything on

boat works and how to respond in emergencies to earn their dolphins and be “qualified in submarines”.

Our qual cards were almost an insult to the months of hard work and little sleep that a submariner goes through, but it was a way to ensure that we had an organized way of experiencing life on a submarine. Paul, having plowed through his submarine quals in remarkably short time, was very focused on making sure that I had all the necessary signatures on my qual card!

One of the first necessities was learning to operate a submarine toilet – not as simple as pulling a lever on your home toilet. In the sonar room, we listened to the sounds of biologics (sea life) including whales and shrimp. While still at periscope depth, we were able to look through the periscope at the quickly disappearing coastline. The tour of the torpedo room culminated in observing a simulated torpedo slug launch. Paul was proud to take me on an in depth tour of the auxiliary machine room – his area of expertise.

I was then introduced to the crew’s berthing area. Dozens and dozens of sailors in racks not much bigger than a tanning bed with a curtain– stacked three high in many rows. My rack was on the bottom, so the only way I could get into it was by rolling in from the floor. Better though, than the top rack, which I would never be able to get into! Paul showed me how to use an EAB (emergency air breathing mask) and pointed out the scores of locations around the boat where the mask could be connected to overhead pipes in the event of a fire or smoke condition. It was then my turn to go up onto the bridge. More vertical ladders, leading through the sail of the sub. The view... how do you describe a sunset in the Pacific with no land in sight, the bow of the partially submerged sub gracefully parting the water as moved forward with no sound except the waves. I was able to spend 15 – 20 minutes soaking this in together with the captain and the Officer of Deck, who is stationed on the Bridge when the sub is traveling on the surface.

The next stop was a tour of the control room. This is a beehive of highly structured activity. We prepared to dive and engage in maneuvers called “angles and dangles”. This a high speed activity where the submarine submerges to many hundreds of feet below the surface at an extreme downward angle and back up at equally extreme angles. I was so excited to be there to hear something I had only heard before in movies..... “Dive, Dive, Dive...” Paul was the helmsman during this maneuver, and I could not have been prouder to see him taking commands and executing them. Then, I experienced what truly is the opportunity of a lifetime. The Diving Officer of the Watch asked the Officer of the Deck if Mr. Norian could assume temporary control under supervision of Petty Officer Norian! So... I maintained course and depth and made a couple of minor course and depth changes. That experience trumps anything that any of my friends have been able to come up with!

As impressive as the control room was – the galley and crew’s mess was a close second. Imagine feeding over 130 crew from a galley about the same size as most of our home kitchens – with a menu that surpasses that which comes from most of our kitchens... four times a day, every day. The cuisine.. and the steak was as good as the best restaurant I’ve been in. The ambiance... well, let me say that I would take that spirit of camaraderie to the fanciest restaurant.

The next several hours were spent observing the regular activities of our country’s Navy Submariners. The professionalism, dedication and focus of the crew was palpable. These submariners live and work in cramped quarters in a 360 foot by 33 foot steel tube for months at a time. They have eighteen hour “days”, with six hours of sleep every eighteen hours... sometimes. It is a routine without sun, weekends, holidays or days off – for months at a time. There is no end to ongoing training and qualifications, and no end to drills to ensure that in an emergency or wartime activity their response is automatic and precise.

I was struck by the seeming incongruence of the age of these sailors and the level maturity they displayed. In a submarine, there is no outside help to call for. The submarine is a self-sufficient environment with an unlimited supply of fuel, air, and water. The only factor limiting the time they can stay submerged is the amount of food they can carry.

The interaction of the crew is different from anything I’ve seen or read about on a surface ship. They are, by necessity, a close knit group. All, officers and enlisted men all wear a dark blue poopy suite – a one piece coverall similar to a pilot’s flight suit. The only differentiation between officers and enlisted sailors is a small insignia and the silver or gold embroidery. If an enlisted man needs to get by in a passageway, the captain moves to the side without a word or salute.

At a point, it was time to try to sleep. The berthing area is always dark, since watches are constantly changing with sailors going to bed and waking up. I squeezed my none too trim frame into a rack and figured out that if I was careful, I could roll over without hitting the top. I pulled the curtain closed, and fell asleep to the sounds of dozens and dozens of men within a few feet of me.

At around 03:00 hours I woke to find myself rolling from side to side in my rack, and realized that we must be getting close to the surface. While submerged, there is no sense of movement. Close to the surface, however, the sub is affected by the sea swells. My rack was close to the officer’s wardroom, and I could hear all of the communication from the control room as the ship was preparing to surface. And then... “Surface, Surface, Surface”!

After a breakfast of eggs (made to order), bacon, sausage, biscuits, and cereal the Tigers gathered in the crew’s mess. The Chief of the Boat, gathered our Qual Cards and presented us with “Honorary Submariner Certificates” signed by CDR Tesar:

Know ye throughout the United States Navy; that as a special mark of our gratitude, he is hereby designated an honorary Submariner. Further, he is entitled to all privileges of a Submariner, and I do strictly charge and require all members of the Submarine Force to render to him every courtesy and their highest esteem, and I do encourage them to assist him in any manner within their capabilities whenever the opportunity arises, by the normal tenets of chivalry or by actual necessity.

What this means most to me, is that I can begin to appreciate more than most the tremendous sacrifice that our nation's submarine sailors make to help our country and our world a safer place to live.

The "Welcome Aboard" pamphlet given to each of us closed with this:

"The Submariner"

Only a submariner realizes to what great extent an entire ship depends on him as an individual. To a landsman this is not understandable, and sometimes it is even difficult for us to understand. But, it is so..

A submarine at sea is a different world in herself, and in consideration of the protracted and distant operations of submarines, the Navy must place responsibility and trust in the hand of those who take such trips to sea.

In each submarine there are men who, in the hour of emergency or peril at sea, can turn to each other. The men are ultimately responsible to themselves and to each other for all aspects of operation of their submarine. They are the crew. They are the ship.

This is perhaps the most difficult and demanding assignment in the Navy. There is not an instant during his tour as a submariner that he can escape the grasp of responsibility. His privileges in view of his obligations are almost ludicrously small, nevertheless, it is the spur which has given the navy its greatest mariners – the men of the Submarine Service.

It is a duty which richly deserves the proud and time honored title of "Submariner".

Photo link to pictures of the cruise:

<https://usscheyennetigercruise.shutterfly.com/pictures/8>

I would close with the Submarine Verse of the Navy Hymn.

"Bless those who serve beneath the deep,
Through lonely hours their vigil keep.
May peace their mission ever be,
Protect each one we ask of thee.
Bless those at home who wait and pray,
For their return by night or day."

-Rev. Gale Williamson