

THE SILENT SERVICE REMEMBERS (Volume 2)

- by Charles Hood & Frank Hood

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— *Volume 2* —



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BOOK PREVIEW

Story by Mario J. Bagaglio, Jr. in *The Silent Service Speaks* (Vol. 2)

It was the summer of 1983. I was the executive officer (XO) on the USS Seahorse (SSN-669), a 637-class fast-attack submarine. We had been making preparations for several months for a Special Ops mission we would soon be undertaking.

I knew we had a new corpsman coming who would arrive within weeks, not months, of our departure. When he, a second class corpsman ("Doc"), showed up on the Seahorse, I felt a little bit of apprehension. I had not seen a second class (less experienced) corpsman on any of the previous four boats on which I had served, so you could understand my concern. Regardless, the old Navy rule is that you deploy with the crew that you have and be as prepared as you can be for the unknown.

I should emphasize that Doc didn't give me any particular reason to think that he couldn't handle his assignment. My initial reaction was simply based on "gut feel" and what I had seen previously. We established a good working relationship and "took in all lines" as we departed Charleston.

Now fast-forward about six or seven weeks. The 'Horse is doing what she has been sent to do, and we are in a place where there aren't "any friendlies around". There's a knock on my stateroom door and in comes Doc with the news that one of our junior cooks is experiencing pain in his lower right abdomen. Doc says he's watching him to see if the pain increases. A day later the pain is getting worse, not better. Doc thinks we have a case of appendicitis brewing and requests permission to administer antibiotics. He also asks if he might set up a special bunk for the ailing cook in the Torpedo Room.

Now normally, this request would not be a problem, but when you are on a mission, the "extra" specialists you have embarked turn the Torpedo Room into their berthing area on a 637. I didn't deny Doc's request, but I was skeptical that he could make it work. Somehow, though, Doc worked with the team to make provisions for not only the sick cook but also for himself to sleep next to his patient in the Torpedo Room. And, for the next 10 days with the exception of taking short breaks, Doc stayed at the cook's side 24/7. I was impressed to see his level of devotion to duty.

When he did take a short break, Doc had trained a half-dozen or so of the crew how to monitor the cook's status and administer to his needs. Doc kept the commanding officer (CO) and me fully informed as to the cook's state of health. Over that ten-day period, any misgivings I may have had at the outset of our relationship were set aside. I came to realize what a "gem of a Corpsman" we had in Doc. He was ever professional and "all business", fully aware of the boat's mission and not afraid to tell the CO and me what was happening. He told it like it was, not what he may have thought we wanted to hear (that all was well).

During that stretch, there were a few times when the cook's condition was "touch and go"; we were prepared to abort our mission if Doc came to us with the opinion that the cook's worsening condition warranted medical evacuation. In our world, the CO and XO counted on the Doc's competence; it was outside our bailiwick, and we did not question his judgment in circumstances like these.

Fortunately, the story ended well. Thanks to the Doc, the cook recovered without the need for emergent efforts. When we got in a position where we could communicate, we passed the cook's saga on to COMSUBLANT (CSL) with the request that the cook be dropped off in Holy Loch and sent back to Charleston for a non-emergent appendectomy. CSL agreed. We pulled in to Holy Loch, dropped off the cook, and headed off for a couple of port calls in Europe before we returned to Charleston.

When we pulled into Charleston, the cook was waiting for us on the pier. I asked him how the appendectomy had gone, to which he responded, "XO, they said I didn't need one since Doc took care of me on the boat!" I don't remember exactly what my response was, but it was one of amazement that I'm certain is not suitable for print. Regardless of the outcome with the medical folks in Charleston, the CO, Chief of the Boat (COB) and I had the opportunity to observe Doc "under fire". We all agreed that he did an exceptional job.

About 18 months later, the Seahorse was tabbed to make another Special Ops mission with a new CO. I stayed on as XO, and I assured the new skipper that he need not worry about Doc only being an HM2. As fate would have it, the new skipper took the helm with a history of kidney stones. Regardless, he had been granted permission to remain in the Submarine Force. Once he became aware of this fact, Doc approached the CO to explain what actions he would take should the CO suffer another kidney stone episode while at sea. Such considerations were particularly important since the pain of a kidney stone (and the pain medicines used to treat it) might potentially impair the skipper's ability to do his job. As XO, I was prepared to step in should that contingency arise, but to our relief the mission went off smoothly with no kidney stone attacks or other medical emergencies.

Story by George Goodwin entitled "Joe Staszewski" in The Silent Service Speaks (Vol. 2)

Joe Staszewski ("Ski") was a shipmate. In fact, he was more than a shipmate, he was a close friend and we often went ashore together during those few years we were aboard USS Sirago (SS-485). Our most memorable liberties were in Philadelphia during a shipyard overhaul. We were both underage for bars, but Joe never got carded and I was always given the hairy eyeball. Just the same we both got served, mostly because we were in uniform and we didn't start fights or argue, except with each other.

I'm thinking of Joe this morning because whenever I cook something for myself to eat, I make it as much a work of art as I can. Joe would appreciate this. Joe was a healthy, rugged, Polish kid from Brooklyn, and he loved two things: being in the Navy and eating.

Joe elevated the simple act of eating to an artful experience—not only for himself, but for those of us witnessing him at chow time, filling his mouth with food and chewing with such vigor and enjoyment. During mealtime, Joe would not look at anyone in particular. No, he would attack his plate with the fork, shove the food into his mouth, and then begin masticating magnificently while staring off into a space filled with his private movies. He may have been reliving childhood moments in Brooklyn or analyzing a circuit in the sonar equipment that was his to maintain. Whatever it was that Joe was envisioning, his mouth was doing a joyful dance while the rest of us sat transfixed. Joe was our entertainment system in the tiny mess hall of the Sirago.

I remember a scene from those days. Woody, our best cook, was watching Joe eat from inside the galley. Woody was grilling steaks to order and mashing potatoes to keep up with demands, all the while watching Joe out of the corner of his eye chewing rapturously on a large steak. Woody was an engineman by training, but he was still our best cook. He was raised in Worcester, Massachusetts, where his family owned a restaurant. Woody had learned his culinary skills while growing up there, and although he wasn't the easiest shipmate to get along with, we were lucky to have him aboard.

Woody continued grilling steaks and mashing potatoes, but his true attention lay upon Joe eating his steak with great relish. Joe was doing the "big jaws" mouth dance and looking happy as he watched mind-movies off in the ether. At the time, I was working my 90-day stint as mess cook, so while the crew ate, I would stand with my arms folded and my back to the deep sinks, just waiting for one of them to ask for something. The crew was crowded around two tables in the small room, and they weren't able to get up freely to retrieve whatever it was they wanted. Instead, they just shouted out what they

needed to the mess cook. It was my job to fetch extra portions, or cups of coffee, or juice. I was their gofer.

As his tablemates looked on with amusement, Joe remained oblivious as he kept swallowing and sawing away on his plate of steak and potatoes. After Woody had stolen several glimpses of the most joyful submarine sailor in the room, he stepped out of the galley and approached Joe at his table. Woody wiped his hands on the apron stretched around his belly and spent a few moments just staring at Joe with amazement. Slowly, a huge grin slid across his lips.

Woody spoke. "Ski?" Joe looked up and focused on Woody.

"Yeah?" replied Joe.

"Ski, I have never seen anyone enjoy eating as much as you. It is a great pleasure you bring me. I love watching you eat. You look like you're really enjoying yourself. You get your plate and you put your food on it with such care and then you begin devouring it with such energy. You build a work of art and then you literally take it in with complete delight."

Woody was not usually in such a nice mood. He was usually grouchy, complaining and cussing about having to feed the crew, but at that particular moment, it was a distinct pleasure for me to see Woody happy and being nice for a change. Joe, too, was visibly pleased to hear Woody's rare purring—and rare it truly was. Joe sawed off another chunk of steak with his knife and fork and stuffed it into his mouth. The great jaw dance returned.

During that brief period after Woody had spoken so kindly, while Joe was pounding the next bite, I thought it might be an opportune moment to ask Woody for a personal favor. The atmosphere in the mess hall at that moment, I thought, was clearly conducive to such acts of good will. So, I turned to Woody to ask for an extra hour off at the end of my mess cook rotation that evening.

Before I could get all the words out, though, Woody yelled over his shoulder, "Shut the f*** up, Goodwin."

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