



Unseen Up North, by Cdr Guy Warner RN

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I had already served at sea as a seaman officer in two diesel submarines and then had been in the first S class SSN for over 18 months when we started on special operations. I had been on operational patrol in Swiftsure before – in the Mediterranean – but this time it was different. We were to gather intelligence on the Soviet Fleet at close quarters in their own backyard. Any mistakes could mean spending the rest of our lives in Siberia, as the Captain was fond of saying.

First there was a special work-up which was overseen by Captain Sandy Woodward and Commander Mike Boyce – both severe taskmasters. During this phase the Executive Officer and Navigating Officer were both replaced as being not up to the job. I survived – mainly I suspect because I was the officer who 'understood' DCA, our new computer driven Action Information system, and the Captain had boldly done away with all the manual tools.

We duly sailed from Faslane for the Barents Sea with special intercept equipment on board and Russian speakers to operate it. Also we had an extra Command Qualified officer whose job it was to take charge of one watch with the Executive Officer taking charge of the other, leaving the Captain free. We kept six-hour watches – six hours on, six hours off – with both watches able to conduct all evolutions so we were permanently at Action Stations. This was necessary as, once in the patrol area, we were always in contact with Soviet forces. The downside of this was that when you came off your six-hour watch you had to reconstruct what had happened during the watch by drawing up and analysing manual plots on the Wardroom table. This sometimes took the full six hours before you were due back on again! Years later this motivated me into including post event analysis in the replacement computer system even though it wasn't in the specification.

Our mission was to gather as much information as possible on new Soviet ships, submarines and weapon systems but, above all, remain undetected. While trailing Soviet submarines, we used to keep in their stern arcs to avoid detection but every so often they would reverse course and come at full speed down their previous track to ensure there was nobody behind them; this manoeuvre was known as 'Crazy Ivan'. You had to sidestep smartly to avoid counter detection or collision. However, this was not as hairy as 'underwater looks' when you sailed under a hostile ship with your partly-raised periscope a few feet from her hull, taking photographs. We also did this on their submarines! The trim had to be perfect with neutral buoyancy and I happened to be the Trimming Officer. It reminded me of the Byron quotation, 'My hair is grey though not with years'.

This task was particularly appropriate when we had a rare reactor system leak in the primary coolant. This had to be repaired and immediately meant a reactor compartment entry – not an evolution to be conducted at sea and certainly not in hostile waters, as the reactor had to be shut down resulting in zero propulsion except for a minute electric motor rightly called the 'eggbeater'. The Captain asked the MEO, who was to do the entry alone with all the protective kit on, how long he would need. 'Fifteen minutes,' he replied. So that was the period in which we had to keep a 'stop trim', that is one not assisted by forward motion. I just about kept the trim in equilibrium for 15 minutes and then we started to oscillate. As we started to come up I would flood water in and then

pump it out as we started to sink – in extremis, a choice between inadvertently surfacing surrounded by soviet warships or exceeding our crushing depth. After 30 minutes things were looking grim with the Captain breathing fire at me but the repair was just completed in time. The MEO subsequently got the MBE!



HMS *Swiftsure* – the lead in a class of seven nuclear powered attack submarines by permission of Navy News (MOD)

I had my share of operational pressure also as Communications Officer. After observing especially important missile firing tests or other significant events, a signal had to be sent back to HQ with details so that other assets could be tasked immediately. During this particular operational patrol, we sent over 40 Flash signals, each of which necessitated special encryption action by the Communications Officer alone and as speedily as humanly possible without any mistakes. Also if our communications mast played up or communications could not be established, guess who got it in the neck?

Moreover when we got back to Faslane, the Captain said, ‘Warner, you haven’t done much this trip. You can take charge of preparing all the material of Top Secret and above for my presentation in the Ministry of Defence to First Sea Lord and others next week and it had better be good’. He was awarded the OBE following this patrol so I suppose the presentation was all right.

I ended up serving nearly three years in the submarine *Swiftsure*, under three different captains, much of it on operations, during which we never failed to sail on time. I certainly ‘Saw the Sea’ even though most of it was from below the surface. I wouldn’t have missed any of it!

Postscript by the RNIOA, 11 November 2024

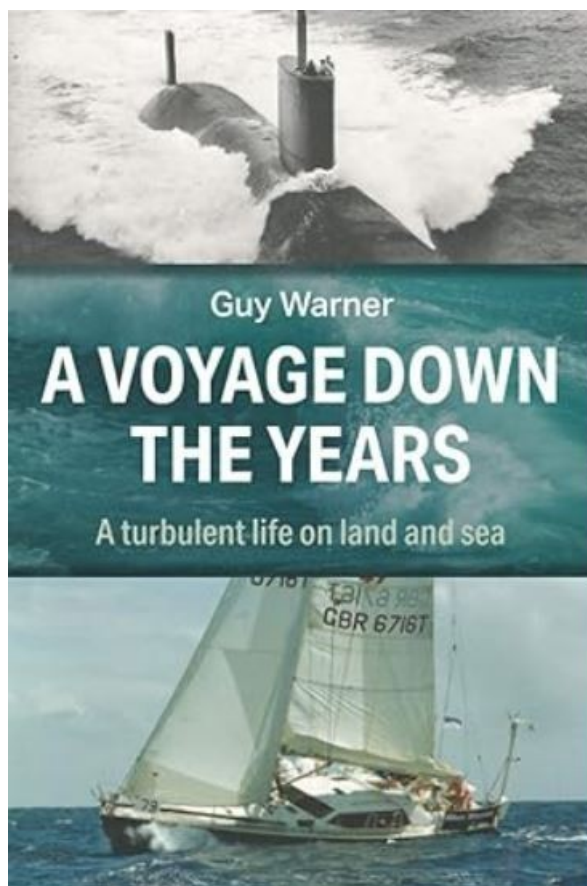


Pondering retirement

Service Career of Cdr Guy C Warner RN

- 1982: Retired to take up Command Systems job in Industry
- 1980: HMS WARRIOR for Staff of Flag Officer Submarines
- 1978: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE for Polaris Performance Analysis Group
- 1977: Royal Military College of Science Shrivenham for Systems MSc
- 1974: HMS SWIFTSURE Swiftsure Class Nuclear Submarine
- 1972: HMS OSPREY for Admiralty Underwater Weapons Establishment (AUWE)
- 1970: HMS DRYAD for Admiralty Surface Weapons Establishment (ASWE)
- 1968: HMS NEPTUNE Faslane for Submarine Tactical Development Group
- 1967: HMS MAIDSTONE Rothesay for Submarine Attack Teacher
- 1967: HMS ALDERNEY Amphion Class Submarine
- 1966: HMS FINWHALE Porpoise Class Submarine
- 1966: HMS DOLPHIN Gosport for Submarine Training
- 1965: HMS ST VINCENT Instruction of Junior Electrical Mechanics
- 1964: BRNC DARTMOUTH for Instructor Officer Initial Training

Guy went on to develop his service story into a published book entitled 'A Voyage Down the Years: A Turbulent Life on Land and Sea' based on his career, as detailed below:



Synopsis

Guy Warner pioneered the introduction of command computers into submarines. How this came about and his follow up in the defence industry are revealed in this enthralling memoir. However, the call of the sea was not to be denied, and he went on to become a passionate and competitive sailor in his own yachts, in which sailing escapades abounded. He has also needed resilience in his colourful voyage through life, as it has been troubled along the way by family tragedies. A story of the ups and downs of an unusual life told with humour, honesty and frankness.

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