

THREE CHOSEN EXCERPTS FROM SSR3:

Keith Windham MTCM(SS)



What was leadership like on your four subs? Without naming names, can you describe the key qualities of a good skipper, and while you're at it, the key qualities of a lousy skipper?

Leadership was better than average because the quality of people chosen to serve in the Submarine Force was high. I know it sounds crass to say that but the testing to even be considered for subs is hard. And in general, there's a whole lot more schooling that must be passed.

But to answer your question about what makes a good submarine commander, that's pretty easy. *A good skipper is one who can make a damn decision and not leave you guessing.*

I got fed up with any skipper (or anyone else in a leadership role on a sub) who would make no decision on a course of action. They were the ones who tried to not be culpable if anything went wrong. These guys got in, but they didn't last in the submarine service. The reason is simple: submarines are not like most other ships because the skipper is not in a position to confer with outside sources most of the time before making a decision.

Another red flag was any officer, including the skipper, who did not trust or listen to men that worked under him when a problem arose. Many of these men had vast experience in their areas of expertise and knew the issue or had seen the issue before. Their input regarding corrective action was essential. The best skippers leaned on such experience for advice on what to do next. The bad ones didn't listen to the enlisted men's recommendations.

In my considerable experience, I learned that a skipper who developed a good relationship with the inhabitants of the CPO quarters always had a successful tour. (The CPO quarters is the berthing area assigned to the chief petty officers, who in turn are the senior enlisted men on the boat.) The adage, “Been there, done that”, is not just a saying; it is a readily available brain trust that a savvy CO can and should tap into for making informed decisions. One of the key mantras beaten into any chief is, “A problem reported to the CO is followed immediately in the same breath by a recommended solution.” In other words, it’s not enough to recognize and report a problem, you must provide possible solutions, too. A good line of communication between the CO and the CPO Quarters is vital in providing actionable recommendations. Skippers who disregard the chiefs and their collective knowledge and expertise do so at their own peril. And it will not be a happy tour of duty. I was lucky and only had one truly bad CO. He was relieved for cause.

When you were preparing to head out on your next patrol of 60 or more days, was the main emotion you felt one of excitement or dread?

As silly as it may sound, there was no dreading of the patrol...but for the three-week refit, yes, there was. A lot.

My first four patrols were made as a second class petty officer. I had to work my tail off during those refit periods, but I wasn’t involved in any planning. Plus, during those initial refits, the whole thing was still a novelty and a new experience for me. Dreading the deployment that followed the refits did not entrench itself.

Regarding later patrols, I had advanced to a leadership position by then, and so I had to help with planning during the refit periods to get the boat ready for the patrols. And for me, that was the most dreaded part. A refit not planned or coordinated correctly was sure to end up with you standing in front of brass demanding explanations. These were people you had no wish to have a conversation with. Patrol time was a relief compared with refit. It was something I looked forward to as a break from the hectic time during refit.

What do you miss most about your submarine service? What do you miss the LEAST?

The people are what I miss the most. The quality of the people that make it to a boat and qualify to remain onboard are consistently of the highest caliber. This is no small feat. It’s one thing to pass through the hoops at the beginning, but it’s quite another to become qualified. By earning your dolphins and having the distinction of putting those two letters, “(SS)”, after your name, it means that you had to learn what everything did on your boat. And I mean *everything*. Every system, every part, every pipe and line. What the equipment does, how to operate it, how it gets its power—be it electrical, pneumatic, or hydraulic—and how to shut it off correctly. What’s the backup when the equipment fails. What does each watchstander perform during his duty (you may be tapped to stand it). The list is nearly endless.

Bottom line, the entire submarine must be mastered in detail. Only by doing that and proving it through rigorous written and oral testing does a submariner get pinned with the dolphins insignia and earn the distinction of being Qualified in Submarines. Only the motivated submariner will ever have a chance to earn his dolphins, therefore, only highly motivated people will remain. That is how a submarine crew becomes so cohesive.

What do I miss the least? Dealing with people who don’t understand the mission of an SSBN (boomer). We are the last line of deterrence to an aggressor. When we go “Alert”, the

mission is to both remain undetected and to do nothing that might compromise that secrecy.

I had the privilege to serve both during and after the Cold War. A big difference between the two was how the boat was operated. During the Cold War, noisy evolutions were held to a minimum. Drills happened once a week, and the various casualties (fire, flood, etc.) were assigned to specific training groups. After the Cold War, drills occurred daily from 0800 to 1600, and every section participated in all casualties. Seemed we became a training platform for the most part.

Can you put your finger on what it is that keeps guys of all backgrounds and personalities working together as a well-oiled machine on a nuclear submarine?

You learn quickly that you must rely on each other to stay alive. When you go to sleep on a submarine, you are depending on someone else to keep you safe. Realization sets in quickly that you are living inside an oversized pipe that sinks, and the cooperation of 180 people to work together as a team is understood as vital to coming home alive.

Robert Porterfield CWO4



Monday Morning at Pier Twenty-two

Monday mornings at the submarine pier in Norfolk were a busy time.

On a typical day, tied up starboard side to, with its bow pointed toward the shore, was the tender USS *Orion* (AS-18). Outboard of it would be two or three boats abreast. On the opposite side of the pier, two clusters of boats were tied up, one forward of the other, with

two to four boats in a cluster. At the head of the pier, a collection of vehicles—some Navy, some civilian—provided services to the submarine community. Among these would be Albano Cleaners, often with a line of sailors dropping off or picking up laundry and dry cleaning. On the pier, a truck from Nolde's Bakery could often be found off-loading trays of fresh bread loaves for the boats—a product often referred to as “moldy Nolde” by the irreverent submariners.

Before colors, a steady stream of “brown baggers” (married personnel who lived ashore) flowed onto the pier from the nearby parking lots. On those boats preparing to get underway, the personnel assigned duties topside (line handlers, anchor detail) accumulated in clutches, dungaree- and khaki-clad, and sporting the ever-present yellow inflatable life jackets (deflated). A continuous flow of people moving up and down the pier could be seen. These included those traveling between the boats and the tender, and to and from each of these to the shore. Among these were mess cooks from the boats carrying garbage cans over to the dumpsters provided for their use; one was for garbage (food waste), while the other was for everything else (trash). After dumping the garbage, the mess cooks would clean the garbage cans from a steam connection provided on the pier for that purpose. The dominant sound at the bustling pier was the roar of the diesels on boats preparing to get underway or those putting in a battery charge. This background noise was interrupted from time to time by the shrilling of the bosun's pipe aboard *Orion*, followed by some arcane announcement such as, “Sweepers! Sweepers! Man your brooms. Give her a clean sweep down fore and aft. Clamp down all weather decks. Empty trash and garbage on the pier. Sweepers! Sweepers!”

Occasionally punctuating the symphony of the diesels would be a loud POP, followed by a shattering roar that would stop in a few seconds as the safety valve aboard a destroyer at the adjacent pier lifted and then reseated. From time to time, orders could be heard from the bridge of a boat getting underway: “Single up all lines!” “Take in the brow!” “Take in four!” “Heave around on one!” “Vast heaving!” “Rudder amidships!” “Take in all lines!” “All back one-third!” “Shift colors!” At the end of this string of orders, the blare of the horn aboard the departing boat would drown out other noises as she gathered sternway toward the channel.

As the time for colors approached, PREP, a yellow pennant with a green stripe along its horizontal axis, would appear at the tender's yard and, as if by magic, a man would appear at the jackstaff on each boat's foredeck and another at the flagstaff aft. Halyards would be freed from their cleats and the flags bent to them, ready for hoisting. At precisely 0800, a cacophony of ship's whistles and bosun's pipes sounded, and, as one, the jacks and ensigns climbed to the top of their staffs. At this time, all activity on the pier, on the boats, and on the shore ceased as all hands stopped in their tracks, wheeled to face the national ensign, came to attention, and saluted. At the end of colors, the pipes and whistles sounded once more, and the stop-frame picture once again began to roll. On some mornings, a band was present to play the national anthem during colors.

Aboard most of the boats, weather permitting, the crew would gather topside aft of the sail for muster. This was usually presided over by the XO with all personnel, save the captain, present. All hands were drawn up by divisions on the port side deck, facing starboard. The chiefs and officers would line up on the starboard side facing port. Once all hands had been accounted for the XO would have everyone “Gather 'round!” so they could hear better.

This was the time when “the word” was passed regarding activities planned for that day, any future events such as inspections or underway periods, and other pertinent news or information that required dissemination. Occasionally the progress of a crew member in achieving some career milestone would be announced. Typical of these announcements would be something like this: “Congratulations are in order for Petty Officer Thompson who has just earned his dolphins. I’m sure you will want to welcome him as a qualified submariner in our traditional manner.”

At this point, the crew would be dismissed to “commence ship’s work” while the XO would head for the wardroom. On those days when someone was to be congratulated “in the traditional manner”, the XO would beat a hasty retreat down the after battery hatch. The XO was thoroughly familiar with how Petty Officer Thompson would be “congratulated” and didn’t want to inadvertently become part of the festivities. The “traditional manner” always involved the honoree being heaved over the side of the boat. This would be quickly followed by one or more other shipmates also going over the side while pulling the honoree back aboard. Such celebratory occasions frequently deteriorated to the equivalent of a feeding frenzy, as most of those not quick or lucky enough to find an open hatch were sent overboard.

On some days, loading stores (bringing on groceries) became the order of the day for a boat. On these occasions, all hands would be pressed into service with stores being picked up from the tender or a truck on the pier and carried aboard. The line of men passing stores closely resembled an ant colony busy carrying crumbs from a morsel of bread to their nest. The stores loading line had to negotiate several obstacles. The first and most formidable of these was the brow, a long narrow gangplank, which spanned the gulf between the boat and the pier or between two boats. This was normally not too difficult for the practiced sailor but became more of a challenge when one was carrying large, heavy boxes of stores. The weight distribution was not what one was accustomed to, and often the box itself obstructed the view of where one was placing one’s foot. Also, using both hands to carry a box precluded the use of the brow’s lifeline for stability.

It was not unusual, then, for a member of the loading party to fail to complete this segment of the trip successfully. When this occurred, the unfortunate individual and his load made a big splash about eight feet below and had to be fished out of the drink. The other big obstacle was in maneuvering any load past the sail. It was situated between the point where the brow ended on the fore deck and the after battery hatch located on the after deck, where most of the stores were struck below. The deck space alongside the sail was quite narrow (a few inches at best), and since both hands often were used to carry the stores, the handrail attached to the side of the sail was of no use. Much like a cliffside trail, there were no lifelines on the outboard side to catch one’s fall. Once again, failure to negotiate this challenge was marked by an unexpected swim and another box of stores lost. An added bonus of such a slip was the opportunity to bounce off the tank tops (the tops of the saddle tanks that surrounded the pressure hull) before hitting the water.

The boats of SUBRON 6 (Sub Squadron 6) at this time consisted of an amalgamation of older fleet boats, fleet snorkels, or some manner of GUPPY boats, all based on the venerable World War II fleet-type submarine. The fleet snorkels, like *Carp*, were recognized by their sails and raked bows. Boats not having undergone the snorkel conversion still retained the conning tower fairwater and exposed periscope shears with which they helped to end the war in the Pacific. The GUPPYs sported narrow, streamlined, snub bows and a sail.

Both EB and Portsmouth boats were present, as was one Manitowoc boat, USS *Redfin* (AGSS-272). The EB and Portsmouth boats were easily distinguishable due to their sail designs, the inclusion of limber holes along the sides of their superstructures, and the placement of their anchors. When I joined her, *Carp* was distinctive within the EB clan for her sail which had no viewports. (This changed in mid-1961 when viewports were installed.)

Redfin was notable for her longer length and, most conspicuously, for her unusual bridge design. *Redfin's* sail was considerably longer than those on other boats. This was due to her conversion years before to a radar picket submarine (SSR). Her bridge was also longer than normal and was fitted with wings on either side. It appeared that half her crew could fit on the bridge at one time. It made for a nice gathering place. This large bridge was considerably less than desirable in heavy weather since the OOD was quite exposed. This was hammered home when her OOD was lost overboard in heavy seas in 1961, as previously mentioned.

Each boat had a topside watch. This individual had a watch station on deck near where the brow came aboard, usually forward of the sail. His responsibilities included controlling access to the boat, checking the mooring lines, checking the draft marks, maintaining the deck log, and announcing over the 1MC (PA system) the arrival and departure of the captain and other august naval personages.

There were several reasons for regularly checking the draft marks, the numerals painted in a vertical column on a ship indicating the depth of its keel below the waterline (draft), and when compared with previous readings, its trim. Changes might indicate an unexpected alteration in the boat's displacement caused, for example, by a leaking main ballast tank vent or a loss of fuel oil. They also could indicate changes caused by consumption or replenishment of fuel oil or other commodities. For example, when taking on fuel, the boat's draft would be expected to decrease because fuel oil is lighter than the water it displaces in the fuel oil tanks. All this information provides a check on the calculations performed to assure that the boat's fore and aft stability was maintained when submerged.

The captain was identified by the boat under his command, not his name; for example, on our boat, the topside watch would announce, "Carp, Carp, arriving!" or "Carp, Carp, departing!" The topside watch was recognizable, if by no other means, by the duty belt and holster he sported. The holster held a loaded, standard-issue, Colt .45 caliber, semi-automatic pistol (Colt Model 1911). For communications, the topside watch had a portable communication center, consisting of a tie into the boat's phone system and a 1MC microphone.

Each boat was tied up with four 1½-inch nylon mooring lines. These lines were numbered one through four with one being the most forward line and number four being the stern line. Lines two and three were spring lines. Line two ran aft from forward of the sail aft, and line three ran forward from aft of the sail; the two lines crossed between the boat and the pier. The lines had an eye splice in each end that could fit over the bollards on the pier. Once a boat had been tied up and everything secured, the lines were "doubled up" by taking a bight of line about the bollard on the pier and securing it aboard. Thus, each boat had four sets of three lines each to the pier (if the boat was alongside the pier or to the adjacent boat if it was outboard of another boat). A large cable, known as a night rider, was carried from the bow of the outboard boat in a nest of boats well forward to the pier.

Herman “Dutch” Prager



You made it aboard! Tell me about your first war patrol.

We left Pearl on 12 October 1944 for the *Kingfish's* ninth war patrol. The patrol got off to a rocky start. Shortly after we left, there was a gunshot accident on board. Our firearms were stored in a gun locker below the mess hall. It was accessed by a hatch on the port side. That's where we kept the pistols, rifles, and ammo for our 5-inch and 40 mm deck guns. Well, one of the chief gunner's mates responsible for maintaining this inventory had gone down to the locker to retrieve a .45 pistol. He and a couple of fellow gunner's mates were sitting at one of the benches in the mess hall cleaning the guns when the chief's .45 accidentally went off. The chief blew off the tip of one of his fingers, but the bullet also passed through the arm of another fellow at the next bench over before ricocheting off the port bulkhead and embedding itself in the same guy's back. Neither injury seemed life-threatening, but the captain ordered All Ahead Flank to rush the two men to Midway for medical transfer. I never saw either of those guys again.

I have to say, this incident bothered me especially since it was the first day of my first patrol. I was thinking, "What the hell did I get myself into?" It was especially bad that the guy who discharged the weapon was the same person who was supposed to be in charge of safekeeping.



Here we are at the submarine rest camp in Guam after the tenth patrol of the Kingfish in December 1944. We called the place "Camp Dengue" because there was an outbreak of dengue fever in Guam during the war. I'm in the left upper center of the photo with a dot drawn on my chest. Our captain is seated in the center of the front row, fourth from left.

You helped build Camp Myrna in the Marshalls, but what can you tell me about the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Honolulu, where those submariners maintaining home base in Pearl Harbor got to enjoy the finest R&R that the Navy could provide?

(Laughs) Yes, Myrna Island was no Royal Hawaiian! I got to experience that treatment at the Royal Hawaiian between the eleventh and twelfth war patrols in April 1945. We had a wonderful time there. One of the most interesting things about it was that it allowed us to see "civilians", you know, just regular people. We hadn't been around other Americans outside the service for an eternity. Before then, we had come back to Guam, where there weren't any people but other service members.

We spent a good two weeks at the Royal Hawaiian. We had real beds with actual bed sheets! Most of us had rooms with balconies that overlooked the beach at Waikiki. I remember looking up and seeing guys drying their washed skivvies (underwear) on the balcony

railings! We had the beach to ourselves, and they made sure that we had all the beer we cared to drink. The food was great, and we all recharged our batteries. The funny thing was, by the end of the two weeks of R&R at the Royal Hawaiian, we were eager to return to our boat and get back to the fight.

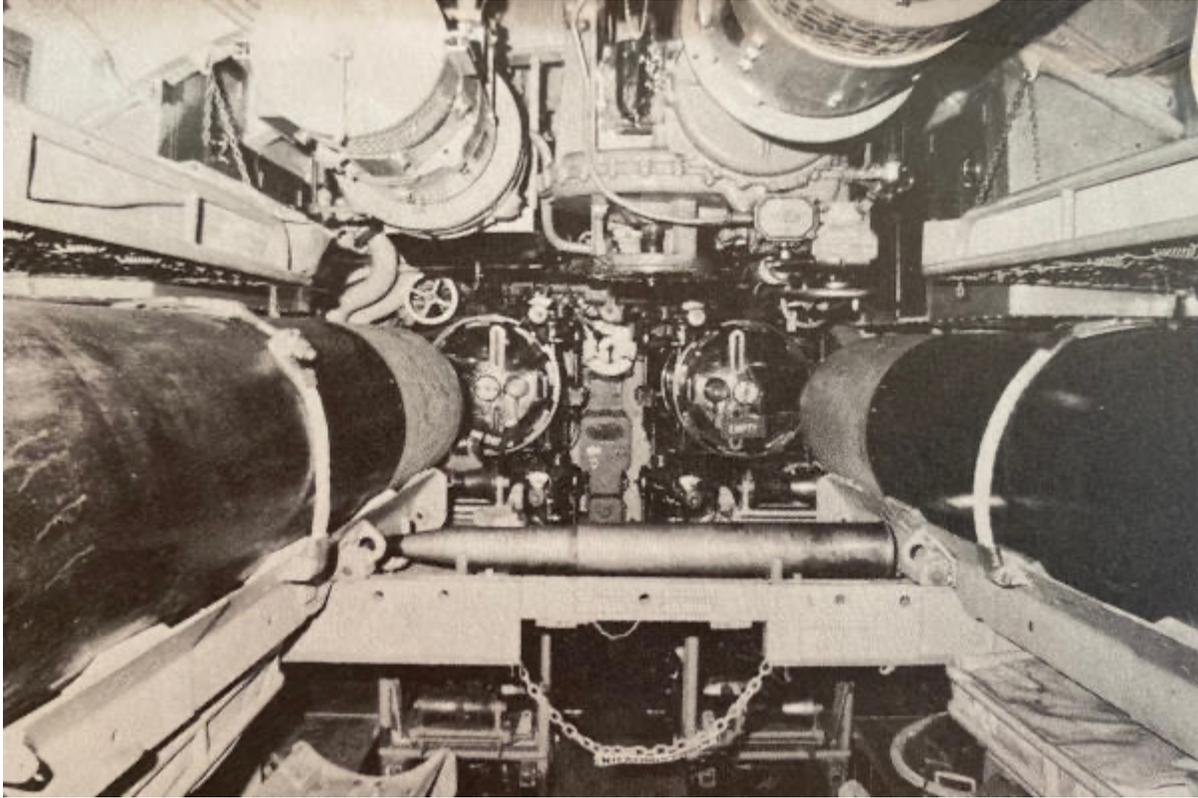


The 1944 Kingfish holiday greeting card. Quite a piece of art!

Tell me about the topside watch at night, when you were on the surface making an attack or recharging the ship's batteries. That must have been a very important position requiring excellent night vision to look for any enemy contacts.

Oh yeah, that was an important post, but I don't remember only certain people manning that post. I think everyone had to have good vision anyway to be chosen as a submariner. But yes, I remember the night during my first war patrol when the starboard lookout saved our boat. His name was John Almqvist.

John was a great guy. He's gone now, but that night—07 November 1944—he really made a difference. We were making an attack when John spotted the glowing wake of three torpedoes in the water coming straight for us. He yelled to the OOD (Officer of the Deck), "Three torpedoes incoming!" The OOD shouted, "Full Left Rudder! All Ahead Flank!" We maneuvered just in time as the torpedoes passed to our starboard side. We were lucky that John could make out the faint phosphorescence of the torpedoes as they barreled along the surface.



Forward torpedo room of the Kingfish. Note four-inch shell on display in center.

Tell me about the circumstances surrounding the sinking of the Japanese freighter *Ikutagawa Maru* during your first war patrol.

Yes, that was my first experience participating in a successful sinking. It happened on 24 October 1944 near the Bonin Islands, about halfway between Tokyo and Guam. Naturally, we were overjoyed when our teamwork yielded a big hit like that. But after we sank that ship, I can't say we were overjoyed to endure 24 depth charges!

After a torpedo strike, the normal procedure was to go deep to avoid the Japanese escorts and destroyers that would be certain to come looking for us. That night was my first experience with depth charges. Fortunately, they were still setting off their depth charges too shallow. They all exploded above us, but the concussion wave was tremendous. Every time one of them went off, the whole boat would shake. Light bulbs would break, and valves would start leaking. Believe me, it was no picnic to sit there and wait out a depth charge attack, not knowing if the next one was going to blow us all to smithereens.

The attack lasted about two hours while we were on silent running—all non-vital equipment off—including the air-conditioning and fan. It got hot as hell down there while we waited it out. The whole thing sure scared the hell out of me, I'll tell you that. The best analogy I can give you for what it felt like is this. Pretend you're inside a 55-gallon metal drum while someone is standing on the outside beating it with a sledgehammer over and over again.

I still can hear the "click-click" sound of a depth charge trigger being activated as it dropped into the ocean above us. Then it was just a matter of waiting for the deafening explosion

that followed, shaking our boat like a snow globe and putting everyone on edge. In short, I didn't like it.

Of course, our advantage disappeared when that congressman from Kentucky, I won't even say his name, decided to tell the world that the Japs weren't setting their depth charges to explode deep enough. I know for a fact that his running his mouth caused at least eight of our boats to be sunk.