

William Hawkins

FEAR

In the seventies, the cold war was hot and mixed emotions were a large part of everyone's life. My bride and I found ourselves depending on a cabin boy's pittance for our survival. An "old salt", leery of the woes I harbored, spoke softly but knowingly that 'the Mother we trusted was usually selfish with her bows and didn't issue other wives to us in our sea bags'. He did surrender the information that permits few 'other women' to invade the navies abode. Our queen of the seas would allow one to try and earn her liberties if I could face my greatest fear, drowning. Being trapped as her oceans filled my lungs as my life slowly ended with a cold wet blue that was black horrified me. I could, the chief continued, as he lit another cigarette off the old one, if I were good enough to help drive her boats, those caskets of cold steel her submarines, earn two dollars a day extra. The dilemma I faced was the horror that gripped me about suffocating and that promise I made my wife to take care of her.

I guess we all have our own skeletons in our past and mine was no exception. When I was around twelve or thirteen years old my friends and I were playing at, in, and around the irrigation systems canals outside of Phoenix in the middle of the blast furnace hot summer.

I 'volunteered' to swim through an 18" concrete pipe from about 25' at a fill station to the canal. Ideally and logically I would duck down, spring off and within about thirty seconds or so I would sail into the canal, about 8' below the surface. As I crouched down and kicked what little kick I could kick off I realized my fears; it was pitch black in this tube of water with absolutely no air, not even a bubble. In the circle of

water in which I was encased was very little, if any, feeling of my moving through it. I was horrified as I could not see anything and I could not use my straight outstretched arms to help my forward motion because the pipe was too small to swing them.

I was near that terrible instant when I would have no choice but to involuntarily blow out the only air I would ever be able to use again and inhale my cause of death.

Then, still in darkness, I ran into a divide in the pipe one ran right and one ran left. It was like a bet from Satan or a chance from God. I picked left, and in what seemed like an eternity I saw a tiny speck of light, no, actually a pin hole of light in my path, it could have been miles away. Looking back, it looked like one might imagine a single far away star would look like on a moonless night. I couldn't tell if I were hysterically in tears from happiness or the fear that it would be out of reach or that there might be a grate or bars welded over the opening to keep brainless animals out.

When I broke through the surface the air tasted like the sweetest flower the world had ever known. I did stop the other two with me from following without saying a word. I had a dilemma about 'volunteering' again. I was afraid of drowning and I was saddled with the knowledge that I swore to my wife I would forever take care of her.

The nuclear fast attack submarine was put to sea at around 'dark thirty' one cold rainy winter morning. There was nothing unusual about this except I was on it. One hundred seventy five other 'tars' shared this steel cold black casket with me. The boat traversed the Pacific Ocean for a week or so in route to our assigned operation area. We arrived at the designation in darkness because the ship's interior was still rigged for red, to protect the night vision of crew members that may be called into the black in an

emergency if we were forced to surface and, of course, to give the crew the creature comfort of 'day and night'.

*The depth gauge I viewed from the passive sonar stack located on the starboard side of the diving stand told me we were at six hundred-fifty feet and the sounding off the bottom told us we were at an elevation of three hundred fifty feet. We were in one thousand feet of water. The unusual and new sound was the **'altitude'** readings that were periodically being barked out around the same time the depth was being announced to the powers that be. This is how the boat bounced about below the dancing waved white caps above and known as the roof. The sounding off the bottom again put us at three hundred fifty feet off the ocean floor.*

This was in the middle of the 'Cold War' with the Russians and they were not to be dealt with lightly. They had an awful lot of submarines that we had to keep an eye on in an awful lot of ocean. Our 'spooks', or intelligence people working the inner workings and 'plans' of the Soviet navy figured the areas that the bad guy 'boomers', ballistic missile submarines, like to travel in. Somebody in Washington must have come up with the idea to wait for these guys on their known highways across the sea.

The old way of shadowing these evil bastards was to catch them coming out of the Pinyarni straits or Vladivostok inlet, crawl in behind them, and act like a 'thought' in the only blind spot they owned, their ass, right behind the screws. The hiding in their baffles had its draw backs though, the 'Boomers' generally were very quite, they went very slow so they could float a wire out the back of their sail to be able to constantly receive the order to blow Los Angeles out of California.

The notorious 'crazy Ivan' turn to port or starboard to listen to her baffles, the baffles in which we were hiding in made us very quite and made us realize that we might have an expiration date on us. Most concerning of all was that she frequently brought with her one or two nasty playmates. The hunter killer submarines that bothered everybody were the Soviet "Alpha" class boats. Tiny, by comparison to most attack boats they were manned by only officers. These people had but one function in life; be hated by one and all. They performed their jobs well. They drove boats that went twice the speed of anything we had and dove them down so deep that we swore they were going down to visit their souls in hell. When they were done making everybody's day they left to find someone else to irritate as fast as they wondered in.

They had but one weakness, they were not quiet. I don't think you needed sonar to hear them. We would be tip toeing around the seas not even breathing deep when the report would break the silence over the 7MC; 'contact , designate Sierra 26 and Sierra 27, bearing 094 degrees running with compressed cavitations , noise level consistent Alpha class boats, range 35,000 feet, depth, two-five hundred, speed 35+ angle on the bow 17 degrees. Great we're acting like a submarine with the stealth of a cloud and these two renegades with the diplomacy of a couple of junk yard dogs that snagged a kitten, want to get frisky. This day though, we were alone.

The 'all stop' order was given, water was moved into and out of the ship as well as from tank to tank and even the movement of ships company was restricted to achieve 'neutral' buoyancy. We were just sitting there; we were not going up and we were not going down. The diving officer ordered the fore and aft mushroom shaped anchors lowered down the 350 feet to the oceans floor. Once the anchors were settled on the

bottom the order was given to line up to run on batteries and take the reactor cold. Air conditioning, fans, non essential motors, even lights that were not considered imperative was secured. Now we were so quite we weren't there.

The forward anchor, believed to be resting on the ocean floor three hundred fifty feet under the ship was actually resting on the side of an underwater mountain.

The anchor started to tumble down the mountainside with our sleeping U-boat hot on its tail. The down angle immediately went from 2 degrees to 5 to 10 to 20 and up to and who knows where down. As I grabbed onto the overhead pipes and wires to stop falling on the wet deck plates and broken glass I could here hear the depth gauge, one of the only things on the ship working, chattering nothing but bad news. Without any power to the screws to back us out of the abyss this crew was looking at being together for a long time. The female voice alarm, affectionately known as 'the bitch in the box,' was reporting that everything that could go wrong was going wrong. The green tinge of smoke or steam seemed to hover over what little light we had. Hydraulic oil could be tasted through the noise and smell announcing its presence. The boat was shuddering and deafening bangs and pops were running up and down her sides.

Though drowning was a real possibility for everyone, no one wanted it to be their fault, though no one would ever know. The crew was working as a team of individuals to keep the individuals alive as a team.

We had four major fears to deal with. The first was the ship chasing the anchor to and beyond design crush depth. We were now a lot closer to it than to the surface. The second was the nuclear genies getting loose on the crew from the dead, dormant, and useless reactor. The third was having one of the 'war shot' torpedoes becoming

*unfriendly; and, of course the final possible dilemma, and my nemesis, flooding. The sound of breaking glass as the hull moaned tight made me bite down so hard my gums bled. The darkness, the darkness which only a dead submarine emits, reeked of the devil's heart. The haunting 'on' and 'off' **click** of the bright yellow battle lanterns chattered their birth and demise. This tore at me, a man that could only think about my wife and baby girl, praying for their safety in a world I could not protect them in. It may seem insignificant, but I found out later many of the men feared not seeing day or night again.*

The Commanding Officer must have thought he had to pay for the boat if she were lost. In between all of the flashing lights, lady alarm warnings, grown men crying, and yelling the cool almost cold voice of the Captain stated, "I have the Conn..." as he entered the Control Room. I knew, I think everybody knew instantly that we were all going to be safe. We all knew this man was only skin and bones, but he was part of the lady we sailed, and she was part of him. I swear, by his actions, he told the boat 'not to sink' and the boat pleaded with him 'not to let her die'.

The thought of drowning is still one that bothers me and I think it will until the day I die. I have, however, become desensitized to the fear. I can now meet the face of my watery fear and know if this is the way I die; the sea will earn my demise with a sweat.