

Conquering Charybdis

A Day aboard the USS *Jefferson City*

By Joe Griffin

SAN DIEGO — The small craft carried us away from the docks of Point Loma toward one of the more ominous vessels deployed by the U.S. Navy. Its black sail loomed against clearing skies at the mouth of San Diego Bay where beyond to the south sprawled the Pacific Ocean and its Mysteries of the Deep. On each side of the sail several sailors stood atop the half-submerged cylinder waiting to welcome our party. There were eighteen of us and we were about to embark on a day-long excursion aboard the USS *Jefferson City*, one of the Navy's 55 Los Angeles Class fast attack nuclear submarines, known officially as SSN 759.

Commander Dean Richter would be our host for one of the rarest privileges offered by the United States military. Only about three or four times a year are small groups of American citizens permitted to enter and then submerge in a U.S. submarine and, with war brewing in the Middle East and deployments already underway, our voyage could possibly be the only one scheduled for 2003.

Those who stepped aboard were men associated with Vi-Jon Laboratories in St. Louis, Missouri. Our group's host was retired Chief Petty Officer Gary Watson, president of Vi-Jon and a former submariner who served aboard the USS *Will Rogers* with John Padgett III, now a rear admiral and Commander Submarine Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet. Gary's request to the admiral for an opportunity to submerge in a Fast Attack had been granted and we were the happy few selected to join him and Vi-Jon's CEO, John Brunner, for the adventure.

One-by-one we stepped on board and were immediately ushered down ladder into the top deck of the three-level boat where we assembled in the dining room for a briefing. I was in the early stages of determining the efficiency of my only hope of avoiding a miserable day: a scopolamine patch provided by my physician friend Weldon Schott. Since childhood I have developed a thick file of experiences with motion sickness and long ago learned to simply avoid all ventures that involved boats and water. But this was a chance to ride in a United States submarine. And because Weldon was among our party and had also agreed to place his trust in The Patch, I decided to attempt the mission. I would know within the first ten minutes whether I would have a normal day or spend it in a vortex of nausea, vertigo, and worse. I donned The Patch the night before and thanks to this magical balm of modern medicine I enjoyed the same good time as everyone else.

The *Jefferson City*, named for the capital city of Missouri and the third president of the United States, headed out to sea at 0800 on Wednesday, 15 January 2003. Some sixteen miles off the coast of California Commander Richter ordered the Officer of the Deck to take her down and we soon sank below the surface, the moment captured by the splash of a final wave against the periscope's face just before the upper world vanished from sight.

The day was spent meandering around the three decks, observing the submariners busy at their tasks, each a dedicated servant of our country and a defender of our shores. The crew's patience with us was only exceeded by their enthusiasm for what they do. Each man is trained to do every other man's job. Those who demonstrate high proficiency at this extreme level of multitasking are honored with dolphins, a pin or image—golden for officers, silver for noncoms—that is proudly displayed on the uniform, cap, or belt buckle—proof that he is a fellow submariner who can be trusted and depended upon when boat or crewmember is in a tight spot. On this day one young man, who had just finished qualifying, was slated to receive his silver dolphins. He requested that former Chief Watson do the honors of pinning them on his uniform during the ceremony performed by Lt. Cmdr. Steve Benke, the sub's executive officer, and we were privileged to witness the event.

Submariners are family. Those of the *Jefferson City* live in a cramped 360-by-33-foot tube, often for months at a time, and usually beneath the surface of one of the world's seven seas—a sunless, timeless grind that in peacetime is consumed with repetitious dry runs of processes and procedures that must become habitual in case of emergencies within or a declaration of war without. The achievement and maintenance of an harmonious rapport among the crew is not a luxury but an imperative.

My knowledge of submarines was limited to Hollywood's stylized dramatizations and Tom Clancy's esoteric descriptions. My real-life experiences inside the *Jeff City* involved data overload. I have already forgotten most of the things I was told although I will always recall firing a "water slug" from Torpedo Tube #4, hanging on to any nailed-down thing during "angles and dangles," and watching the navigators plot our course using some higher form of math that to me was far more of a mystery than those of *The Deep*.

More than anything else I remember the officers and the crew. With the exception of a few senior officers, the USS *Jefferson City* is a half-billion dollar boat, bought by 535 old men, and run by 100 young sailors between the ages of 19 and 25. It is a testimony to their training, their leaders, and the United States Navy. The *Jeff City* is one shining example among many that military training can take a hundred boys and systematically turn them into honorable men, dedicated to a common goal, and entrusted with two daunting responsibilities: take care of the tax payers' boat and with it defend them against all predators.

These young men are also proof that the idealistic notions of multiculturalism and diversity can only be achieved through amalgamation, something the leadership of this nation has completely ignored for the past 40 years. Among the crew of *Jeff City* are Anglo-Saxons, Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics. They are trained to work as a team for the safety and success of each and all. They depend upon each other for survival. In order to coexist in such cramped quarters they must learn complete camaraderie: relaxed conventions but not at the expense of proper respect for authority; individual personalities but not at the expense of group harmony; a sense of humor but not at the expense of another's loved ones. There are no races, just Submariners. One boat, one crew, one mission! Only when these things are true can different races, cultures, and religions coexist, survive, and succeed. The lesson for America is the necessity for her citizens to amalgamate into one country, one people, one culture. Given enough time, universal military training might contribute greatly to the restoration of such national harmony.

At the completion of our voyage, Commander Richter and Senior Chief Neal Johnson presented certificates declaring each of us an “Honorary Submariner ... a true and loyal descendent of the Wearers of the Dolphins.” Nicely put, but, with the exception of Chief Watson, an insult to those who make a career of patrolling the world’s waters including the brave souls who man the USS *Jefferson City*.

Around 1600, we were delivered safely back to Point Loma where all of us were at once physically tired but spiritually encouraged by the experiences of the day. Later that night, nine of the crew joined us back on the Bay’s eastern shore to enjoy the recipes and libations of one of San Diego’s finest restaurants. Events of the day were relived; stories were told—most embellished; some invented. It was rowdy, it was loud, and it was fun—a perfect way for a bunch of Midwesterners to celebrate their first day ashore as newly-decreed submariners.

I cannot conclude without offering a salute to Admiral John Padgett for his gracious invitation and to Commander Dean Richter and the officers and crew of the USS *Jefferson City* for their genuine hospitality. But most of all I salute Gary Watson for encouraging me to take advantage of this opportunity. He took care of every detail and did so in grace. The dinners were the finest cuisine at the best restaurants. The accommodations were Five-Star and Ritz-Carltonesque. The flights were non-stop and perfectly timed. Punctuating it all was the ride of a lifetime. Great Day! Great trip! Great memories!

And for me, a bonus: Charybdis has been conquered!

Joe Griffin is pastor of Grace Doctrine Church in Chesterfield, Missouri. His congregation includes Gary Watson, John Brunner, Dr. Weldon Schott, and Bobby Watson, all of whom accompanied him aboard the USS Jefferson City and are fellow Honorary Submariners.