

THE NEPTUNE AWARD –
A TRADITION WITHIN THE SUBMARINE FORCE

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Can anybody claim to have made 38 SSBN patrols? That record – equating to over 6 years on patrol and submerged – was established by Master Chief Andy Sierra, the holder of the “Neptune Award” while serving on the Blue Crew aboard USS Maryland (SSBN 738). Reflecting on his service, Chief Sierra commented, “I have received many awards during my career, but none as significant to me as the Neptune Award. The award celebrates the dedication of the officers and men who made (makes) the fleet ballistic missile submarine program so successful.”¹ Before and after Chief Sierra’s record-setting number of patrols, the Neptune Award continues as one of the traditions of the submarine force.

During the 60 years of the fleet ballistic missile program and with over 4000 *Polaris*, *Poseidon*, *Trident I* and *Trident II* strategic deterrent patrols, the officers and enlisted personnel on board our strategic submarines have established a largely unsung record of dedicated service to the nation. This article is intended to record the origin, anecdotal background and current status of the Neptune Award; a continuing part of the history – the lore – of the submarine force.

Back in the late 1970s, in the days of “41 for Freedom”, it became apparent that many of our submariners were accumulating significant numbers of patrols since the completion of USS George Washington’s (SSBN 598) first patrol in January 1961. While serving as Deputy Chief of Staff for Strategic Warfare Systems Readiness (then N6) on the Submarine Force Atlantic Staff in 1978, I proposed the creation of a continuing award to focus attention on this ongoing history of dedicated service being established by SSBN crew members. Subsequently, in August 1978, the proposal for the Neptune Award, named after the God of the Sea in Roman mythology, was submitted to the CNO by ComSubLant, then Vice Admiral Ken Carr, to recognize that submariner, officer or enlisted, who had completed the most SSBN deterrent patrols. The Neptune Award was approved and promulgated by OPNAV Instruction in February 1979 as a means of honoring “all those individuals who have sacrificed so much in years of continued performance of duty in the strategic submarine force”.

When QMC(SS) Hubert Coleman made his first patrol in USS Patrick Henry (SSBN 599) in 1962, he “had no idea . . .” that he would be the first recipient of the Neptune Award 17 years later after completing 23 patrols on five submarines. When receiving the award in the Pentagon in January 1979 from VADM Charles Griffith, the DCNO for Submarine Warfare, Chief Coleman commented, “Every boat is an individual. The closeness of the crew is what makes life aboard a submarine special . . . I’d recommend it to anybody.”²

As prescribed in the original OPNAV Instruction, the Neptune Award was to consist of a permanent trophy and a miniature replica to be presented to each recipient. The holder of the award was also authorized to wear a gold SSBN Deterrent Patrol Pin for as long as he retained the award.³ The recipient would retain the award as long as he held the record and remained on active duty. Subsequently, the governing Instruction was updated to include a detailed description of the trophy to consist of a bust of Neptune rising from the sea holding a Trident spear mounted on a tiered foundation with a model of an SSBN, the SSBN deterrent patrol pin, and the names and number of patrols of the award recipients; and, prescribing that the trophy is to be retained at the recipient’s off-crew site.⁴ In addition, in a change from the original instruction, the current instruction authorizes any submariner who has completed twenty or more deterrent patrols to wear the gold Deterrent Patrol Pin.

In May 1980, Lieutenant George Beaton, topped Chief Coleman's record when he completed his 24th patrol while serving in the Blue Crew aboard USS Ethan Allen (SSBN 608). He had accumulated his patrols while serving aboard six SSBNs, making 18 patrols as enlisted – six as a Limited Duty Officer. He received his Neptune Award from CINCPAC, then Admiral Bob Long. Lieutenant Beaton's patrol count was surpassed in December 1981 by MMCM(SS) Jim Brooks, serving on the Gold Crew aboard USS Mariano G. Vallejo (SSBN 658). Master Chief Brooks went on to record 29 patrols from his service on 5 SSBN crews prior to his retirement.

The number of patrols of the award recipients continued to increase as the years went by. In November 1985, STSCS(SS) Joseph Gemma, serving in the Gold Crew of USS Casimir Pulaski (SSBN 633), succeeded Chief Brooks, registering his 29th patrol after service aboard five other SSBNs. Senior Chief Gemma received the Neptune Award in Charleston, tagged at the ceremony by ComSubGru SIX, Rear Admiral Stan Bump as the “most waterlogged submariner”. Chief Gemma was quoted in a Navy press release stating he had no idea there was an award for completing the most patrols. “I never considered winning recognition for what I've done, or saw making a large number of patrols as an accomplishment. All this time I have just been doing a job I like . . . That's the main reason I stayed with it so long.” He stated his respect for the mission of the FBM submarine, and commented about his personal preference for submarine duty, “I turned down shore duty whenever I came up for rotation . . . preferring to stay on submarines.” He went on to record a total of 33 patrols.

Chief Gemma's record stood for over four years until March 1990 when FTSM(SS) Stephen Wellinghurst recorded his 34th – and last – patrol, while also serving in the Pulaski's Gold Crew. He remained the record holder until October 1993 when MSCM(SS) Andrew Sierra recorded his 34th patrol on the Blue Crew of USS Henry Stimson (SSBN 655).

On the occasion of succeeding Chief Wellinghurst, Master Chief Sierra received the Neptune Award in Kings Bay from ComSubGru TEN, RADM Jerry Ellis. He continued to hold the award while serving ashore for two years. He returned to SSBN duty aboard the Blue Crew of USS Maryland (SSBN 738), adding four more patrols to reach a total overall number of 38 patrols (aboard nine SSBNs) prior to his retirement. His record still stands as the most SSBN patrols by a submariner. Chief Sierra recently e-mailed the following comment: “I spent most of my career in Charleston . . . everyone knew or were familiar with each other . . . a very tight and dedicated group of submarine officers and sailors. I was able to move from boat to boat because I knew who was getting transferred and when they would be leaving. I took the initiative to call my detailer and ask to be assigned to a particular command.”

Upon Chief Sierra's retirement in May 1996, ETCM(SS) Benjamin Smith became the holder of the Neptune Award while serving aboard the Blue Crew of USS Nebraska (SSBN 739). Chief Smith retained the award for nearly five years with a total of 29 patrols until he retired in April 2001.

For the next 48 months until April 2005, ETCM(SS) Larry Keene held the Neptune Award. He accumulated 27 deterrent patrols completing his final patrol while serving in the Gold Crew of USS Maryland (SSBN 738). During his service aboard Maryland, Master Chief Keene also received the Naval Submarine League “Silver Dolphin Award” recognizing his standing in 2002 with the earliest date of qualification in submarines.

A new longevity period for the Neptune Award was set by MMCM(SS) Korey Ketola who held the award for the most patrols from April 2005 until his retirement in July 2013. Master Chief Ketola also received the Submarine League Silver Dolphin Award in 2012. All 35 of his patrols were made aboard *Trident* submarines – recording his 35th while serving in the Gold Crew of USS Maine (SSBN 741) prior to his transfer to duty ashore at the Trident Training

Facility, Kings Bay. His last sea duty assignment occurred aboard USS Georgia (SSGN 729) prior to his retirement.

In July 2013, COMSUBFOR announced that Lieutenant Commander Floyd Rinehold, then serving at the Trident Training Facility, Bangor, was the next Neptune Award recipient having recorded his 32nd patrol during his previous assignment aboard USS Alabama (SSBN 731) Blue Crew. After enlisting in 1986, LCDR Rinehold served on six SSBN crews, initially aboard the Blue Crew of USS Alexander Hamilton (SSBN 617). Following his commissioning as a Limited Duty Officer, he served aboard three additional SSBNs, completing his sea duty assignments as Weapons Officer on the Blue Crew of USS Alabama (SSBN 731). In April 2015, his Neptune Award status was recognized by Admiral Cecil Haney, Commander, U.S. Strategic Command, at an awards ceremony in Omaha during which he received his replica of the Neptune Award. LCDR Rinehold, currently ashore at the Strategic Weapons Facility, Bangor, remains the holder of the Neptune Award pending his potential retirement in 2016.

Since the establishment of the Neptune Award, the permanent trophy had been displayed at the off-crew site of the current recipient. Over the years, the base of the original trophy became damaged while on display at the off-crew site in Kings Bay. Recently, the Neptune Award Trophy has been remade with the names of all recipients and will remain on permanent display on the Quarterdeck at ComSubLant headquarters in Norfolk. Recipients will continue to receive a miniature replica of the award and, as occurred for LCDR Rinehold, the award ceremony for the recipient will be held when possible at ComStratCom in Omaha.

As might be expected and as history records, the Neptune Award is infrequently turned over. Since the initial award in January 1979, there have been only ten Neptune Award recipients. On average, the recipient has retained the award for not quite 4 years, varying from the first award holder, Chief Coleman, who held it for just 4 months, to Master Chief Ketola who retained the recognition for over 8 years. With current and fewer projected SSBNs in the future, the next generation of Neptune Award recipients may likely make fewer qualifying patrols than in the past. In any case, as established in 1979, the Neptune Award will continue to be a traditional means for the Submarine Force to recognize “all those individuals who have sacrificed so much in years of continued performance of duty”.

¹ *Periscope*, Naval Submarine Base, Kings Bay, GA, 4 February 1994

² *All Hands, Magazine of the U.S. Navy*, June 1979

³ The creation of the original SSBN Deterrent Patrol Pin was initiated in late 1967 by the N6 Division (then the Strategic Operations Division) of SubLant Staff, headed by DCOS Captain (later VADM) Oliver H. (“Hap”) Perry. It was eventually authorized in Navy Uniform Regulations about January 1969. (In 2009, the UK submarine force similarly established the Royal Navy Deterrent Patrol Pin awarded for patrols exceeding 30-days; a silver patrol pin for less than 20 patrols; a gold patrol pin for more than 20 patrols.)

⁴ ComSubLant/ComSubPacInst 1650.5, 29 June 2012