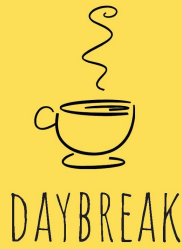


LETTERS TO



Like a long patrol

When the pandemic lockdown started around March 17th I didn't think much about it, other than we'd be staying home a lot and would have to be very careful when we did have to go out for groceries. My wife and I are retired and tend to spend more time around the house rather than going out all the time, so I figured, OK we can deal with it. We always seem to keep ourselves busy with various hobbies and projects around the house. As we got more into the lockdown we noticed that it was a bit hard not at least having the option to say, "Let's go to the store," or to drive here or there on a whim if we wanted. As we progressed, memories and feelings from a long time ago started to come to mind for me.

In the 1960's I was a young man in the Navy Submarine service. I was stationed on an early nuclear submarine, the USS Snook (SSN 592). Our main limitation on how long we could stay at sea was pretty much based on our food supply. I remember well our typical western Pacific deployments, or as they were known, WESTPAC. On a typical WESTPAC we were away for about 7 or 8 months and of that we were underwater for about 6 months. During 1966, Snook steamed for 35,000 miles, of which 34,000 were submerged. That was a lot of time isolated underwater and no choice about it. When we left port, the minute we had enough water under us we submerged and we didn't surface until coming back into port when our keel was almost scraping the bottom.

During our patrols the Navy knew the area where we were supposed to be patrolling but had no idea where we actually were and no contact with us, other than scheduled broadcasts from them that they assumed we received. We transmitted absolutely nothing and were on patrol quiet all the time. If we had trouble we were on our own. The Navy would have no idea we were in trouble until we didn't show up when we were due

back in port. Where we were on patrol we could not surface for anything, since it would likely cause a huge incident. Remember, this was during the Cold War and Russian trawlers were very active and really wanted to dissuade us from where we were patrolling and also were trying very hard to track us. Our typical routine while on WESTPAC was a 60-to-70 day patrol and then a week or so in some port for stores, liberty and repairs then do it all over again. During my time on Snook we left for a WESTPAC from San Diego to Hawaii, then Subic Bay in the Philippines. Then Hong Kong via Vietnam, Yokosuka, Japan, Okinawa, Guam and back to San Diego via Hawaii.

With this background in mind you can see why, just passing the 60-day mark from the pandemic, memories from the long patrols return. Now, also, I tend to think and plan my day based on meals like we did on patrols. Meals on the sub were very important for morale. I especially remember midnight watches when I was fairly new onboard. My duty station was helmsman, piloting the sub. During the mid-watch sometimes, the night baker would bring freshly baked bread or other goodies up to the control room for the watch-standers. What a treat it was.

I will always remember those long watches. Our diving officer on some of those mid-watches was a chief torpedoman who had been on World War II submarines and on a sub that went into Tokyo Harbor. His tales were right out of all the submarine movies you ever watched, but he actually had been there. The history he told was amazing. Meals were not just a meal, they were much more. It was relief from the boredom. It was catching up with your shipmates and playing cards or watching a movie. It was a small amount of downtime from the 6 hours on and 6 hours off of watch to decompress a little or not pay attention to what was currently happening on the patrol.

I also remember one time when a new commissary man who had never provisioned a sub under-packed for a patrol—even with the usual Navy documents to help you plan. Towards the end we were definitely running low on food. Then, to make matters worse, we received orders via one of our scheduled receive-only broadcasts to remain on station for another 2 weeks. There was nothing we could do. By the end of the patrol we were down to Spam, cans of dehydrated cottage cheese, and instant mashed potatoes. The cooks tried to make things seem better by calling breakfast Spam “grilled,” dinner Spam “baked,” and so forth. The potatoes were called “fried” at breakfast, “roasted” at noon and “snowflake” at dinner. But they were all the exact same. Morale at the end of that patrol was not the best. To this day I can’t even think of eating Spam and eye suspiciously and feel much the same about instant mashed potatoes.

So here I sit in mid-May like I just finished a patrol and now will get ready to do it all over again into at least June or July, with all the memories and feelings from a long time ago returning. And my wife and I will do this routine for however many more months we have to so we protect others and remain safe ourselves from the virus.

The big difference is that we can every so often carefully go to the market for supplies or do curbside pickup from Wal-Mart or have Amazon ship it in. We have access to unlimited books, movies, and other content from the internet. I have a lot more space available than I did on the sub and the whole outside at the house to roam around the garden in the fresh air and sunlight. Not bad compared to the past “long patrols” in the 60’s that I was on. And please remember that the same things are still going on now for the people in the submarine fleet and the other Navy sailors on ships and soldiers on the ground being isolated and eating MRE’s for many days and months at a time. I think of way back then and what our troops are doing or people in cities like New York are going through now and I figure... I’ve got this, no problem.

--Tom Gillen