

An Officer of
the Thresher says:



By Lieut. RAYMOND A. MCCOOLE
as told to Jack Ryan

I'll Still Sail Nuclear Subs!

■ THE TELEPHONE CALL came Wednesday afternoon, April 10. Capt. Louis Larcombe, commanding officer of the submarine *Dogfish* and chief of casualty control of the Portsmouth (N.H.) Naval Shipyard, was on the line.

"Lieutenant, get this right the first time. I can answer no questions, and I can say this only once. The *Thresher* is overdue. Come to the shipyard."

That was the first word I had that my ship, a nuclear attack submarine with 129 persons aboard, might be in trouble. I wasn't concerned, though. A sub deep in the sea often loses radio contact with surface vessels, and I knew the *Thresher* and its crew well enough to match them against any possible emergency.

My wife Barbara was sitting in bed, the room darkened to rest her injured eyes. "Some problem has come up at the base," I told her. "I'll be back in no time." Barbara had suffered a household accident, so I needed somebody to watch our five young boys. I called my sister-in-law to come over.

By 7 p.m. I was walking into the message center in the Portsmouth Administration Building. Captain Larcombe turned to me from a group of men encircling a telephone. "Not a word," he said. "Just got a report, however, that they've spotted debris about where she dived."

"That's probably stuff left topside when the *Thresher* dived," I said. "She'll be coming up soon."

The voices in the room were more hushed than usual, heightening the excited clatter of the machines. The ominous feeling made me wonder if my confidence might be merely the mask of a man who doesn't want to believe. I joined the vigil at the radio receiver and waited.

AS A KID in Dover, N.H., I helped out my mother by working the fishing boats. I recall looking out to sea and glimpsing Navy ships coming in and out of the Piscataqua River. Someday, I promised, I'm going to sail on one of those. Once in a while, when the sun was low and reflecting on the sea, I'd catch the low silhouette of a sub, and if I were feeling optimistic I'd add another promise: I'm going to be a submariner.

At 17 I was in Navy boot camp all right, but as for making a submariner—well, that seemed remote. We were advised that both the physical and intelligence tests were particularly rugged; that even if we were accepted, many would drop out because they could not adjust to the confined life aboard a submarine.

More than 100 men were in my boot class; 18 volunteered for submarines. When orders came through, though, only four names were posted. Mine was one of them. Only two passed the sub school—and I was lucky again.

I joined the sub *Conger* in Panama in early 1947 but missed being assigned to one of her special groups. Instead, I got the lowliest job—chipping paint. Even that didn't dim the kid's dream: I was on a submarine!

As they told me, the first year on a sub is your real test. You learn whether you are a team man;

whether you can work and live while locked together for weeks, often in semidarkness, beneath the sea, smelling stale air and oil, and yearning for such simple things as a fresh-water shower or an unfamiliar face.

You learn, too, every valve and switch of your submarine. A sub is a machine: under the stress of taking men out of their natural environment, it possibly can get into serious trouble.

Yet there is nothing you can't cope with if you know your job—and more. "An extra pair of hands, and extra pair of eyes" is a phrase a young submariner hears often. It reminds him that he must be special. He has to put out more because more depends on him, including the lives of his shipmates.

By 1958 I was an officer—and a disappointed one, at first. As a chief petty officer, I had qualified aboard our first nuclear submarine, the *Nautilus*, and had been with her twice when she tried unsuccessfully to cross beneath the polar ice cap. On the third try she made it and proved the worth of nuclear subs once and for all. Only one thing took the edge off that triumph for me: two weeks earlier I had been transferred to an officers' candidate school.

Landlocked in Idaho

My next assignment almost topped the disappointment of missing out on submarine history. I was to be a sailor in landlocked Idaho—me, who'd practically been raised on the sea. Well, it was only a temporary assignment, I was told. By now I had married my home-town girl, and Barbara had accepted the lot of a submariner's

Through an ironic accident, you are not aboard the day your ship goes down;
How do you feel? What do you do? Here is the poignant personal account
of the sole surviving officer of the ill-fated atomic submarine

wife—the anxieties, the long periods away from home, the times we couldn't even write.

That wasn't the case in Idaho, of course, where I came home most evenings like a suburban businessman. Barbara liked that change, and our kids got to know the stranger in the blue uniform.

Maybe I can describe how I felt this way: 72 miles from our home in Idaho is a nuclear submarine engineering compartment parked in the middle of desert. The Navy put it there for training, and when I first saw it I thought it was pretty comic. But as my temporary assignment was extended six months, then another six months, I looked at it with different eyes. It was a beautiful if incongruous sight.

After two "temporary" years in Idaho, I was so despondent I drove out to see my submarine one evening. The sound, smell, and roll of the sea were missing, but somehow I felt a little like that kid 15 years before who had seen a sub and vowed to sail aboard one. I made that vow again, went home, and began writing letters to Washington. When that didn't work, I took to the telephone. Lieut. Lou Pence, deskbound himself, took an interest and, after my third year in Idaho, called me: "Ray, your orders are on the way—it's back to sea!"

I sold the house, and Barbara packed our things. But orders never came. Another year passed before Pence called again: "This time is really it. I don't know the ship, but you're to report to the East Coast."

He was right. By August, 1962, I was with the *Thresher*, then undergoing an overhaul at Portsmouth. I had come home in many ways—to

Dover, the sea, old friends. The *Thresher* was heavily complemented with former shipmates, and many of the crew had been my students at the nuclear power training unit in Idaho. The skipper under whom I would eventually serve, Lt. Cmdr. John W. Harvey, had been on the *Nautilus*, and I knew he had a gifted way with men and ships. One of my friends, Lieut. John Smarz, had been aboard the *Thresher* since she was commissioned and gave me a run down:

"There's no ship in the world like this one—faster, goes deeper than anything we've known. We're lucky—just wait till we take her out."

Raring to Get Thresher to Sea

By January I was sharing John's excitement and, like everyone else, raring to get the *Thresher* back to sea. I was electrical and reactor-control officer and had five chief petty officers and an engineering crew which was the best I'd ever encountered. But every time we seemed ready, some new modification or experimental equipment would be installed, and we'd be delayed.

By spring the *Thresher's* wardroom was restless, and the old expression, "Just wait till we take her out," had a bitter tag line—"If we ever take her out!" My "E" division reflected the impatience, and my toughest job was to keep them keyed up through the tedium of yard life.

I was more eager than most, I suppose. I still wore the submariner's silver dolphin on my uniform, meaning I'd qualified on nuclear subs as an enlisted man only. I was aiming for the officer's golden dolphin, and this had been an extra long wait for me.

In April we got orders for a test run. I said good-bye to Barbara and the boys and brought my gear aboard the *Thresher*. Everybody aboard seemed fresh and new, as if they'd just awakened from a limbo-like sleep. They moved quicker, joked easier—for a few hours. But then the *Thresher* was being towed ignominiously back to berth by a cussed little tug. Some more minor adjusting—and waiting.

The following Monday, though, I sensed we would really get out this time, then I got a telephone call from Barbara. "I can't see," she said. "Come home. I can't see." She had had a stiff shoulder and had bought some rubbing compound. As she opened the bottle, the fluid splashed into her eyes. Now, with five children, she was helpless. I got permission to leave ship. I took Barbara to a hospital, got my sister-in-law to help her at home, and by 2 p.m. was back on the *Thresher* ready to sail the following morning. Then I got a call to see the executive officer, Lt. Cmdr. Pat Garner:

"The captain says you're not going with us. You should be with your family."

I explained I had taken care of everything and hadn't requested leave, but the 'exec' had his orders, so I got permission to see the captain.

"I waited four years in Idaho and eight months here," I explained. "I want to qualify as a watch officer. It seems I'll never get the chance."

But Captain Harvey was adamant. "There'll be plenty of chance for you to qualify. Your wife needs you at home."

Cmdr. John Lyman and I drove home together that night. I guess he knew how disappointed I

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The ill-fated nuclear submarine *Thresher*.

