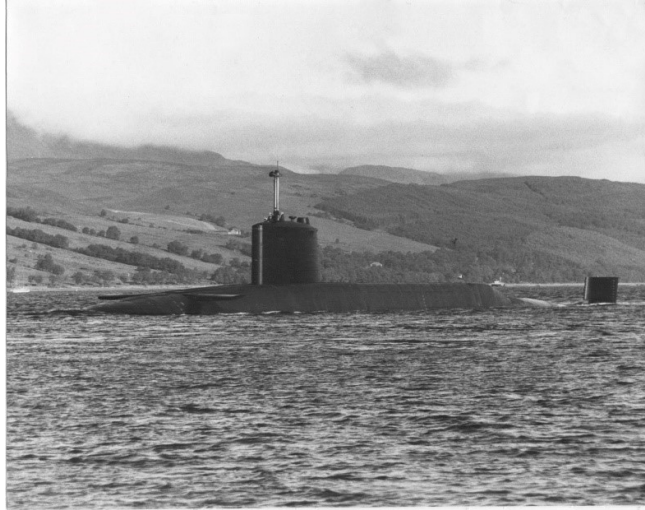


## How to survive in isolation - the experiences of a submariner

*Rob Forsyth*

It's the 5th Sunday morning in a row for a Polaris missile submarine on patrol; I stroll down the main passageway pulling a scrubbing brush on a string behind me casually acknowledging various social greetings but creating no surprise. Have I gone mad? No, the Executive Officer is just taking his 'dog' for a walk as a way of deliberately disrupting the tedious routine of what could be an 8 week patrol but no one will know just how long until the recall signal sets a wave of channel fever sweeping through the boat.



I am frequently asked if we submariners were volunteers and underwent psychological testing to establish if we could live for months at a time, totally isolated underwater, in the company of a very disparate group of people. The answer is No to both. In fact the Canadian Navy once sent a 'head shrink' to interview a submarine crew because it was contemplating obtaining its own submarines. 'They are all half mad' was the conclusion but this missed the point. Yes we were strong minded, opinionated and very idiosyncratic - our partner's description when being polite - but even the most diverse personalities, forced to co-exist, will modify their behaviour to avoid annoying their fellow beings and cope with the mental strain of being 'locked up' for an uncertain period of time.

So what were our coping mechanisms? It was important to have a structure to the week. Every day needed its own characteristic by way of a scheduled activity - church every Sunday for instance. Few came but all complained if they did not hear the sound of a hymn being sung by the few that did. Social events such as quizzes and film nights or a fiercely competitive naval version of Ludo called 'uckers' on set nights were regulars. Saturday night F1 races round a Scalextric track weaving its way between the missile tubes was the highlight. Card games had unique rules revolving round fierce cheating. This allowed the letting off of steam facing up to someone who had perhaps been getting on your nerves - even the Captain! Towards the end of every patrol there would always be a variety show - aka a 'Sod's Opera' - in which dressing up using the engine room rag bags as a source for surprisingly 'exotic' costumes was essential. Talent was mixed but, like all amateur productions, the anticipation, taking part and audience involvement was what it was all about.

But through it all ran a strong thread of humour, poking fun whenever possible at our isolated existence. This was well expressed in our Sunday newspaper which reported gossip and goings on in the boat in a thoroughly scurrilous manner from which no one was exempt. It also provided a platform for some very talented cartoonists.

Finally, it was best not to count the days because that merely emphasised how long it had been since you sailed. If all else fails - you could take your scrubbing brush for a walk - but on no account let it lift its leg on someone's newly washed deck.