

Many Major Changes in the Submarine Service Since the WWII Diesel Boat Era

by Michael Skurat mksurat01@snet.net

Member Groton Base USSVI & Central CT Chapter of SubVets WWII

There have been many major changes in the U.S. Navy Submarine Service since the WWII Diesel Boat Era. It might be interesting historically to note some of them.

Initially there were only seven pay grades (actually eight). They ran from one to seven with Apprentice Seaman (AS) as one, Seaman Second Class (S2/c) as two, Seaman First Class (S1/c) as three, Petty Officer Third Class (e.g. MM3c) as four. Petty Officers Second and First Class as five and six. Chief Petty Officers were initially promoted to "seven A" for one year (Acting Appointment) and then to Chief Petty Officer as pay grade seven. There were no Master or Command Chief, etc. The "C" for Chief Petty Officers preceded the rate designation, for example CMM not MMC as today. For all of the seaman ratings there was a comparable Fireman (F)

The Officer's rank structure has remained consistent with minor exceptions. During WWII a five star Fleet Admiral rank was added and bestowed on Nimitz and King. No one promoted to that rank since WWII. Another thing there was no Commodore rank utilized. Officers were promoted from Captain to Rear Admiral (lower half) and hence to Rear Admiral (upper half). The Rear Admiral (Lower Half) replaced the Commodore rank. As it is custom to call any Commanding Officer Captain it also was custom to call a Submarine Squadron Commander Commodore.

Before WWII an Apprentice Seaman's pay was \$21.00 per month. Pays increased in WWII with Apprentice Seaman to \$50.00 per month and to around \$120.00 per month for a Chief. All personnel on Submarines got 50% submarine money and 20% sea duty pay. When added together added up to about 80% extra pay.

If you were married and/or had dependents your pay was reduced by \$28.00 per month the U.S. Navy supplemented another \$22.00 and your dependent was sent a monthly check for \$50.00. Consequently, an Apprentice Seaman would get \$22.00 per month. However, enlisted personnel below pay grade four could not marry without the permission of their Commanding Officer. This breached more often than observed and obviously many entered the service married.

At one time the Navy Paymasters would pay personnel with \$2.00 bills so so that when spent it would indicate to the local economy the impact of the service. Also when being paid by the Paymaster on board a tender you would line up with your "pay chit" to draw your pay. When you reached the pay desk you would salute the Paymaster, put your fingerprint on the "pay chit" and draw your money. There was a posted pay list indicating what you had on the "books" and you could draw all or whatever amount you desired

Submarine and sea pay were a real boon especially when sea store cigarettes at six cents a pack and a bottle of beer on Bank St. was twenty-five cents. Later when you came in off patrol you would have that back pay and be really flush.

Due to rapid expansion of every aspect of the U.S. Navy, if you could cut the mustard, promotions were forthcoming. Many a serving enlisted person commissioned (called mustangs) or advanced in rating because of the enormous need to fill billets in new construction and replace casualties. Classes at the U.S. Naval Academy graduated early. Personnel with special qualifications were coming into the service rated and/or commissioned. You could see a Chief Petty Officer with no hash marks. These ratings were derided and called "slick arms" (no hash marks) and/or "Tojo" ratings by the old-timers. Some enlisted personnel commissioned as regular line officers, Warrant Officers and Limited Duty Officers (LDOs) in specific areas. Such commissions initially were considered temporary with reversion back to their permanent grades at the conclusion of hostilities

They created many specialty ratings. In their "Crow" specialty designator was a diamond with a letter inside, e.g., the letter "A" would be for a coach or professional athlete who would conduct physical conditioning, etc. Most, if not all, of these ratings ceased to exist with the end of the war. Some referred to these as "square knot" rates.

There were right and left arm rates. Right arm rates were considered "Sea Going Rates" (BM, QM, GM, SM, FC, TM, etc) and the "Crow" was worn on the right arm. Left arm rates were ancillary and

were MM, Y, EM, RM, MoMM, ET, etc. Right arm rates were senior to left arm ratings. There was no Boatswain Mate Third Class they were called Coxswains.

Seamen and Firemen wore a "watch stripe" round the right shoulder - white for seamen red for firemen. There was other colors of "Watch Stripes" for aviation, CBs, etc. Indication of rate was on uniform cuffs. One white/red stripe for AS/FA, two for S2c/F2/c and three for S1/c and F1/c. The present diagonal 1, 2, or 3 stripe(s), in color was originally for WAVE uniforms and after WWII were adopted for the present enlisted uniform and the watch stripe was eliminated.

The "T-Shirt" a part of the enlisted uniform initially served two purposes. (1) It was to be worn without the Jumper on work details, especially in tropical locations. (2) It was meant to have the high white neckline to show in the "V" of the Jumper. Some personnel, to enhance the appearance would cut the tab off and wore the "T-shirt" backward for a better appearance especially if with age and washings it seemed to sag. The popularity of the T-Shirt expanded into wide public acceptance after WWII and is now utilized, not only as an undergarment but as outerwear with various designs, logos, etc.

There were no Silver Metal Dolphins for enlisted personnel. Dolphins for enlisted personnel consisted of embroidered "patches". (white for blues and blue for whites) sewn on the right forearm. Silver Metal Dolphins for enlisted personnel was authorized after WWII.

All enlisted personnel wore embroidered "patches" as distinguishing marks e.g., if you were a designated striker you could wear the insignia for that specialty on the left upper sleeve.

Other distinguishing marks for enlisted personnel were "patches" on uniforms, e.g., an Expert Lookout "patch" binoculars, a diver a divers helmet (M for Master. with degree of qualification indicated on the chest section of the helmet. These worn on the right upper sleeve and there were many of them. One "perc" that has persisted is the wearing of gold rating insignia and hash marks for those with 12 years of good conduct.

Chief Petty Officers merely pinned their fouled anchor hat insignia to the front top of their hat covers. The black band and background for the insignia was initiated after WWII.

Officers did wear Gold Metal Dolphins as they do today.

Unknown today was also the fact that there was a dress white uniform for enlisted personnel. The collar and cuffs were blue and were adorned with piping. What is worn today are "undress whites". Pictures of them are in old "Bluejacket Manuals".

Officers wore swords for ceremonial occasions as they do today but back before WWII Chief Petty Officers had a cutlass for ceremonial dress occasions.

Another uniform item that is now passe is the flat hat. Once the ribbon had the name of your ship but this discontinued for security reasons and all flat hats merely had U.S. Navy in gold on the ribbon. In boot camp all of your uniform items were stenciled with your name and service number. There were no doors on lockers and each item had a prescribed method of folding and stowing. It was even prescribed as to how you would pack your seabag.

Originally, the entire submarine base was literally below the railroad tracks. Later as the base expanded it was called "lower base". Most of the upper base buildings, i.e., Morton Hall, Dealey Center, etc., were constructed for WWII. The road from the present main gate past the golf course was the Groton-Norwich road. About half way up the road was an overhead railroad bridge. The entrance to the base was under the bridge and the Marine guard stationed there in a guard shack. The base commanders office was housed in a small brick building about half way between the training tower and the Torpedo Shop.

Submarine School - six weeks enlisted and three months for officers.

Of some 250,000 men who applied for submarine duty less than 10% made it to Sub School and many of those washed out. ***Submarine School was the sole tyrannical domain of one Chief Torpedoman Charles Spritz. Submarine School was called "Spritz's Navy". He ruled with an iron hand and was feared by instructors and students alike. He had little regard for rate whether you were a Seaman First Class or a Petty Officer First Class. To call him eccentric was a gross understatement. He did not smoke, did not drink and was single It is open to debate as to if he ever even pulled a liberty. His total devotion was to the Submarine School. It***

was universally conceded that he had gone "asiatic", not 100% stable and perhaps as a youngster he might have been dropped on his head.

He insisted that personnel, at all times, be properly and neatly attired in the regulation "Uniform of the Day" without exception. No tailor mades, proper rolled neckerchief down to the "V" in the Jumper with immaculate white T-Shirt showing, shoes well shined, etc. He did not permit smoking nor any type of horseplay. He demanded that all personnel move at a fast pace.

Chief Spritz had the uncanny ability to be everywhere at all times and pity the poor individual who crossed his path. His discipline was swift and sure. He felt it was his personal mission to ascertain that anyone leaving sub school for submarine duty was in every respect ready. He had many axioms but his favorite was "There is room for anything on a submarine except a mistake". Sub school students were not "boots", many, if not most, had time in the U.S.Navy and were rated.

There is an article in POLARIS issue of August, 2000 (Submarine Saga segment) which delves into more detail relative to Chief Spritz and is briefly incorporated here as it is a definite part of the Diesel Boat Era.

Sub Vets of WWII in recognition of respect, and a fealty obligation to this once feudal lord and master, wear a "Spritz's Navy" patch on their vests.

It would seem that the screening at Sub School served us well. Friction between members of the crew was unbecoming and unacceptable. If an individual demonstrated an inability to "get along" he could be transferred to another boat. If the same conduct prevailed there he would be transferred out of submarines.

The training tower caused many a wash out for both physical and mental reasons. If a person could not "pop" his ears it could cause pain and even bleeding from the ears. Your voice changed dramatically to a high pitch under pressure. All personnel had to qualify from the 100' lock with the Momsen Lung. Right after the war it was noted that some German submariners had made emergency escapes using free ascents. A number of crews from boats went to the tower and made free ascents.

We had less pomp insofar as the ceremony observed when a member of the crew qualified than is apparent today. The individual, thrown over the side then sewed dolphins on his uniforms and wore them with pride. They have always been, and always will be, a badge of honor regardless of manner in which bestowed.

There was less reverence on some other occasions also., e.g., when a "Good Conduct Medal" was awarded to a member of the crew it would be given by the Captain (or perhaps the Exec) at quarters amid "hoots and hollers" with cries of "Undiscovered Crime". There was also a bonus system for awards ranging from \$1.00 per month for the Good Conduct Medal to \$5.00 per month for the Congressional Medal of Honor.

"Tailor Made" dress blues were the uniform of the day for liberty. The jumper was skin tight with a zipper in the side so that it could be taken off. Accentuated bell bottoms were mandated. The inside of the cuffs were decorated with embroidered color decorations, usually dragons, etc., and were only visible when the cuffs were turned up.

When you made Chief you initially bought the cheapest hat you could find since it was also considered appropriate and properly respectful to have all of the crew urinate in your first hat.

Sad to note in this day and enlightened age all of the military services of the United States were segregated during our era. The practice abolished by President Truman over 50 years ago. Stewards, at that time, recruited from America territories and from American minorities. Even in such a tight knit group as American Submarines two racks in the Forward Torpedo Room hung off the overhead beneath The Torpedo Loading Hatch were reserved for the Stewards. Rated Stewards wore uniforms similar to Chiefs.

The submarine sailor was a very irreverent individual with an avid distaste for regulations, etc. The average life span of a submarine sailor was four patrols (about a year). Despite bravado, that thought prevailed to varying degrees depending upon the individual. That premise however, was unsaid but used as an excuse for hell-raising. Rarely mentioned in tales of WWII submarine lore was the fact that going through minefields was as apprehensive as being depth charged.

Submarine Officers and crews were very young - anyone past thirty was a very old man. Admiral Charles Lockwood (Uncle Charley) ComSubPac was most forgiving, as were Skippers and Execs, of transgressions of both Officers and men. Returning from patrol crews were treated extremely well.

Another "perc" of the submarine force was that any record of "minor" disciplinary action that a member of the crew suffered would be entered into the "page 9" of his service record. Virtually all disciplinary action was handled internally on the boat. However, both the original and carbon copy (BuPers Copy) retained in his jacket. When transferred, the original and copy, removed by the Yeoman to be deep sixed. Unless there was a serious offence personnel transferred with a clean record.

Many friendships were formed in sub school, plus other training and schools and transfers were not uncommon due to the needs of new construction, promotions, etc. Consequently, the force became even more closely knit. It was the rare boat that did not have personnel whom you knew.

Submariners were very independent and resourceful, both individually and as a group. Needs (and desires) of the boat as prescribed by the U.S. Navy, did not always coincide with what was considered proper nor adequate. Therefore, a system of "midnight requisitioning" and "midnight small stores" developed to enhance efficiency. This avenue of acquisition considered a solemn duty in promoting the war effort. Those proficient and innovative in this endeavor were greatly admired. It was an art as well as a science executed individually or as a group cooperative effort. Some of these escapades took great ingenuity as well as "brass balls". As a term of affection they were called "scroungers" and/or "dog robbers". If a Skipper or Exec made an "innocent" passing remark that some particular thing might be "nice" it would appear mysteriously in due time.

On board an informal, but professional, attitude prevailed. Although we had an evaporator to make fresh water, battery watering was primary. In the design and scheme of things, personal hygiene or washing of clothes did not seem to be considered. One Engineering Petty Officer, called the "Water King" ran the evaporators. Personal hygiene or washing of clothing was an afterthought. The use of after-shave lotions, deodorants and especially talcum powders prevailed. Large cans of "Lilac" were the norm, purchased inexpensively and sprinkled liberally.

To the unacquainted it could appear that the rapport between Officers and men was quite informal and to a degree it was but it in no way detracted from efficiency, military courtesy, tradition or discipline. There was a strong mutual respect. Aye-Aye Sir, Very Well and Well Done were accorded as appropriate. The vast majority of the crew was rated and competent in their skills. Obviously so were our officers. There was no such thing as stenciled ratings on dungaree shirts so a person coming aboard a submarine at sea would have a difficult time determining any individuals rate. Also there was an axiom that in submarines "you left your rate on the dock". Ability was the hallmark.

When conditions approached that of a Chinese garbage scow junk with an over flowing head and the crew in dire need of fumigation the Skipper might decide to allow showers piecemeal by sections. You lined up to enter the shower, the Chief of the Boat turned on the water for 2 seconds and shut it down while you soaped down. You were then allowed a correspondingly brief rinse.

Each member of the crew was allotted one locker which measured about 12" high, 18" wide and about 18" deep. You kept your uniforms under your mattress. Your rack had a plastic zip around cover. Your mattress was encased in a "mattress cover" which was akin to a oversized pillow case. Able to be turned over once and some even turned them inside out and got two more uses. Less the uninitiated be stunned by that you must be cognizant of lack of water for regular laundry.

Internal communications on board were conducted by the 1MC and 7MC phone and speaker systems.

To reenter a submarine after handling lines etc. when returning to port was a shocking revelation. It

was impossible to believe that you had survived that malodorous environment. Politely put the atmosphere was conducive to a shanty town house of ill repute that also was inundated by a back up of its sewer system. Pity the poor relief crew that had to come on board and make the boat shipshape again.

You could immediately identify an Electrician on a submarine. He was the individual with the most shredded moth eaten dungarees.

Ribald humor was the tenor of the day. No topic or human frailty was off limits. Nothing was sacred. Horseplay and trickery were the order of the day. The antics and demeanor of the crew, both at sea and ashore, would not be socially acceptable nor politically correct nowadays. I fear that the late Admiral Rickover would have been aghast.

One real advantage was food, especially when you first went out. Although they were ridden without mercy the cooks did an excellent job of feeding the crew. We ate family style off china plates. Our officers ate exactly what the enlisted personnel did. The stewards would come back to the After Battery Galley and fill their serving plates and bring it to the Forward Battery for the Wardroom. When leaving port rations were stored in every conceivable space (including the shower since it wouldn't be needed). However, as supplies diminished the cooks were hard pressed to come up with varied favorable menus. All boats had "open icebox" so you could prepare and cook anything you wanted at any time as long as you cleaned up after yourself. The After Battery "Mess" was for chow, off duty recreation, meeting space and a hang-out.

This is a collective attempt at recollection after the passing of a half-century so any errors or omissions hopefully forgiven as "senior frailties". Much of this is collective memory and is a compilation of boats in general. There is no pride of authorship so any comments, additions, corrections and/or deletions are welcome and appreciated. This is merely a historical comparison as best one can do and is in no way a negative reflection between "then and now".

GOD BLESS ALL SUBMARINERS - Past, Present and Future

Michael Skurat
Central Connecticut Chapter U.S. Submarine Veterans World War II