

The US Submarine Force

An Overview of Its Makeup, Missions, People, and Related Issues

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Background

The United States Submarine Force is often one of the most misunderstood and, thus, least appreciated forces within the US military establishment. Referred to as the “Silent Service,” this silence encompasses more than just the silent machines and secretive missions, it includes the inclination of the Submariners to not discuss many aspects of submarine life and duty. This silence, lack of understanding, and misunderstanding of the Submarine Force can lead to submariners being left outside of, at best, or ostracized from veteran communities.

From recent research, it can be determined that the major contributing factor to the misunderstandings within the veteran community and veteran service organizations (VSOs) is a failure in leadership. This failure extends to several different aspects of leadership, which include, but is not limited to:

- Unbalanced and inconsistent recognition of performance, duties, and patrol operations
- Overemphasis on the importance of certain types of submarines over others
- Inadequate communications
- Failure to support the entire Submarine Force
- And, failure to accomplish the mission and vision of the organization

While the first item above will be seen to lie almost solely within the authority and purview of the US Navy’s Submarine Force command hierarchy, the remaining four will be demonstrated as failures in the Navy’s command and/or the leadership of the VFW and other VSOs.

This paper is intended to identify the failures and current state of these in both the Active duty and veteran Submarine Force communities. Following this, a proposal for a plan of action will be presented to rectify the failures and move forward into a brighter future.

Within the VFW, this is manifested in a refusal to consider extending eligibility to those who have not received either qualifying medals, ribbons, or been awarded the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia. Yet, have served in an environment, on missions/patrols, and duty that should fully qualify them for membership eligibility. Further, it will be demonstrated that within the VFW, with a mission to “to advocate on behalf of all veterans,” and its vision, as fully cited below, there has been a failure to fully advocate on behalf of Submariners.

In this time when large portions of the VFW membership are reaching the end of their life’s journey, the VFW is being confronted with reduced membership and a smaller target source of members. There is no better time for us to dig deep and look “outside the box” for veterans who should qualify for eligibility, but don’t. The VFW must resume its leadership role of advocating for all veterans, even those from small service-related communities, to ensure that these veterans receive the recognition, support, and benefits due them as a result of their service to our country.

We must take the lead in preparing the VFW for new members, and prepare “our house” to welcome new and younger members. Now, is the time to reach out to the Submarine community by demonstrating through our efforts how we support and recognize their service. We must rectify our past failures that have led to mistrust and a lack of desire to join the leading VSO in the United States. Yes, now is the time for us to stop alienating any veterans and potential

members. Otherwise, we will demonstrate, once again, that we have learned nothing from our past failures.

The Submarine Force

The Submarine Force “officially” began with the purchase and delivery of its first submarine the *Holland* on April 11, 1900. (*Today in History - April 11*, n.d.) Since that inauspicious beginning, with a small submarine with limited capabilities, the US Navy’s Submarine Force has continued to evolve and face a wide variety of changing threats while providing offensive, defensive, and deterrent capabilities within the US military’s scope of operations.

During World War II approximately 16,000,000 Americans served in the Armed Forces, of this number only 16,000, or 0.1%, served in submarines. This small band of brothers played a major and almost unequaled influence on winning the war in the Pacific Theater. These small boats sank more ships, having a greater impact on the Japanese ability to wage war than any other aspect of the US military. This is not to belittle or diminish the impacts of the Army, Naval surface forces, Marines, or the Army Air Corps (soon to become the US Air Force), rather it is intended to draw attention to the power, influence, and impact of small and fragile submarines manned by dedicated men. The Submarine Force suffered the staggering losses of 52 submarines and 3,506 men. Stated differently, these losses equate to nearly 20% of the US Navy’s submarines and almost 22% of its submarine manpower at that time.

During the Cold War, the Submarine Force evolved into the most dominant in the world. It was the first to design, build, and deploy nuclear-powered submarines, the first to deploy submarine-launched missiles, the first to develop and utilize covert intelligence gathering capabilities, the first to circumnavigate the Earth – submerged, and the first transit and operation in and under the Polar Ice Cap.

Submarine Nuclear Deterrence Capabilities

During the mid-1950s, the Navy’s submarine command began investigating the feasibility of deploying nuclear-armed missiles as a deterrent against Soviet/communist aggression. The first project utilized the Regulus missiles, a missile derived from captured Nazi Germany’s V-1 rockets. Both the Regulus and Regulus II missiles were remote-controlled using radio guidance from equipment installed on submarines (Picket Boats), ships, or chase aircraft. There were five missile-carrying submarines and two Picket Boats designed and retrofitted or built to support this program. This included the first nuclear-powered missile submarine the USS *Halibut* (SSGN 587). The Regulus patrols were conducted from 1953 to 1964.

The Polaris Project began sometime in the mid to late-1950s. Between December 1957 and December 1966, 41 SSBNs (Submersible Ship – Ballistic Missile – Nuclear-powered), or the **41 For Freedom**, were built and deployed. All of these SSBNs had the capability of carrying up to 16 Polaris A1 or A3 missiles and the capacity to be upgraded to newer and more capable missile systems, except for the 598 and 606 classes (ten submarines). The other thirty-one were upgraded to the Poseidon (C3) Missile system beginning in 1971, then twelve of these were refitted to the Trident I (C4) system beginning in 1979.

Next, the Navy designed, built, and deployed the Ohio class submarines, or Trident submarines (T-hulls) beginning in 1981. These boats were designed to carry up to 24 Trident I missiles initially, then the Trident II missiles. There are 18 of these submarines still in service with four being converted to SSGN or Guided Missile submarines.

Fleet and Nuclear Attack Submarines

The Fleet submarines in the US Navy were diesel-powered submarines designed, built, and deployed from 1940 through the end of World War II. Fleet boats were designed for speed, range, and endurance operating to cover the vast expanses of the Pacific Ocean. (Wikipedia contributors, 2023) Those remaining in service after the war continued service until the 1970s, some going through multiple conversions to improve various aspects of their capabilities.

Nuclear Attack submarines are designed to seek and destroy enemy submarines and surface ships; project power ashore with Tomahawk cruise missiles and Special Operation Forces (SOF); carry out Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance (ISR) missions; support battle group operations; and engage in mine warfare. (United States Navy, n.d.) Additionally, these submarines are the “first responders” should an SSBN detect a follow or be in danger of compromise by an enemy force. There are currently approximately 55 of these submarines in service.

Submarine Crews – The Human Resource

Submariners come from all walks of life, different religions, ethnic origins, genders, educational backgrounds, socioeconomic strata, and cultures. Yet, they all share one thing in common, they volunteered to serve on submarines. Yes, the Submarine Force is an all-volunteer force within the all-volunteer Navy.

Additionally, sailors who volunteer must meet very high standards in education, knowledge, and aptitude. It is often stated that these volunteers are “the finest and the brightest” and “the elite of the fleet.” This does not imply that non-submariners are not intelligent or elite, only that submariners must be a cut above the rest. (*MILPERSMAN 1220-040*, 2018 and *MILPERSMAN 1306-402*, 2018)

Submarine-related schools set higher expectations and performance levels than other fleet schools. This is first experienced in the grading curve. While fleet schools have a fail percentage of 67.5, submarine schools expect grades higher than 72.5%. Further, submarine schools do not accept or tolerate failure. If a student fails a weekly unit they are immediately transferred out of the school. While they may be assigned to a different submarine specialty or school, often they are transferred to the surface fleet.

The same holds true while assigned to a submarine. Should a crewmember fail to complete his/her ship's qualifications within the prescribed time, transferred to the surface fleet. In the event a crewmember does not perform his/her duties as expected or outside of procedural requirements, depending on the severity of the event, they are, again, transferred to the

surface fleet. Yes, the expectations placed on the submarine volunteers are high, but they have to be.

Submarine Insignia and Combat Equivalent Medal

Submarine Warfare Insignia

The Submarine Warfare Insignia Officer and Enlisted, or Dolphins, are the second oldest warfare insignia in the US Navy, only the Officer Aviation Warfare Insignia, wings, are older. The Dolphins insignia was approved in March 1924 by acting Secretary of the Navy, Theodore Roosevelt. (Submarine Insignia History, n.d.) Also, Dolphins hold a higher priority or rank than any other warfare insignia of the fleet, except for aviation officer wings.

The Submariner must earn his/her Dolphins. For the enlisted, this is a process that can take up to a year to complete. This is called Submarine Qualifications or Quals. Quals involve learning every major system on the boat and are not an easy or simple undertaking. Also,

Personnel **are not eligible** to be designated “qualified in submarines” by the CO until they have served aboard a submarine for 6 months. **The CO must ensure personnel have sufficient underway time to ensure the validity of the designation “qualified in submarines.”** (MILPERSMAN 1220-040, 2018) (Emphasis added)

The above directly contradicts a point made at the National Convention 2022 when a member of the ByLaws Committee stated something similar to, “Dolphins could be earned without going to sea!”

Once earned, the Dolphins become the most prized possession of every Submariner.

Submarine Patrol Insignia

“There are two types of submarine patrol insignias awarded to a member, Submarine Combat and SSBN Deterrent.” (MILPERSMAN 1200-010, n.d.)

Submarine Combat Patrol Insignia (SCPI)

The SCPI was awarded “to members regularly assigned to submarine duty on or after 7 December 1941, who completed one or more wartime combat patrols” (MILPERSMAN 1200-010, n.d.) during World War II. It is no longer awarded to Active Duty personnel.

SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia

This insignia is awarded to assigned Fleet Ballistic Missile (FBM or SSBN) submarine crew members who have completed one or more SSBN deterrent

patrols. (MILPERSMAN 1200-010, n.d.) Additionally, “It is the successor to the Submarine Combat Patrol Insignia awarded for submarine patrols during World War II.” (*Submarine Insignia History*, n.d.)

This insignia was approved and authorized in 1969 retroactively to 1961 to the first deterrent patrol of the USS George Washington SSBN 598.

Navy Expeditionary Medal (NEM)

“The medal will be awarded to the officers and enlisted men of the Navy and Marine Corps who shall have actually landed on foreign territory and engaged in operations against armed opposition, or operated under circumstances which, after full consideration, shall be deemed to merit special recognition and for which service no campaign medal has been awarded.” (*Navy Expeditionary Medal / Marine Corps Expeditionary Medal*, 2017)

The NEM is only authorized for non-SSBN submarines and is considered a “combat” medal in these cases.

Command-Induced Force Problems with the Patrol Insignia and NEM

Since its inception in 1969, the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia has caused problems within the Submarine Forces. This is especially true with it being designated as the successor to the SCPI without a comparable patrol pin being approved for members of the Fleet and Attack submarine crews. It is often derisively referred to as the “Hide with Pride” pin by non-SSBN Submariners.

Unbalanced and Inconsistent Recognition of Duties Performed

No reason or justification has been discovered as to why similar patrol insignias were not designed and approved for Fleet and Attack submarine crews. Yet, the uniform visibility of the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia and the ease with which it is awarded to SSBN crews cannot be compared to the minimal visibility of the NEM on the crewmembers' “ribbon racks.” This presents an unbalanced recognition of submarine combat-related duties. Additionally, the lack of consistent awarding of the NEM to submarine crews has compounded this failure to properly recognize the hazardous service of these dedicated crews.

Ill-informed Submarine Command Related Decision

In 1997, Vice Admiral Richard W. Mies, Commander, Submarine Force U.S. Atlantic Fleet (SUBLANT) informed the Bureau of Naval Personnel that veterans “who conducted Regulus missile deterrent patrols are hereby authorized to wear the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia in accordance with article 142-130 of the MILPERSMAN and in the fashion prescribed by the Naval Uniform Regulations”. (Parmar, 2021)

Yet, this only applied to the crews of the five submarines that carried the Regulus missiles. It did not include the Picket Boats required to accompany these submarines to provide remote control of the missiles. Yes, the launching of the missiles would have been worthless without the service provided by the Picket Boats that were required to accompany the missile-carrying submarines. Again, unequal recognition for equal service and sacrifice.

Further, this can be interpreted to be a direct violation of MILPERSMAN 1200-010 as these submarines were not SSBNs nor were they conducting an SSBN deterrent patrol.

Contemporary Questions

Do the four Ohio class submarines currently designated as SSGNs receive the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia for their patrols? If so, why and how? Wouldn't this be a further violation of MILPERSMAN 1200-010 as cited above?

Are SSN Attack Submarines crews being awarded the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Pin for conducting patrols possibly armed with nuclear-armed Tomahawk missiles? The latter questions above would equally apply to this case.

VFW

We, the Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (VFW), are the premier veterans' service organization in the United States. The VFW can truly state, "No One Does More For Veterans." Our mission and vision statements encompass the passions we share as members and the goals that empower our service to our communities, states, and country.

Our Mission: To foster camaraderie among United States veterans of overseas conflicts. To serve our veterans, the military and our communities. To advocate on behalf of all veterans.

Our Vision: Ensure that veterans are respected for their service, always receive their earned entitlements, and are recognized for the sacrifices they and their loved ones have made on behalf of this great country. (*About Us*, n.d.)

Yet, in committee meetings held at National VFW Conventions in the past, Submariners have been insulted, belittled, and lied about in direct contravention to **Our Mission** and **Our Vision** and the admonitions read at the beginning of each VFW meeting. These insults and falsehoods were spoken during official committee meetings and were filled with "petty jealousies."

As a result, some within our submarine veteran population have felt ostracized and unrecognized for their service and sacrifices that accompanied their service within the Submarine Force. The addition of the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia as a VFW eligibility qualifier has alienated many Submariners

In a time when many of our older members are reaching the end of their life journeys and membership in the VFW is decreasing, do we enjoy the ability to alienate any veteran or veteran

community? The author and contributors to this whitepaper do not think so. Rather, it is time to reach out to often-neglected small veteran communities and strive to fulfill our mission and vision statements. It is time for us to seek ways to welcome veterans who should be eligible but are not at this time. The time is now for us to identify and determine ways to make these veterans, or at least assist them, in becoming eligible rather than brushing them aside.

Proposed Plan of Action

We propose a multi-pronged approach to better serve the US Navy's Submarine Force veterans and Active Duty personnel, as follows:

1. National VFW Liaison Office to the Submarine Community

A liaison is defined by the Merriam-Webster Dictionary as:

3 a: communication for establishing and maintaining mutual understanding and cooperation (as between parts of an armed force)

b: a person who establishes and maintains communication for mutual understanding and cooperation (n.d.)

Truly, this provides us with a basis for the VFW National Liaison Office to the Submarine Community.

This office will be tasked with three primary objectives:

1. To educate VFW leadership and membership in matters regarding submarine service, duty, and the uniqueness associated with such service to empower VFW leadership to better address the specific needs of submarine veterans and Active Duty personnel.
2. To facilitate and foster mutual understanding and cooperation with US Navy Submarine Force commanders, commands, and Submariner veterans organizations (e.g. United States Submarine Veterans, Inc. and Naval Submarine League) to establish trust and courses of action to better serve submarine veterans and Active Duty personnel.
3. To initiate and facilitate conversations with the VA to establish better care and services for submarine veterans and to advocate for special studies related to the duties and time spent serving onboard submerged submarines.

These three objectives will enable the VFW to demonstrate our commitment to advocate for and work to ensure that Submariners received proper recognition for their service and sacrifices.

We recommend this National Liaison Office be manned by two VFW Liaison Officers, one for the East Coast and the other for the West Coast. Also, these officers should be one veteran of SSBNs and the other a veteran of Attack Submarines. This will provide a total view of the Submarine Force in this office.

2. Work with Submarine Commands for New Submarine Patrol Insignias

As demonstrated above, the SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia (Pin) has led to unequal and unbalanced recognition of service within the Submarine Force since 1969. Therefore, we propose the following:

1. A new SS/SSN Patrol Insignia for extended deep water patrols of 45 days or more.
2. A new SSG/SSGN Patrol Insignia for extended deep water patrols of 45 days or more.

These insignias will have equivalent award rank to the SCPI and SSBN Deterrent Patrol Insignia and thus be considered combat insignia. They will be retroactive from 1947 through the Present. For veterans, there will be a simplified manner to identify eligibility for the insignia, since they will not be included on existing DD214s. The VFW, submarine commands, Department of the Navy, and military records organizations should work for a simplified and easy-to-use website that veterans can use to validate or verify their eligibility for these new patrol insignias. Finally, with the approval and authorization of these new insignia, the VFW National C of A will adopt them as membership eligibility qualifiers and add them to the Eligibility Rule without delay.

Conclusion

This paper has provided a brief overview of the Submarine Force, submarine patrol awards, problems associated with these awards, and a proposal for action. It is our belief this establishes an understanding from which the VFW may move forward in the future to better serve submarine veterans and Active Duty personnel. Further, it can be utilized as a template for future activities associated with other similarly neglected or overlooked veterans of the United States military.

Your consideration and time taken are greatly appreciated and we look forward to working for the betterment of the VFW.

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