



Silent and Unseen: On Patrol in Three Cold War Attack Submarines

by Alfred Scott McLaren.

Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2015. Pp. xi, 241. ISBN 978-1-61251-845-9.

Review by Jan D. Galla, Englewood Cardiac Surgery Associates (jdgalla@gmail.com).

Fire torpedo One! One fired, sir.... Running hot, straight and normal, sir.

For readers familiar with these words from books or films about life aboard US submarines, *Silent and Unseen* should be mandatory reading. It paints a much more realistic picture of a submariner's existence during the (post-Korea) Cold War than the writings of noted prolific popular authors like Edward Beach, Tom Clancy, Patrick Robinson, and Michael DiMercurio.

Author Alfred McLaren¹ developed a strong interest in Arctic exploration after graduating from the US Naval Academy (1955) and completing Submarine School (1957). His first posting was to Pearl Harbor, where he was assigned to the USS *Greenfish*, a Second World War-era submarine later modified into a GUPPY (greater underwater propulsion power) IIA boat. He vividly conveys the many discomforts of existence on this twenty-seven-foot wide vessel (commonly called a "pig boat") capable of remaining submerged only two days at a time. These included the uncomfortable ride associated with its hull design; hot, humid, and cramped quarters (requiring "hot bunking"—two or more crew members sharing one bunk); constantly accumulating dirt; the reek of diesel oil in confined spaces; and a burgeoning cockroach population. During various local operations, with occasional submarine vs. submarine exercises, McLaren began the arduous task of completing his qualifications or "quals," the learning exercises in which new junior officers had to master every system on the vessel to qualify for command.

The author sometimes conveys humorous aspects of the routines of submarine life:

I can never forget my first shower at sea. Ensign S and I were the newest officers on board. One day when showers were allowed, the most senior officer said, to our utter surprise, "You two go ahead and take yours first." "What a gentlemanly gesture," we thought, and I urged S to go first since he was a year junior to me. It was only when I heard his anguished screams that I recognized we'd both been had: our brother officers wanted us to drain all the cold water out of the shower piping before they took their own showers. (18)

McLaren gives a detailed and sometimes painfully accurate account of his duties and the endless examinations by section chiefs and the eventual "signing off" in the Submarine Qualification Notebook by his superiors and trainers, the executive officer, and the captain.

Among the trainee's responsibilities were periods of standing watch as, for example, the diving officer. During one of these, the submarine became entangled in an abandoned fishing net. McLaren, under the critical eye of the captain, had to delicately maneuver the sub back and forth to remove the net. Far more dangerous were all too common chance encounters with loose floating mines.

"Mine ahead! Mine ahead! Twenty degrees off our starboard bow! Range close aboard.... Captain to the periscope!" ... Captain Knudsen took the periscope, confirmed my sighting and quickly ordered "Left 10

1. McLaren earned a doctorate in Physical Geography (Polar Studies) at the University of Colorado.

degrees rudder, make turns for three knots.” As the mine drifted dangerously close to starboard, he judiciously adjusted both course and speed as necessary to prevent further closure by the mine, particularly toward *Greenfish’s* stern plates and propeller. His was a careful and very well executed maneuver.... Whew! It was a tense moment, and the knees of all in the conning tower were fair to shaking as we slipped by the mine, noted its position, and slowly continued on our way. (34–35)

After being called to interview for admission to the Nuclear Power School, McLaren had to rapidly complete his quals and earn the coveted Gold Dolphins insignia awarded to fully qualified submariners. After a stint of training as a reactor operator, he was assigned to *Seadragon*, the sixth nuclear-powered ship in the Navy, again having to pass relevant quals. His time on this ship sparked McLaren’s lifelong interest in Arctic exploration. During the twenty-some Arctic missions of his career, he made the first submerged transit of the Northwest Passage, crossed the Bering Strait, and carried out several missions in the Barents Sea. He also developed the insights and instincts of a submarine commander, devising techniques of tracking enemy vessels without being detected, techniques that remain standard procedure to this day.

Following McLaren’s transfer to the *Skipjack*, he experienced the loss of many colleagues in the *Thresher* disaster; the threat of active warfare against the Soviet Navy in the Mediterranean during the Cuban Missile Crisis; classified missions to trail Soviet submarines in the North Atlantic and Scandinavian waters; and the accidental death of one of his crew. His accrued experience paid off when his captain recommended him for his own command.

Readers may miss here the excitement of real-war actions found in other books,² but McLaren’s subject is a peacetime Navy in a period of transition. His book’s strength is the insight it gives readers into the maturation process of submarine commanders entrusted with one of the most complex and lethal fighting machines ever created.

I have three quibbles with the narrative. First, in his junior officer days, McLaren found himself heading a special court-martial. After rendering a “not guilty” verdict, he was overruled by his captain without explanation. One is left to wonder why he was overruled and why he does not tell us what he learned in the process. Second, McLaren’s interview with Rear Adm. Hyman Rickover during his vetting for the Nuclear Power School gets very short shrift. More information about the admiral’s notoriously rigorous interview sessions would have enhanced the reader’s appreciation of the hurdles that officers had to clear to gain access to the exclusive club of nuclear submarine commanders. Third, after bringing formal charges against two chief petty officers for gross dereliction of duty, McLaren was again overruled and the two chiefs were reinstated without penalty. One understands why McLaren might avoid confronting his captain regarding this, but the reader aches for a fuller explanation of the episode.

Silent and Unseen offers many valuable insights into the career of a submarine officer during the Cold War. McLaren’s commendable, engrossing narrative will leave readers looking forward to his next book.

2. E.g., Paul Schratz, *Submarine Commander: A Story of World War II and Korea* (Lexington: U Pr of Kentucky, 1988).