

October 25, 2009

Hi Christian,

After my short interview with you over the phone yesterday I figured you could use a little more information as to how things happened to me after the sneak attack on Pearl Harbor, our naval base on Oahu Territory in Hawaii. You must remember that Hawaii was not a state of the USA in 1941.

Just before the sneak attack the Japanese government sent over 2 peace ambassadors to sign a peace pact or truce with Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who was our President at the time. It was later after the attack that this was a ruse by the Japanese government to throw us off, thinking that all would be peaceful but at that time these 2 ambassadors knew an attack was going to take place on December 7, 1941. It was just to lull our government that all was ok.

As I told you in our short interview I was 16 years old, a junior in Gorton High School in Yonkers, NY. As there was no communications other than radio in those days, we didn't hear about the sneak attack till late Sunday evening. Everyone asked, "where is Pearl Harbor?" No one knew where it was except learned adults who studied history.

It was a peaceful Sunday morning aboard all the battleships, destroyers, submarines, and auxiliary vessels docked at the Pearl Harbor Naval Base that morning. Many were going on liberty into Honolulu or attending mass aboard the ships when all of the sudden hundreds of aircraft first thought to be friendly American planes conducting a "mock attack" came in and began dropping bombs and torpedoes on the unsuspecting ships and crews. It must have been mass confusion before everyone realized this was no "mock drill" but the real thing. Our aircraft were all on the ground and only a few ever got up in the air to fight. We lost hundreds of aircraft. Fortunately none of our aircraft carriers were in port; they were on maneuvers in the Pacific elsewhere too far away to eventually help. The Japanese had lulled us to sleep in Washington, and if the Japanese had known at the time how much damage that they had done to our Pacific fleet, they could have gone on to bomb our West Coast and large cities like Los Angeles and San Francisco and even our naval base at San Diego. But after making two passes over our Pearl Harbor base they returned to their carriers

off shore and hightailed it back to Japan to await our actions if any, as our great battlewagons were sunk, overturned, and left burning hulks. We managed to shoot down several Japanese planes and capture several 2 man suicide submarines launched from the Japanese ships but that was it. The city of Honolulu was put on emergency station as many people of Japanese descent lived there and they were interned as probably some of them were Japanese spies sending back information on our fleet to their homeland.

On Monday, December 8, 1941 our high school principal Dr. Kelly called for a general assembly in the school auditorium where we were to listen to the famous speech made by FDR to the Congress declaring war on the Japanese Empire after the day of infamy at Pearl Harbor.

The country began mobilizing its assets. Factories making cars and trucks slowly began making tanks, jeeps, etc. Factories making carpets began making tents, uniforms, etc. It took time but our shipyards went to work fast as did our aircraft factories. Things were changing fast – air raid drills were being conducted, etc. – and now this is where my life changed.

Lots of kids including yours truly were incensed by this sneak attack and vowed then and there to do all we could to fight back. We went down in droves to join the Marines, Navy, Air Corps, Army, Coast Guard, anything to get into action. I originally wanted to join the Marines but the lines were too long so I figured I'd join the Navy where the lines at the recruitment center weren't as long. As I told you in the interview, I had to lie and use "white out" on my birth certificate to change March 21, 1925 my true birth date to 1924. I passed all my preliminary medical and physical tests in New York City, but I had to get my parents signatures on my enlistment papers before going to "boot camp" in Newport, Rhode Island. With a lot of persuasion, I finally got my mom to sign her name but my dad refused to sign – telling me to finish high school and wait to be drafted at 18 years of age, but I couldn't do that and with more persuasion my mom forged my dad's signature one day while he was working. Off I went to "boot camp" with hundreds of other New Yorkers and kids from the East Coast. My dad was a heavy drinker at the time, but according to my mom he stopped drinking from the day I joined the Navy until the day I came home safely (April 6, 1946). After that he knew God spared me and he began drinking again – true story.

Now here I am in the beginning of January, 1942 in "boot camp", 16 years of age (wouldn't be 17 until March 21st legally). A friend of mine was only 15 and he was with me. He was only a sophomore in Gorton, named Jimmy Driscoll. Before he graduated from "boot camp" 12 weeks later, his family went through the channels and got him released much to his dismay but he came back when he was 17. Boy was he mad. Imagine that – only 15 years old and willing to sacrifice his life for his country. Would you see that today if we were attacked? I don't think so. That kind of patriotism is lacking in our youth today. They don't seem to care about the history of our great country and about the flag and about the millions who sacrificed their lives since the Revolutionary War to make this country free. It's kids like you who will have to carry on that tradition.

As Driscoll was caught, so was I. But I was allowed to stay in the Navy but wasn't allowed to go on the active rolls till March 21st when I truly turned 17. I was reprimanded by the Captain of the base and actually could have been court marshaled, but I was let go with a mild slap on the wrist.

When I graduated from "boot camp" I was sent to Iowa State College in Ames, Iowa for a four month US Naval Engineering School training program just started on campus for the Navy in diesel electric engines. Northwestern University and Purdue had similar programs, all sponsored by the Navy and on campuses. We had separate dorms, etc. from the student population.

As our four month training was ending and we were getting ready to graduate, we were told our new assignment would be the USS Helena a new heavy cruiser just built in San Diego. About two weeks before graduation a CPO began asking for 18 sailors to volunteer for sub duty in New London, Connecticut so I volunteered and was eventually sent to sub school in New London instead of the Helena (which was eventually sunk by the Japanese in the Battle of Kula Gulf many months later with a great loss of life). So maybe, just maybe, fate intervened for me at this time.

I passed the strict physicals, psychiatric, and medical tests for sub duty and started sub school. We had classroom sessions, and 2 or 3 times a week went out into Long Island Sound on WWI "O"- "R"- "S" boats. They leaked when they went down to 90 or 100 feet but they were truly the "pig boats" you read about. They had rivets instead of welded hulls like the fleet boats. Many "S" boats made WWII patrols off Alaska and the Pacific too

before they began building the new subs in New London, Portsmouth, NH, Manitowan, Wisconsin and on the West Coast. Philadelphia Navy Yard also built subs.

The Archerfish SS311 was built in NH. Previous to being assigned to it, I made several Atlantic patrols on the R-6, a WWI sub. We were looking for German U boats which were sinking our ships all along the East Coast.

At last the Archerfish was commissioned and ready for sea. I boarded it in New London and was amazed how big and roomy it was compared to the cramped quarters of the R-6. (Just a little side story, involving my drinking too much one night. I was originally assigned to the USS Dorado – but that's a long story for another time. But sad to say the Dorado was sunk by U-boat before it even got to the Panama Canal... a very sad story, all hands lost. But fate intervened again for me, I lost many classmates on the Dorado – God bless them all.)

The Archerfish left New London, transitted the Panama Canal and arrived safely in Pearl Harbor. We were horrified at what we saw after so many months after the Japanese attack. The battleships were still overturned, sunk and Navy and yard personnel were working around the clock to keep the channel clear. It made you cry to see once proud “men of war” our proud Navy at the bottom of the bay. The Arizona was still overturned and leaking oil as it does today with the Memorial built above it for all to see and to “never forget Pearl Harbor”.

After making trial runs we were assigned to patrol sector north of Formosa. We paused at Midway Island to refuel and went to our assigned sector. You couldn't go out of your assigned sector as other US Subs were nearby and you possibly could be a target for them. Our greatest fear were the Japanese Zero Patrol planes which were originally made of plywood and therefore our aircraft radar would not pick them up, as radar only “pinged” in on metal. Very scary, that's why our 3 lookouts in the periscope shears had to remain alert not only for enemy periscopes but these planes. Many times we had to “crash dive” and bombs were dropped very near us as well as being strafed by enemy gunfire. Remember a sub's hull was only 3/8” thick. We ran into a convoy of 6 ships near shore in shallow water and fired 6 torpedoes, sinking one and damaging perhaps three others. Exactly a year to the day that our hull was laid in the Portsmouth, NH shipyard we sunk our 1st ship. We were depth charged immercifully for many hours by the

escorting destroyers but thank God we got to deeper water and eluded the enemy. This is what I joined the Navy for. During the remainder of our patrol we spotted more ships but they outran us and we never got any more targets worth shooting torpedoes at. Only sampans or fishing boats but were again bombed several times by those darn Japanese Zero Patrol planes. They sunk several of our subs which were caught on the surface during the day time. Normally when near enemy shores we remained submerged all day and came up at night to charge our batteries. I worked in the forward engine room as an oiler. A sub has the following compartments starting at the bow – Forward Torpedo Room (6 torpedo tubes) – next Forward Battery Room (which is also where the Captain and officers slept) – next the Control Room (directly under the conning tower where periscopes are located) – beneath the Control Room is the Pump Room, where eventually I worked (all the air compressors, pumps, etc. were located there) – next a small room called the “Radio Shack” (where all messages were received and decoded) – next the Galley (where food was prepared and where we ate). We had a crew of 70 enlisted men and 8 officers. The officers ate the same food we did, which I must say was the best in the Navy. Next came the After Battery Compartment where I slept and the CPO’s slept. Next the Head (or bathroom) very small, 1 stall shower (we were allowed 1 shower a week, as we had to make fresh water out of sea water which is quite a process). There was also a head in the forward torpedo room for the officer’s use. Next the Forward Engine Room, next the Maneuvering Room or Motor Room (where all electrical equipment was managed from both engine rooms). We had 2 Fairbanks Morse 1600 HP engines in each Engine Room. Our top speed was 18 knots per hour or about 20 miles per hour. Next came the After Torpedo Room (4 torpedo tubes), we carried a total of 24 torpedoes – 10 in the tubes, others on racks ready to reload. Men slept in between these extra torpedoes as space was very tight. If you had claustrophobia, subs were not for you, especially the Diesel Boats. Nuclear boats are much longer and space is a little better.

After refit, repairs at Midway we were off for our 2nd Patrol. Oh by the way, at Midway we lost one of our men who apparently had too much to drink one night and fell overboard striking his head on the hull and drowned. We buried his body out at sea with full naval honors off a PT boat the next day. What a sad way to die, he was a nice guy too.

Our 2nd Patrol was off the island of Palau for 67 days. We only encountered planes and small sampans and the captain decided to train our gun crew so we "battle surfaced" and our gun crew went to work sinking several sampans, which we think were communicating with shore whenever they spotted a sub. We also sank several floating mines by gunfire exploding them. Mines sank several of our subs also. We took one Japanese prisoner for interrogation and set the others adrift in a small boat with provisions. The only reason we didn't want to take prisoners is because we had to watch them 24 hours a day as they could sink our sub if left unguarded. The prisoner we kept was a captain so our captain thought he could supply information to our naval intelligence once taken ashore upon our return. After another 67 days at sea we were running out of fuel and food and were ordered to Pearl Harbor but had to stop at lonely Johnston Island a refueling stop in the middle of nowhere. What a lonely port that must have been worse than Midway -- nothing but a fuel stop. Got to Pearl Harbor, dropped off our prisoner, and went for R and R at the Royal Hawaiian Hotel in Waikiki Beach. They treated us royally there. It was for submariners and airmen only. Two weeks of rest, and we were back on the boat again after repairs were made.

Our next patrol took us to the busy and hot Bonin Islands. Several subs were lost there due to enemy action. Our captain became very daring and took us into shallow water where he spotted a Japanese destroyer moored to a dock and fired two torpedoes into it blowing it sky high. But, did we take a beating for that. They spotted our periscope and by the time we got to deep water were over us depth charging us all day. Someone counted the depth charges and came up with 123. Our oxygen level was diminished as we were in "silent running". No one could move or make any noise as the destroyers stayed above us all day. As nightfall approached we evaded them and finally surfaced for much needed battery charging and fresh air. I said many Hail Mary's that day, believe me. I thought it was the end. I even envisioned my mom getting a telegram from the War Dept. saying the Archerfish was overdue and presumed lost. God was our co-pilot that day. We were assigned to lifeguard duty as our pilots were bombing Iwo Jima. We remained on the surface and our job was to pick up our pilots who were shot down by the enemy and had to ditch their planes in the water. We picked up a Lt. J.G. (junior grade) named Johnson who was in the water wearing his "Mae West" life jacket colored yellow. Somehow he talked the

captain into saving the raft for a souvenir and the captain agreed letting him tie it to the after 40 mm run rail on the bridge. The captain put him to work as a lookout, as a battle between US and Japanese planes were taking place and Johnson could spot the enemy planes for us. Our radar soon picked up a plane coming in just above the water about 8 miles away. Johnson looked at it through his binoculars and told our captain it was one of ours. As the plane got to within a mile of us the Captain looked at it and said "no wonder you got shot down Johnson – I can plainly see the red balls on the wings... it's a Jap". He ordered a crash dive and as we were submerging the Japanese pilot dropped a large bomb nearby almost blowing us out of the water and strafed our Conning Tower with machine gun bullets, making several holes in our shears. We were bombed incessantly for hours and the Captain finally figured out that in the clear water the yellow life raft was visible from the air making us a target for enemy planes. As soon as darkness fell we surfaced. The first thing the Captain ordered was for the raft to be thrown overboard and he never let Johnson on the bridge again. Ironically Johnson went on to fight again and later became a Rear Admiral and came to several of our reunions after the war.

We returned to Midway after several months at sea and were refitted by our tender the Proteus. Our next patrol was off Honshu, right off Japan, as by now our B-29's were bombing Tokyo from our captured airbase in Saipan and later when we took Iwo Jima they took off from there. We couldn't find any targets this time as they were scarce and spent 63 days at sea on lifeguard duty for downed pilots, but fortunately we were never asked to look for any.

We returned to Pearl Harbor, visited the Royal Hawaiian again, and left soon thereafter for our next patrol. After stopping at Saipan for quick repairs several officers and crew were allowed ashore with guards, as there were still Japanese in the hills refusing to surrender. Several of our guys came upon some Japanese but the enemy ran further into the hills leaving their weapons and other souvenirs at the scene. Our officers picked them up and eventually I guess they either turned them in or kept them. Close call for them. We left Saipan and our primary mission again was off Tokyo Bay on lifeguard duty picking up downed B-29 crewmen as they were bombing Tokyo night and day.

On the 28th day of November we received word that no air strikes were scheduled that day, so we resumed patrol and that evening radar picked

Archerfish was in 7 Pacific battles and received the Presidential Unit Citation. Quite an accomplishment. Not many veterans of WWII submarine warfare left. Our organization is about to close and give up it's National Charter. Too few members to keep it going. We are a dying breed.

Christian, I enjoyed reliving my time in the submarine service with you and I hope this transcript answered all your questions. I will see you November 10th at your school tribute to war veterans marking Veterans Day, which is November 11th. May God bless you and keep you safe, Keep up your interest in the military and always be proud of your country and your flag. You are a true patriot.

John Potanovic
(84 years old)