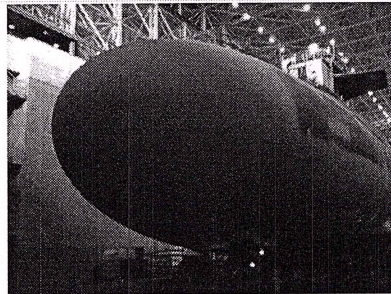




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Confessions of an SSBN Sailor (A letter to my SSN colleagues)

by CDR John Elritsky, USN

Fellow Submarine Warfighters,

Admittedly, I came by it honestly: the concept that SSNs were somehow more prestigious, more glamorous, and even better than SSBNs. Perhaps it was the clichés most of us have heard, "Fast Attack Tough," "SSN: Saturdays, Sundays, and Nights," and "Ain't no slack in Fast Attack" - as opposed to "Boomer Weenies," "Part-time Sailors," and "On patrol going two knots to nowhere." Maybe it was our training pipelines that until recently have been wholly SSN-centric. Even the Prospective Commanding Officer (PCO) course only recently started having SSBN PCOs embark on a TRIDENT submarine for their underway torpedo firings. Out of fiscal necessity, all our programmatic rhetoric justifies the SSN inventory and leaves our junior officers with the misconception that only attack submarines are important.

We may have reached the point where a real dichotomy exists between SSBNs and SSNs. Are SSBNs just this other part of the Submarine Force that we SSN purists tolerate, like F-18 jockeys tolerate their helicopter pilot counterparts? Have the myths generated a potential schism?

For me, these myths began on my first SSN. On that boat, our Commanding Officer, Navigator, and Engineer were all previous SSBN sailors, but you wouldn't know it. They never wore their Strategic Deterrent Patrol pins and rarely discussed their patrol operations out of Guam. Not the SSN thing to do, I guess? The Executive Officer, who had never been "corrupted" by an SSBN patrol, forbade discussions of "Boooo... ooooomers" at the wardroom table.

Later in my career, I encountered similar attitudes. A senior staff member once told me that "...not much goes on during those Trident refits. It's sort of Sleepy Hollow down there in Kings Bay." More recently, a Captain told me how much it bothered him to see sailors in Kings Bay wearing gold patrol pins (signifying 20 SSBN patrols). Too much time on "boomers" doing the same old thing. And I confess that I unwittingly perpetuated some of those same myths. But I had it wrong, and if you are propagating that same attitude, you may need to reconsider.

I was fortunate to get some great advice about SSBN operations amidst all the sniping. Despite having served entirely on SSNs, I asked for command of a TRIDENT and just recently completed my first patrol. Having learned a lot myself during this first operating cycle, I provide the following perspective to help dispel some of the myths regarding SSBNs.

Myth #1: The SSBN force is comprised of "part time sailors."

SSBN junior officers (JOs) will complete at least five patrols during their first sea tours. On average this amounts to only two weeks less than their SSN counterparts in total underway time. TRIDENT crews prepare for and execute a deployment about every 220 days. Admittedly, it's not a six-month Mediterranean run, but the challenges of preparation and deployment are the same, and the cycle repeats itself more frequently than our current SSN Inter-Deployment Training Cycle.

The "off-crew" period is undoubtedly the most inappropriately named portion of the cycle. It should really be called "off-boat" because in terms of the crew's activity, there is nothing "off" about it. A former SSBN Commanding Officer once told me that he worked his crew very hard underway just to be able to pass the many graded training sessions during off-crew. This may be a little backwards in priorities, but it's somewhat true nonetheless. Because about 30% of the crew turns over between each patrol, we must make full use of the hands-on training opportunities available at the TRIDENT Training Facility to be ready for our wartime mission.

The first time I watched our Battle Stations Missile Navigation Team complete the transition to readiness for missile launch in the Strategic Navigation Lab, I realized how challenging and effective these trainers can be. At first, I questioned why we ran such complex and layered casualties. With their multiple anomalies, these training sessions make most engineering drills look like they're moving in slow motion, but they provide the hands-on training that enables us to truly practice like we will fight. This same intensive casualty response drill is also found in the Ship Control Trainers, Tactics Team Training, Sonar trainers, Command and Control Exercises, Piloting Lab, Mariners Skills Labs, and Strategic Weapons Labs, to name just a few.

Myth #2: SSBN refits are sleepy affairs requiring little effort on the part of the ship.

I had survived several pre-overseas movement up-keeps on SSNs, so I figured how bad could an SSBN refit be? A Selected Restricted Availability (SRA) on steroids is the best analogy to a TRIDENT refit. In addition to corrective maintenance, numerous incremental overhaul work items and a host of pre-patrol tests must be completed during each refit. The average refit easily matches an SRA in man-hours of effort, yet it is accomplished in about half the time.

The TRIDENT Refit Facility completes a refit and gets a ship ready to deploy every two weeks. It takes active involvement of both the Blue and Gold crews to complete the required maintenance and preservation, and if they don't hit the deck running and work together as a team, they quickly find themselves behind the power curve. In the case of the officers, imagine an SSN junior officer who has completed five SRAs and seen most of his ship taken apart and put back together, and you have the equivalent of an SSBN JO's expertise. This experience provides essential skills for these future department heads.

Myth #3: SSBN operations consist of driving around at two knots going nowhere.

The increase in Modified-Alert periods, with more flexible scheduling, has gone a long way to break down the myth of boring underway operations. During my first two weeks underway we acted as the opposition force for a destroyer squadron's undersea warfare exercise, which culminated in a night-time choke-point defense against eight darkened and deceptively lit warships. It proved pretty challenging even for this experienced SSN sailor. We followed that evolution with an open-ocean submarine tracking exercise coordinated with Maritime Patrol Aircraft. As a newly initiated strategic sailor, I didn't think I even needed to be able to spell BULLPEN, much less have to establish one. Fortunately, our JOs were more than up to the challenge. By the time we began our alert patrol, I could easily have forgotten I wasn't on an SSN any more, if not for the Chief of the Boat's reminders that "This is a TRIDENT submarine, not a little boat!" The operations were frequent, tactically challenging, and just plain fun.

Alert patrol added a dimension to underway operations that I never experienced on an SSN. In addition to the challenges found in fast attack operations, SSBN patrols include the requirement to maintain constant communications connectivity, missile system readiness, and navigational accuracy while remaining completely undetected. Couple this with externally-generated round-the-clock weapons readiness tests, "mini-war" exercises with strategic scenarios, and preparations for the next inspection, and you have a good picture of an SSBN on alert. I found I was concerned about issues I never considered on an SSN, such as communications buoy operations, TACAMO aircraft reception paths, ELF connectivity, and Aguada VLF down times. Contrary to the popular misconception that SSBN patrols are boring, my crew and I found the patrol period busy and challenging.

So are SSBN sailors really very different from our SSN brethren? Maybe we're more just differently evolved than actually different. We maintain our ships as national assets, practice many of the same warfighting skills, and exercise many of the same tactics. The only real distinction is that we've had to learn the additional complexity of operating strategic weapon systems. I tell all my newly reporting Sailors that what makes SSBNs different from the ships they've served on before is that every time we go to sea, we're there to execute our primary, real-world mission. This is not a drill! In deterring the use of weapons of mass destruction, we shoulder a heavy responsibility in our dangerous and constantly changing world.

If we go by current force level plans for SSNs - the schedules for new construction and decommissioning - approximately 42% of submarine commands will be on TRIDENTs by the year 2001. You owe it to yourselves to try one and understand what we do. I'll see you out there. You'll know me. I'm the CO with the shiny new patrol pin.

"An SRA on steroids is the best analogy to a TRIDENT refit"

USS Maine (SSBN-741) (Blue)