

# Homecoming

by James Fasino

**0500, day 68:** I was standing the mid watch in the torpedo room when the messenger of the watch entered the compartment.

"We're going up at 0600," he said.

"That's great. We're just a few hours from home sweet home," I responded.

When he left, I began to reflect on the events of the past 68 days.

It had been a difficult patrol for the crew of this 637 Sturgeon class, nuclear powered, hunter/killer submarine. We had put to sea out of Norfolk on the Thursday prior to Thanksgiving.

Upon completing a six-hour surface transit beyond the 100 fathom curve, we dove and have been submerged since. Today is January 29; we've been down and out of touch with the world over Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Eve, and for me, my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday too. It has been particularly tough on the "marrieds" aboard who were away from their families, but this is what we signed on for when we volunteered for the Silent Service.

However, being assigned a "northern run" over the holiday season is rare since Navy policy is to have the majority of ships in port during this time. But, being the newest, fastest, and stealthiest sub in the Navy, we were selected.

It had been a recon mission in the Barents Sea, within the territorial waters of the Soviet Union. The ship had been "rigged for silent running" for over 2 months. That was

akin to being entombed, because internal lighting was reduced and nonessential

equipment was shut down, including one water purifier, so we had to conserve - no long showers. We spoke in hushes, wore sneakers to cushion our steps, and performed our duties quietly, lest we give up our position to a Soviet contact, risking depth charging to force us to surface. Aboard was a team of Navy linguists, or "spooks", whose jobs were to work in the Radio Room to intercept "enemy" messages and return false intelligence; therefore, the Soviets would charge that we were engaged in espionage. This mission was classified "Top Secret" and the details of it won't ever be made public; our crew is sworn to secrecy.

Thanksgiving wasn't difficult since we'd been submerged for just a week and hadn't yet reached our patrol area, so we hadn't been rigged for silent running. We had plenty of fresh food left, all the good stuff like fresh milk, fruit, vegetables, and eggs. We even had eggnog; however, it was all short lived because both our reefers were configured as freezers so we could carry sufficient meat, fish and frozen provisions to last us over the long haul and to freeze our garbage, too. Consequently, when we passed 30 days, the good stuff was gone, so it was canned fruit and vegetables,

and powdered milk and eggs (ugh). The Thanksgiving meal was tasty, consisting of sliced turkey with all the fixings, but not like home.

Cases of food and restaurant-sized cans of white potatoes and coffee are packed in every spare space aboard a sub that's heading out to patrol. So our berthing compartments had two layers of cases of canned goods stacked on the decks; in order to walk, we had to bend at the waist to avoid banging our bonnets on the overhead piping. As the food was consumed, the layers disappeared, and even-



tually we could walk upright again.

But by time Christmas arrived, the good stuff had been used up, so it was powdered milk in the coffee and powdered eggs for breakfast, no over-easy of course. We'd been down over a month and rigged for silent running for much of the time, putting a serious damper on the holiday celebration. Also, this was my first extended patrol, so I was getting pretty squirrely. I was waging a battle to sustain my morale, but I could usually pick it up by writing a letter home even though it couldn't leave the ship 'till we hit Norfolk again. Still, I would write it, seal it in a Navy envelope, 'cause mom liked those, and then affix an air mail stamp to it, hopeful that would get there faster when it finally left the ship. I'd drop it in the mail basket and imagine that it was going someplace; just writing it made me feel closer to home and family, and I felt good about that.

As well, I was having yearnings. Once, while on watch, I began to crave milk. If I could just have a big glass of cold, fresh, creamy white milk, I thought. Yes, and a crispy, fresh garden salad with tomatoes and cucumbers and some green olives, yeah, the ones with the pimentos in them. Then I would be happy; yes, that would make me so happy. But I couldn't have those common pleasures because they were unavailable, as was so much that we take for granted, like the warmth of the sun on our faces, or the scent of a fresh flower, a newspaper, a telephone, a TV, or receiving Mom's letter in the mail. Those things, and more, don't exist in the world of the submariner at sea.

However, a bright moment occurred for me just prior to Christmas, on my birthday. I was feeling disheartened when my friend Ty, a fire control tech, who was from Texas, came by to see me. Ty

looked like a typical Texan, lean and tall, and he strode like a cowboy with feet slightly apart, knees bent a bit, like he had just dismounted a horse. He had an easy going manner and spoke with southern twang.

"Hi, Jim.... how you all doing today?"

"Hey, Ty, what's up man?" I said.

"Well, ya know that I took leave before we left port to go home to be married."

"Yeah, I heard; congratulations, Ty."

"Well, while I was on the flight back from

Texas, I remembered that it would be your birthday while we were down here, so I brought you a little gift," he said. I perked right up.

"You're kidding me! You remembered my birthday and have a gift for me?"

"Now don't get too excited; it's not all that big a deal," he said. He reached into his jeans' pocket, pulled out his closed fist, and then extended it towards me.

"Here, Jim. Happy Birthday, ship-mate."

I took the gift. It was an airline-sized bottle of cognac. "Wow, thanks a lot, Ty. This is great."

"You're welcome Jim. Now make sure that you keep it hidden real good because you know we ain't supposed to have that kind of stuff down here," he said.

"I will, man, and thanks a again. I can't believe that you remembered my birthday."

Overall morale rebounded after Christmas, fortunate because soon we would have to perform at our peak, as a crew. Thus far we had been patrolling the Barents Sea, going up to scope depth in order to take a peek, receive squadron traffic, intercept Soviet messages, and then scoot down into the depths to hide out. But in order to accomplish our specific mission, we had to go in very close, entering the fjord that their ships utilize to transit between the Soviet naval base at Murmansk and the Barents Sea. It got pretty hairy.

New Year's Eve arrived and I had asked three of my friends to join me at midnight in the lower level bow compartment for a celebratory sip. Regrettably, Ty couldn't attend because he had the mid watch. I selected that location because it was a desolate area of the ship much of the time. So at 1145 our quartet met with our coffee cups, and I poured a portion of cognac into each. Then at midnight, huddled in the chilly bow compartment, we four American attack boat sailors, somewhere in the Barents Sea, toasted in the New Year, and our unwitting hosts, the Soviet navy, and then thanked them for their ineptitude in detecting us.

At last the time came for us to make our big play, so the captain called a meeting in the Crew's Mess for all enlisted men; the officers had been

*Continued on page 33*

## Homecoming

by James Fasino

*Continued from page 32*

briefed earlier. "First I want to congratulate everyone on a job well done, thus far. As many of you know, we are going to make our run-in this evening. The president has authorized this mission, and we have been ordered to go in and snap some photographs, so we'll be right in their backyard, men."

We all glanced around, and then smiles began to cross many faces; some were grinning. "Boat sailors" relish the opportunity to pull off a coup. In our business, it helps to be a bit wacked.

"All right, now listen up... this won't be a milk run, so we'll go in at night to make it difficult for them to spot our periscope wake. We'll take two to three hours to complete the round trip run, and we will man battle stations from beginning to end; so get some rest beforehand. If detected, we will high tail it out of there, pronto, and we won't hesitate to defend ourselves. Being depth charged in a shallow fjord isn't my idea of a good time. If you have questions, or concerns, air them out now.... Nothing? OK then, good luck sailors!"

That night, when the word was passed to man battle stations, I manned the starboard side of the weapons launch console which controlled tubes 2 and 4, and Smitty was on port side. If we had to fire torpedoes, he and I would control the flood down and opening of the outer doors; the fish would be fired remotely from the control room through the fire control system. Lt. Davies stood behind us on the sound-powered phones, in direct communication with the con, to relay firing orders, if necessary. So now we waited as our captain slowly guided our boat into the fjord towards our objective.

The first hour was humdrum except for Mr. Davies' occasional reports of sonar contacts. An hour and a half in, we cleared baffles and then went to scope depth.

"We're up, and so are the scopes now," whispered the lieutenant. We're equipped with two periscopes - an attack scope and a navigation scope. The nav scope can be outfitted with a 35 mm, SLR camera, and the scope lens has two power positions, normal and close in. "Cap has sighted the base and we are beginning to photograph it now."

It was quiet in the room except for the hum of the ventilation system; the situation grew tense, and I began to sweat. We'd been up for 45 minutes, but it seemed like a week. "That's it! We've got it, and they're lowering the scopes now," said Davies.

I took a deep breath and resettled myself on my seat. "Cap's taking her down and getting us the heck out of here." I felt the sub nose down slightly and turn to starboard; the rumble in my butt told me the captain had ordered up more speed.

Soon, Mr. Davies reported. "We're clear of the harbor; we just have to navigate back out of the fjord now." Slowly, we crept back towards the Barents Sea, and the stress mounted.

An hour passed, and then Lieutenant Davies said, "We're at the mouth of the fjord now and entering the Barents Sea again." That's great; they'll secure battle stations soon and then we can head home, I thought.

"Ah, oh."

"Now what?" I said.

"They've got a sonar contact." Not good, I thought. "It's an Alpha," said Davies.

A Soviet Alpha submarine that was returning from patrol, and we had to run into him - very bad luck.

"Has he picked us up?" I asked.

"No, not yet, we're tracking him."

A few minutes more and then suddenly I felt an increased vibration in the seat of my pants; we were pouring on the speed and then we began cavitating. We were running... big time, and Cap wasn't concerned about generating noise; it was an all-out jail break

"He's got us and his sonar and is pinging on us," the lieutenant said breathlessly. The vibration increased as the captain ordered up ahead flank speed. "Flood tubes number 1 and 2," ordered Davies.

"Flood one, aye," Smitty responded

"Flood two," I said as I pushed the green recessed "flood" button on the panel labeled tube #2. The flood valves opened, allowing hundreds of gallons of sea water to pour into both tubes.

"One's flooded," said Smitty.

"Two's flooded."

"Open the barn doors on tubes one and two," commanded the lieutenant.

These are two huge seawater ports in the bottom of the ship that open the WRT tanks to sea to facilitate impulsing the fish out of the tubes. I pushed the button

"Tube number one, barn doors opened. Tube number two, barn doors are open."

The situation was grave, because the next and final step was to open the outer doors and then fire the weapons. I trembled in anticipation.

Suddenly, the boat nosed down severely and lay over on its port side. Davies clung to an overhead pipe; Smitty and I grasped the hand rails on the console to stay seated. We were going deep, doing angles and dangles to try to shake the Soviet sub. The hull creaked in response to the increasing sea pressure.

IMC: "This is the captain. I'm taking her down below test depth and am deploying ECMs. All hands stand by."

ECMs are electronic countermeasures, audio devices that can be ejected from our hull to transmit artificial sound to their sonar. By going into high speed dive and turns, the captain is trying to break their active sonar from bouncing off our hull. Then, if they lose us momentarily, they will have to start listening for us again with their passive sonar. Hopefully, they will pick up the ECM sound while we dive deeper to elude them.

The boat snap-rolled to starboard now as we continued descending deeper into the sea; the hull groaned, compressing under the enormous pressure; my ears popped. Finally, we began to level and then slow. The captain had found a layer to veil us; he's a crafty ol' sub driver. A layer is an iso-ballast, or temperature layer in the ocean that can conceal a sub because it may deflect sound waves. If we've found a layer, then that Alpha might be up above listening and single pinging for us, but could miss us because his sonar waves could deflect away when they encounter the layer. Could, not would... but I hoped so because we were cornered, and well below test depth.

Now we waited in silence, alone, lurking in

the frigid darkness of the Barents Sea. Another 45 minutes passed, and then I felt our speed increase a bit. Ten more minutes, then our bow inched upward. We were ascending, very slowly... deliberately.

"Sonar thinks that we lost him," said Davies. "Cap's going to bag ass out of here now."

Then the speed increased and we were ascending at a faster rate.

.IMC: "This is the captain speaking. We've eluded the Alpha, and we've fulfilled our mission requirements. Well done to all hands.... we're heading home." The danger had passed for now.

"Drain tubes one and two and close the barn doors," said Davies. Smitty and I carried out the orders and reported back.

IMC: "Now secure battle stations... secure battle stations."

When we secured the Torpedo Room, Smitty had the watch, so I went up to the Mess, grabbed some chow and then I turned in.

The trip down home was calm, except for the occasional friendly sonar contact. I knew when we were getting closer to home because the water in the bilges thawed and the boat's atmosphere warmed up.

IMC: "Now rig ship for surface... rig ship for surface!"

Alright... we're going up. We must be off the Virginia coast and the good ol' U.S of A. I grabbed the Surface Bill from the compartment bill holder for reference, rigged the Torpedo Room for surface, manned the sound-powered phones, and heard some compartments reporting already.

"Control, AMR #1 rigged for surface."

"Control, aye," came the response.

Now was my turn. "Control, Torpedo Room. Torpedo Room rigged for surface," I reported.

"Control, aye." The remainder of the boat reported in. Then came those sweet words that we all had been yearning to hear.

IMC: "Now surface, surface, surface! Now surface, surface, surface!"

The boat nosed upward as I heard a short burst of 3000 PSI air hit the forward group of ballast tanks. I guess the OD wanted to get us up fast. Our speed increased as he drove her up from the depths.... we were heading home. Next, I felt our bow broach the surface and then we leveled off and settled back into the sea. Ah, the gentle rock of the ocean - it felt so sweet. At 0530 my relief arrived; I briefed him, then turned and hurried into the adjacent bunk room, grabbed a jacket, sprinted up the ladder to Middle Level Ops, continuing to the upper level, then on into the Control Room.

"Permission to go to the bridge?" I asked excitedly.

"Sure tubes," said the navigator. "Go on up; I'll announce you to the OD."

When I approached the ladder, I felt the chilly air wafting down through the bridge trunk; then I looked aloft to see a small circle of morning sky some 25 feet above. I started up the ladder, eyes skyward; the circle grew wider as I climbed. I saw a cloud pass by overhead, the first one I'd seen in nearly 3 months. Then half-way up, I inhaled my first full breath of fresh Virginia air; it seemed divine. At last I reached the upper hatch, stuck my

*Continued on page 34*

# Homecoming

by James Fasino

Continued from page 33

head out into the darkness, and heard the gentle rumble of the surf passing over our hull as we slipped through the waves. I still couldn't see anything, though, because I was at deck level and surrounded by the black bridge cowling. I shouted up to the OD.

"Officer of the Deck, permission to come to the bridge?"

"Permission granted; come on up," he yelled back.

I placed my palms on the deck plate in order to pull myself up while pushing on the top ladder rung with my feet. Then I hauled myself up into a squatting position on the cramped bridge deck, looked up to the heavens, and savored the moment. I reached up, grasped the upper cowling and slowly pulled myself up past the rim; the cold wind blast smacked my face. I stood there, upright.... the salt air rustling my hair, my jacket flapping in the breeze, and the deck rolling beneath my feet. I peered out over the bow at the morning vista of the sun just breaking above the horizon and lighting the dark sky ahead, its first rays illuminating the white water flowing over our bow, giving it a luminous aura against the blackness of the sea. I felt I had climbed from the grave and had become reborn. My eyes filled, and tears rolled down my cheeks; the brisk air, I guess.

I turned and looked aft beyond our stern to see the froth of our wake winding a seemingly eternal white ribbon upon the calm sea; I heard the sound of the "Stars and Stripes" cracking in the breeze above me. I looked up to see it furling in the golden, early morning light; the sight reaffirmed to me why we do what we do. Maybe in some small way the sacrifices made by this submarine crew over the past months would someday contribute to the eradication of the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain. If so, then it will certainly have been worth it. I stayed on the bridge a while longer enjoying the sunrise, then retreated below for breakfast.

When we hit port, were tied up, and had put our brow over, we got any sick and injured crewmen over first, then the mail. Next we had stores and supplies loaded aboard. I sat in the Crew's Mess gripping a drinking glass and waiting patiently for the Mess cook to put a carton of milk in the dispenser. When he finished, I began pouring; I guzzled the first 2 glasses one after the other; then I slowly sipped the next 3, savoring them as if they were fine wine. My evening chow would include a large, crispy, fresh garden salad with tomatoes and cucumbers, and don't forget the green olives. I hoped we would have the ones with the pimentos in them.

The crew's families were waiting on the pier to reunite with their loved ones, and there were many hugs, kisses and tears. The marrieds were

looking forward to spending time with their families now. However, I didn't make it home until the 2<sup>nd</sup> weekend in February. My mom was waiting for me when I arrived at the bus stop. After our initial greeting, she drove me to our house, but when I entered, it seemed desolate. No one else seemed to be home.

"Go on," said Mom. "Go into the living room." I made the blind right from the hallway into the living room and saw a fully decorated Christmas tree that looked droopy and browned out. Beneath it lay a stack of gifts, and my family was there too. "Welcome home, Jim," they announced.

What a nice surprise for me, I didn't expect to see a Christmas tree in February. Then my Mom said, "Now we'll have your Christmas, Jim."

Now every year I recall that long ago holiday season and remember my shipmates, the sacrifices, and hardship that we endured. I appreciate the common things in life, like the sight of the driven snow, the icicles hanging from the trees, the star-lit sky, or the twinkle of Christmas tree lights in a child's eyes. But mostly I remember that sad-looking, browned-out Christmas tree with my family standing beside it, welcoming me home from a dangerous mission beneath the sea. And I think that the best Christmas that I ever had was the one when I was absent. And... it was worth it!



**IVECO  
MOTORS**



**FPT**  
POWERTRAIN TECHNOLOGIES

POWER, ECONOMY, RELIABILITY



**A range of marine engines for pleasure craft offers modern engines with advanced mechanical and electronic injection systems. These engines are equipped with top quality marine components, and guarantee high performance in spite of their limited size, weight, low emissions and silent running.**



**RUDOX**  
www.rudox.com

**Rudox Engine & Equipment Co.**  
Carlstadt, NJ  
201-438-0111 x119

<p><b>Steve's Marine Service West</b> Amityville, NY 631-264-1600</p> <p><b>RAF-D Services</b> Woodhaven, NY 917-560-1431</p> <p><b>J.R. Mobile Inc.</b> Shirley, NY 631-395-4120</p>	<p><b>TB Boatworks Inc.</b> Lindenhurst, NY 631-225-2585</p> <p><b>Atlantic Service &amp; Equipment</b> Rockaway Beach, NY 718-474-7993</p> <p><b>Theodore De Garmo Marine Service</b> Babylon, NY 631-669-0789</p>	<p><b>Superior Specialized Service</b> Port Washington, NY 631-807-2334</p> <p><b>Klopping Competition</b> Hyde Park, NY 845-266-8040</p> <p><b>Pat Dickson Inc.</b> Hampton Bays, NY 516-817-9701</p>
---	---	--

<p><b>East Coast Diesel &amp; Generators</b> Stratford, CT 203-383-4409</p> <p><b>American Marine Tech</b> Cos Cob, CT 203-625-2686</p>	<p><b>Boardwalk Marina</b> Stratford, CT 203-378-9300</p> <p><b>Lobo Marine Products</b> Stratford, CT 203-673-4098</p>	<p><b>Brothers Boat/Cycle Repair</b> Carlstadt, NJ 347-865-0303</p> <p><b>Master Marine Services</b> Little Ferry, NJ 201-370-4975</p>
---	---	--

www.fptpowertrain.com

Great Bay Marine



ROBALO



TRIUMPH



CROWLINE



ANGLER



LEFTOVERS ON ALL BRANDS!

LOW PRICES! MUST GO!

NEW INVENTORY ARRIVING!

2937 Sunrise Highway  
Islip Terrace, NY  
**631-859-0654**

565 W. Montauk Highway  
Lindenhurst, NY  
**631-957-0386**

www.greatbayboats.com