

ROB FORSYTH

Rob Forsyth



'When I made a decision, aged 16, to apply for entry to Dartmouth, it was only 10 years from the end of WWII, two years from the end of the Korean War, National Service was still in force and bookstalls were still full of war-time stories. I could not think of anything more exciting than to join the Senior Service. I was right. The Cold War became very "hot" for the submarine service in which I was to spend nearly my entire naval career.

I first went to sea in *HMS Appleton*, a coastal minesweeper. I then joined *HMS Chichester* which was an air defence frigate destined for the Far East station but the 1961 Kuwait/Iraq crisis intervened and we were dispatched to the Gulf. My career path changed completely after four months because my Captain had decided that my character and skills were well (better?) suited to the submarine service and I was to start training in September 1961. This was a bit of a surprise but sounded exciting. In any case there was no room for objection - once you received the Queen's shilling you did what you were told! I was landed in Mombasa to make my own way to Nairobi to catch an RAF trooping flight home a week or so later.

The training school was located at Gosport in Fort Blockhouse, originally built during the Napoleonic wars. It became the home base for submarines when the first RN submarine, *Holland 1*, entered service in 1901. It is now a museum.

My first submarine was *HMS Auriga* (March 1962) attached to the 6th Submarine Division in Halifax, Canada. *HMS Auriga* had just completed a refit in UK so the first few months were spent "working up" in the Clyde, Scotland, before deploying to Halifax. Nonetheless I managed to find time to get married before we sailed.

This period marked the real start of the Cold War. The stand-off between the USSR and USA over the installation of Soviet missiles in Cuba occurred just before we sailed across the Atlantic. It was to affect all our lives from then on. During the two years of being based in Canada we would regularly go north to practise patrolling beneath the arctic ice where the Soviet submarines often operated.

1965 to 1968 was spent serving in *HMS Sealion* based at Faslane in Scotland, taking a specialist sonar course in Portsmouth and then back to Scotland on the shore

responsible for the operational efficiency of all submarines. With Russian ships and submarines passing our front door, so to speak, every day we were very pre-occupied in tracking their movements around the Atlantic seaboard.

Hong Kong: traditional farewell to our Captain, in a rickshaw pulled by his officers



In 1968, after barely a year in Scotland, the family (two children by now) and I had to pack our bags to fly to Singapore because I had been appointed as the 1st Lieutenant of *HMS Cachalot*. These were the dying days of Empire before the services pulled out of their East of Suez bases. Although the Indonesian Confrontation had ceased three years previously the emergence of the Chinese Navy as a major force gave us new intelligence tasks.

In 1969 I was selected for the Submarine Commanding Officers' Qualifying Course - aka "The Perisher". This six-month course is a prerequisite for command of a submarine. Failure means your submarine career "perishes". I was appointed in command of *HMS Alliance* in January 1970 at Devonport. One's first command is a daunting experience but we were too busy chasing Russian submarines or practising attacks against our own forces for me to have much time to think.

Periscope photograph showing the track of a torpedo heading for the target.

The target ship is 2 ½ nautical miles (nm) away but the visible bubbles extend only a few hundred yards. The target and torpedo tracks co-incided at 1 nm and were assessed as a 'hit'. The torpedo was set to run about 25 feet below the keel of the ship to avoid a real hit!



Two years in command was followed by nuclear training at the RN College in Greenwich to prepare me for joining *HMS Repulse* (1972). This was one of the four Polaris missile-carrying submarines based on the Clyde. The Polaris Force was required to have one submarine at sea at all times, ready to launch its 16 missiles within 15 minutes of receiving the order to fire. This required each submarine to have two crews (Port and Starboard) alternately taking it on patrol. I was to be

the Executive Officer of the Starboard crew. A patrol lasted from four to eight weeks and during that time there could be no contact of any sort between the crew and their families, other than that each crew member could receive a short weekly message (known as a “family gram”) of 40 words. It was a very difficult existence for the crews’ families who did not know when the submarine was sailing or would return. No outgoing signals of any sort could be made even for, say, a death on board. This is still the case today with the Trident Missile Force.

I was promoted to Commander in 1974 and appointed to run the “Perisher” for two years. Being a student on this course five years previously had been a challenge; being in charge of it as ‘Teacher’ was even more so.

In April 1977 the family (now three children) came to live in Deddington which is not very far from Priors Marston, Warwickshire, where I had grown up. The original plan was to stay here for a few years during my next appointment, which was to command a nuclear “Hunter Killer” submarine *HMS Sceptre*, but somehow we never found any reason to move away.

I joined in time to see *HMS Sceptre* launched. The two years that I then spent at sea on her I can only describe as exhilarating. All I can disclose at present is that we were a very fast, deep diving submarine designed specifically to counter the Soviet submarine threat at a time when the Cold War was at its height.

Barrow-in-Furness 20 November 1976



Bigger and better Russian ships and submarines were appearing in the Atlantic every year. Our task was to track them so that we could counter-attack immediately if hostilities started. We therefore spent a lot of time trailing very closely behind them wherever they went to observe how and where they operated; this included such exciting manoeuvres as passing under Russian ships’ hulls to take periscope photographs of propellers and other underwater equipment.

At the end of my command time I was sent to a desk job in the Ministry of Defence (July 1979). Everyone has to do their penance time here and I was no different. While I found it interesting, I was fretting to get back to sea but my chances of doing so were going to be much reduced because the Navy was about to lose a large number of ships; and so I decided to opt out before it became a sad place to be. In January 1981 I stepped “ashore” for the last time as a serving officer and embarked on a commercial career which led me to Ferranti, Racal and Westland before retiring from corporate life in 2000.’