

A Caiman Dive

A caiman is a vicious crocodile native to the Amazon. This essay is not about a diving crocodile but about a dive of a US Navy submarine named after the vicious Amazon crocodile. This essay was completed on Memorial Day 2011 in remembrance of the 80 Caimanites with whom I had the honor and privilege of serving. It is an imaginary scenario but it could have been real.

I saw the submariners, the way they stood aloof and silent, watching their pigboat with loving eyes. They are alone in the Navy. I admired the PT boys. And I often wondered how the aviators had the courage to go out every day and I forgave their boasting. But the submariners! In the entire fleet they stand apart!

James Michener, Tales of the South Pacific

Imagine it is nearing dawn one morning in March, 1952. The Korean War is at a stalemate. The cold war between the United States and the Soviet Union is heating up. The US submarine, USS Caiman, SS-323, a diesel-electric snorkel boat, has a few hours earlier slipped quietly through the La Perouse Straits which separates the Japanese Island of Hokkaido from the Soviet island of Sakhalin. The Caiman is heading in a southwesterly direction through the dark and choppy waters of the Sea of Japan. In the east, a narrow orange sliver of sunrise is just visible, making the sea seem even darker, and the twin stripes of the wake of the Caiman even brighter.

The Caiman is running on the surface with four engines at 17 knots, heading to her assigned patrol station off the coast of the Soviet Union, near Vladivostok, where she would tickle the Russians, and perhaps later patrol farther south off the North Korean coasts where she would participate in the blockade of North Korea. Per normal operating procedures, she would submerge before daybreak.

Radar is shut down. Running lights are off. The Caiman is also maintaining radio silence. As the Caiman plows through the sea, heavy spray cascades over the bridge, dousing the Officer of the Deck (OOD) and the Quartermaster with cold salt water. Both are dressed in heavy foul weather gear. Above them at their lookout stations, the port and starboard Lookouts, dressed likewise, with powerful binoculars scan the sea, the sky and the horizon. Suddenly the starboard Lookout reports sharply: "Green light, 025 degrees."

Both the OOD and the Quartermaster turn their binoculars to 025 degrees off the starboard bow. They can make out what appears to be a green running light, a white mast light, and against the sky the dark outlines of a ship. Friend, foe or neutral? Japanese, Chinese, North Korean or Russian? Not distinguishable in the darkness. As the OOD and Quartermaster focus on the vessel, it steers to its starboard, heading in the direction of the Caiman. Moments later, the OOD shouts "Clear the bridge", "Clear the Bridge" and sounds the diving alarm, the klaxon goes oo..gah, oo..gah, "Dive", "Dive", sounds throughout the Caiman.

Movements of the dive immediately commence throughout the boat. (Submarines are called boats, not ships.) Though there is no music, and for the most part they cannot see one another, the movements of the crew on watch are like a dance, simultaneous and perfectly synchronized, as they each perform their well-rehearsed movements.

The port and starboard Lookouts leap from their lookout stations to the bridge deck, drop feet first through the Conning Tower hatch into the Conning Tower. They free-fall down another level to the Control Room. The port Lookout rigs out the bow planes (small wings) while the starboard Lookout grabs the wheel of the stern planes. Each awaits the orders of the Diving Officer.

The Quartermaster is next off the bridge, he falls feet first into the Conning Tower stepping aside to clear the way for the last man off the bridge, the OOD. The OOD jumps feet first into the Conning Tower grabbing the lanyard to close the hatch to the bridge. The Quartermaster then spins the wheel to set the dogs firmly latching hatch shut. He then remains in the Conning Tower to work the periscope and the Torpedo Data Computer.

The OOD descends one level further to the Control Room where he becomes the Diving Officer. As the Diving Officer he gives the Planesmen the depth to reach (say 200 feet) and the diving down angle, perhaps twelve degrees. "12 degree down bubble, 200 feet!" The Diving Officer remains alert to see that the boat is diving at the required down angle, ready to react should something be reported or discerned to be amiss.

Four compartments back in the Maneuvering Room, the Controllers have leaped to their levers and rheostats. The lever sending air to shut down the engines is hit. Rheostats spun, shutting off power from the generators, and levers (sticks) are thrown to shift power from generators to battery propulsion. Generator electricity fades as the power from the huge batteries comes on line. Sticks are pulled to new positions, and rheostats turned to keep the electric motors turning the twin propellers that drive the Caiman into the deep.

Moving forward from Maneuvering to the Aft and Forward Engine Rooms, the Enginemen, one in each room, have closed throttles finishing the shutdown of the huge 16 cylinder, 1600 horsepower GM-278A diesel engines, two in each room. Hydraulic levers pulled to close the outboard exhaust valves. A chrome plated wheel, the size of average auto steering wheel, is spun to close the inboard exhaust valve on each engine. Sea valves permitting sea water to cool the engines are manually closed. Drain valves are opened to let cooling water from the engines drain into the bilges.

Further forward In the Control Room, the Chief of the Watch, positioned forward and just to the right of the Diving Officer, after closing the main air induction valve, has his eyes focused on the Christmas tree which will tell him when all pressure hull openings are closed. When all the lights on the Christmas tree turn from red to green, the chief signals the Auxiliaryman at the air manifold just across the Control Room to bleed high pressure air into the boat to confirm water tight integrity. Integrity confirmed by a pressure gage, the Chief announces loudly, "Green Board, pressure in the boat." Whereupon the Diving Officer orders; "Flood main ballast." "Flood safety." The Chief pulls the levers opening the vents to flood the main ballast tanks and safety.

Through the steel pressure hull, the "shush" sound of sea water rushing in and forcing air out of ballast tanks can be heard. The boat shifts from positive to negative buoyancy in seconds. She is driven into the depths at a twelve degree down angle by her twin propellers. Hereafter the Caiman's depth and angle will be controlled by her forward movement and the bow and stern planes, somewhat like an airplane in flight.

By this time perhaps the Executive Officer or the Captain, will have eased by the Diving Officer and climbed the ladder into the Conning Tower. From there he takes the "Conn."
"The Caiman will maneuver as ordered by the officer with the Conn.

Also by this time, the Forward Engine Room Engineman, having shut down and secured the Forward Engine Room, has raced forward and will have squeezed past the Diving Officer and climbed over the Stern Planesman to man the trim pump from the trim manifold located in the aft, port corner of the Control Room. (This could have been me.) From the trim pump manifold, sea water may be flooded into or pumped out of the boat, or pumped fore and aft, to maintain the trim of the boat. To maintain trim is to maintain as near as possible neutral buoyancy and equal weight fore and aft of an imaginary fulcrum.

Started by the grating sound of the diving klaxon's oo..gah, oo..gah, a sound similar to the horn of an old model A Ford, the dive ends quietly as the Caiman slips smoothly beneath the choppy surface of the sea. On a good dive, the 310 feet of steel displacing 1800 tons will have gone from the surface to periscope depth (58 feet) in 40 seconds or slightly less. The crew on watch now assumes a state of quiet alertness; skilled submariners confident of themselves, of each other and of the Caiman; a band of submariners acting as one. They have done this many times. In qualifying as submariners, they have at one time or another performed each of the movements described. They have taken the Caiman to where she belongs, where she is most lethal; lurking in the depths of the ocean.

Men off watch, having morning coffee, reading or playing card or board games in the crews' mess continue as though nothing is happening. Men asleep in their bunks are pulled from deep sleep by the sound of the diving klaxon. They become half-conscious of what is taking place. They can do the dive in their sleep. They quickly drift back to deep sleep confident their shipmates and the Caiman will keep them safe. Safe as it should be with family at home. The Caiman is their home, their mailing address. Their shipmates are family, the camaraderie of submarine service.

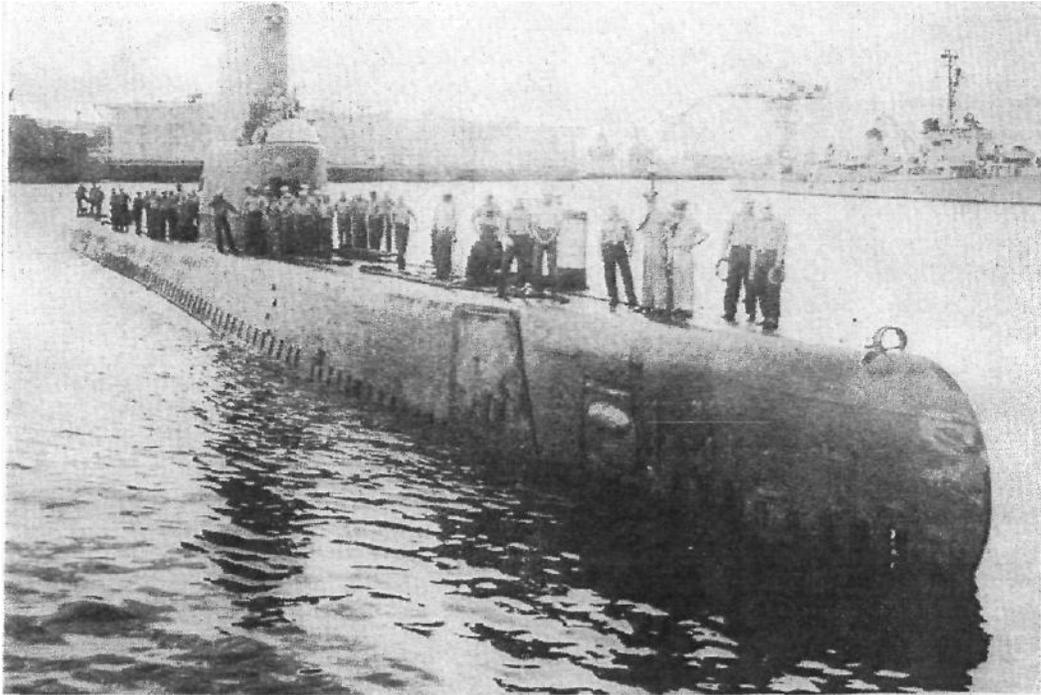
"Submariners are a special brotherhood, either all come to the surface or no one does. On a submarine, the phrase all for one and one for all is not just a slogan, but reality"

VADM Rudolf Golosov of the Russian Navy

"To the Soviets, American submarines were more than the enemy, they were ever present pests. To other Americans, they were simply the anonymous men of the silent service."

Sherry Sontag, author of *Blind Man's Bluff*,
The untold story of American Submarine Espionage

Below is a photo of the Caiman as she arrives in Pearl Harbor
after war patrols in the Far East.



HOME AGAIN... The crew of the USS Caiman lined the deck to get a good look as they arrived here on August 6, 1952 after a tour of duty in the Far East.

On 6 August 1952 the Caiman slowly maneuvers to moor alongside a finger pier at the Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. The COMSUBPAC, an Admiral, gold braid up to his elbows, and his staff were on the pier. Also on the pier was a Navy band, perhaps hula dancers, and wives and girl friends. An absent girlfriend meant a disappointed or perhaps broken hearted, young submariner. In any event, you can bet it was lively that night in Pearl City or downtown Honolulu on Beretania Street, as the single submariners unburdened themselves of six months of hazardous duty pay.

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Memorial Day, 2011

Note: When I wrote this story, it had been 60 years since I had participated in a Caiman dive. Shipmate Smitty (Marvin Smith) reviewed it in January 2012 and corrected some of my technical errors. He also added comments improving the information below about the Caiman and a few Caimanites. The remaining errors are mine. This story about a Caiman dive was inspired, you might say, by a better story in my opinion. I cannot locate the story now, but I believe it was authored by a sailor by the name of Dexter. I would not want anyone to think my story is entirely original.

About the Caiman and a few Caimanites

The Caiman was in the service of the United States from 1944 to 1972. A few over 1200 men went to sea in her in those 28 years. I had the honor and privilege to go to sea aboard the Caiman. This essay was written in remembrance of the 80 submariners I had the honor and privilege to come to know on the Caiman.

Though my memory grows dim as the years pass, it does not dim with respect to many, such as my best pal on the Caiman, Walter (Penny) Pennington, who several years ago sailed on eternal patrol. Or submarine veterans from WWII who were recalled to active duty for the Korean War: Dorfman, Malhado and Schuster, quality men from whom I learned so much. (Schuster had chronic seasickness and could have avoided recall but wanted to serve and was most happy and effective when the Caiman was submerged - smooth sailing, no seasickness.) Or Engineering officer. Lieutenant Skoog, who in a hazardous situation demonstrated his faith in me, which was so important to me as 18-19 year old striving to do well. Or Chief Finch, one of the few "lifers" I really respected, a teacher and a leader, who replaced Chief Crayton who did not return with us from that 1952 deployment but who instead was tragically taken for eternal patrol. I remember well many others too numerous to mention individually in this essay. I have not seen any of them since I left the navy in Honolulu in July 1953 to sail on a merchant vessel back to the Far East. They remain eternally young in my mind.

Today, I and all my former shipmates might be called heroes as that term has been so misused and debased in recent years. Such misuse and trivialization of such an important word and concept diminishes the achievements not only of the real heroes but also of those who simply do and have done their duty to the best of their ability. There were real heroes among the Caimanites, as recognized and decorated for valor by the Navy, I suggest those not decorated for valor by the navy would resent being called heroes; would consider it patronizing. They would just want it acknowledged they did their duty conscientiously and to the best of their ability as the young of all nations have done for their countries in so many different ways since time immemorial. No exaggerated kudos, no heroes bull crap, no superlatives such as the "greatest" and no special thanks required or desired.

The "Hiring Heroes Act of 2011", recently introduced in the US Congress, is a recent example of the gross misuse of the term "hero". The Act is clearly intended to assist all veterans who honorably served, the vast majority of whom are by no stretch of the imagination heroes; they simply answered America's call to arms and did their duty while in uniform. The vast majority of veterans are no more a hero than the farmer, rancher, factory worker, lumberjack, engineer, scientist, etc. who create the wealth that pay the bills; or the police

officer or firemen that protect us on the home front; or the Peace Corps volunteer, generally serving all alone in a strange country and culture representing the good of America in underdeveloped and developing countries.

As to the Caiman, she transferred to the Turkish navy in 1972 where she served that NATO ally as the TCG Dumtupinar, S-339, until December 1983 when she was finally decommissioned. Over 1500 men went to sea in the Caiman in her 39 years of proud service to the navies of the United States and Turkey, 1200 Americans and 300 Turks. I have no doubt the Caiman holds a special place in the hearts and the memories of all who went to sea on her.

If I let my imagination roam freely, I can easily find myself again a young submariner back on the Caiman anticipating liberty at the next port of call. Submariners were especially welcomed ashore in foreign ports as the Dolphins (insignia of a qualified submariner) over our left pocket indicated we drew 50% more pay than other sailors of equivalent grade. Occasionally a diesel-electric submariner in a foreign port might remove his dolphins in an effort to get a better bargain on some item he sought to purchase. It didn't always work. As he attempted to bargain, often the response would be such as: "No be cheap, you can pay! I know you submariner. All submariners smell same, same."

The smell of an old diesel-electric submariner was said to be of the 4 F's: Food, Fuel, Feet and Farts. Those submariners, however, did not smell to another submariner. They were shipmates of the first order, warts, smells and all.

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