

THE SILENT SERVICE REMEMBERS (Volume 1)

- by Charles Hood & Frank Hood

The background of the cover is a photograph of a submarine on the water at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and purple, with the sun low on the horizon. The submarine's conning tower and masts are visible, and their reflection is seen in the calm water. In the distance, a city skyline is silhouetted against the sky.

THE SILENT SERVICE REMEMBERS

— *Volume 1* —

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BOOK PREVIEW

Story entitled “Encountering (and Avoiding) Admiral Rickover” by Frank Morgan in The Silent Service Remembers (Vol. 1)

Our nation owes a considerable degree of thanks to Admiral Hyman Rickover. Without his untiring efforts, we would not have led the world in developing nuclear propulsion for naval vessels, most notably submarines. The stringent engineering principles and practices he pioneered continue unabated to this day. Admiral Rickover had committed to Congress that he would personally interview every officer candidate applying to the nuclear power program. These interviews were the stuff of legend, and everyone looked forward to them with considerable trepidation. There are very few people who look back on their personal interactions with Rickover with “undiluted pleasure”.

My interaction with him took place during my visit to Naval Reactors (NR) in Washington, D.C., which took place in February of my senior year of college. Three detailed interviews with NR staff members occupied the morning session, covering both technical topics as well as leadership issues. All those officer candidates awaiting their turn with the “Kindly Old Gentleman” were placed in an overheated room down the hall from his office. Officer “monitors” (prospective COs at NR for pre-command “charm school”) briefed us on where to go when we were called, and they emphasized that our answers to Rickover’s questions should be precise; that is, without any modifiers such as “about” or “perhaps”.

I was one of the last called that tense afternoon, and I hurriedly straightened my tie, which I had loosened in the hot room, on my way to the admiral’s office. Rickover’s first question was “How many hours a week do you study?” Remembering the stricture about precision, I answered “25 hours, Admiral”. His next question was, “What do you do in your spare time?” I answered that I spent a lot of time as rush chairman for my fraternity. Most of the remaining time was in a Q&A form that left little doubt that Rickover held a poor image of fraternities. As an example, one specific question he asked was, “Do you spend your time wiping the pledges’ asses?” He finally pushed me to assert my opinion that the practical experiences gained by serving as rush chairman for my fraternity were actually better leadership experiences than anything I had experienced in NROTC.

Rickover concluded with the same question he asked every officer candidate, as much as I have been able to ascertain over the years. “Are you planning to get married?” I was not at the time, so I replied, “No, sir!” At that, he ended our “conversation” by dismissively saying, “GET OUT!” I was then pulled across the hall by one of the PCOs, who proceeded to tell me everything I had done wrong during the interview—he had apparently been listening from the outer office.

I was chagrined, and the voice inside my head registered my immediate reaction: here-we-go destroyer duty. (Serving on a destroyer was my second choice after submarines.) As I was literally walking out of the building, I stopped to check out with a receptionist or secretary. She must have had a list with her, because when I told her my name, she said that I was “in”. I had been accepted. You could have knocked me over with a feather! What a strange but memorable experience that was. I don’t know how long the interview really lasted, but I still regard it as the longest five minutes of my life.

There were two other occasions later on when I passed on the opportunity of “renewing my acquaintance” with Rickover.

The first occurred relatively soon after my interview with the admiral. While at the prototype stage of my training, I learned he was to visit the site on a specific day. Fortunately, by that time I had qualified as EOOW and had earned the privilege of taking one day off during my shift’s seven-day cycle. As I left

the site that morning, I saw the site CO in the guard shack waiting for Rickover. My only thought was, “You poor SOB.”

On the other occasion, I learned that Admiral Rickover was scheduled to inspect the Boone during her shipyard overhaul. I had originally been scheduled as the Duty Officer for that date, but I was able to swap duty days with our Navigator, to whom I then owed a considerable debt of gratitude.

A funny yarn about Rickover made the rounds when I was in the Silent Service. I cannot substantiate the details, but it was a widely repeated tale about one of the legendary Rickover interviews. The story goes that Rickover was interviewing an officer candidate named Paul Tomb (a real person who entered the nuclear program in 1956 and eventually retired as a rear admiral). His last name “Tomb” rhymed with “bomb”. However, either by design or happenstance, Rickover kept pronouncing his name as “Toom”, like the burial vault.

The interview went something like this (insert generic questions):

- Adm. Rickover: How many hours a week do you study, Toom?
- Paul Tomb: That’s “Tom”, Admiral. (question then answered)
- Adm. Rickover: How do you spend your free time, Toom?
- Paul Tomb: That’s “Tom”, Admiral. (question then answered)

This song-and-dance went on for the entire interview, with Rickover apparently unable to correct himself. (Sounds a lot more like design than happenstance.) While Rickover continued to mispronounce the last name, the interviewee remained poised and politely corrected him each time before answering the question.

After concluding the interview, but before Tomb could leave the office, Rickover asked, “One final thing—when did you become interested in nuclear power?” Tomb responded, “I think it was when they dropped the atomic boom.” Nobody knows for certain if Rickover cracked a smile, but Tomb was obviously accepted.

Story continued on the next page. Please continue reading...

Story entitled "How Cold Is It?" by Jerry Pait in The Silent Service Remembers (Vol. 1)

January of 1966 was probably the coldest in memory. My boat was tied up in Connecticut on the Thames River at State Pier, outboard the Fulton. I was not qualified in submarines yet, so I was standing topside watches. At that time, there was only one person at a time topside on watch. When the long ballistic missile subs came along, two people stood topside at the same time, one forward and one aft. Regardless of the number, standing topside watch offered zero protection from the elements. The situation was very similar in all branches of the service when you stood guard duty outside. If you were fortunate, your guard post had a small watch shack to stand inside, to at least shield yourself from the wind. No such luxuries on a diesel boat like mine, though. You had best pay attention to the weather before you assumed the watch and dress appropriately.

My boat had spent four months that fall in the tropical warmth of the Caribbean, operating with surface ships, aircraft, UDT/SEAL teams, and other subs. Each weekend we'd pull into a different port. It was interesting bouncing around from island to island. On our way back to New London, CT, the cooks discovered we had a problem with the freezer. On a diesel boat, the route to the freezer was through the chill box or refrigerator. Access to the chill box was through a thick, insulated hatch in the mess hall deck. The hatch was located in the passageway through the mess deck, so safety chains had to be snapped into place before opening the hatch to keep crew members from falling in the hole. Some people were preoccupied and would have injured themselves.

It was determined before arrival in New London that two Army field food storage units would be placed topside: one freezer and one chill box. Upon arrival, the on board contents would be transferred to the units topside while repairs were made to our freezer. After these trips down south and especially around the holidays, maximum leave was granted for several weeks. Each day, only the duty section was present on board.

Winters can be brutal in Connecticut with winds howling down the river, heavy snow, and waves sending freezing spray into the air. The main purpose for a topside watch was to inspect mooring lines, check the ship's draft, and provide security; with security being at the top of the list. No one could come on board the boat without proper identification. On the nukes, you had to be on an access list and have the required identification. This particular duty day, the weather was as miserable as it could possibly be. I was assigned the 0400-0800 watch—the coldest part of the day. You actually relieved the watch at 0345 and you were then relieved at 0745. When I was awakened at 0300 for my watch, the below decks watch informed me it was 15° F with a 10-knot wind; in other words, a wind chill below 0° F. He told me to dress accordingly. Which meant that I wore heavy socks, arctic boots, and my working uniform, plus from the foul weather locker I put on heavy full-length winter bib-overalls, snow boots, and a very large full-length parka with a fur-lined hood and winter gloves. When fully dressed, you ended up looking like you had gotten carried away and had too much on.

I informed the below decks watch I was heading topside. Of course, the hatch was closed to keep heat inside the boat. I climbed up the ladder, opened the hatch, and climbed out on to the deck. Immediately, I knew I was going to freeze to death. I shut the hatch and turned to locate the poor soul who had stood the mid-watch (midnight-0400). I found him standing on the east side of the army chill box using it to shield him from the wind. He was shivering and said everything was okay and quiet; he had not seen a single person since he came on watch. We hurried through the watch turnover requirements, he signed out in the watch log and I signed in which officially meant I had the watch. He could not get below fast enough.

I made my first series of rounds checking mooring lines, draft, and the overall condition topside. If it snowed, I had a broom to keep the walking deck clear as best I could. At the end of my first rounds, I

returned to the chill box area and made a log entry concerning my rounds. Then began the deep freeze effect as cold slowly penetrated the layers of clothing one by one. Even sheltered from the direct wind, the subzero wind chill was swirling around the chill box and there was nothing I could do to avoid it. I tried walking around, jumping around, jogging around, slapping my arms around my body, anything to generate some heat but not enough to sweat. (Sweating is a ticket to certain death from hypothermia.) Only minutes into my four-hour stint, I knew it was going to be the worst possible watch in my entire Navy career. Those sunbaked adventures in the Caribbean seemed like distant memories.



Department head photo at SSC.

I made my second set of rounds topside and felt the cold down to my bones. That's when I told myself, this is stupid. I don't know why, but I opened the door to the chill box and right there was a thermometer indicating 40° F. You have got to be kidding me, I said. It was much warmer inside the refrigerator than it was outside! I quickly figured out how I was going to survive my watch. I moved a few things around inside the chill box, put a wood crate of cabbage on end, and sat down. From there,

with the chill box door cracked, I could see the aft deck and the brow (gangplank). Essentially, I had the same view I had when standing outside.

I hadn't been inside the chill box very long when I started to get hot. Hot! I flipped the fur-lined hood off, unzipped my parka, and took my gloves off. Now you're talking. I was comfortable sitting my watch, and I reached over, pulled an apple out of another crate, and started eating. Improvisation is a handy thing—another skill honed during my years on the boats.

When it was time to make rounds, I zipped up my parka, put my hood back up, and donned my gloves. Then I left the warmth of the chill box to brave the elements. What had begun as an experiment in freezing a human turned out to be a very comfortable watch and one of my favorite stories to tell for many years. All it took was a little ingenuity and bending the rules just a wee bit. You know it is cold when you stand a watch inside a refrigerator to stay warm.

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