

Sirago Newsletter



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Stories from the Forward Battery

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"No Respect for Junior Officers" – Mike Bickel

It seems to me, in retrospect, that the entire crew of a submarine waits in anxious anticipation for the arrival of a new junior officer to haze. This is not to take away from the happy harassment given to the new "white hat" apprentice coming down the after-battery hatch on his first "indoctrination" to the animals that inhabit the boat. But...while seaman and fireman apprentices report aboard regularly during the life of a submarine, junior officers are considered a sort of "delicacy."

I reported aboard in New London while Sirago was in a floating dry dock having some sonar-dome repairs and upgrades done. Coming down the forward torpedo-room hatch trying to figure out how to "bend" and drag my sea bag through the escape trunk, I slipped and was grabbed by a sonarman named Morris who officially welcomed me aboard by French-kissing me...and then said in a deep booming voice..."You must be the new officer we are anxiously expecting!" I think that my entire life flashed before my eyes at that

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Now & Then!

For Whom the Bell Tolls – **Joe Roche**
With apologies to 'Papa' Hemmingway!

Over a period of time, Mike Bickel and I discussed getting a ship's bell to use at our reunions, for tolling our lost brethren. Mike explained that the people he contacted had no record of having Sirago's bell in storage. So we let the matter drop.

Last Memorial Day, I attended a service held at the USS Ling (SS297) Memorial, in Hackensack, New Jersey. While waiting for the service to begin, I met two Sirago plank owners and was discussing our 2005 reunion at New Hampshire. I mentioned how we were looking for Sirago's bell to Toll the Boats and how appropriate it would be to be able to do that in the shipyard that built her. One of the guys, who were standing near us, overheard my remark and said, "I have Sirago's bell, and have had it for a long time". Well, I almost fell over from the shock of such a coincidence. He told me his name is Gerry and I made arrangements to call him so I could take some pictures of the bell.

A month or two later I made arrangements to meet him at the Ling. I borrowed a digital camera and, on the prearranged date, I drove down to Hackensack to the Ling. I carried the bell on board and hung her on the forward part of what I guess would be the sail, (the Ling has open shears).

It was a strange sensation seeing the bell, with Sirago's name and number etched into it, knowing that the boat has been gone for so long a time. It was a reminder of Sirago when she was alive with young men. It's probably the last tangible item left from Sirago, without having to prove its provenance.

Each of us carries, deep in our memory, our personal remembrances of Sirago, the time we served on her, and her influences on each and every one of us.

point, but before I could get my senses back he patted me on the butt and said, "Come on ahead, sir, and I'll introduce you to the rest of the crew."

It wasn't just the crew who participated in "testing" new officers. The entire wardroom was in cahoots. In the year and a half that I spent aboard Sirago, I learned that if you're going to spend lots of time in a hot, sweaty boat, cutting donuts in the ocean at 250 feet depth, having "fun" with a junior officer is almost as good as a USO dance and much more funny.

Usually it was the OD Submerged in the CONN who would dream this stuff up and get the Chief of the Watch (COW) involved. That's how the plan was launched and it was spread from watch stander to watch stander via the sound-powered phones. One time I was on the dive and everything was going just fine. We were all tired and the boat was hot and steamy, but at least there wasn't much to do. Then I noticed that we seemed to be "extremely" heavy forward, so I assumed that we had experienced a change of temperature or something. I commenced pumping 1000 pounds from forward trim to after trim tank. Of course I didn't notice that while this half ton of water gurgled from the front of the boat to the after trim tank, there was this "conga line" of overweight crew members walking behind me in the same direction that the water was going. And while they were traveling, they were waking other heavies from their racks and having them "join the crew" in their trip to tubes aft. Thinking perhaps that I had done something wrong and reversed what I should have done, I gave the order to pump 3000 pounds from After Trim to Forward Trim. My orders to the trim manifold operator were being duly reported to the watch stander in tubes aft who sent the merry men forward with due haste. This frantic correction and re-correction continued, with sweat breaking out on my brow, until I finally noticed this huge gang of crewmembers skipping merrily behind me in a rush toward the forward torpedo room.

Trim parties were common, of course, for the uninitiated. But I'll never forgive good old Mustang Officer Carl Whisman when he was in the CONN who cooked up the prank that gave me my nickname. In

those days, as diving officer, I probably weighed 130 pounds dripping wet and had some difficulty getting the lower conning-tower hatch shut when it came time to "Set Condition Baker," which involves shutting all watertight doors on our way up to periscope depth. Once Condition Baker is reported as "set" throughout the boat, I would give this status to the officer in the CONN who would say "Very well...make your depth 62 feet smartly...shut the lower hatch." This was done by me pulling on the lanyard while the sound-powered phone operator dogged the hatch. It was that "lanyard pulling" that was hard for me to do. My weight wasn't really sufficient to move it much and I usually ended up leaning backward on the gyro table. Carl had been questioning my "manhood" on this issue for days before, and this time he had spread a plan through his watch standers via the sound-powered phones. As the boat was setting Condition Baker, crewmembers in the control room were encouraging me to REALLY pull down on that lanyard and lift my feet up off the deck if necessary to show everyone that I was worthy to be called a submariner. Even Frank Berlinger, the trim manifold operator, Chief Czarniecki, the COW, and Rollins on the air manifold got to talking it up. So, thus encouraged, I was ready to give it my best shot. When Carl said his "very well" speech and ordered me to shut the hatch about 3 fellows there were shouting encouraging words to me. There were also about 8 "extra" people in the control room, including most of the officers who weren't on watch. I gave it all I had and threw my whole body into it and lifted my feet off the deck to give that hatch the best "slamming shut" it had ever known. But for some reason, it did not budge one inch...and this was because Carl and the quartermaster had their feet on the hatch, bracing it up so it wouldn't move. All of this was unknown to me as the pendulum effect took over and I began swinging on the lanyard...first slamming into the bow planesman and then back toward the air-manifold operator. Being so convinced that I could show everyone what a man I was, I didn't think to put my feet back down on the deck to stop the show. During the few swings of the pendulum before I gave up, Rusty Curtis sang a verse of "He flies through the

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Mike is presently trying to see if he can get a loan of the bell for our next reunion.

You can view these photos on our photo album under the heading Sirago Photos. Photos 101-105 are pictures of the bell.



Above is pictured the Sirago Bell mounted on the USS Ling.



Yours truly (Joe Roche) in contact with Sirago's Bell. While we believe that this bell is truly the bell that Sirago had when it was decommissioned, there are some reasons to believe that it is one of a number of bells that Sirago had during its life. We hope to have THIS bell in our hands at the next reunion in Portsmouth, NH.

air..." but then he did something that stuck with me the rest of my boat career. He made this squawking sound like a parrot makes and then said "Bickel-Bird, Bickel-Bird" and it cracked up the whole wardroom that had come to the Control Room to watch the show. Although most crewmembers in the months following still addressed me as Mr. Bickel, there were many that would say "Mr. Bird" or "Mr. Bird-Man".

The wardroom, however, was not so kind.



LT. Mel Dresbach holds officer Bickel's head on the Wardroom Table. This photo was posted in the After Battery for months.



The Bridge is the favorite roosting place for Red Headed Bickel-Birds. They are usually observed during the mid-watch or 0400-0800 hours, but here is a rare appearance during the daylight hours.

REUNION INFORMATION!

Mike Bickel

Our next reunion will be August 11–14, 2005 (almost 2 years from now), in Portsmouth, NH. Let me know if you are planning to come. So far I have about 100 crewmembers that are PLANNING to come. Let's build this to 150 or more crewmembers plus their wives. Those planning to come are listed on our Web site (www.sirago.com)—refer to the “information” tab. If you ARE planning to come but aren't listed there or haven't told me, please email or write me:

RMBICKEL@STUPP.COM

(Mike Bickel / 1125 Villaview Dr. / Manchester, MO 63021).

The arrival day will be a Thursday this time, rather than Wednesday, and departure will be on Sunday. You and your wife or guest will enjoy shopping, going on a dinner cruise, and/or touring the Portsmouth Shipyard and Museums, as well as our usual banquets and breakfasts.

DUTY SECTION NEWS

Recently Deceased Sirago Crewmembers:

John Duff, Jr. (LT, 46-51 died 7/09/03)
Michael Stan Glover (HM1, 67-69 died Fall 02)
Gus Z. Lancaster III (EN3, 59-62 died 9/14/03)
John D. Mackenzie (LCDR/XO, 60-61 died 8/9/03)
Thomas Warburton (LCDR, 64-65 died 9/20/03)
-----*Sailor, rest your oar*

DUES INFORMATION

For those of you who are NOT crewmembers of the USS Sirago, dues are “due” for 2004. Check your address label to see what year you are paid through (/2003/ is likely).

For the CREW MEMBERS, dues are NOT required but are appreciated and earn you the right to VOTE and to HOLD OFFICE if elected. Check your label for the year through which you are paid. If it is /2003/ then \$5.00 will move this date to /2004/. You can pay for multiple years if you like.

Refer to the Small Slip inside this newsletter.

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