

FOREWORD

(from *Submariner* by John Coote)

by **Admiral IJ (Pete) Galantin, USN (Rtd)**

In 1940, before the U.S. entered World War II, Commander James Fife, USN, was embarked as an observer in HMS *Triumph* based on Alexandria, under the command of Lieutenant-Commander ‘Sammy’ Woods RN. His mission was to get first-hand experience of British wartime submarine operations that might translate into improved materiel and personnel readiness of our own subs. There was little to learn on the technical side but much to emulate in the skills and daring of Royal Navy submariners. Alas, those qualities were not immediately transferable to a US force whose pre-war mission and training were misdirected.

At any rate, from this experience and the excellent performance of British submarines under his operational control in the South-West Pacific, Rear Admiral Fife when he rose to be the Commander, Submarine Force, Atlantic Fleet (COMSUBLANT) seemed to many of us to be anglophile to the point of preferring the British pronunciation ‘sub-mar-in-er’ to the American ‘sub-mar-eeen-er’. As one of his staff, I suggested that we resolve this light-hearted impasse by adopting a new word, “submarinist”, denoting a trained, highly skilled master of our arcane speciality.

The Admiral did not like the word, but I think it fits Johnnie Coote. To the qualities of leadership, decisiveness, attention to detail and acceptance of responsibility which are essential to successful submariners, he adds uncommon energy, initiative and innovation, plus a rare gift of expression that is enjoyable throughout this lively and fascinating account of submarine duty in war and peace.

My own entry into submarine duty was in 1936 when Commander Scott Umsted, USN, was in charge of our submarine school at New London, Connecticut on the Thames River. In World War I he served in one of our L-class submarines (450 ton displacement) which operated out of Bantry Bay, Ireland. To expand his students’ knowledge of submarines beyond the narrow bounds of a hardware-oriented course, he required that we read and report on six books concerning submarines. American writings on the subject were so limited that we had to turn to British and German authors to meet the requirement. We did know that the first use of a submersible in war was in the United States. A Connecticut Yankee, David Bushnell, had built a one-man, hand-propelled submersible which unsuccessfully attacked Admiral Howe’s flagship, HMS *Eagle*, at anchor in New York harbour in 1776.

Considering that the United Kingdom now operates both nuclear-powered attack and deterrent (ballistic missile) submarines, and that her navy was the first to use nuclear submarines in combat, with consequent great impact on the Falklands War, it is well to recall the precarious origin of her submarine arm.

In the nineteenth century it was Britain’s naval policy to avoid introducing new weapons which could make existing armament obsolete. This was especially pertinent to the submarine, for it was quickly recognized as the chief threat to Britain’s naval superiority. In 1899 Great Britain, Germany and Russia were willing to abolish submarines, but the US and France were opposed to

giving up the weapon that favoured inferior naval powers. Then, after World War I and its evidence of the devastating effect of Germany's unrestricted submarine warfare, when 15million tons of allied shipping were lost, the US joined the UK in proposing abolition of submarines. Britain even argued that the Versailles Treaty's prohibition of U-boats in the German Navy was a first step toward banishing all submarines. France continued her opposition, but in 1930 Great Britain proposed again that submarines be abolished. However, international agreement could be reached only in specifying rules of war to govern submarine operations, rules that were impractical, unenforceable and finally ignored.

No doubt this persistent disinterest contributed to the fact that, by the outbreak of war in 1939, Britain's submarines were not as technically advanced as those of Germany and the US, nor as numerous as they should have been. Yet they performed heroically and effectively in some of the world's most difficult submarine operating areas. The Mediterranean is a particularly uncomfortable area for submarines, as Johnnie Coote's experiences in *Untiring* vividly testify. Not great in extent, the Med's generally calm, clear waters are subdivided into even more confined seas. Numerous nearby air and naval bases concentrated the enemy's anti-submarine surveillance and counter-attack, whilst their minefields made the transit of straits and shallow areas extremely hazardous. Even between patrols in Malta, submarines were not spared bombing.

As with the US submarine force, the UK submarines suffered a higher percentage of personnel loss than any other branch of her armed forces. Small wonder that a submariner's life expectancy in the Med was little more than 12 months! Of the 74 subs Britain lost, 47 went down in the Med. The larger US boats, built for long-range operations in the Pacific, would probably have fared even worse.

From the inception in Washington of the British Joint Services Mission, the Royal Navy always detailed an outstanding officer to fill its submarine billet. When Johnnie Coote came to that spot in 1955, I was head of the Submarine Warfare Branch in the Pentagon. It was a time of great activity, promise and anticipation in our submarine force. *Nautilus* had just commenced operations, and soon her astonishing performance at sea gave evidence, not only of the coming revolution in submarine warfare, but portended a revolutionary change in sea-power itself. We had already created what was in effect the first ICBM by mating the 'Regulus' cruise missile with the submarine *Tunny*. We were well on the way to improving that system with a supersonic 'Regulus' and larger submarines, when its technology was overtaken by the 'Polaris' ballistic missile launched from nuclear-powered submarines. Meanwhile, our hydrodynamic test submarine *Albacore* was proving the ideal hull-form for future attack submarines. Another significant development was the steady progress towards a realistic anti-submarine (ASW) capability for our submarines.

Thus Johnnie Coote could not have come on board at a time of greater significance in the evolution of submarine capabilities. His professional competence, keen observations and engaging personality made him a welcome visitor in submarine wardrooms and shoreside headquarters as well. He happily shared the risks and discomforts of special submarine operations at a time when Soviet reaction to intruders in their territorial waters was predictable. That regime had shown its readiness and ability to shoot down aircraft that inadvertently or otherwise violated its airspace. Fortunately its anti-submarine capability was not so well developed. Should a US or British submarine have failed to return from patrol, who would know from what cause - operational accident or hostile action? (*IJ Galantin Admiral USN*)

How Lord Mountbatten secured a reactor from the USN

By

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An irreverent – aren't they all? – headline writer might have created 'Rickie snubs Dickie' to describe the 1955 non-meeting between Admirals Mountbatten and Rickover, in which I played a small role.

I arrived in Washington DC in April 1955 for a two year appointment as the submariner on the British Joint Services Mission. Only weeks previously, Commander Gene Wilkinson USN had flashed the historic signal from the *Nautilus*: "Underway on nuclear power". At the very moment that I reported to my admiral in the old Main Navy Building on Constitution Avenue, she was surfacing off San Juan, Puerto Rico, having averaged 16 knots submerged on a 1,400-mile shakedown cruise from New London.

On 20 June 1955, Congress ratified the US/UK Military Atomic Co-operation Agreement which, at first glance, augured well. It stated, inter alia, that "the USA may exchange with the UK such atomic information as the USA considers necessary for the development of the UK's defence plans...." Just who was going to exercise the discretion ominously permitted by the wording of the agreement was not at first apparent. We were soon to find out.

A visit to Washington by our newly appointed First Sea Lord (Admiral Lord Mountbatten) was planned for November. The CNO, Admiral Arleigh Burke, shared the views of Commander Submarines Atlantic (Read Admiral Frank T Watkins) that it would be appropriate for Mountbatten to be the first British officer to go to sea in the *Nautilus*, and thus to have his well-known instant enthusiasm sparked off. The itinerary was drawn up accordingly.

My contribution to the First Sea Lord's trip was to prepare him for a meeting with Admiral Hyman Rickover. It seemed to me to be like briefing a Romanov to meet Rasputin. I was well aware of the unprecedented steps which had been needed to get Rickover promoted to flag rank.

By invitation of one of his staff who happened to have ridden my boat during the previous year's Flag Officers' Summer War, I got as far as having coffee in Admiral Rickover's outer office with (could it have been?) Lieutenant Jimmy Carter shuffling up secret papers out of my sight at one of the desks. Another friend, whose professional qualities were of the highest order, filled me in on what it was like to be rejected for the nuclear programme after being catechised by the admiral. On the whole it made the prospect of being caught red-handed by the KGB with a roll of film of the Kola Inlet in one's briefcase seem greatly to be preferred.

My personal acquaintance of the admiral at that time was limited to a one-sided discussion on the tarmac of Honolulu Airport. Oddly enough, it was during a long break between aircraft movements that he suddenly turned on me and asserted that, next to O'Hare, Honolulu was the busiest airport in the world. I fell straight into the trap, mentioning Heathrow as a possible contender for that dubious honour. I promptly got both barrels at full calibre, complete with statistics and all their sources. The ensuing ride to San Francisco was in total silence. Presumably he was getting his thoughts straight after the first holiday he had taken in seven years – a two-day stopover in the Islands. I started my piece for the First Sea Lord.

I told Mountbatten how, despite a frustrating and friendless career, towards the end of it (sic) Rickover had emerged as the single-minded, single-handed progenitor of the nuclear submarine. From the day that Admiral Chester Nimitz signed his famous letter to the Secretary of Defence in December 1947 stating a firm military requirement for the nuclear powered submarine, Rickover took off. Here are extracts from what I wrote nearly a quarter of a century ago:

“The story of the building of *Nautilus* reveals a restless, lonely and ruthless man, working around the clock to get the boat to sea regardless of opposition. It is said that he stoops to quite unethical methods if the ends justify the means – as they always have in his book. For example he would play off one firm against another by attributing quite untrue statements to one another.

“It is difficult to assess Admiral Rickover’s true importance today. One must presume that, by virtue of continuing to hold the chief responsibility for the development for naval reactors both in the Bureau and the AEC, he is now engaged in implementing the USN’s recently declared policy to put nuclear propulsion into all ships which will be employed in offensive roles, including CVAs and their escorts.

“But there are many who are eager to point out that his mission was accomplished with the launching of *Nautilus*; and that he will be discarded as not being whole-heartedly behind nuclear power for surface ships. In any case, they say that he is not a physicist so much as a hard-driving coordinator of a specific engineering project, who has made too many enemies in the process for his survival in the Navy.

“Much of this is wishful thinking by his detractors. The USN Submarine Force freely admits that, but for him, *Nautilus* would not be at sea today. They regard him as being more influential than any other serving officer, except perhaps the CNO himself. They accept as a painful necessity his dictatorial methods. Some even explain his boorish manners and insulting conversational gambits simply as devices to make his listeners remember what he has to say.

“One thing is certain: Rickover will pursue his self-appointed course regardless of the opinions of friend or foe, particularly friend. Even his bitterest enemies cannot deny his single-minded devotion to duty. Nor have they ever attributed to him ambitions for commercial or financial rewards – now or in the future. No can he be dismissed outright as megalomaniac. Whilst he shuns personal publicity of any sort, he has carefully built himself a solid political lobby and the support of the most influential voices in the media and in the highest corridors of power to maintain the priorities he needs for the continuation of his nuclear programme.

“In this respect he bears an uncanny resemblance to the Royal Navy’s Jackie Fisher, who became First Sea Lord in 1905 at the age of 64 and proceeded to ram through his revolutionary *Dreadnought* programme, which gave Britain the lead in high-speed, hard-hitting capital ships long before the Great War broke out. Nothing was allowed to stand in his path, even those amongst the highest in the land who mistrusted his methods and feared for sacred naval traditions being dismantled.

“To further his aims, Fisher used the press and friends in Parliament to a degree hitherto unknown. He wrote anonymous articles in *The Observer*. Friendly journalists got special briefings from him. Soon the public took up his cry: ‘We want eight, and we won’t wait’. The resemblance does not end in the two Admirals’ drive and ruthlessness, as their portraits show. But to find out what makes Hyman Rickover tick, it is necessary to start by taking account of a lifetime spent in antipathetic surroundings. In the end one has to settle for the fact that he is

motivated by the love of the Service which he joined as an expedient and which has repeatedly reminded him how unwelcome he is, rather than hopes of honours, self-aggrandisement or financial reward”.

It should be said that Mountbatten himself was no slouch when it came to manipulating official or public opinion. For him the end also justified the means, but he got his way with kid-gloved finesse. Note how he used the Emperor of Ethiopia at a reception at Buckingham Palace within earshot of Prince Philip to railroad a distinctly reluctant Prime Minister Churchill into endorsing his appointment as First Sea Lord on the spot.

Unhappily, he did not meet Rickover during his first visit to Washington. At the 11th hour, the trip to *Nautilus* was blocked, much to Admiral Burke’s chagrin and embarrassment. Instead, a flying visit to Key West was arranged so that Mountbatten could see for himself how the *Albacore* performed while dived, at 30 knots. The trip made a lasting impression, for the First Sea Lord always set great store by precise ship-handling at high speeds.

Nor did our Flag Officer Submarines, Rear Admiral Sam Woods, fare any better when he came over early the next year. Again there was much embarrassment and some unprintable explanations offered.

The Uranium Curtain had been well and truly rung down!

The official explanation was that the 1955 Agreement was never intended to cover nuclear propulsion. Even the Supplementary Agreement passed by Congress on 14 June 1956 did not immediately open an SSN’s fore-hatch to British officers. It was enacted to permit “the exchange of information on military power reactors, including those for the propulsion of naval vessels”. Objections were raised by the AEC and the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy, so the Secretary of Defense and indeed the White House had to settle for the British having access to only data on the *Nautilus* and general information about nuclear ship propulsion reactors.

To hark back to 1955: as Mountbatten flew home after being publicly ostracized by the Nuclear Propulsion Club, he wondered how Rickover could be persuaded to hand over to the British the fruits of his high endeavour, when he had shown himself to be so out of sympathy with most flag officers in his own navy. The effort was as far-reaching as it was unexpected. The introvert iconoclast from the Ukraine, who had, by his own efforts, risen to be one of the most powerful men in the Western World, fell under the spell and aura of Queen Victoria’s great grandson. Yet, this unlikely friendship overcame much of the undue delay which the development of the British SSN had already suffered.

In March 1958, Rickover visited Britain. He arrived at the Ministry of Defence while there was a meeting going on of the top-level UK Nuclear Advisory Committee to consider a gloomy progress report of the British-designed propulsion system for HMS *Dreadnought*. Suddenly Mountbatten entered the room with his guest from Washington at his side. He announced that the two of them had just shaken hands on a deal to install a complete *Skipjack* propulsion unit in our first nuclear submarine. Apart from his last-ditch attempt to retain an absolute veto on all Royal Navy officers appointed to our SSN programme, relations with Rickover thereafter went smoothly.

They were further improved in 1961, when Rickover finally met someone in the UK defence world whom he considered worthy of his confidence. Sir Solly (now Lord) Zuckerman was the

Chief Scientific Advisor to the Ministry of Defence. His qualifications and international stature as a scientist were such that they could not be brushed aside, as were most of our experts who came into the Rickover orbit when the 1956 Agreement finally led to bilateral talks. They became close and remain so, to the great benefit of the Royal Navy's SSBN programme in its formative stages.

By 1958, I was in my second year as Operations Officer to the Home Fleet and CinCEastLant. Still no foreigner had been allowed onboard a US Navy SSN. Without any warning or explanation, a signal reached the flagship from the Admiralty offering us operational control of the *Nautilus* for a week's operational evaluation against our ASW forces. The exercise was code named "Rum Tub", and took place in October 1958. It pitched Commander William Anderson USN and his crew against our top submarines, frigates, and airborne forces. It culminated in a spectacular event in the North-West approaches, when the *Nautilus* successfully acted as an integral part of the antisubmarine screen for the carrier *Bulwark*, maintaining her station and tactical involvement by UQC and sonar without the slightest difficulty. It was a devastating demonstration of her potential, which changed our thinking forever.

At the post-exercise conference at Londonderry, I was able to say so with some authority, having written into "Rum Tub" orders that a Royal Navy observer should ride the *Nautilus*.

Maybe Admiral Rickover had forgotten our conversation at Honolulu Airport, or never got word of the name of the first Royal Navy officer ordered to sea in an American SSN under operational conditions!