

Military Writers Society of America
2010 Anthology/Book, *Hearts of Steel*

CHAPTER 42: USS REQUIN – A Lady's Amazing Journey

Nancy Yockey Bonar

From Obsolete to Vibrant



She's a knock-out 65-year-old beauty, once a rockin' and rollin' kind of gal. This lady was accustomed to dangerous seas, both riding atop and silently under them. So why did she change her home address to Pittsburgh's placid Ohio River? And how did she get so far inland?

Hearts of Steel 169

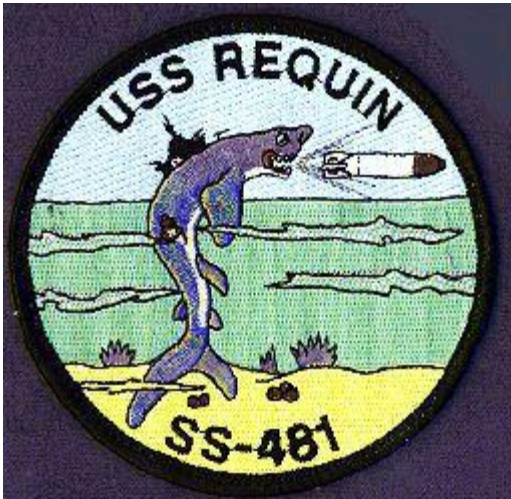
Submarine USS Requin (SS-81) and her about 1,250 sons, all Dolphin Brothers, punched holes in oceans for 23 years. Always alert to perils of the sea, from outside and within, she and crew had healthy co-dependencies: “You take care of me; I’ll take care of you.” As Cold War undersea warriors from 1945—1968, including during the Korean and Vietnam wars, they helped the U.S. and allies thwart communist Russia. Requin’s “run silent, run deep” patrols were in the hotbed Mediterranean, around South America, in the Caribbean Sea and under waters between Florida and Cuba during the 1962 missile crisis with the Kremlin. Also, she was among ships that searched unsuccessfully in 1968 for the nuclear sub, USS Scorpion (SSN 589), which had gone down with 99 men. This was Requin’s final patrol, but would it be the last time she’d see her sons?

The proud sub’s ups and downs surfaced. With classified military and scientific missions done, Requin was put out to pasture by the Navy. It switched her address from Virginia’s Norfolk Submarine Base to St. Petersburg, Florida, where she was a Naval Reserve Training Ship for several years. In 1971 the Navy called her “obsolete.” (Dreadful for *any* lady). Requin’s name was stricken and her hatches were sealed. She sat alone, empty. What was her fate? Was she, like her sister sub, USS Sphinx (SS-485), headed to a scrap heap? Requin was rescued by a Tampa group. She was a tourist attraction, but after 14 years closed and the lady was again deserted, this time for four years, then ...

Fate intervened in 1990. Requin was acquired by Pittsburgh’s Carnegie Science Center as its first major showpiece and educational exhibit. Today she is more than just a collection of metal. Her steel is permeated with stories of the terrors and joys of the men who’d been aboard. From her top deck to within the hull, Requin tells these stories to about 172,000 annual visitors. She also teaches history, oceanography, propulsion, systems, periscopes, Morse code and more.

Hearts of Steel 170

Equally important, Requin is among only about 20-plus U.S. submarine memorials/museums paying tribute to the more than 4,000 submariners who're on eternal patrol. The majority of these men went down with 52 boats during WW II. Among sub memorials, just nine are located inland, and Requin's river journey was the longest.



“My first insignia was designed by Mr. Walt Disney. ‘Requin’ is French for ‘shark.’”

Submarine Requin tells her story

“OK, I’ll dive right in. Love my name. It’s pronounced ‘rëikwein’ and is French for ‘shark.’ This is neat as all submarines are called ‘sharks of steel.’ I’ll tell you later about some sharks that thought twice about putting their snouts into my business on the Mississippi River. But, I digress.

“I was born in August 1944 in the Navy’s Portsmouth, New Hampshire, shipyard. I was a short-term baby, one of the thousands of ships hurriedly built during World War II. After just 130 days, I was fully grown at 312-feet long, 29-feet tall and svelte at 27-feet wide. As a sub, I was almost ready to immerse myself in The Silent Service and the mightiest navy in the world.

However, first were my launch, sea trials and commissioning.

Hearts of Steel 171

“Although it was back on New Year’s Day 1945, I can still hear the glass shattering when my sponsor, Mrs. Slade Cutter, whacked a champagne bottle across my bow to christen me. Her husband, Commander Cutter, would be my first skipper. She injected into me a spark of life with the words, ‘In the name of the United States I christen thee USS Requin (SS-481).’ As I slid down the inclined shipway into the water, a band played the National Anthem and Anchors Aweigh, and shipyard workers cheered. After my roll out, some sailors, technical people and I headed out to the Atlantic for sea trials. This was to ensure that all of my parts were working and if I’d need some fine tuning.

“I was immersed in another celebration in April of ‘45. At my commissioning in Portsmouth, pride ran deep for Commander Cutter, about 80 crewmen and me. These, my first sons and wearing dress blues, stood at attention dockside and also on my deck. Before our skipper read his orders and accepted command of me, I heard someone say, ‘The old man already has the greatest WW II combat record as a submariner. See the Navy Crosses he’s wearing with his gold officer’s Dolphins pin? He earned four of them for sinking 19 Japanese ships while commanding the USS Seahorse.’ Now I surmised where I was going and felt assured I was in good hands. The ceremony hoopla ended with the National Anthem and the hoisting of flags and our dynamite Requin pennant.

“You should know that I’m not like today’s fancy-shmancy submarines. They run on clean nuclear power and are as long as one or two football field. No, I’m a ‘smoke boat,’ a term coined by shipmate, Dex. Powered with diesel fuel (and coffee). I belched blue hazes of smelly smoke when my engines started. And inside, I was much smaller than modern boats. When we deployed, my passageways were stacked with canned food.

Bags of onions and spuds hung in the after battery room, and the men bet

Hearts of Steel 172

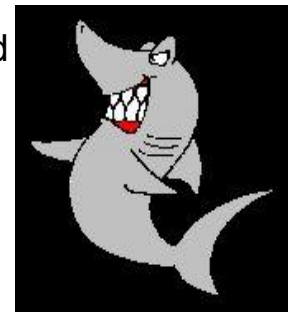
which bag would sprout first. Crew slept in narrow beds stacked three high. Sometimes they 'hot racked,' taking turns sleeping in bunks.

"I didn't carry much water for showers, so the men reeked of diesel oil. But the cooks and night baker were fantastic. I especially enjoyed the aroma of cinnamon sticky buns wafting throughout me. My sons, as with all submariners submerged for long periods, handled stress and boredom with salty-language, pranks, jokes and can-you-top-this lies. They even gave one another affectionate, but funny, names like Rat, Bird Man, Sleepy, Drifty and Lil' Abner. My code name was Rocketwolf.

"Back to business. In June '45 we deployed for the WW II Pacific Theater via the Panama Canal. We'd been ordered to a Japanese harbor loaded with war ships. However, this wasn't to be. Two weeks after our arrival in Pearl Harbor, World War II ended. We headed back to the Atlantic and other missions.

"You know about my Cold War service – there's more at www.ussrequin.com – and my Carnegie rescue. But chances are you don't know about my amazing journey to Pittsburgh. Briefly, on Aug. 7, 1990, and from a private Tampa shipyard where I'd been made ship-shape, I was towed about 500 miles across the Gulf of Mexico to Baton Rouge, Louisiana. A crane hoisted me aboard four barges and, on Aug. 11, with a towboat pushing our flotilla, we started what would be a 29-day, 2,000-mile river journey.

"Oh, yes, the sharks. On the Lower Mississippi we passed over bullhead sharks that must have been up to their gills with curiosity. But even if they'd stayed around, this wouldn't have fazed me – not *this* 'shark of steel!'



Hearts of Steel 173

As my parade turned northeasterly on the Ohio River, we traveled uphill by passing through 20 locks. Joyfully, I arrived in Pittsburgh on Sept. 4. I was lifted from the barges and anchored at my new address. Home!

“And guess what? While many of my sons have gone on eternal patrol -- are sailing on THE Admiral’s boat -- others like Peter, Ronnie and Don have reunions with me. And I can always count on attention from submarine veterans who wear USS Requin Base caps. When these Dolphin Brothers host Memorial Day public ceremonies on my top deck, my pride runs deep.”

Author’s Note: For visiting hours at the Carnegie Science Center, 412.237.1637. In memory of Marl “Tink” Garlock, USS Requin, September 21, 1962; and with “thanks” to Jim Mandelblatt, Requin author/tribute website creator <http://ss481.com/> and to Requin submariners for their memories. *“Fair winds and following seas.”*



This Military Writer Society of America member is a “chip” off at least three “blocks.” Nancy (Yockey) Bonar’s dad was a newspaper editor — she became a newspaper reporter/columnist for a major daily; her mom was a great down-home cook — Nancy loves to cook; her brother was a submarine commander — Nancy has dived aboard submarines and is acknowledged U.S. Submarine Force family. She is a life/associate member, U.S. Submarine

Veterans, member of its Lockwood Internet Base, and on the advisory group, USS Cod submarine memorial/museum, Cleveland, Ohio.

*Raised in Dover, Ohio, Nancy was graduated from Kent State University's School
Hearts of Steel 174*

of Journalism with a bachelor's degree. After a year as a flight attendant and another as an advertising account executive in The Big Apple, she joined the newsroom of the Akron (Ohio) Beacon Journal. Her next stints were as a wife, mother of two children and a freelancer.

Accredited by the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), Nancy was a senior account executive for David Meeker Public Relations, Akron and, with a merger, Edward Howard and Co., Cleveland. She and Meeker won, on behalf of a Fortune 100 company, PRSA's top award. In retirement, she's a freelance PR consultant, and a volunteer for several community, professional and military organizations.

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