

Our June 12, 2008 meeting was hosted by Robert Mayfield at the Tenaska Virginia Generating Station. Robert, who is a member of our Base and the Plant Manager at Tenaska, also hosted us last April. We had a pretty good turnout of members and spouses and Robert provided dinner, tours and a slide show. THANKS ROBERT!!

Before our abbreviated meeting we were joined briefly by Nancy Miner, a reporter for The Central Virginian, who interviewed Base Commander Kenn McDermott and Vice Commander Mike Martin. After some technical struggling Kenn was able to capture the on-line article written by Nancy as it originally appeared in the June 19, 2008 edition of the paper. Scroll down to read it in case you don't get this particular paper. Robert also scanned the article and e-mailed it as an Adobe PDF shortly after it appeared in the paper - thanks again Robert and thank you Nancy!!

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Under the sea with local submariners

By Nancy B. Miner

Mike Martin has spent a lot of his professional life under water. He joined the Navy in 1956 and was stationed on his first submarine in 1957. Over the course of his 22 years in the military, he served on five different subs. In 1977, he retired and moved to Fluvanna. Today, he is a member of the USS Virginia Base, a group of Richmond and Central Virginia submarine veterans. The USS Virginia Base held its June 12 dinner meeting at the Tenaska Virginia Partners power plant in Scottsville. Plant manager Robert Mayfield hosted the event and provided tours of the facility.

Martin grew up in Baltimore. At age seven, he and his family were among the thousands of visitors to a post-World War II victory tour of ships – an aircraft carrier, a destroyer and a submarine.

"I fell in love with the submarine," he said simply.

He was particularly taken by the fact that subs can operate independently and have smaller crews, allowing for more

camaraderie.

"When you go to sea and you submerge, your life depends on every person doing their job," he continued. "If one person messes up, it can kill all of you. High responsibility."

A WWII vintage diesel sub is a little longer than a football field with a displacement of about 1,500 tons and surface speed of 22-23 knots (27 mph) or 6 knots submerged. The crew consisted of about 75 men. On the ballistic missile sub he served on in Scotland in the early 1960s, the crew was about 135. On the Sea Devil, a Sturgeon Class nuclear Fast Attack sub, Martin's last assignment, the crew was about 105.

"Each had a particular advantage and disadvantage," he stated. "Probably the one that I enjoyed the most was the Sea Devil. I served on that from 1970 to 1973, which was basically at the height of the Cold War."

Martin cited the book *Blind Man's Bluff: The Untold Story of American Submarine Espionage* by Sherry Sontag

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Kenn McDermott in the 'Pilot Seat' of the new USS North Carolina (SSN-777) during a tour of the fourth in a new Virginia class of submarines at its commissioning in Wilmington, NC on May 3, 2008. Photo courtesy of Kenn McDermott

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Submarine commander

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look around. You can see evil in the world. There are people who want to kill you, there's no doubt about it.”

As for himself, McDermott prefers to be prepared.

“A true military person, the last thing they want is war. But, in order to prevent a war, we have to operate from a position of strength ... If you are operating from a position of strength you can carry out all kinds of foreign policy activities, knowing that that strength is behind you.”

He, too, said the camaraderie was the best part of being a submariner.

“You get to know everybody and to trust everybody because your life literally depends on them,” he said.

Vets

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as an accurate, albeit extreme, account of those times.

"We did a lot of different things. A nuclear submarine can stay submerged as long as the crew can take it or the food lasts. You normally would carry provisions – food, toilet paper, consumables—for a minimum of 120 days."

By distilling seawater, they manufactured their own oxygen.

"It's sort of like a space capsule," he said. "You have to be self-contained."

The longest period he was continuously submerged was 98 days. The boat was about 250 feet long on the interior and 30 feet in diameter, but much of the space was occupied by supplies and equipment, including the nuclear reactor.

"We have an old saying in submarines: 'Don't scratch your butt, it might not be yours,'" he recalled

Named for largest of all sting rays, the USS SEA DEVIL (SSN-664) was built by Newport News Ship Building and Dry Dock Company and commissioned in 1969. She was deployed many times, mainly to the North Atlantic and to the Mediterranean, and was the first nuclear powered submarine to visit Morocco and Kalamata Greece.

A normal "day" was six hours on watch, 12 hours off. When not on duty, crew members occupied their time in various ways—playing cards, watching movies, reading, lifting weights, or attending "Polaris University" for college credits.

Of course, Martin didn't spend all his time undersea. He visited the Arctic, England, the Mediterranean, Gibraltar, Italy, and more.

Looking back, he said, "What probably sticks with you the most is the people ... I have a friend in Alabama I served with three years on the Sea Devil. He was up here last week; I am going down there next week. We get together several times a year, we talk three or four times a week. That's the big thing, the people. Good people."

Martin hopes that more young people will consider the military as a career. He joined the Navy at age 17.



can run as high as \$100,000 for military personnel with jobs that are in high demand.

It also can lead to an interesting second career. When he retired from the Navy, he went to work for Sperry Marine. In the course of that job, he traveled to Indonesia, Australia, Malaysia, Singapore, Denmark, Norway and Japan.

Kenn McDermott

At six feet, seven inches tall, Kenn McDermott seems an unlikely candidate for a submarine. He is the commander of the USS Virginia Base's chapter, which has about 35 members.

"It's a group of qualified submariners," he explained.

"Qualified" refers to a crew member who has been through a year-long training program to learn the sub's systems and operations and has passed a series of tests, including a final, full-day hands-on and oral exam.

"Every submarine crew member has to go through this qualification program so the ship can be confident that no matter what happens when you are anywhere in the ship, you can respond right then," he continued. "It's like everybody is a First Responder."

Once qualified, crew members are eligible to wear the submarine warfare pin referred to as a "Dolphin," silver for enlisted men and gold for officers.

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is named, can deploy and recover SEAL teams, deploy unmanned underwater and aerial vehicles, deploy mines, fire cruise missiles and torpedoes, work in shallow water, hover, gather intelligence, and more.

Asked what the subs do when the country is not at war, McDermott responded, "You're always at war. We are constantly at war."

He compared the military to sheepdogs and the citizenry to sheep.

"Military people are sheepdogs," he said. "The sheep don't generally like the sheepdogs much, because the sheepdog tries to herd them and move them in a certain way and keep them organized. But, when the wolf comes, they want that sheepdog. They want it to take care of them.

"The average citizen in America is a sheep. They are not worried about their safety or security. They don't think we need anything because nobody is going to hurt us. But, there is evil in the world ... You can

look around. You can see evil in the world. There are people who want to kill you, there's no doubt about it."

As for himself, McDermott prefers to be prepared.

"A true military person, the last thing they want is war. But, in order to prevent a war, we have to operate from a position of strength ... If you are operating from a position of strength you can carry out all kinds of foreign policy activities, knowing that that strength is behind you."

He, too, said the camaraderie was the best part of being a submariner.

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KapSS 4 KidSS

The USS Virginia Base is participating in a national outreach program called KapSS 4 KidSS which McDermott hopes to get started at the University of Virginia Medical Center. It was initiated by submarine veterans to provide specially embroidered ball caps for children who are undergoing any sort of treatment that causes a loss of hair. The caps are embroidered with the submarine service Dolphin insignia and the words "Honorary Submariner."

"We have blue caps for the boys and pink caps for the girls," related McDermott, who also made up "Honorary Submariner" certificates to go along with the caps.

“Today’s young people don’t look on military service as being a particularly honorable profession,” he stated. “...There’s a stigma that the military profession is somehow not good ... What I would like to convey is that it is an honorable profession and it can be a lot of fun.”

There can be monetary benefits, as well. According to Martin, nowadays re-enlistment bonuses

Like Martin, McDermott was interested in submarines from childhood. A friend of the family lived in New London, CT.

“From the time I was a youngster we would go down and see this person,” he said. “Her house was right on the Thames River and I would see the submarines coming in and out of port.”

For him, the lure of submarines was simply being able to survive underwater.

“As a kid, I had a canoe on the lake where my folks had a cabin and I would tip that canoe over and get up under it like a submarine and swim along,” he recalled.

Noting her son’s fascination with the submarines, his mother arranged through her church for him to have a tour.

“That sort of cemented it right there,” he said. “I was toast.” He enlisted when he was 17.

While submerged, the Virginia class boats, for which the Base