A story from the December 11 Citrus County Chronicle highlighting the career of our Withlacoochee Sons of The American Revolution Treasurer, Jack Townsend

CITRUS COUNTY CHRONICLE

Taking the dive

ZODEE TREIER/For the Chronicle

Navy veteran Jack Townsend points to an old photograph at his home in Inverness of chief petty officers Townsend served with on his last submarine assignment.

Nuclear subs steer career path for sailor

C.J. Risak
Correspondent

In Their Words

Name: Jack Townsend.
Rank: Master chief petty officer, E9.
Branch: U.S. Navy – submarine fleet.
When: 1960-1981.
Where: Basic training in San Diego; electronics training, San Diego; Submarine School, New London, Connecticut; submarine quals aboard USS Baya, San Diego; nuclear power school, Mare Island Naval Shipyard, San Francisco; nuclear prototype school, Knolls Atomic Power Lab, near Schenectady, New York; oversaw construction of USS Kamehameha at Mare Island Shipyard, San Francisco; served aboard Kamehameha, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; advanced electronics school, Treasure Island, near San Francisco; aboard USS George Washington Carver, New London, Connecticut; enlisted advisor on Admiral Hyman G. Rickover's staff, Washington, D.C.; aboard USS George Washington, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii; aboard USS Fulton submarine tender, New London, Connecicut.
Jobs: Started as an interior communications electrician for submarines, advancing to become an advanced electrician responsible for all instrumentation relating to the nuclear reactor aboard early nuke subs in the U.S. Navy. Also served as an instructor for nuclear prototype reactors and was a member of Admiral Rickover's staff in Washington, D.C., serving as an enlisted advisor.
Awards: Submarine Warfare Insignia, also known by its nickname, Dolphins, awarded to qualified submariners; qualified as a marksman with both the .45-caliber handgun and M-1 rifle.
Veterans Organizations: U.S. Submarine Veterans, USSV1; American Legion, Inverness Post; Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Ahead of his time — that's the best way to describe Jack Townsend, who now lives in Inverness but grew up on a small farm in northeast Pennsylvania.

His ancestors date back in colonial history to 150 years before the American Revolution (he's a member of the Sons of American Revolution), with farming almost a family tradition. Townsend, however, didn't see his future in farming: "Farming really wasn't something that was going to work out for me."

Thinking like that wasn't all that set him apart. In the 1950s, planning their entire life wasn't high on the agenda for teenagers. But Townsend never acted like a kid from his era.

He went to a school in which one teacher taught all eight grades; his second-grade class consisted of two girls and himself.

"How could I ever have ended up where I did when I started there?" Townsend asked rhetorically. "It's because you learn more than you think you learn. And it wasn't all just reading and writing."

He did know what he wanted: "My big goal was to develop a sale-able, in-demand talent where I could make a decent living."

With farming off his list and the nearby mines all closed, his local options were few. There were shoe and dress factories not far off, but Townsend didn't see himself doing that. "Raising a family on minimum wage working in a shoe factory. That's not what I had in mind."

What he wanted was college, which he believed would expand his opportunities. His plan focused on a job to help pay his way and a college in Scranton, located 20 miles away. But that plan — he already had his class schedule when it happened — was ruined when he lost his job.

There were no student loans to finance college at that time, and scholarships were scarce. That's when another idea came to mind: Townsend had joined the National Guard (at age 15, which wasn't legal), and that got him interested in the military.

It was 1960. He spoke with Army recruiters, but the number of choices available that could lead to a possible career seemed limited.

The Navy, on the other hand: "This was early 1960 and they were building up and looking for people to go into the nuclear power area, because that was just coming up.

"I thought that sounded like a real good thing to get involved in."

There was an obstacle, however. "The only thing was, to get into that program, you had to enlist for six years. That was part of the problem."

The reason: It took three years of training just to become a nuclear-proficient seaman, leaving the Navy with getting just one year of active service in a regular four-year tenure. So to get into nuclear power training, Townsend would have to enlist for six years.

He decided to do just that. "It was the best move I ever made, considering what was going on and the economy, and what options I had. It was a very good decision for me."

Townsend began the trek toward his future with basic training and then electronics school, both in San Diego (where he would meet his future wife, Marlene). After that, Townsend was sent to submarine school in New London, Connecticut.

Then came the part that many submariners revere the most — earning your "Dolphins," officially known as the Submarine Warfare Insignia. It wasn't easy to accomplish; a seaman had to learn how to operate everything in a submarine, from firing a torpedo to operating the steering control system.

No one, other than the captain and his top officers, could be expected to be an expert in all of a submarine's instruments and apparatus. But, they had to know the basic tenets of each, in case they were needed to do that particular job.

A seaman was given a year to earn his Dolphin. Townsend was sent to the USS Baya, a diesel submarine, to get his. Operating out of San Diego, the Baya had regular crewmen aboard working with those trying to learn every facet of the boat.

"You had to qualify to the extent that in an emergency you can handle every watch station on board," he said. "Even the cook has to be able to go back in the engine room and start the diesel. Everybody has to do that, everybody has to be able to fire a torpedo. This is all part of the qualifications.

"The reason for that is way, way back you learned that a submarine is a very dangerous place. If you happened to be in a particular compartment or area and there is a problem, you've got to take care of it."

Townsend served aboard the Baya for just over a year as an interior communications electrician. Once his Dolphins were secured, he was shipped to learn the expertise he had sought – he was sent to the nuclear power school at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, near San Francisco.

Of course, you couldn't just walk in and get started. Once again, you were tested first.

"On Day 1, when you reported to school, they'd give you a written test to assess your ability at that point and your probability to go forward," he said.

"You give a difficult test to a group of men like that, you're going to get

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scores that run the gamut, from barely passing to almost getting everything right. It took four, five hours to take the test."

Fortunately for Townsend, he was proficient in both math and the sciences, so the tests weren't terribly difficult. Thing is, they had nothing specifically about submarines.

"It was math, it was physics, it was chemistry, those kinds of things — reasoning, logic, even Boolean algebra, which was coming in at that point," he explained.

The Basis course lasted six months and provided Townsend with a basic understanding and knowledge of a nuclear plant. His next stop: To study a prototype of a nuclear reactor located at the Knolls Atomic Power Lab at Schenectady, in upstate New York.

This was hands-on work, building a prototype of the reactor that would go into a submarine. It wasn't easy work: Townsend figured somewhere between 25 and 33 percent of those who entered the basic class flunked out; the same percent failed to finish the six-month prototype class.

Townsend, however, did well, so well that he was asked to remain and teach — which is what he did, for the next two years.

But the chance to be part of a nuclear sub and its crew from its very birth awaited.

The commanding officer of his prototype school was selected as the commanding officer for a new submarine being built at Mare Island.

"He invited several of his staff at the prototype school, of which I was one, to come with him," Townsend said. "By that time I had made E6 (first class petty officer). So I did it, I viewed the construction of the ship he was to be CO of, the Kamehameha."

This was another training session for him and his sub mates, overseeing the construction of the boat they would serve in. They helped when and where they could, making changes as it was being built, and they absorbed as much as they could, in case that knowledge was ever needed.

The Kamehameha, named after an early king of Hawaii, was a ballistic missile craft, nicknamed a boomer. It carried 16 ballistic missiles, estimated to be more destructive firepower than all of that expended in both world wars combined.

So they studied the boat. "All of us had systems we were following while they were being developed, because there was an extensive amount of testing done on all the systems," he said. "We witnessed those tests."

The Kamehameha was launched in January 1965. While Townsend was aboard, during its first six patrols, it cruised throughout the Pacific, including the waters around Vietnam while that war expanded.

Patrols were initiated at Pearl Harbor and would last 90 days, "sometimes longer," all that time spent underwater. Like all boomers, the Kamehameha had two crews; they would alternate to keep the boat at sea constantly.

Townsend's time with the Kamehameha ended in 1968, when he was sent to Treasure Island, near San Francisco, for advanced electronics class.

"By this time I was an electronics technician," he said. "I took care of all the instrumentation associated with the sub's reactor. It was very sophisticated stuff."

Now-retired Master Chief Petty Officer Jack Townsend is shown here in 1969, when he first earned the rank of chief petty officer.

But it didn't measure up to the class he was ordered to take: "That really was advanced electronics, it was a year long."

His time spent underwater wasn't over. By 1970, he had been sent east, back to New London, to serve aboard the USS George Washington Carver, another of America's fleet ballistic missile subs.

Now a chief petty officer, Townsend served on the Carver for "three or four" patrols before his time to rotate for shore duty approached. That's when the Navy intervened.

"I had orders to go to nuclear power school as an instructor in Bainbridge, Maryland," he said. "On my last patrol (aboard the Carver) before I'm to be transferred, the captain gets a message.

"If I was willing, Naval Reactors in Washington, D.C., wanted to interview me for a possible job on the staff of Admiral (Hyman G.) Rickover, who

was the father of the nuclear Navy and nuclear reactors."

Townsend was considering the option, but his captain wasn't: "He (Commander D.R. Briggs) was so tickled pink that one of his crew had been chosen to be on Rickover's staff in Washington, he was dancing up and down," he recalled.

Townsend had too much respect for Briggs to refuse the interview, which went well enough that he was off to Washington D.C. for his next posting.

"I was an enlisted advisor to Rickover and his staff. The particular area that I was in dealt with interfacing with the nuclear power schools and nuclear power prototype, assigning people and reviewing service records, all kinds of personnel-type stuff involved with training," he said.

"It wasn't particularly demanding for me; I pretty much made my own hours. I didn't wear a uniform the entire time I was there, and I was there almost four years."

Now an E8, or senior chief petty officer, Townsend still had time to spend under the waves.

"I pretty much picked my next place," he said. "I went to the USS George Washington, doing the same stuff, doing a few patrols on her."

Launched in 1959, the George Washington was America's oldest ballistic missile sub. Once again, Townsend's boat was patrolling the Pacific when he got the chance to do something different. The Washington would prove to be the last underwater boat he would serve on.

"A couple of years into it, I got a call that a new billet was opening on a submarine tender in New London," he said. "They wanted me to take the job, working there in the repair department."

The ship, the USS Fulton, handled repairs on subs while anchored in New London. The Fulton rarely went to sea, maybe three or four times a year, but Townsend – having been promoted to E9 (master chief petty officer) – had a lot to do, including plenty of command duties.

"I had six or eight chiefs working for me," he said. "I was the senior enlisted man on the ship. I had a lot of responsibility. I was a busy boy."

The Fulton was hardly a new ship, launched in 1940 and still having wooden decks. It would prove to be Townsend's final posting.

Having reached the highest rank an enlisted man could obtain without becoming an officer, he retired from the Navy in 1981.

Townsend got what he wanted from his time in the service — a career. When he retired, he was 40 years old and looking for work, which didn't take long. He got hired at Analysis and Technology, located in Stonington, Connecticut.

"They hired me because of my operational nuclear background," he said.

However, the work included lots of traveling, which meant Townsend would be away from his family — again — just like the Navy. Fortunately for him, another job soon opened up, this one in Waterford, Connecticut, handling operations in the instrumentation and nuclear control department at a power plant.

Townsend would remain at that job for 17 years, finally retiring at age 59 in 2000. He and his wife, Marlene, then did some traveling of their own, visiting family and seeing the world before moving to Inverness 12 years ago.