

Thursday, May 04, 2000

That evening when I got home from work, I checked my e-mail just like I try to do at least a couple of times a week. There was the usual junk. People trying to get you to “get out of debt,” loose weight “without trying,” etc. but one e-mail caught my attention. It was from Lt. Bill Speaks of the US Navy. The subject line of the e-mail said “Lose a Belt Buckle?” When I opened and read this e-mail, I could hardly believe my eyes.

It seems that Tim Clodfelter, a reporter for the Winston Salem Journal, had received a letter that day from a man who had been in the US Navy Submarine Service, a few years ago.

The letter stated that a friend of his found a belt buckle while swimming in White Lake in Elizabethtown, NC. When he found the buckle, he was about 12-14 years old. He liked it so he wore it for a few years, until it finally broke. He put it in a drawer and forgot about it. The buckle eventually ended up in his attic in a box of “stuff.”

Now, some 25-30 years later, he borrowed a chain saw from a friend, and, in payment for the use of the chain saw, and remembering his friend had once been in the US Navy Submarine Service, he gave the belt buckle to him. The reason he had hung on to the buckle in the first place was that it was larger than the average buckle and it was engraved. The engraving reads as follows:

Robert K. Curtis
Blue Crew
USS Abraham Lincoln (SSBN 602)

The friend, being an ex-submarine sailor, realized that this buckle had been made for someone in particular. It may have special meaning or sentimental value to its original owner. With that in mind, the friend wrote a letter to “ASK SAM” of the Winston Salem Journal.

Tim Clodfelter, a reporter for the Winston Salem Journal, got in touch with a friend of his, Lt. Bill Speaks, in the US Navy, and asked if there was any way to locate the original owner. Lt. Speaks knew an associate of his, Jim Collins, had once been stationed on board the USS Abraham Lincoln (SSBN 602) as chief engineer before he retired. (The USS Abraham Lincoln is now the name of one of the Navy’s largest aircraft carriers.)

As a past crewmember of the Lincoln, Jim Collins contacted the Abraham Lincoln’s web site. With the assistance of “Doc” McCance, the WebMaster, he found the name of a past crewmember, Robert K. Curtis and the e-mail address.

When I received the e-mail asking about the belt buckle, I immediately responded that they had found the right person. As near as I can recall, I must have lost the buckle in the early to mid 60’s. I cannot explain how it got into White Lake. I have never been to, or even heard of, White Lake. In fact, I have never been to that part of North Carolina. My wife and I were both raised in western NC (Pilot Mountain – just 25 miles north of Winston Salem). The man who actually found the buckle lives in King, NC; even closer to Pilot Mountain.

Less than two weeks after my initial e-mail, I received my belt buckle. I had the buckle made when I was stationed on board the USS Abraham Lincoln (SSBN 602) during new construction at Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, Portsmouth, NH in 1960/1961. I was transferred sometime in 1962 (I think) to another FBM submarine.

I continued to serve on board FBM Submarines until I retired in June 1980. I served as a Torpedoman (both horizontal and vertical). I made a total of 26 FBM patrols on four different submarines:

USS Abraham Lincoln (SSBN 602)
USS Nathan Hale (SSBN 623)
USS Lewis & Clark (SSBN 644)
USS James K. Polk (SSBN 645)

My heart-felt thanks to all those involved in returning my belt buckle. I realize that it is just a piece of metal to most; but to me, it is a symbol of my first FBM Submarine. To be truthful, I had forgotten about the buckle until this event took place. I thank God that there are still honest and caring folks around.

THANK YOU

- (1) Jerry Bullins of King, NC for finding and keeping the buckle.
- (2) Matt Pace of Winston Salem, NC for caring enough to go to the trouble of writing a letter in an attempt to locate me.
- (3) Tim Clodfelter of the Winston Salem Journal for realizing that this may have meant something to someone and following thru with the effort.
- (4) Lt. Bill Speaks of the US Navy for taking time and finding my e-mail address then putting me in contact with the others.
- (5) Jim Collins, past crewmember of the 602 boat, for having the initiative and thoughtfulness to "dig" for my e-mail address out of literally hundreds listed on the Lincoln Web site.

God Bless each one of you, I am very grateful.

Robert K. (Ken) Curtis, TMC(SS),
US Navy Submarine Service, Retired