

Life below the waves

The cramped world of a submarine places unique demands on its crew. By Gary Oakley

The Oberon class of submarines were in Australian service from 1967 to 2000. Their missions, like those of any such service, were withheld from all but the most senior members of government and defence, and remain classified to this day. But it is possible to give a sense of the kind of life the submariners led.

The Oberon-class submarine was technologically advanced for its time. Designed from lessons learnt during the Second World War, it was one of the quietest conventional submarines operating in the world. Its stealth, endurance and difficulty of detection made it excellent for covert operations. The Royal Australian Navy had six "O" boats: HMAS Oxley, Ovens, Onslow, Otway, Orion and Otama, all based at HMAS Platypus in Neutral Bay, Sydney, until the submarine squadron moved to HMAS Sterling in Western Australia.

The selection criteria to join the squadron were exhaustive and tough, producing a high attrition rate of prospective submariners. Medical criteria, both physical and mental, were stricter than those required for a member in the surface navy. Prospective submariners were expected to be able to cope with the cramped and confined conditions on board an "O" boat; to be able to get on with their shipmates for periods of dived time as long as eight weeks; and in an emergency, to perform not only their own job but the basics of most other crew members' jobs. In the early days, basic training and escape training in "the tank" were done at HMS Dolphin in Britain; later all this, apart from the tank, took place at HMAS Platypus. After months or even years, the result was a very dedicated, exceptionally well-trained sailor or officer who had a deep commitment to the submarine service and to his fellow submariners.

Submariners are trained to react quickly to any problem. A second or two of hesitation could kill your shipmates – or worse, lose the boat, sending you all to a watery grave. Drills for flooding, fire, hydraulic bursts and so on are practised over and over again until they become second nature. The slightest problems are treated with the utmost care, so that you can have total faith in your fellow submariners. Every submariner knows that he holds the lives of his shipmates in his hands.

The submarine and its crew prepared for a patrol by conducting a long series of equipment trials and safety shakedowns, normally followed by an operational period at sea. During the shakedown phase, routines were practised continually, watch-keeping was conducted as if on patrol, scenarios were laid out as realistically as possible, and surface ships were used to make life as difficult as possible for the submarine and crew. This training raised the boat and its crew to a level required for the task ahead, so submariners trained continually on all seagoing boats as if at war, whether they were going on patrol or just daily running.

Once the objective of a mission, the operational area, the duration of the patrol, and the logistical problems of a submarine operating far from its maintenance base and home port were finalised, the boat was considered to be operational. Storing for the patrol began with the taking on of victuals; when the fridges and the dry store were full, extra stores were stacked and lashed out of the way in the foreends, so as not to hinder the day-to-day work of the submarine. The engineers took on water, fuel and oil, and the crew prepared themselves by stowing uniforms and personal effects in the small lockers provided in the various messes.

On leaving Platypus, the boat transited on the surface to a port where leave was given to the ship's company and extra stores taken on to replace those used on the surface transit. Any minor defects were rectified at this point. The boat then left port and transited to its diving area, then submerged, and the patrol began.

The routine now settled into a system of two watches, with half the crew on watch throughout the boat while the off-watch crew spent most of their time sleeping, reading, doing maintenance and watching movies. A small proportion of the crew were day workers, outside the system of two watches; these included the cooks and some technical hands who did any maintenance that was needed. Most of the time the two-watch system was in place, but when a boat was at action stations, all the crew were closed up at their stations.

The basic things that a non-naval person takes for granted, like putting out the rubbish and going to the bathroom, were not as simple as they sound on board the submarine. All the rubbish (known as gash) was placed in calico bags and weighed down with crushed cans; the neck of the bag was tied and the bags loaded into the gash gun and ejected into the sea.

Personal hygiene is important when you have 60 or more men living together. Three showers serviced the whole crew: one for junior sailors, one for officers that also doubled as a toilet, and one for senior sailors that usually doubled as a darkroom while on patrol. The only people able to have showers on a regular basis were the two cooks. The rest of the crew had to be satisfied with a bird bath every day; apart from this, a shower about once a week would get you by.

If clothes had to be washed, it was done with an agitator known as a pogo stick in a rubbish bin. Water and dhobi dust (washing powder) were placed into the bin with the dirty clothing, and the pogo stick sloshed up and down until the items were deemed to be clean. Wet clothing was hung in the forends or the engine room to dry. But it did not matter how clean your clothing was, it always smelt of diesel fuel and old socks – guaranteeing you a seat to yourself on the train when it was time to go home.

Using the traps, or heads, was not for the faint-hearted. They were so small, it was not unusual for the sailor to drop his overalls to the ankles in the passageway and back into the cubicle, leaving the door open. To flush, a hose was used in conjunction with a foot pedal that controlled a flap in the bottom of the pan. If the flap was left open when blowing slop drains and sewage, the tank could blow back inboard, leaving a nasty mess in the passageway.

Early in the patrol, when fresh vegetables were available, meals were generally good, with everyone on board fed from the same galley, which provided the same food to officers and men. Four meals a day were served; breakfast, lunch, dinner and a midnight snack when the watches changed. As the patrol progressed and fresh vegetables disappeared, the cooks were obliged to come up with appetising meals from frozen meat and veg or from tins. It was not unknown for the crew to be placed on restricted meals as the victuals began to run out.

All meals are eaten in the individual messes, which can make life difficult if you live in the aft mess. To collect your meal, you had to travel through the motor room and engine room, passing through the control room and through three watertight bulkheads. The trip was made difficult if the engine room, motor room and control room were getting ready to snort (to run the diesels while under water) and the control room was in "black lighting" with all the lights switched off.

As the patrol progresses, days and nights merge into one and you lose track of time. If it's egg and bacon on your plate, it must be breakfast; if the control room is in red lighting, it must be night time. You also have no idea where you are in the wider world. The chart table is screened from your view, and only a select group of officers knows where the patrol is actually taking the boat.

Your rack (bunk), into which you happily crawl after each watch, becomes your own private little world, where you can try to shut out the rest of the submarine for a few hours' sleep. The racks are built three high, with just enough room to roll over. If you were lucky, on the Oberons you got a rack that was athwart ships; those in the after ends had three large lockers built under the lower bunk. Normally a sailor had to make do with a small Formica-covered wooden box with a cushion on top, which doubled as a locker and a seat. Most racks faced fore and aft along the curved hull of the boat, a space you could also share with a valve or pipe-work. If you were a searider for the patrol, or under training, you had a rack in the forends, which you shared with either the Mark 8 or Mark 48 torpedoes and encapsulated Harpoon missiles.

At sea, time rolls on and you feel as if you have been living in this strange world for ever. But at last the patrol is over and the boat is surfaced, shut down to prevent accidental diving, and the transit to your next port of call begins. It's back to barbecues and a beer with your mates on the casing (the sub's deck), and hands to swimming stations – if you're lucky and don't have any defects to contend with.

Author

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