

Sirago - The Early Years

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Don DeGenaro (CS3 48-51):

Dear Mike,

Here is a story regarding John Ball, who is among the missing (John M. Ball, SA 49-50). Hope this helps you find him.

Perhaps I can give you some help in two areas. I don't remember exactly how long I was a shipmate of John Ball, maybe about two years, but we were pretty good friends. John was a polite easygoing guy and was a yeoman striker working for a yeoman 1/class. I don't remember his name.

After the completion of the Sirago's conversion to a Guppy/Snorkel (1948-1949) at the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard, we were assigned to the Norfolk Naval Base. Soon after arriving there, John asked me to go back to the shipyard with him to pick up his car, which he had left there. I agreed and the first weekend we had off we left to go back to Philly. The trip back there was uneventful. We checked out his car and except for a lot of dust, everything was fine. We decided to head back to Norfolk. We thought that by alternately driving and napping, we could make good time. That was before the movie Smoky and the Bear was made. On the trip back, however, we were definitely the 'Bear'.

As we traveled through Maryland we were stopped by the State Troopers on suspicion of being shirkers. At the time there was a \$25 fine for those who were AWOL. They held us at their barracks for about 3 hours, until they received word that we were law-abiding sailors and a credit to our country. They were not very happy about losing the \$50, but they let us go.

We continued on toward Rte.1 and on to Virginia. We got as far as Richmond when the Highway Patrol stopped us on suspicion of DUI. (Neither of us did much in the way of alcohol.) After a thorough inspection, the officer said he would have to talk to his superior before letting us go because someone had called in the complaint

About 20 minutes later a Ford coupe arrived with a large trunk and stopped where the three of us were standing. Out stepped a four and a half foot giant who identified himself as a Justice of the Peace and said he was there to adjudicate the situation. He opened the trunk of the coupe, wrestled out a chair, folding card table, a small suitcase-- which contained a bible, law book, name plaque and gavel. He was ably assisted by the trooper, as John and I looked on in wonderment.

While cars, trucks and buses whizzed by in both directions the judge gaveled the court into session. First he asked the officer to list the charges. The officer explained that at first he had stopped us on a complaint of drunk driving, but he inspected our car and had us walk a straight line. While checking our demeanor, he decided to drop that charge. John and I figured we were home free, until the officer noticed that the inspection sticker had expired a week ago.

The judge asked us for an explanation. We figured we still had a chance but it didn't work out that way. Because of the traffic noise it took John awhile to explain what had happened. It didn't really matter, because as the J.P said 'the law is the law' and fined John \$40—just about all the money we could pool together.

After posting the \$40 bail money we started toward the car to continue our trip to the Sirago. The JP said that if we drive that car anywhere but toward one of the two inspection garages he pointed them out on either side of the highway, the officer would have to arrest us again and this time he would have to impound the vehicle. We thanked him for his advice and headed for the nearest garage.

The trip ended with no further problems. The garage owner was a pretty decent guy and didn't pile on any extra fees since John was a fellow Virginian. I hope you locate John and I get a chance to talk to him again. **Don**

John King (RM3c 45-46 – Plank Owner)

I read Frank Alexander story about the water in forward torpedo room (August 2004 Newsletter). The rest of the story is: My battle station submerged was sound operator in forward torpedo room, sound was directly under FWD torpedo loading hatch, for some unknown reason the hatch opened up and the water came in FAST. I ended up in the FWD battery room and CSTM Wilson closed the hatch to forward torpedo room.

I was one of 12 survivors out of a crew of 74 of a ship that we lost in the North Atlantic in Feb. 1944, and I thought maybe someone was taking a second shot at us. Because of a great crew no major problems happened, many spare parts in FWTR had to be replaced. Boat and Crew all saved. After pumping water out closed the hatch, then did our deep dive trials.

CSTM WILSON had served with CDR Harlfinger on USS Trigger, I am sure that is why he was on the Sirago, a good man at the right place at the right time could have been the difference in good or maybe a bad ending for the Sirago. CDR Harlfinger was a great CO, and a Great Man

Fred Tassell (MoMM3c 45-46 – Plank Owner)

Regarding the story told in the August issue concerning flooding in the Forward Torpedo Room:

We had guys from the shipyards with us... inspectors... making sure everything worked properly... we left Monday morning and the night before we left it was raining and someone shut the forward torpedo room hatch to keep the hatch from letting in the rain. When rigging for sea (Harlfinger ordered) the officer (newbie) went through and said everything was OK and the XMAS tree was green. Then they ordered "pressure in the boat" - bleeding ship service air into the boat while still tied up. Pressure in the boat OK. Skipper started up diesels, singled up all lines, etc. and went out until the depth was 450 feet and then he dove the boat. I was on the air manifold.

When Sirago nosed under the water, there was enough pressure from the sea to keep that forward torpedo loading hatch from coming open and we went down to almost 450 feet. Meanwhile the inspectors aboard were doing testing, trimming up the boat (with negative tank venting and auxiliaries venting) and a pressure was caused in the boat due to all this activity. Shot a few torpedos, etc. Brought it up to periscope depth, etc. but now there was enough pressure in the boat to blow that hatch open... and the forward torpedo room began to flood..... VERY RAPIDLY. A chief mess cook secured the forward torpedo room hatch but another junior steward went to open the FTR hatch to get his buddy out and the chief steward knocked him out and secured the hatch. 25-30 guys in FTR at the time (due to torpedo ops and yard guys). When he called out the FTR was flooding I instantly bumped the bow buoyancy to get an upward angle and began to blow the forward group (1... then 2...) then 3... then 4... When we surfaced there were some patrol boats that they hadn't seen such an angle.

The Skipper came forward and said "who told you to blow those tanks" and I said that nobody told me and told the Skipper that the good Lord had told me to do it. He looked at me a little strangely and then I reminded him that he had always told the crew that every time he went out to sea he fully intended to come back... I told him I was just married before this time and, like him, I had an intense personal interest in returning intact. Over the preceding months I had become a good friend with the CO by doing some repairs for him.

I think maybe this incident was the first week in October or maybe September or so of 1945. Grover Miller YN1 can attest to this.

I felt kind of sorry for the young duty officer who was reported that the boat was "rigged for sea" in the first place. The CO chewed him out from time we surfaced till we got back to the pier. He restricted him and wouldn't even let him kiss his wife goodbye when we then went to Albany, etc. The closest that he let that officer get to his wife was at opposite ends of the gangplank and they just blew kisses at each other. **Fred Tassell**