



SUBMARINERS REMINISCE



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Robert Coucho, left, and Robert St. Pierre, both alumni crew members of the USS Albacore, share stories Friday about their time on the boat during a reunion weekend at Albacore Park in Portsmouth.

Albacore reunion

Men who served on the vessel gather for weekend celebration

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PORTSMOUTH — When you bring together a bunch of old "Salts," the result is lots of hugs, good stories and a glimpse at living history.

A reunion is being held this weekend for men who manned the Albacore submarine in times of war and peace. The came from across the country, and almost to a man, proudly wore their

Albacore hats, stitched with their years of service.

A series of activities and programs are planned that began Friday and will finish Sunday morning. The submarine is now a popular Portsmouth tourist attraction, where children can climb inside the vessel in which these men served their country.

The Albacore was commissioned in December 1953 and decommissioned in

September 1972, meaning 19 years of Navy men passed through her hatches.

She is the first submarine to have a teardrop hull design and was used as an experimental sub, to see if the design was feasible, so it carried no armament. The diesel/electric powered sub was faster than a nuclear submarine and paved the way for future submarine design.

She remains the property of the U.S. government, on a long-term lease here.

During her commission, she was based at the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard.

The real stories this weekend come from the men who cared for her.

"Being a submariner is a special thing," said Butch Jordan, who was a yeoman on board from 1966 to 1968. "We are a real band of brothers. We depend on each other like no other service does." Jordan, who lives in Connecticut maintains strong

SHIPYARD TALKS
Congressional delegation met Thursday with Navy secretary, more stonewalling feared.

Page A3

See ALBACORE, Page A6

Albacore crew reminisces

ALBACORE, from Page A1
ties with the Albacore. He is a member of the Friends of the Albacore and makes a monthly trip here for their meetings.

"We are expecting about 173 people," said Jordan. "We even have five plank owners coming. They are men who were on the vessel when she was commissioned."

"To wear the dolphins of a submariner, you have to learn every system, how to operate and how to isolate it if there's a problem," said Gordon. "I was a yeoman, that means I did the paperwork. We had a fire in the deep fat fryer and Norm Bower, my chief, had me put on an oxygen mask and go in. It was full of greasy smoke. I had to do an emergency ventilation by feel because I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. I was 20. I am not special; we have all done something like that."

Indeed they have, many moving through the waters to detect enemy Japanese subs, with no weapons on board.

"We used passive radar; we just listened," said Gordon.



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Butch Jordan, facing, hugs old Albacore friend and crew member Bruce Greif as they arrive at the Albacore reunion Friday. "I spent 25 years in the Navy, and I never had a better friend than Bruce Greif," says Jordan.

"We couldn't use the active radar. It sends out a ping and they'd know where we were."

Robert St. Pierre, from Williamsville, Vt., was an electrician, third class from 1966 to 1968.

"I remember a time in 1967 the shaft steel went and the motor was locked," said St. Pierre. "We were a couple hundred feet down and there

was water up to the plate. It blew all the emergency ballast tanks and we went up but it felt like we were corkscrewing. Then she shuddered and stopped."

The year 1976 had more in store for the crew of the Albacore.

Norm Bower, chief of boat, served from 1959 to 1969. He told the story of the hurricane

that hit while they were at sea.

"That was definitely the hairiest experience, but we all survived," said Bower. "We were heading from Florida to Portsmouth. We were on the surface and couldn't submerge. The battery props were taking on water."

After a harrowing experience, the crew managed to bring the Albacore to Block Island, off the coast of Rhode Island.

While there is a breakfast planned for Sunday morning, the true final event, a solemn one, comes at Saturday night's banquet — the tolling of the bell for "those who are out on eternal patrol."

The park where the Albacore lies is the product of the Portsmouth Maritime Museum Association, dedicated in 1985. Getting the submarine in the park was no easy task, because she's heavy. There is no way to weigh her, short of weighing individual parts, but it is known that she displaces 1,250 tons of water.

"They built an inlet from here to the Piscataqua River and she cruised in," said Gordon.