



## Emergency Deep: Cold War Missions of a Submarine Commander

by Alfred Scott McLaren.

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The US Navy's Submarine Force has a reputation of being the "Silent Service." This refers not only to actual operations and tactics, but also the Force's aversion to disclosing its history. Except for well publicized voyages of endurance or exploration by early nuclear-powered submarines, the US Submarine Force has declassified very few records of Cold War submarine operations. As a result, retired US Navy Captain (ret.) Alfred Scott McLaren's new book is a welcome addition to a growing body of Cold War submarine memoirs and unofficial histories,<sup>1</sup> including two of his previous works.<sup>2</sup>

It is my hope that the contents of *Emergency Deep* will prove to be of value and use to all serving submariners—young, old, and future; to Cold War submarine historians; and to all US citizens whose taxes have supported, and will support, the building and operation of US nuclear attack submarines, together with the training of the wonderful men and women who crewed and will be crewing them. (xiv)

*Emergency Deep* covers the entirety of McLaren's command tour on board the *Sturgeon*-class nuclear-powered attack submarine USS *Queenfish*. Before that command, he served on the diesel-electric submarine USS *Greenfish* and nuclear attack submarines USS *Seadragon*, USS *Skipjack*, *Queenfish* (as first executive officer), and USS *Greenling* (as a supernumerary for additional experience). Unlike today's submarine officers, who have a more regulated sea-to-shore duty rotation, McLaren served only a few of his first twenty years in the Navy onshore.

McLaren led *Queenfish* through three deployments to the Western Pacific, conducting missions vital to national security, as well as an extended under-ice exploration of the Siberian continental shelf. This latter mission was treated in detail in his *Unknown Waters*. *Emergency Deep* presents a less scientifically detailed account of the voyage, concentrating instead on the author's operational decision making.

One of McLaren's Cold War missions was to trail a Soviet Yankee-class ballistic-missile submarine to its patrol area north of the Hawaiian Islands. He observed practice launches off the Soviet coast by various Soviet ballistic missile submarines. During one mission, he found himself in the middle of a torpedo exercise with Soviet torpedoes passing close aboard. While on patrol during the Vietnam War, McLaren was authorized to sink vessels supporting the Communist war effort in South Vietnam. He found only one such target.

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1. E.g., Sherry Sontag et al., *Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage* (NY: PublicAffairs, 1998), Dan Summitt, *Tales of a Cold War Submariner* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 2004), Peter Sasgen, *Stalking the Red Bear: The True Story of a US Cold War Submarine's Covert Operations against the Soviet Union* (NY: St. Martins, 2009), David C. Minton III and Alfred S. Berzin, *From Opposite Sides of the Periscope: The Trail Is On* (Bloomington, IN: Archway, 2018),

2. Viz., *Unknown Waters: A First-Hand Account of the Historic Under-Ice Survey of the Siberian Continental Shelf* by USS *Queenfish* (Tuscaloosa: U Alabama Pr, 2008) and *Silent and Unseen: On Patrol in Three Cold War Attack Submarines* (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2015).

It looked a valid target all right, but it was a small, unarmed vessel loaded with boxes and manned by only four scrawny crewmen. The more I looked at it, the less inclined I was to go to battle stations and take it under attack. It was definitely not worth an expensive torpedo or two. I also, quite frankly, couldn't have lived with myself if I had blown those four wizened crewmembers to kingdom come with some five hundred pounds of high explosive.... It was the correct decision, and I have never regretted it. (240)

This one anecdote, amid over two hundred pages of intelligence collection and undersea exploration, helps explain why US nuclear-powered submarines have not conducted combat actions since World War II. Submarines are expensive platforms designed for high-level combat, not the typical constabulary missions the Navy has undertaken since 1945. Consequently, Cold War American submariners have earned their keep by carrying out intelligence missions that came as close to high-end combat as one can get without firing a shot.

Such missions entailed high personnel attrition. McLaren describes several submarine officers who could not withstand the strain of repeated Cold War missions. For instance, he served with four executive officers; of these, he considered just one to be suited for future command. He helped transfer two of them to duties outside the Submarine Force. McLaren tells similar stories of having to relieve his navigator/operations officer, a division officer, and his engineer officer.

Although some of the nuclear training and operational/tactical details the author includes will be familiar to recent veterans of the Submarine Force, many others show that he served in a different era. At one point, he describes placing an under-performing officer on restriction, which he correctly describes as “probably no longer in use and would have had me in serious trouble with my superiors if I were in command today” (261). McLaren was only issued a non-punitive letter of caution following a submerged grounding off Hawaii. The Navy was likelier to tolerate such a significant event before the advent of global positioning satellites and other precise navigational aids; today it normally relieves commanding officers with a career ending letter of reprimand.

I am disappointed that the memoir lacks enough pictures and detailed diagrams of the *Queenfish's* interior.<sup>3</sup> These would have benefitted future historians and submariners. There are no more *Sturgeons* in existence and as the years pass, fewer and fewer people recall the interiors of the workhorses of the Cold War Submarine Force.

As the Cold War recedes into the past, some of its military history is being lost, particularly since the US government continues to lag in the declassification of relevant records. Even when those records are released, however, Alfred McLaren's *Emergency Deep* will remain an invaluable resource to anyone interested in the operational and tactical history of nuclear-powered attack submarines during the Cold War.

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3. I found the diagrams of *Queenfish's* sister ship USS *Seahorse* in Frank and Charles Hood's independently published *Poopie Suits and Cowboy Boots* (1921) to be of some benefit as I read *Emergency Deep*.