

HAIL TO THE SILENT SERVICE

By SHERRY SONTAG

In July 1898, a small boat fell beneath the waves in New York Harbor, off Staten Island. The event caused great celebration. For the boat was called the Holland, and she was designed to sink. And she did this so well that on April 11, 1900, Holland was bought by the U.S. Navy - and thus was the world's most successful submarine service born.

Holland's first dive was only to 12 feet, and it lasted for just 11 minutes. These days, U.S. submarines easily go deeper than 1,000 feet, travel to the farthest reaches of the planet's oceans, sidle up close against enemy shores and often stay submerged for months at a time.

John Lowe, the nation's first submariner and the man at the helm during Holland's first dive, had much in common with the nearly quarter of a million men who have served on the nation's submarines over the last 100 years, men who proudly call themselves "bubbleheads" - and who, for the most part, believe that they are all a little bit nuts.

Why else would anyone purposely sign up to serve on a ship knowing he was going to risk not just enemy torpedoes and depth charges, but also asphyxiation, drowning or implosion under crushing ocean pressures.

Submariners have always been a completely volunteer force, a group of men struck with a brand of patriotism that outweighs their own sense of survival.

They go because they've asked themselves the question, "What else?"

In those early days, John Lowe was convinced that only submarines - a fleet of 50 at least - could protect the nation's shores should an enemy do what he was certain any enemy would: "An eight-day dash across the Atlantic would bring their ships to Montauk Point, where they would encounter the American Fleet, which being destroyed by force of numbers, the remainder of the enemy's ships could pass on, and anchor in Long Island Sound in perfect security.

This idea of subs as the ultimate coastal picket, guarding against all enemies who may venture near, lasted until World War I - when German U-boats demonstrated in a lethal campaign against merchant shipping that submarines could be very effective as a blue-water force.

Submarines were equally deadly during World War II - and it wasn't just Hitler's navy that posed the threat: U.S. subs crippled the Japanese navy and destroyed Tokyo's merchant fleet, mounting their first successful attacks within days of Pearl Harbor. Along the way, the United States lost 52 subs - and 3,500 men.

After the war, submarines fell out of the spotlight, but the calculated insanity that sent men out beneath the waves never diminished - nor did the question, "What else?" If anything, both reached new intensity during the Cold War, in missions that were just as much a question of life and death as they had been during the years when depth charges routinely blew holes in the Pacific.

These new missions were so deeply cloaked in secrecy that thousands of men went out - often for months at a time - never telling anyone where they were going, or why. They didn't tell their wives, their children, their parents, their best friends.

And for good reason.

The mission had moved beyond one of mere stealth to one of utmost secrecy. And submariners had become more than hunters. They had become spies. It was their job to venture to the shores of the Soviet Union, sometimes straight into Soviet harbors. It was their job to trail, a push of a button away from sinking, the Soviet subs designed to carry more - and more deadly - nuclear missiles to U.S. shores than had been deployed during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

To do this, submariners suffered from confinement, and from the dangers of the ocean depths. Submariners stood by as both USS Thresher and USS Scorpion were lost with all hands - and they watched as many of their own families fell apart from the imposed distance of time and silence.

They did this all to prevent a repeat of Pearl Harbor in a nuclear age.

Their own families thought them involved in mere exercises, perhaps in a few "cat-and-mouse games" played with the Soviet Union. The American public was told that the subs themselves were technological marvels almost able to drive themselves. What was left out was that these marvels often were held together with shoestring, spit and the creativity of their men.

Submariners made up their own rules, their limits often drawn on the spot by victory and disaster. There was no other way. They were attempting feats that had never been considered possible, moving as quickly as their technology and the technology of their adversaries, allowed - dreaming it up as they went along.

Who could have imagined that they'd find themselves right inside the minds of Soviet leaders, by sneaking into the Barents Sea and the Sea of Okhotsk to tap Soviet underwater telephone cables.

This extraordinary intelligence coup came about when a submarine captain recalled signs along the Mississippi River warning boaters "cable crossings - do not anchor." He guessed similar signs - in Russian - might be their warning to Soviet fishermen - and that those signs could also point out the cable to American underwater spies.

He was right, and cable-tapping and similar missions highlighted the last 20 years of the Cold War, but the men involved only got to tell the world they were conducting simple research.

The secrecy was necessary at the time - but the so-called Silent Service paid a price for it when the Berlin Wall fell and the nation began demanding a peace dividend.

From a Cold War high of 141 submarines - 41 of which were designed to launch thermonuclear ballistic missiles - federal defense analysts declared that the nation should carry no more than 50 attack boats and 14 Trident ballistic-missile subs.

This winter, however, the Joint Chiefs of Staff released a new study declaring that the force should have 68 attack subs and 14 Tridents. What hasn't been decided is how those extra attack subs will be paid for.

Meanwhile, the Navy, which had shrunk the attack fleet to 56, has stopped its efforts to diminish the force. There are 18 Tridents still in commission, with a proposal under consideration to convert four to a new type of sub - one that can carry and launch 150 Tomahawk cruise missiles each. That's as many as are now carried by an entire Navy surface battle group.

The potential utility of this capability was proved just one year ago - when 25 percent of all the cruise missiles launched during the Kosovo war came from submerged U.S. attack submarines. During the Gulf War, by comparison, submarines launched only 4 percent of the cruise missiles used against Iraq.

Meanwhile, construction is also moving forward on the new Virginia class of attack sub, which can also carry Tomahawks, Navy SEALs and other special forces.

Amid all the controversy, the Silent Service has managed once again to reinvent itself - and has been proving that submarines can play a crucial role in the kind of high-tech wars that will be fought in the 21st century.

Today, spy satellites scour the surface of the globe, but still can't effectively peer under- water. Submarines remain the best of the nation's stealth weapons. This is far from the world that John Lowe could have imagined when he guided Holland into New York Harbor a century ago.

But it is a world that the U.S. Navy's Silent Service is well-equipped to dominate well into it's second century. It's the modern answer to the old question: "What else?"

Happy Birthday.

Sherry Sontag is co-author of "Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage."