Names and Faces D3
Entertainment D6-8
TV Tonight D7

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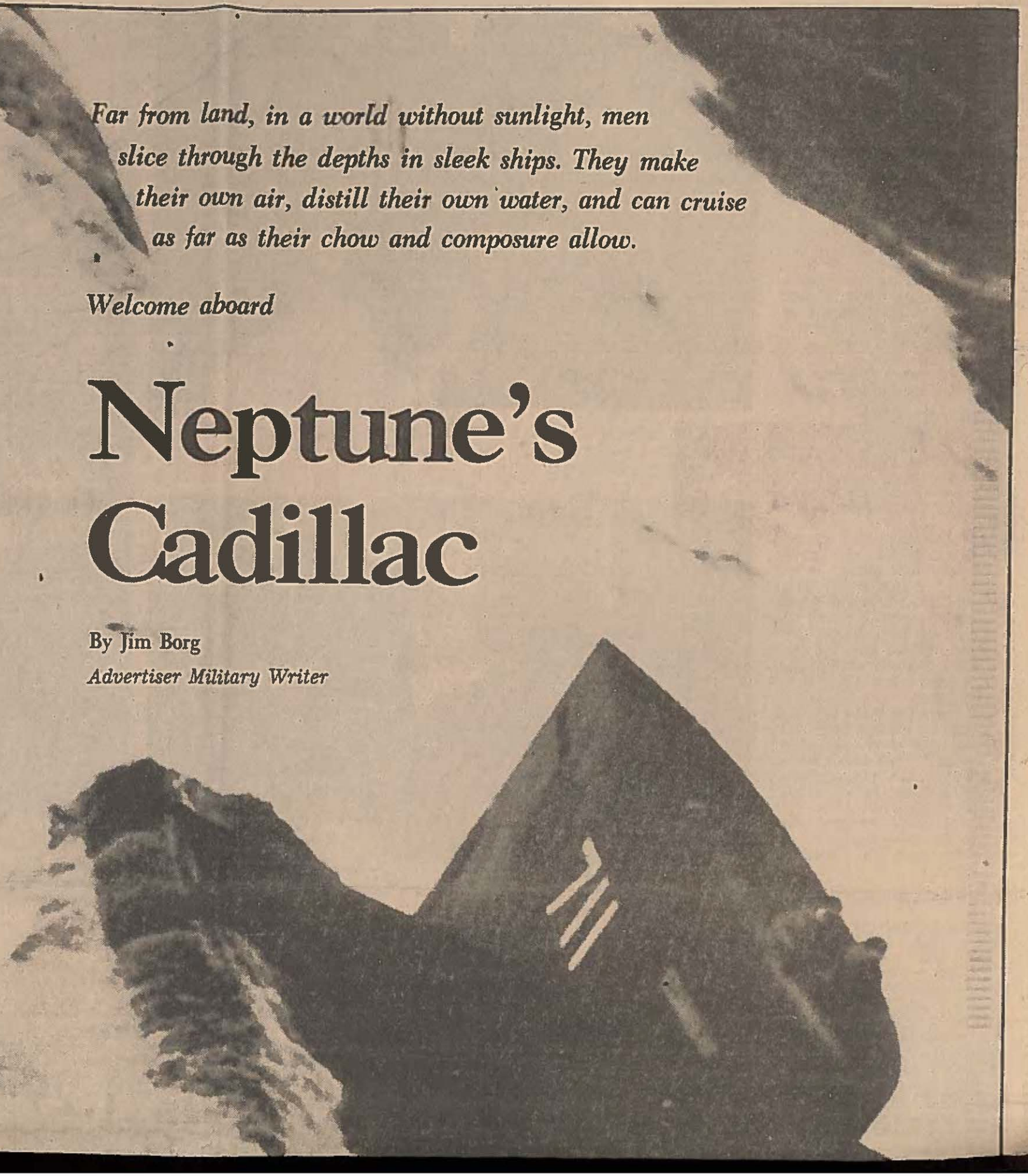

Far from land, in a world without sunlight, men slice through the depths in sleek ships. They make their own air, distill their own water, and can cruise as far as their chow and composure allow.

Welcome aboard

Neptune's Cadillac

By Jim Borg
Advertiser Military Writer

Editor's note: The Navy has reviewed this report for classified data.

Coutts kept his cool until they slit his teddy bear's throat.

There it was, stuffing showing and everything, so it's hard to blame the guy for allowing some measure of annoyance to cross his normally placid features. And if a four-letter word or two passed his lips, why, it's understandable.

In the submarine service, they call it "pinging," similar to when sonar locks onto the enemy. Among undersea sailors, pinging means you finally got a guy where it hurts.

Blowing sanitary

By and large, a submariner is as gracious as the next guy. But it takes a special breed to handle the artificial environment.

For that and other reasons, those who earn their dolphins, comparable to an aviator's wings, consider themselves the Navy's elite. And as with any competitive class, they are continually testing themselves and one another. By prank and prod, they search for signs of weakness.

Slander washes off a typical submariner like water off a walrus, but occasionally a guy gets peeved and pulls down more pings.

The ones who really come unglued are scrubbed, of course, consigned to civilian life or "dirtball" duty aboard destroyers or other surface ships. But it's par for a little squirreli-

under the waves.

One crewman recalled the time he and a colleague donned dark glasses in the manner of The Blues Brothers, popularized by Dan Aykroyd and John Belushi.

The four launch tubes in the torpedo room were empty as the two sat at the firing panel enjoying their impersonation, which ruled out any chance of sinking a carrier or causing other such embarrassments, which explains the captain's lax reaction as he walked around the corner.

"What are you two doing?"

"We're on a mission from God."

"Well, I'm glad you're on some kind of mission," he said and walked away.

Sailors new to subs usually are gullible

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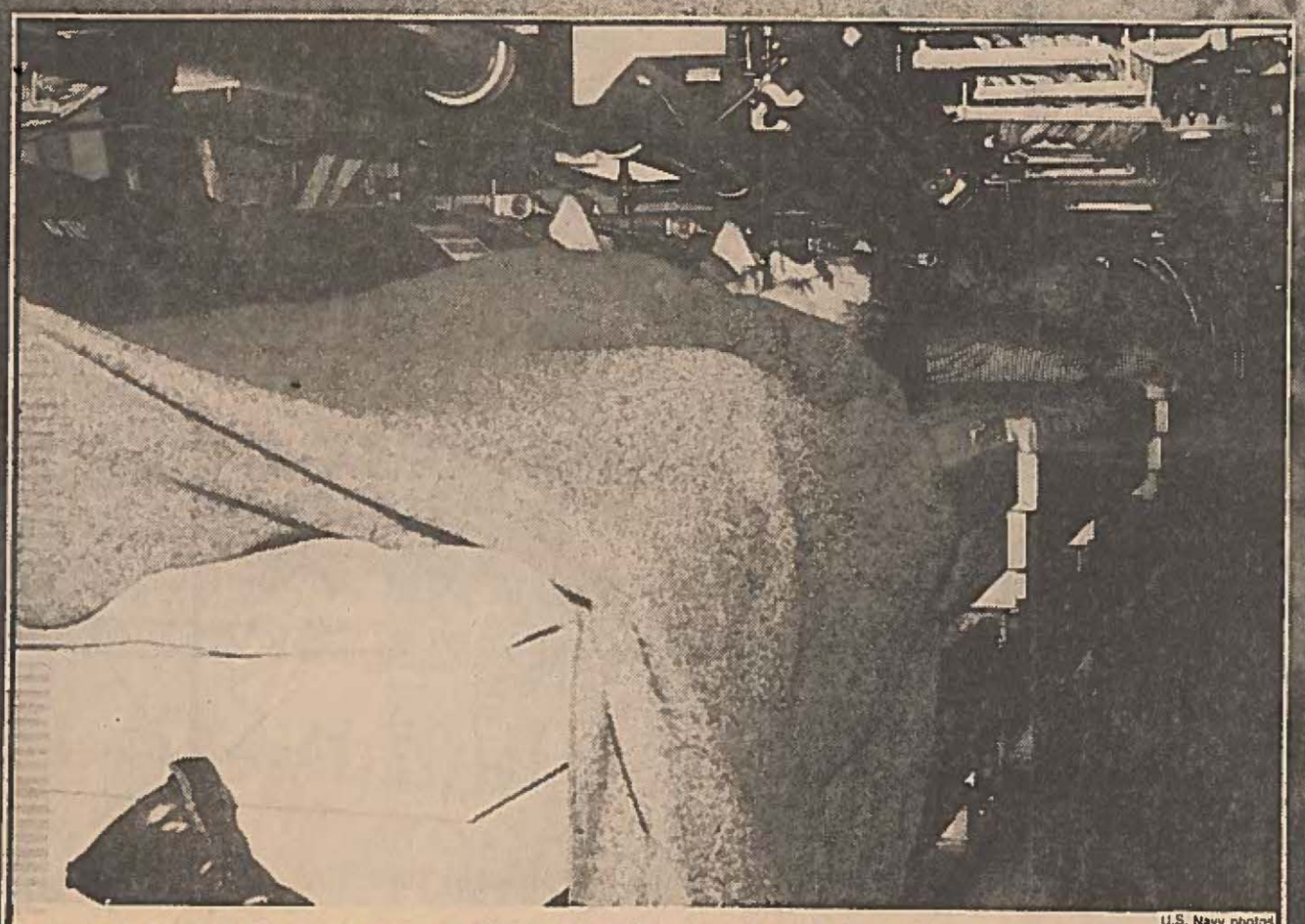

U.S. Navy photos

A crewman sleeps in the torpedo room of the USS San Francisco. At right, the sub at surface cruising speed.

Neptune's Cadillac: aboard hunter-killer submarine

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nough to accept the infamous mail buoy" assignment. It's obvious when you think about it that etters and cookies from Ma would ot be dropped off at buoys on the pen ocean, but eager crewmen ave swallowed that one for years.

"We've actually had youngsters ressed in foul weather gear and ats ready to go up the ladder," huckled one old-timer, age 21 or 2.

By far the cruelest stroke is to emove the warning sign on the ead when the ship is "blowing anitary," leaving the next custom- r eligible for the Golden Flapper ward. As the flush handle de- cends, compressed air intended to last the bilge brew overboard in- tead explodes skyward, bathing he victim in brown effluvium. But hat hasn't happened in a while.

A ransom note

Coutts is Doug Coutts, a young sonar technician from just outside Anaheim, Calif.

The bear was a present from a girlfriend. At first he kept it on his bunk.

After the terrorist attack, he locked it up in his sea-locker in the barracks at Pearl Harbor. It was easy enough to sew up the bear's neck, and Coutts allowed as how he wouldn't have minded, except that it was a present from this girl."

Another crewman said, "He let it show that it bothered him and that's when his bear was kidnapped." Ping, ping.

When his locker was rifled, bear abducted and a ransom note received, Coutts broke cover and reported it to the chief of the boat, who put out the word that the bear was to be released unharmed. It was, and the matter dropped, except that weeks afterwards the men were still talking about it, like it was the funniest thing that's happened for a long time.

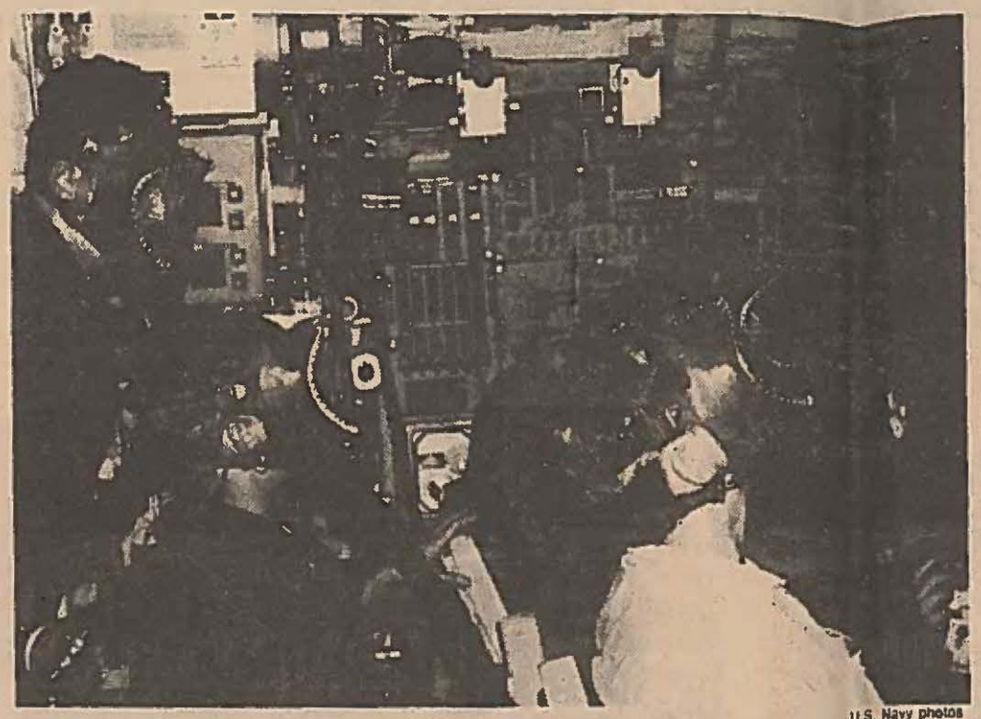
Nuclear speedsters

The world of modern submarines is one of heavy responsibility and buoyant humor. Life revolves around high technology and relentless repetition, meager exercise and interrupted sleep, big meals and little privacy.

Sub duty demands the highest standards of the Navy. The training is great, the pay good and it's an adventure, just like the recruiting ads say.

But unlike crossing the prairies in a Conestoga or hiking Haleakala, it is not an adventure in the healthy tradition of the great outdoors.

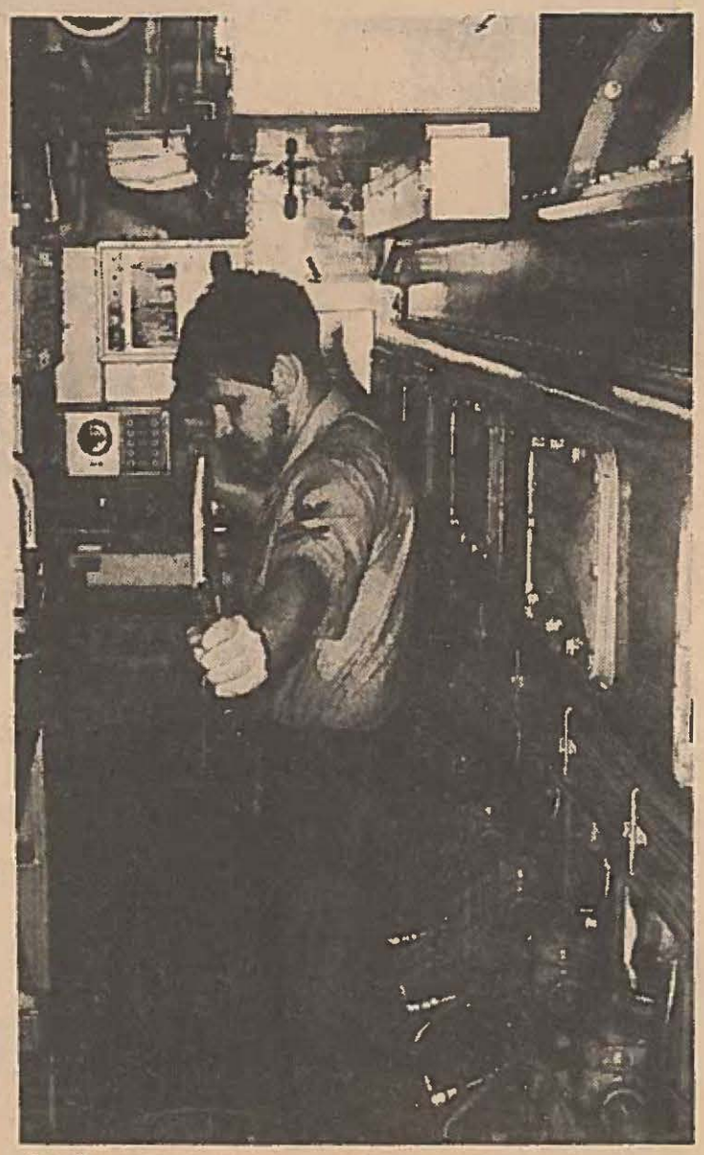
As adventures go, sub duty is more like setting a space orbit endurance record. Or breaking out of a safe, Houdini-style. It takes technical skill and an unassailable inner calm.



U.S. Navy photos

Crewmen in the control room wear emergency air masks during a fuel spill drill. The panels at right and in the background control the ship's speed, angle, direction and ballast tanks.

The skipper, Capt. Al Marshal: "The first 10 years you're learning, the next 10 you're teaching."



A sailor gets some exercise with a set of chest-springs in the narrow space next to Kermit, the submarine's backup diesel engine.

San Francisco, one of six Los Angeles-class submarines based at Pearl Harbor.

The Los Angeles-class submarine is the Cadillac of the so-called "hunter-killer" fleet. Except for the new Trident, it's the biggest U.S. sub afloat, making World War II vintage and even modern diesels look like sardine cans.

Commissioned last year, the San Francisco is 360 feet long, 33 feet wide, displaces 6,000 tons, makes air, distills water and can patrol for as long as the food and fissionable fuel hold out. The price tag was $600 million.

Equipped with MK 48 torpedoes and Harpoon guided missiles, it can armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles in the mid-1980s, the San Francisco and its classmates will be able to launch nuclear warheads at distant cities and defense centers, taking on a strategic role thus far reserved for their cousins, the Poseidon ballistic missile submarines.

The submarine service is also the Silent Service, meaning its members guard their lore like magic tricks, so it was not without conditions that the Navy endorsed my cruise. Under the ground rules, the nuclear reactor was off limits and I was foresworn to secrecy regarding such niceties as torpedo ranges and the speed and depth of the ship.

sail faster than 20 knots (23 mph) and dive deeper than 400 feet. But it was not on the basis of 20 knots/400 feet that the captain issued me an "honorary nuclear speedster" certificate — signed by King Neptune — for having descended "deep into my subaqueous kingdom in the USS San Francisco (SSN-711) at such great speed and in such maneuvers heretofore not witnessed . . ."

Angles and dangles

Neptune's Cadillac cruised out and down, doing maneuvers and drills in an assigned area about 60

upcoming deployment to waters farther west.

As with all subs, the San Francisco must be "trimmed" on each voyage, with ballast tanks adjusted to balance the new stores and bodies aboard. That accomplished, we went through what resembled a car chase through the streets of Namesake City, a roller coaster ride known as "angles and dangles" — diving at 10 degrees, then sailing up at 10, diving at 15, then up at 15, down 30, up 30, then banking hard right, then hard left, and so on until those things not tied down were identified by their characteristic crash.

"I just heard a forward door

"Watch those things. They can chop a finger off."

Time in a bottle

At a steady speed, course and depth, there is no apparent motion, no sound but the air conditioning, no sunshine.

After weeks at sea, crewmen awaken unsure whether 4:20 means morning or afternoon. They don't care. Chow call at 5 is breakfast or dinner. They'll know then.

In the control room, where the periscope is, sailors know it's nighttime when the officer of the deck wears red rimless glasses. The red is to preserve night vision in case an emergency or a scheduled satellite message requires the sub to surface.

The men soon adjust to roles in a non-stop three act play. A day no longer has 24 hours, but 18 — six hours on watch, 12 hours off.

Except for the captain and executive offier, who are always on, each of the crew bends to this routine, with time in between devoted to drills and other duty. For the junior officers and sailors, that means learning about the boat's countless electronic and hydraulic systems. Shuteye or the mess deck menu of music, cards or a library book are sandwiched in between.

Time in this opaque bottle is measured not in lengthening shadows, but in the cycle of familiar settings . . . silver napkin rings on the wardroom table . . . an after-dinner backgammon match . . . popcorn and cola and a Goldie Hawn movie . . . midnight Thursday pizza rations . . . reading Popular Mechanix, Omni and Car and Driver on a stainless steel seat.

The elusive Boing fish

Jules Verne fans may be disappointed to learn Navy submarines have no big window through which to watch marlin and squid.

On or near the surface, closed-circuit televisions around the ship show the view out the periscope, but the sub's true "portholes" are the sonar screens. Sonar equipment picks up noises from vessels and marine life and translates them into green waterfalls, waves and teardrops on TV-like consoles.

By watching the displays and listening to their sources, sonar technicians can identify just about everything out there.

An exception is the Boing fish, an elusive creature scientists believe to be a whale. It leaves a very noticeable smutch on the screen and I heard its telltale "boing" myself after borrowing some headphones.

Sonar men swear it sounds just like an electronic transmission.

According to a Navy handbook, "Boing sounds have been observed mainly in late fall and early winter off San Diego and in the Hawaiian area. They are especially common

Neptune's Cadillac: aboard hunter-killer submarine

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sure the galley is clean.

If an appendix bursts or other surgery is needed right away, Hospitalman 1st class McNamara will do the honors. On the wardroom table.

Subculture

As a rule, the dolphin clan is a close fraternity of intelligent and highly-motivated men who are given big jobs very early. (No women sail on submarines yet.)

All officers were screened personally by Adm. Hyman Rickover. Except for the supply officer, an ensign whose job is solely that, they learn every wire and widget on the ship — how to operate the reactor, navigate, drive, plot sonar contacts and fire weapons.

As junior-grade lieutenants, age 24 or 25, they begin to stand watches as officer of the deck, making them responsible for the operation and safety of the entire ship and crew of 127.

Skippers of nuclear submarines, usually Navy commanders, are among the highest paid officers in the military. Last year Marshall made $61,000, which includes sea pay, nuke pay and skipper's pay.

Add to that free medical benefits for himself and his family back in Virginia, and cheap meals when he's at sea. (My mess bill for three days came to $11.10.)

A 1962 Annapolis graduate, Marshall is a good example of how a submarine officer climbs the career ladder.

After post-graduate training, he served as a reactor jockey aboard a

and as sailors look back on the account book of a career, missed christenings and birthdays make heavy debits.

"I missed it when my daughter was born," says one chief petty officer. "I missed Christmas. I missed my anniversary. When my son became a Webelos, I wasn't there."

A six-year sonar tech explains why he was leaving the Navy for a civilian job: "If I stay in, I got two choices. I could go to shore duty and lose $4,000 a year, or go to sea and not see my wife."

"It's murder on a marriage," says another sailor.

'Loaded for bear'

Undersea life brings other pressures.

A sailor crouches with a book in the tiny companionway corner just outside the officers' wardroom, oblivious to passers-by.

During battlestations, 20 people cram into the control room, measuring six steps by eight. Before dinner, the mess deck is like high noon at Ala Moana Center.

The sub at times seems to have the space and pace of an anthill. By day three, that's what began to get to me.

The head and shower offer temporary privacy, but the closest thing to personal turf is your curtained bunk, part of a triple tier and measuring 18 inches high, 24 inches wide.

Thanks to a design flub, Neptune's Caddie has fewer bunks than bodies. On our cruise, the ship had only a partial load of weapons, so some sailors shacked up next to the long, green MK 48s — not homey.

What's more distressing, there's no opportunity for any real, heart-thumping exercise — for blowing psychic sanitary (except by slitting the throats of teddy bears, etc.) After 10-week deployments, you'd think the men would all be hearing Boing fish sans sonar.

"We had one guy from the inner city of Chicago," recalls Lt. Jon Poland. "He's the only guy I've ever seen pull a knife on someone on board a submarine. *Whoa.*" The sailor was scrubbed and later busted for drugs.

Kurt Viestenz, chief of the boat, the sub's top chief petty officer, puts it this way: "Sometimes a guy will close himself up, become antisocial. He doesn't want to communicate. Somebody usually'll see it and break it up. On long operations, you have a lot of time to think — about your family, your work — and sometimes you get into it too much. The boat inside becomes smaller. Where men can take out some of their tension is the mess decks. The only other way is to find yourself a corner and a book."

In time of war, these are the men and machines — the Marshalls and McNamaras and Couttses aboard hunter-killer submarines — who may decide a naval campaign.

In time of peace, the enemy is Houdini's safe. The campaign, against a counterpoint of pings, is keeping calm.

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Neptune's Cadillac

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about 100 miles south of Oahu. The sounds also have been reported off Panama and as far west as Okinawa and Japan . . . Often the sounds seem to alternate from near and distant sources as if the sources were communicating. Only one case was reported in which these sounds were observed in the presence of unfriendly (Soviet) contacts."

Apart from pesky boings, and without getting into the vagaries of underwater acoustics, suffice it to say the Navy has become quite adept at detecting and tracking ships. And it can be done without emitting radar or "active" sonar waves that would tip off the competition.

Kermit must breathe

Despite its dark-alley advantage, a nuclear sub faces a unique set of potential disasters.

Fire is a nightmare aboard any ship, but on a submarine smoke has no place to go except the ventilation system. The same hazard applies with a fuel spill, when fumes could quickly poison the air.

As soon as the alarm sounds, therefore, crewmen put on gas masks. Each mask has a 10-foot hose that is hooked up to emergency air ducts with outlets every few steps.

The problems then become communication — voices are badly muffled behind the masks — and movement. In order to move beyond 10 feet, a sailor must unscrew his hose and hold his breath.

A reactor shutdown or "scram" is another worry. Scram drills require the submarine to come to periscope depth to "snorkel" air for Kermit, the backup diesel engine.

In wartime, that would increase the risk of exposing the sub to the enemy.

But there are no alternatives and not much time. If the crew can't get the diesel running within two hours, the lights go out.

Sic transit appendix

If, against the captain's warning, a door slams on someone's finger, the ship's medical corpsman springs into action.

"I've had people almost cut their hands off," says Tim McNamara, a medic for 14 years. McNamara has seen cases as serious as a heart attack, but far more commonplace are cuts, colds and chipped fillings, he says.

Syringes, swabs and a microscope are about the extent of his equipment, and, to make things more confusing, medical supplies are scattered throughout the ship in case fire or flooding blocks off certain compartments.

Unlike big surface ships, a submarine can't easily evacuate a patient, so McNamara's chief task is keeping the crew healthy and stabilizing the serious cases until the sub can get into port. He also keeps tabs on the crew's radiation doses and makes

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