Over the last year or so, I’ve had the distinct honor and pleasure of interacting with literally hundreds of submarine veterans, both in person and online, during the process of writing and rewriting our book entitled *Poopie Suits and Cowboy Boots*. My own journey in this endeavor, as a civilian physician and part-time writer, began as an interest in helping to put together a book explaining some of the basics of submarine operation, all told in the context of my brother Frank’s Navy story as a junior officer aboard the *USS Seahorse* nearly 50 years ago. The process of collaboration with Frank on this project led me to become aware for the very first time of all of the fantastic stories—some humorous, some daring, and some offbeat—of the secretive world of submarine service. I saw a real need to peel away the layers of dust and concealment from these stories, many over a half-century old, especially those that weren’t classified and really needed to be shared with the public. These guys had done some amazing things! But, very few people were (are) the slightest bit aware. As I kept digging, I developed a greater appreciation for the vital role that these men played during the Cold War era to maintain the peace. It is one of my passions nowadays to get the word out about their contributions, while this generation of men is still around to tell their stories, so that they can be properly appreciated and take their rightful place in history.

This tribute was published just recently in the *American Submariner* magazine, one of the many fringe benefits of USSVI membership. For those of you who aren’t members, the essay is reproduced below. Don’t forget! Our book is still on sale for the crazy-low introductory price of $15! It includes this essay and many others. Thanks-- Charles Hood

HOW TO SPOT A BROTHER OF THE PHIN

Since the middle of 2017, when Frank and I began our research and writing on *Poopie Suits and Cowboy Boots*, I’ve given book presentations at the regular meetings of nearly a dozen USSVI bases (with more planned), and I’ve had several opportunities to eat and chat casually with a wide range of these men, from those in their 30s who have only recently gotten out of the Navy to several of the living legends of the World War II fleet boat generation. During these get-togethers, I’ve had a rare opportunity to glimpse their culture from the inside. Through our well-followed Facebook page on submarine history and by email, I’ve corresponded at length with dozens of sailors who have shared their submarine stories, photos, and expertise. Many of these men have volunteered significant chunks of time to help correct the technical details and refine our narrative about the exploits of the Silent Service during the Cold War years. While these men are different in countless ways—age, ethnic background, political and religious persuasions, for starters—their years serving aboard submarines shaped their lives profoundly in both obvious and subtle ways. As an outside observer of this fascinating group, I have noticed several common attributes among them that form the basis of this essay. I’d like to share a few of these thoughts as a tribute.

**Submariners are a proud and elite group**. What makes these guys tick? Short answer: The irrefutable sense that their service aboard submarines was critically important in the safety and security of our country. At the core of their self-identities is pure patriotism; not the attention-seeking kind associated with bumper stickers and flag lapels and other fanfare, but a quiet and more informed version. These are the men who decided that it was worth it to put their personal lives aside—for a few years, or even an entire career—to answer the call to volunteer for the corps that defends our nation’s defensive interests at sea. About those precious personal freedoms that the vast majority of us just accept as inherent rights…the reason we civilians can take them for granted is because these guys *didn’t*. While they were putting their families and personal ambitions on hold, they served for long stretches in cramped and unforgiving surroundings. The missions they accomplished remained largely secretive and therefore unheralded. They accepted the underappreciated anonymity of working in the shadows, even though it deprived the rest of us the privilege of knowing as much as we should about their important contributions to national security.

**Submariners like to kid.** The jokes can come fast and furious, often right after the initial firm handshake, and if you’re not prepared for them, your first impression might be that these guys are out to harass you. The truth is, they do enjoy yanking your chain. The practice evolved as a sort of warped survival skill, honed after many months at sea, to boost morale and preserve some degree of sanity during those times of great pressure and uncertainty. But even today, the humor serves a very important purpose. By disarming you with a quip or mild insult, they are checking you out. Can you take a joke, or do you wither under the heat? In the end, they won’t waste time with someone who doesn’t pass muster. So I take it as a good sign that, during my talks to the USSVI audiences, several of the guys will continue to blurt out jokes or witty remarks. Submariners appreciate individuals with thick skins. They’re not so keen on those who pack up and run at the first perceived slight or ridicule. And they really can’t stand the related notion of political correctness.

**Submariners revere the American flag, and what it really stands for.** When our national anthem is played at a sporting contest, we civilians may only see the familiar stars and stripes before us, For these men, though, the song hearkens them back to their years aboard the submarines, recalling the solemn ritual of raising and lowering of the ensign at Morning and Evening Colors. As the song rolls on, they think about the close calls that they had during their Navy days, and how fortunate they are to be standing there saluting the flag at that moment— posture erect, hand over heart-- and intensely appreciating the moment, while silently thanking those who were lost at sea while heeding the call. Understandably, then, they don’t appreciate attempts to politicize this sacred tradition.

**Submariners are comfortable in their own shoes.** Pretense is not in their repertoire. They call things as they see them, but they don’t need to always hear the sound of their own voices to be content. It’s not that they don’t like to talk, but at gathering with their civilian friends and family, they are masters at deflecting the topic of conversation away from their years in the Silent Service. But—put two of these sub vets together in the same room—especially if cold beer is involved—and you may never hear the end of their lively discussions about the “old days”.

**Submariners do not suffer fools gladly.** These are guys who were held to extraordinary standards of competency while serving aboard our nation’s subs. They practically invented the mantra, “zero mistakes”. So don’t try to B.S. them. They’ll see through the artifice in a skinny minute. They appreciate straight shooters. And they themselves are the prototypical straight shooters.

**Submariners don’t like to guess.** For every question or problem, there’s a right answer, and if you work alongside one of them, they would rather keep striving until the proper answer is found. This sense of precision, inculcated by submarine service, also applies to timeliness. Don’t be late for things. These guys expect punctuality and live by the rule, “If you’re five minutes early, you’re late.” Their very DNA seems intertwined with the science of unflinching exactitude. But I get it. When the fate of you and your crewmates on the same submarine hinged daily on flawless execution of your assigned duties, well, that mindset had a knack of following you into your post-military life. So forgive these men if they seem befuddled when the rest of the human race doesn’t seem equally disciplined. It’s a shame that the same sense of personal responsibility and accountability isn’t also a given in the civilian world. Sloppy work and tardiness are major annoyances for these men.

**Submariners are a little wary of strangers.** I think this has to do with the oath to secrecy that they all had to sign upon penalty of imprisonment. Since they are forbidden from talking about a substantial part of their personal histories, they can seem a little suspicious of those who may try to draw them out in conversation or otherwise attempt to ingratiate themselves. That makes sense to me. Trust is a precious commodity to them, and it is not earned without some time and effort. Once that hurdle is crossed, though, they will bend over backwards to help you. In offering their help to me countless times over the course of the last 12 months, they have exemplified the giving spirit in so many ways. You get the feeling after working with so many of them that they would give you the shirt off their back if you needed it.

**Submariners are very frugal individuals.** While generous with their time and talents, they are careful about how their hard-earned dollars are spent, and they won’t open up their wallets to just any cause. This reputation for penny pinching makes sense; they didn’t exactly earn a fortune while serving aboard submarines, and the strong disincentives about unnecessary waste that governed ship duty simply reinforced the notion of “waste not, want not”. Still, despite their understandably thrifty tendencies, they make tremendous contributions to their local towns and cities through endowed scholarships, fund-raising for worthy causes, and various community awareness projects. I have seen how the USSVI gives them the vehicle to make these things happen and to continue to make a difference with their neighbors.

**Submariners like to speak in code.** Listening to them converse among themselves is both an intriguing and baffling activity. Their language is steeped in the acronym-laden phrases of Navy-speak, so unless you have a willing translator, you may not the faintest idea of what they are talking about with such enthusiasm. (Coming from the world of medicine, I thought *our* jargon was bad! Not even close.) With some practice, though, the code may be cracked. For example, here is an excerpt from a message I received yesterday from a veteran submariner: “…HGR was our senior EDO, and he was OINC of a SRF at one time.” I actually understood him!

**Submariners are sentimental about their old boats.** They swap stories with their fellow veterans about their former rides with great affection. They like to wear vests adorned with badges that tell the story of their military service. They pay homage at every USSVI event to those boats on eternal patrol, and they hold the fleet boat generation of WWII in particularly high esteem because of the tremendous loss of life sustained by submariners during that global conflict against tyranny and evil. They thoroughly enjoy one another’s company, knowing that each of them is indelibly linked for life by that youthful decision to volunteer for submarine service. Finally, while they may recall those years at sea as some of the most difficult of their lives, practically every one of them would do it again in a heartbeat if asked.

I salute these men—the “Brothers of the Phin” as they call themselves—proud members of a storied military fraternity. You’d be hard-pressed to find a finer group of men anywhere. They truly represent the best of us all.