

UNCLE CHARLIE'S LOST BRASS SUBMARINERS

By Don "Robby" Robertson

It is as sure as the rhythm of a setting sun ushering in the night. The life force of this day is nearly over and my mind's eye dives into the imponderables of the past, while genuine eyes have been studying the sapping emissions of a drowning sun. It gasps in pulsating, sinking, shimmering colors on the peaks and prominences of the vast western skyline. Changing rays of light expose interesting terrestrial details of the mountains to my west. At this hour, hidden canyons divulge themselves, appearing as deep scars on the backs of the monoliths forming the White Tank Mountains. Memories drizzle out of the deep folds and recesses of a life's experiences. I have a sinking feeling. My time remaining in the light of this life's journey is also fast fading. Soon enough, all my memories will fade away.

Today, I walked a back country wash in the hills south of Harquahala Peak. Arizona sunshine's radiant heat rises off the floor of the great Sonoran desert valley for hours after sundown, and hours later, it still pours out of my body. A gush of sweat is making its way toward the small of my back. The wetness permeates my shirt, spreading out from under the arms. Flush with a day's long exposure, there is a scarlet hue across my face. Warmth grasps both feet, deep inside my boots. I'm sitting in the sanctuary of my home, comfortable in my easy chair. I'm once again aware of the sunshine and heat still blazing inside my mind and on the form of my youth, a long time before today.

It is 17:15 Hours, Island of Oahu, U.S. Territory of Hawaii, 01 January 1946, Hawaiian Standard Time. It's a lovely sunset of scattered clouds splashed in wavering rays of subsiding daylight. It's a gorgeous natural scene. There are vivid hues of yellow and highlighting traces of gold. The sky has strokes of orange brightness, tinges of red and glowing pink. A calm, wet-warm breeze embraces all of it. The atmosphere glimmers beyond the shapes and superstructures of the vast fleet. Certain tranquility settles in. There's a gentle, hypnotic rhythm of the harbor's tidewaters lapping at the sides of the boat. It resonates within the mind of this topside deck watch-stander. A moment of reflection seems as endless as the vast stretch of the western skyline of the Pacific Ocean.

Two magazines in their pouches and the sidearm are glowing hot at my sides, even after having struck evening colors on our boat, in the usual, more casual way of a submariner. My feet ache deep in their boondockers, the radiating warmth from her deck had them baking in the afternoon's long sun. My face is glowing, and red. It feels like the careless swipe of a blowtorch has passed in front of me. My

USN issued dungaree shirt is saturated, and strong body odor radiates with each movement that exposes the undersides of my arms. Sweat soaks my waistband and my duty belt sags unevenly, reaching for the deck on the holster side. She is secure in her lines, and I am adrift in my mind. Considering that if it were not for her, and this crew, I might not be going home to live out any future days. She has brought us so far, so safe. Here she rests peacefully, apparently all repaired, in the place where the war down under the waves began. She is USS Archer-Fish, SS-311. She is moored port side to pier, comfortably nestled in Pearl Harbor's submarine base. She and I are near to slumbering in this berth called, "Sail Six".



All those ashore have stayed ashore, to the point of nautical twilight. Something stirs. All thoughts return to the reality of the deck. No longer staring into the western sky that holds the past, my gaze locks onto the perception of change happening up forward. First seen are shifting bands of vertical, manufactured light rays dancing in the hatch opening. At the handhold of the forward escape hatch are seen fingers, hands, and a crop of dark hair. Khaki covered arms and shoulders reveal the silhouette of the whole man as he pulls himself out and emerges on deck. It's Mister Joseph Jasper Bozsa, Lieutenant JG, and the ship's junior Duty Officer for tonight's watch. Bozsa receives his salute and a greeting. We turn and stand together, shoulder to shoulder at the wire safety rail, opposite the brow. He too, takes in the scene. Minutes go by.



Bozsa's thoughts reveal their dwell, "Haven't seen so many warships since Yokosuka Lagoon". "Aye Sir!" is my reply, thinking back on the momentous occasion that concluded the war's hostilities. Noting the contrast of the evening's low din overcome by a slapping tide, and the congregation of what seems like the entire U.S. Pacific Fleet, I say, "It's so very quiet for all that machinery and manpower". Bozsa smiles and then snickers, "They're all agog with giggle water and headaches". My memory of Yokosuka recalls a perception of a rebuff and I let loose with a cunning quip, "Unlike our stay at Yokosuka, well, for *some* of us". Bozsa rapidly retorts, "Oh yeah! That was one *hell* of a blowout".

Mister Bozsa takes a longer pause and offers an observation, “Well, I heard one of those Army-Air Corps boys say that before he came onboard our Archer-Fish, he thought the Navy was a hundred and seventy years of protocol and privilege, uninterrupted by progress.” “Oh yeah!” he elaborates. “Well”, I say, “I heard one of those airmen say that they take a case of beer with them on their missions so that the crew can enjoy an altitude frosted drink *together* when they return to their base”. Bozsa sarcastically replies, “So, that kind of makes you wish you’d joined the Air Corps?” “Ah – No,” I say defiantly. “It makes me wish that *Uncle Charlie* had made arrangements for the entire crew to join in on lifting some glasses that night.” Bozsa’s head shakes while his face pops a wide grin and he says, “Hell, you guys have lifted enough glasses and drank more beer this past month than can be used to fill all of the ballast and trim tanks of every boat in this fleet”. The lieutenant smiles at me and halfway turns towards the forward hatch saying, “I’m headed below”. I salute him rather sloppily and with a smirk. The lieutenant acknowledges with an equally half-hearted gesture. “You need anything up here, like coffee?” “No, thanks for asking, Sir”, is the reply. Now, my mind reels further backwards.

Not so very long ago, the war was just about over. Archerfish had stood down from rescue duties for crippled B-29 Super-fortress crews forced to bail out or ditch their aircraft near the patrol area off Erimo Saki, Hokkaido. It was then that the boat received the re-direct message of all re-directs. A new course had them gliding her right past still active enemy minefields, until they took a mooring alongside USS Proteus, AS-19. They had finally made their way to their long intended destination. Unlike the majority of Allied forces in the European Theatre, at the defeat of the Nazis, whom were watching multiple surrender events and waiting for the Russians to take the prize of their enemy’s leadership and capitol; this submarine’s crew had sailed right into their enemy’s most sacred waters, Tokyo Bay, last August 31st.



The U.S.S. Proteus was a splendid ship all by herself. She was purposefully built as a sub tender, and was chalked full of supplies, and relief crews. They were now riding the tides and nestled tight alongside her, outboard of five other boats. There, while I was transiting her O-1 level deck, I had a momentary reunion with one of my buddies from the days when we were in class together at Basic Enlisted Submarine School, New London, Connecticut. I had bumped into Radioman Lou Reynolds. Lou was able to whisper that he finally got a permanent duty assignment on a boat, only it was a

Japanese super sub, the I-14. I was so envious of Lou being a part of a prize crew. We only had a short time there to contemplate the wondrous sights of our adversary's homeland, discussing the Jap's last sanctuary and redoubt near Yokosuka Naval Base. We marveled at our foe's awesome capabilities for undersea war fighting. Lou's journey in the submarine force was just beginning, while most of the rest of us in the crews were riding a waning relationship with the Navy at the closure of hostilities.



The crew of Archerfish's sister boat, the USS Segundo, SS-398, had captured at sea the Imperial Japanese Navy's I-401. She was Japan's largest and most technologically advanced submarine, carrying aircraft, having radar, and sporting something most U.S. sailors only had wished they'd had, a snorkel. Now, she too rode alongside their little flotilla, as a prize of war. '*Uncle Charlie*' used her to hoist his command flag for all to see. Proteus was now host for his quarters and the bed-down location for his staff. The admiral was on deck and looking down on them from her O-1 level on the 1st of September, as they got as many of Archerfish's crew as they could onto her topside deck. Then and there, we posed with our battle flag and had a magnificent victory photo taken. The emotional reprieve to realize the end of the war overrode any thoughts of what each of us would be doing in the future. It was time to put the final exclamation point on the story of WWII.



Photo # NH 90517 Crew of USS Archerfish, in Tokyo Bay, 1 Sept. 1945



The next day began with low fog, and low hanging dark clouds. The weather and floating aspect kept most of the crew from going topside and witnessing the formalities on the “Mighty Mo”, BB-63. The big battleship was at anchor just a mile away. Some saw her plenty of times that day amidst her grand task force of over two-hundred fifty other, lesser ships. As those proceedings concluded, some of the crew topside watched in amazement as the cloud cover parted and the blue yonder began pouring through two-thousand allied aircraft. They came roaring in formations on the wing, piercing the Japanese skies with an overwhelming howl to cap the demonstration of US military might and dominance. The war was over; the celebration had yet to begin. The reality of peacetime was only measurable by what we had known about life, and the Navy, up to this point the war.

Most of the crew on Archerfish huddled around the boat’s interior 1-MC public address speakers to hear Missouri’s Public Affairs radiobroadcast of the surrender. ‘Uncle Charlie’, Vice Admiral Charles A. Lockwood, Commander, Submarines, Pacific, the submarine force’s legendary leader was now aboard USS Missouri. He was representing all of them, the men of the submarine service. They visualized him penning his John Hancock on the surrender document, which he did, just above that of Admiral Chester Nimitz. The admiral was also eager and at the ready to keep a solemn vow. Some of the crew were keenly looking forward to participating in that undertaking.

Back in ’43, Uncle Charlie told the commanders of his boats, “We’ll have a drink together at the IJN submarine officers club in Yokosuka, when we whip the Japanese”. That promise was given to a select few, but it resounded amongst the crews of the submarine force throughout the duration of the war. Imperceptibly, over the course of the conflict, many a US submariner would lose sight of the fact that the intended audience for his ’43 declaration was in fact, all of the boat skippers. That night of September 2nd, 1945, would see him keep his promise.



The launching of the celebration was done with the assistance of some of the submarine relief crews on the Proteus, who had been on Yokosuka Naval Base and other nearby Japanese facilities. They had been busy there disarming Imperial Japanese Navy human guided torpedoes and midget subs. The event was finished in coordination, where the boat skippers, their executive officers, and some handpicked others in the little task force riding about the Proteus, were called ashore.

However, it was done without most of the boat crews, those whom wore their hearts, and their silk insignia dolphins, sewn on the outside of their right sleeve. It was a blowout in more ways, than one.

The Supreme Allied Commander Pacific, General Douglas MacArthur, had taken charge of Japan and published his General Orders. First, he stipulated that all of the Japanese people were to take themselves at least three 'leagues' from any shoreline in the country of Japan. Amazingly, diligently, they complied. Next, he stipulated that U.S. personnel were to do no harm, nor commit any assault, upon the Japanese people. Furthermore, he prohibited U.S. forces from eating any foodstuffs grown in Japan, as famine was looming over the land. Consequently, all of the boat crews in Tokyo Bay were forbidden to go ashore on liberty, lest there be any incident by, or upon, U.S. sailors.

In the principality of an Admiral's command, it was apparent that Yokosuka could serve its purposes. Yet, there were orders and proprieties to be observed. In the presence of the mighty fleet of U.S. warships, there was scuttlebutt about how in these post-war times, in the new age of Atomic bombs, submarines were no longer needed to sink anybody's fleet. We had heard that Admiral Halsey had rebuked an officer that had accepted a Samurai sword as the instrument of surrender from the commander of an Imperial submarine that was captured at sea. He supposedly violated the admiral's orders against keeping such as souvenirs. Some of the crew members thought they'd be relegated back to being known as 'Pig-boat sailors', subjected to scorn and forced compliance with the endless protocols, class privileges, and minutia of a 'surface-oriented', "Battleship", navy culture that had existed before the war.

As Archerfish's beloved and steadfast Pharmacist Mate, Leo 'Doc' Carter would gladly attest, anyone who had ever witnessed a submarine crew on a liberty call between their war patrols would know the prudence of keeping them in check. In the Land of the Rising Sun, they were sure to run



aground of rule sets and orders, general issue, or admiral specific. That place was the focus of their animus for years. It was not a good place for anyone to have idle time and access to alcohol, whilst contemplating the emotions of an uncertain future and any painful memories of the past. As September 3rd dawned, most of the crew were happy to put the events of the preceding days in their wake. They sailed on past Ashika lighthouse, as they were once again underway and bound for Pearl Harbor.

A motor whaleboat passes by at a short distance and its chortling engine snaps me back to the task. I once again turn time and attention to checking her waterline, examining her lines, and taking responsibility for the conditions of her deck while she rides the tide in Pearl. I hear the distinct sound of steps being made as a sailor traverses the brow. I look to verify it's one of our own, and see it is Wes Mayhew. Wes is a big, rugged looking, stout fellow. Wes is a Torpedo Man! He also is the leading petty officer of the Forward Room torpedo gang. Wes's uniform appears disheveled and I suppose that it is from a long, hard night in Honolulu. I render the proper salute as he's coming aboard and I return to my post. I wave at Wes, hoping he'd pause and provide some conversation. However, Wes barley glances at me. Instead, the Torpedo Man goes directly below through the forward escape trunk. I turn back again to check conditions at the aft end of the boat, with just enough time to check the Port Services connections.

There is a distinct thud and the clank of metal on metal coming from behind me. I turn and look forward to see Wes standing up on deck. The man has a tool roll, bolt cutters, burlap bags, and some smaller hand tools. Without so much as a word, the big man gathers up his kit and proceeds back across the brow and onto the dock. Wes disappears faster than the image of a phantom. I'm a kindred spirit, and would have liked to known what Wes was up to with his gear. I shrug off the thought, knowing that I will find out soon enough when the big man returns. I go further aft to check the last line. Tasks are satisfied for a short duration, so I throw a stare at the stars in the constellation of Orion. I will stand relieved soon, prior to the mid-watch, just two and a half hours from now.

Maybe I shouldn't have blown off Wes's antics so easy. The phantom's image reappears in the form of a man staggering back down the dock with his arms full of tools and something obviously heavy wrapped in burlap bags. Wes's wide grinning face is puffed out, as he is straining mightily to maintain his balance and his load. I rush across to the head of the brow and get a quick peek under a fold. I'm astonished at this brazen act. I burst forth with both inflection and volume, "WOW!" Instantly, I commiserate with this deed. "Now that's justice!", "Or, maybe a crime", I said. It was both, a prankish act, maybe even the reckless act of foolishness.

Had I only known that Wes was on his way to liberate ‘Uncle Charlie’s’ pride and joy, I might of swapped my watch post to help him. It was a thing of beauty to behold. She was a four to five foot tall brass statue, and a model replica of a US fleet-type submarine rising. It had a home out in the small pond that was in front of the Administration Building on the submarine base. It was poised there with the bow coming out of the pond water, at about a ten degree up bubble, with water pouring out of the limber holes. Everyone knew about it and everyone admired it, especially Wes.

Without a further word passing between us, I lent a hand and helped Wes get the trophy across the brow and down into the superstructure, just forward of the Forward Torpedo Room Escape Trunk. I left it to him to wire the prize solidly in place and return the evidentiary tools to their designated storage places. I sprang back onto the deck and returned to my official post, only now I tried to determine if Wes had been followed by anyone ashore. Amazingly, he had not!

With breakfast done and the maneuvering watch secure, at 09:45 Hours, we were once again underway. This trip was the run for home. Soon enough, it would be the last time some of them would ever wear a uniform. They were bound for Tiburon Bay, San Francisco, California, USA. In the Forward Torpedo Room, there was private muster amongst the gang. Wes called them all together to share the tale of his deed. Now, there was common knowledge, what the Navy would surely call a conspiracy, about the precious booty stored up in the superstructure. Some of them were impressed and willingly agreed to assist him in holding onto his prize. One of the guys, Jimmy Dolan, piped in that he didn’t want anything to hinder his out-processing from the Navy, like a courts martial. Another, one of the resident wise asses, Carl Yotter, chimed in about how making big rocks into little rocks, and playing with cocks in Leavenworth, was not his idea of what he would be doing after the war. After some reflecting with a clear, now sober head, Wes could see there wasn’t much future in trying to get his prize brass submarine from the security of Archerfish’s superstructure to any place ashore. Wes concluded the meeting’s discussion by drawing from all an agreement that none would spill the beans on this escapade.

Archerfish, on the surface, had commenced steering various courses and speeds to take up station fifteen-hundred yards astern of the USS Tilefish, SS-307. A topside working party was formed, mostly the torpedo gang, to dump ammunition over the side. At 14:25 Hours, she had stopped making turns on the port shaft and they proceeded to toss eighty-three rounds of HC ammo overboard. Like a Siren singing to one of Odysseus’ crew, the lashed down brass object hiding just under their feet commanded the imagination of several of the team. Noting the inescapable desire to peek at the

captive beauty and not wanting his efforts to be a total loss, Wes offered and sold his prize to Jim Steward, a 3rd Class Torpedoman in the forward room. Wes now had a \$10.00 bill for all of his trouble.

It was only a couple of days before Jim had some serious thoughts about his purchase and went through the same process as Wes. On 06 January, the method repeated itself with another working party formed to dump ammo overboard. The waters of the Pacific were colder now and nobody wanted to loiter on deck. It only took 17 minutes for the men to expend 396 rounds of 40mm and 1240 rounds of 20mm over the side. It only took a second for Jim to notice another shipmate to fall under its spell. Jim sold the artwork to J.W. Kent “Square Peg” Rountree for twice what he paid for it.

On 08 January 1946, at 05:50 Hours, the lookouts on the bridge sighted the lighthouse at Farallon Island. Two hours later Archerfish had formed up in single column with the submarines U.S.S. Dentuda (SS-335), U.S.S. Manta (SS-299), and U.S.S. Roncador (SS-301). By 11:00 Hours that morning, she was moored starboard side to Dentuda and nested as a group of four alongside U.S.S. Pelias, AS-14. She now rode the tides off Chauncey Point, San Francisco Bay.

Tiburon Bay affords a beautiful vista of the massive basin that is hidden from the Pacific Ocean behind California’s golden gate. The low mountains along the west-side of the bay are topped with green, and the higher ones on the east-side are grassier brown and stone gray. There is humanity’s mark along the distant shores, where society’s cities awaited their sailors return. The waves on the bay are choppy and the skies intermittently white and blue, as clouds wisp by, only to dissolve into the ether.

I stand the topside-deck watch again. This time, I’m looking for the small craft that has an unofficial rendezvous with Archerfish. I’m playing my part to ensure that Uncle Charlie’s statue, U.S. Government property, is delivered ashore. With it will go some of my shipmates, and we will sail and toil together no more... unless we are caught. In that case, we might serve together for another twenty years, only inside the confines of a federal prison.

The group huddles once more in the forward torpedo room to discuss the prize on the afternoon of Archerfish’s arrival. There was plenty of head scratching on what to do with a sixty pound brass submarine statue, and how to get it ashore without anyone seeing it. Dolan suggested that they dump it over the side that night and send Uncle Charlie a letter, telling him where to send divers to recover his last missing submarine. Dolan almost caught a flying wrench for that remark. Our resident wise-ass, Yotter, said that we should use one of the Pelias’ cranes to hoist it into the highest reaches of the tender. He wanted to leave an anonymous note about whom its true owner was, how much the enlisted men

enjoyed having it, and how many drinks sixty pounds of brass would have bought in San Francisco. However, the new owner objected, loudly. “Just get me and it ashore!”, “I got it figured out!” says Square Peg.

Jim had hit on the only solution available at the time. His ex-brother-in-law ran the ‘honey barge’ for the ships anchored at Tiburon. This barge was actually a Higgins boat converted from an LCVP and now was using fifty-five gallon drums to haul sewage and waste oil for disposal at shore facilities. Jim would have him bring the barge alongside and then Roundtree, with his purchase, along with several of the crew, could take the LCVP to the docks of San Francisco. Jim made the call, his brother-in-law agreeing, and they set the plan in motion for 19:00 Hours, the following evening. The plan having been set, they were about to go their separate ways.

I can still make out the little skimmer, splashing through the chop of the bay and then shrinking into the ever-decreasing light of the evening’s oncoming hours. There are now thousands of very distant illuminations along the shores to the southeast of Archerfish’s position. The Honey Barge finally disappears into the void of the narrow bands of horizontal blur that are the port city’s orange-tinged lights. Its tiny image is appropriately washed out somewhere between Treasure Island and Alcatraz. I know they hit the docks in San Francisco. I never do learn if the resourceful and ambitious Square Peg successfully made his way home to Mesa, Arizona, with his prize.

Twilight now twinkles over the White Tank Mountains. I wonder why I recall this final escapade as part of her crew. I know that most of her WWII commission crews are long buried in Veterans cemeteries around this glorious country. Of those of them that are left, most are beyond knowing or articulating what became of Uncle Charlie’s brass submarine. Perhaps the hourglass that represents the gift of my generation’s lives is nearing to empty on the top half. It’s near time to turn it over and start afresh in a new beginning. Maybe, I’ll awake to join my comrades once again. They will be huddled in the forward torpedo room, sharing conversations and coffees, riding on U.S.S. Archerfish’s eternal patrol journey. I managed to evade the siren’s call of that beautiful brass submarine, and it ended up in Square Peg’s care. If I could, I’d find it and prepare a fitting tribute for all U.S. Submariners. I would place it in a location where all the ranks can raise their glasses in toast to the honor of those that made their mark on history and did willingly risk giving themselves up for their nation, in its Silent Service.

