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Former Hartford Man, Now Retired U. S. Naval Officer, Has Had Many Dramatic and Thrilling Sea Experiences

Captain Frank L. Pinney Was Commander Of First Submarine In Naval Use

A Pioneer In Under Water Craft, He Gained Valuable Knowledge When Submergings Were Endurance Tests Calling For Extreme Courage In Facing Possible Death

By A. E. Magnell

The tense and gripping action in the submarine moving picture "Hell Below," being produced in theaters this summer, made little appeal to officers of the United States Navy. The heroics of "Hell Below" might be cause for griping on the part of the Navy men because it might be a reminder of tragic experiences.

Captain Frank L. Pinney, a native of Hartford who recently retired upon completion of 35 years of active service in the United States Navy, gave years of service in the Navy on submarine and torpedo duty. Captain Pinney was the commander of the first submarines in regular United States naval service. It was he who led the way for those who have written records of heroic and hazardous branch of Navy service. They were lived through by Captain Pinney, who, in the line of duty, learned through actual experience the new science of submarine operation dating back to 1902. His log reports and recommendations incidental to duty were contributions to submarine science. Captain Pinney [helped develop] the submarine branch of the United States Navy, for in addition to the fact that he was commander of the first submarines, he laid out and established the submarine base at New London. Since he has been mostly associated with submarine service.

While Captain Pinney has made important contributions to submarine service, his 35 years in the Navy have abounded in interesting duty calling for service in strange places and under unusual conditions.

Captain Pinney is a veteran of two wars, the Spanish-American and the World War, and has commanded ships in every rank in which he served, passed midshipman, ensign, lieutenant junior grade, lieutenant, lieutenant commander, commander and captain.

First Submarine

Connecticut's first contributor to submarine achievements was David Bushnell of Westbrook, who in 1772 conceived the idea of a war machine to be employed against British ships. His conception of the value and importance of an outside attack on enemy ships, embodying an idea of attaching gunpowder to blow up the ship, was the germ upon which subsequent inventors

worked and finally brought about today an effective submarine. The National Encyclopedia credits Bushnell with being the inventor of the submarine.

Bushnell conceived the idea of constructing the so-called American Turtle, because it resembled a turtle in some respect, while a freshman at Yale. The idea received consideration and a boat was built in 1776.

The motive power was an oar, built on the principle of a screw and set forward in the strange oak-timbered craft. It was a one-man boat. For submerging, water was admitted through a valve and to come to the surface again the water had to be pumped out by hand. The limit for submersion was 30 minutes. Bushnell's original "torpedo" was carried outside above the hull and was made of 150 pounds of gunpowder. The gunner's job was to attach the torpedo to the enemy ship and adjust the clockwork percussion cap to obtain its discharge.

Demonstrations of the usefulness of the strange craft were given and in August 1776, Sergeant Ezra Lee, a neighbor of Bushnell's, undertook the dangerous task of attempting to torpedo the British ship "Eagle" in New York harbor. Lee missed his target, and the torpedo discharged away from the point of effectiveness.

The modern submarine fleet of the United States Navy had its beginning in 1902 with the delivery of the first two submarines, forming the nucleus of the command of Mr. Pinney, then an ensign. These were the "Adder" and the "Moccasin." Navy officials watched the performances of these boats with misgivings and skeptical eyes.

Under Water Craft In Disfavor

To the naval authorities of that time submarines were in disfavor. John Holland, the designer, had been engaged for 25 years attempting to receive favorable consideration of underwater craft. The contract for the first craft was given over the protests of bureau executives. Admiral Dewey, then fresh from his victory at Manila, was one of the few naval officials who proved ordering of submarines and believed in their effectiveness.

The "Adder" and the "Moccasin" having met contract requirements, Mr. Pinney took command at New Suffolk. Upon him devolved the training of sailors for the recognized [duties] of the crew and [to] look for leadership.

The experimental work in operation was expected of the then young officer, a few years out of the United States Naval Academy. Resourcefulness in meeting strange and unusual conditions was continually called for.

Sakuma's Bravery

Others were having their troubles with the new type of boat. Facing death in a sunken submarine in April 1910, Lieutenant Sakuma of the Japanese Navy calmly carried on in the fulfillment of his duties, keeping his log until he was no longer able to write. It is a record [that demonstrates] the qualities of those who engage in submarine duty and tests.

Lieutenant Sakuma assumed responsibility for the loss of his ship and as death crept upon him he wrote:

“My subordinates are killed by my fault. It is with pride that I inform you that the crew to a man have discharged their duties as sailors should with the utmost coolness until the dying moments.”

The dying lieutenant detailed the account of the tragedy, not sparing himself of blame. With the suffocating carbonic acid gas sapping his life he wrote:

“It is my opinion that men embarking in submarines must possess the qualities of coolness and nerve and must be extremely painstaking. They must be brave and daring in their handling of the boat.

“The crew of a submarine should be selected from the bravest, the coolest, or they will be of little use in time of crisis, in such as we are now. My brave men are doing their best.”

In less than three hours the poisonous gas fumes had accomplished their deadening effect and 14 men were entombed in 10 fathoms of water.

This was eight years after Mr. Pinney performed his pioneering service.

The “Adder” and “Moccasin” were of the period before the periscope was conceived. Only when boats came to the surface of the water could the navigators determine their situation. If they should come up under a small surface boat it was just too bad for that craft.

The motive power of these submarines was gasoline engines and leaking feed pipes and accumulated gas created a great danger, making smoking aboard taboo and causing constant menace from uncontrollable electric sparks. The new boats, however, contained one feature indicative of progress. The torpedo tubes were operated by compressed air, whereas dynamite guns were employed in the predecessor ships. This was a great forward step, because upon the use and effectiveness of torpedoes rested the argument for the adoption of submarines.

Learned From Experience

The pioneers in submarine operation had much to learn from actual experience. One of the submarines in Peconic Bay, L. I., was sent down for an endurance test to last 15 hours. Having settled on the bed of the bay observations were recorded. The submarine rested, we will say, in 20 feet of water. Twelve hours later instruments recorded the fact that it was resting under 26 feet of water. How could such a thing be? How could a ship resting at the bottom go lower?

The answer was found when the ship came to the surface again. During the night a terrific storm, one of the worst in years, came up and raged unknown to those undisturbed on the submarine and the tide had risen six feet.

Severe tests and demonstrations of usefulness were ordered by Navy officials. The submarines were taken out to determine how effective they could be against the fleet. Close approaches were made to the big battleships at their anchorage. The submarines were required to demonstrate ability to remain under water 24 hours. To ascertain their strength they were submerged to a depth of 200 feet.

So new and unusual were the submarines that they commanded much attention and were constantly in the news. Queer ideas were entertained concerning them. Jules Verne had whetted the interest in submarine adventure by his "Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea."

The "Adder" and "Moccasin" were designed for service in either salt or fresh water. In order to advance interest in submarines the "Adder" was ordered to Washington for demonstrations. There new troubles were encountered in the operations because of the fresh-water conditions, but they taught lessons of importance. The performances ultimately were brought up to requirements and expectations and contributed to the advancement of submarines for the Navy.

Curing The Senator

The story is told of a United States senator, a member of the appropriations committee, who wanted the unusual experience of going down in a submarine. A demonstration was arranged, the senator having been convinced that submersion would have no ill effect on his weakened heart. While still running on the surface with the conning tower open, the senator, thinking the ship had dived, complained that he felt the effect of lower air pressure on his heart. The officer in command merely pointed up through the hatch, where a blue sky was visible, and the senator was at once cured and lived to be the butt of remarks of colleagues, who learned of his imaginary change of "air pressure."

Some women were taken aboard a submarine to be given the thrill of a submarine dive and the story goes that one curious about the ship construction asked in regard to thickness of the hull. "The steel is half an inch thick, just above where we stand," she was told.

"Mercy, that is not safe," she exclaimed and moved away, taking a place forward, where, it was said, she would be safer because the steel was thicker there. She remained there until the boat returned to the surface.

The "Adder" and the "Moccasin" were diminutive craft, more toys as compared with modern submarines about 65 feet in length, about 120 tons displacement. Submarines of 1933 in displacement illustrate the advancement during the last three decades. The modern submarine

has a crew of [approximately 80]. That surface speed was about 8 knots and considerably less submerged.

The Cuttlefish will displace approximately 1,400 tons and measures 260 feet over all. Its complement is a crew of 46, having comfortable living quarters, whereas the “Adder” and “Moccasin” were manned by eight men. The cruising range of the original ships was given as 500 miles, while the modern submarine has a cruising radius of more than 9,000 miles.

Machinery took up so much space on the “Adder” and “Moccasin” that there were no living quarters aboard. As a consequence a torpedo boat was assigned as the submarine tender. Upon this the crew lived when the submarines were not under way. Because of this, Mr. Pinney had the rare distinction of being in command of three ships in commission at the same time. Naval records fail to disclose few if any parallel instances.

Developing Skill

Operations of the submarines in Narragansett Bay and offshore at Block Island in 1903 under command of Mr. Pinney proved fruitful in experience, developing skill in handling this type of craft, standardizing practices, and originating improvements which were adopted for incorporation in subsequent submarine designs and operations.

Uncle Sam recognized the danger of submarine duty and the personnel engaged in this line received a bonus for every dive made.

In 1904 Mr. Pinney was ordered to service on the Asiatic Station, where he served most of his time on the U. S. S. Oregon, Captain Bob Evans’s famous ship of the Spanish-American War period. Service on the Asiatic Station abounded with interest, visiting the strange lands and people on the other side of the globe.

Mr. Pinney was given command of the U. S. S. Villalobos, a gunboat taken from the Spanish in the Philippines and reconditioned for operations on the Yangtze River against Chinese pirates interfering with American activities.

From Pirates to Classroom

The transition from combatting pirates on the Yangtze to less hazardous duty as an instructor at the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, Md., illustrates how quickly a naval officer must adjust himself. The fall of 1906 found Mr. Pinney serving his tour of land duty as instructor in the engineering department on the banks of the Severn. Ten years previously Mr. Pinney himself had been wrestling with engineering problems at the same school.

“Skinny,” in naval academy parlance, means engineering, is the cause of failure of many who aspire for commissions in the Navy, being one of the most difficult of the courses at the United

States Naval Academy. In connection with this tour of duty Mr. Pinney made three practice cruises with midshipmen on the U. S. S. Arkansas, the U. S. S. Nevada and the U. S. S. Chicago. These cruises, each of three months duration, included visits to European, Mediterranean, South American and Pacific Coast ports of interest, promoting good relations with the United States and being conducive to the broadening of the culture of the midshipmen.

Again the regulations of service called for three years' sea duty and from 1908 to 1912 Mr. Pinney was senior engineer officer on the battleship U. S. S. Vermont. This was followed by an assignment to Washington, D.C., embracing supervision of the ordnance design section of the United States Naval Gun Factory. Before the end of this service Germany was at war.

World War Service

With the European war in progress, but before the submarine had demonstrated its importance to the warring nations, naval authorities again ordered Mr. Pinney into submarine service. Between 1915 and 1917 he performed important duty. He commanded the U. S. S. Ozark, converted to a submarine tender, which at times included G and L boats.

Orders from the Navy Bureau instructed him to bring the G boats from the base at Key West, Florida, to New London. The approach of the submarine fleet in New York harbor caused excitement among the civilian population of Manhattan, who were unfamiliar with the Navy Department orders for the change of base. The submarines by this time were taking a more active part in the war overseas.

In connection with the instruction to bring Uncle Sam's submarines to New London, Mr. Pinney was ordered to take over the Navy coaling station at the latter port. This was the foundation of the establishment of the present submarine base at New London.

Up to this time the effectiveness of the submarine had not been demonstrated. The Navy still had capable officers who were skeptical of their usefulness.

Mr. Pinney was ordered to temporary duty in the office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Navy Department (materiel section), just before the United States entered into the World War. The duty became permanent for the period and covered the years 1917 to 1919, despite Captain Pinney's request for active sea duty.

The United States was again at peace after the signing of the World War armistice and Mr. Pinney, now ranking as a captain, was given command of the U. S. S. Cleveland, a cruiser. Mr. Pinney took over the command at Santos, Brazil. He came north and for a time had duty in Central American waters.

Although the United States was at peace with the world, good will was not universal. One of the many periodic revolutions grew to alarming proportions in Honduras. In order to adequately

protect the American interests it became necessary for Captain Pinney to land armed forces and to take over the port of Puerto Cortes. Conditions soon righted themselves.

A Good Will Cruise

Official Washington deemed the time opportune for a good will cruise and Captain Pinney was assigned to make courtesy visits to the capitals of San Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. South Americans vied with each other in the splendor of hospitality when informed of the friendly visit impending.

Executive orders are always specific and no successful officer goes beyond them. The ports of call had been specifically named and scheduled. The “Cleveland” came to anchor in a bay, through the center of which passed the border line of adjoining countries, one scheduled for the courtesy call, and the other which had not been included.

Upon arrival the country not to be honored invited Uncle Sam to make a visit. This could not be arranged without consent from Washington, but it was obtained. The time was appointed for the formal visit. The “Cleveland” had to move its anchorage scarcely more than 100 yards to be within the domain of friendly hosts.

Shelling The “Cleveland”

Captain Pinney proceeded ashore to make his formal call and half way across the bay was met by a shore party, which apologized profusely because there was no gun salute. There had not been sufficient time to get the cannons down from the inland city, but they would be there before dawn the next day, it was said. Sure enough, the next day the guns roared the formal salute.

“Did you observe anything unusual about the salute?” Captain Pinney was asked by a guest who made a return call to the “Cleveland.”

“No,” replied the captain, who had been busy in his cabin, and inquired, “Why?” The guest again apologized.

“We were a little fearful some damage might be done. We had to use regulation service charges and were afraid the shell might hit your ship.”

Captain Pinney had opportunity on this cruise to observe how some South Americans designed peace. The “Cleveland” arrived at a port just after one of many customary revolutions. The victor and new president-to-be was in a hospital being treated for wounds received leading his troops in the revolution. Captain Pinney called on him.

A patient on the bed adjoining was concealed by a temporary screen. This patient was the ex-president, who also had been wounded. The new and the old presidents would convalesce at the same time. The screen would soon be removed and then, both in the same predicament, would

become good friends and peace would reign, according to the native belief. It had worked that way in the past, Captain Pinney was informed.

From 1921 to 1923 Captain Pinney had shore duty as assistant chief of the Bureau of Ordnance of the Navy Department in Washington, and the next two years found him again at sea, [followed by] duty at the Naval War College at Newport, R. I.

Arctic Service

Finally service in Arctic waters came to Captain Pinney. For two years Captain Pinney commanded the U. S. S. Milwaukee. The Navy cooperated with the United States Army in perfecting the "around the world flight." The "Milwaukee" established bases at Pictou, N. S., Cartwright and Indian Harbor in Labrador and at Ivigtut, Greenland, for the first round-the-world fliers. At the last-named place an extended stay became necessary while the flyers were delayed. It afforded opportunity for interesting visits with the natives of the port.

This tour of duty was brought to an end in another extreme of conditions, Captain Pinney proceeding to tropical islands on the cruise to the Hawaiian Islands and the Philippines.

Land duty again came around and from 1928 to 1930 Captain Pinney was assistant superintendent of the United States Naval Gun Factory at Washington. Then came his last sea duty as commander of the battleship U. S. S. Wyoming, flagship of the scouting fleet. Finally, from 1931 until June of this year Captain Pinney was inspector of ordnance in charge of the United States Naval Torpedo Station at Newport, R. I.

The broad naval service of Captain Pinney also embraced humanitarian duty. In 1902 Mount Pelée in Martinique erupted, destroying the city of St. Pierre. The U. S. S. Dixie, on which Mr. Pinney was then serving, was quickly loaded with food and medical supplies and ordered to sail from Brooklyn Navy Yard to engage in relief work. Supplies were also delivered at Kingston, St. Vincent.

From 1898 to 1902 Mr. Pinney was an ensign on the U. S. S. Prairie, then being used for training cruises for state naval militiamen, and training the citizen sailors devolved upon him. The "Prairie" was used for transportation of the United States exhibits to the Paris Exposition in 1900, making two transatlantic trips.

First Naval Service

Mr. Pinney's first service in the Navy was in war. The outbreak of the Spanish-American War was deemed sufficient cause for the advancement of graduation of the class of 1898 from the United States Naval Academy. Mr. Pinney, one of the class, was immediately ordered to duty on the U. S. S. San Francisco, then engaged in patrolling the New England coast. Later he was transferred to the U. S. S. Badger and participated in the blockade of the north coast of Cuba.

Captain Pinney, a native of Hartford and son of the late Lucius Pinney of South Manchester, graduated from the West Middle School in Hartford in 1888 and from the Hartford Public High School in 1892. He entered the United States Naval Academy in 1894. In addition to the prescribed four years' course at the Naval Academy, Mr. Pinney took a two years' postgraduate course at the academy, specializing in naval architecture.

Today Captain Pinney's son, Frank L. Jr., is carrying on the Pinney traditions in the Navy, being a first classman at the United States Naval Academy. Midshipman Pinney will be commissioned as an ensign upon graduation next June. At the Naval Academy Midshipman Pinney is a member of the lacrosse team, is a star student, and has also displayed inherent officer-like qualities and ranks high in the regiment of midshipmen.

Thirty-five years of active naval service by Captain Pinney have come to a close. It was service marked by two wars and duty that made [him] familiar with many parts of the world. Captain Pinney had the experience of having commanded submarines and other vessels from the earliest years of the submarine service through command of a battleship.

He commanded a boat at the international yacht races off Sandy Hook when Sir Thomas Lipton came over from England in his first attempt to lift the America's Cup.

"I have thoroughly enjoyed my active service in the Navy. It has been extremely interesting," says Captain Pinney.

Service regulations brought about Captain Pinney's retirement, although now only 57 years of age. However, the rocking-chair fleet will not immediately receive a new member, for Captain Pinney plans activities suited to his energies and scientific training and also for the exercise of leadership for which he is highly respected.