

Naval Submarine Support Facility: Submarine Base New London (A)

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On a beautiful 1999 New England summer day, while driving north on I-95, Captain Jack Pine crossed the Thames River above Groton, Connecticut, and glanced down at the east bank and the New London Submarine Base. It had been a little over six years since he had commanded the attack submarine USS *Boise* (SSN 764), homeported in New London. From this distance the sub base looked the same—old. The waterfront remained the Atlantic fleet’s leading industrial repair center for attack submarines.

Jack realized that he would be commanding that major industrial facility in just five days. Command of Naval Submarine Support Facility (NSSF), New London, was not the command of the submarine squadron (SUBRON) he coveted. But, in this austere downsizing era, a major command in New London was something to be excited about in Jack’s book. During his twenty-seven years in the “silent service” he had always been a customer of submarine repair facilities. Like all waterfront customers he believed that repair facilities could do a better job.

Jack had spent most of his career on various submarines prior to command of the *Boise*, and he had been an instructor at the Submarine School in New London. After command of *Boise*, Jack spent a year at the Naval War College, three years with the commander in chief, Pacific Command (CINCPAC), working regional policy issues, and, most recently, two years in the five-sided building working Navy Pacific Rim policy.

Jack recalled a recent *Boston Globe* article about the submarine force that indicated operations tempo (OPTEMPO) was still a critical issue. The David Abel article stated,

According to the U.S. Navy, the number of missions demanded of its submarine force has doubled since 1990, with espionage, reconnaissance, and attack missions focusing not just on Russia but also on more than 600 subs owned by nations such as Iran, North Korea, and China. With the U.S. submarine fleet 40 percent smaller than in 1990, the Navy says it can no longer carry out all the missions the Pentagon would like. ‘We are already saying no to important requirements,’ said, Vice Admiral Giambastiani, head of Atlantic Fleet submarine forces. ‘We are saying no because we flat out have less resources.’¹

As Jack drove through the main gate he remembered the first time he had come through this gate. He was a Sailor, designated as a nuclear electricians mate, and just promoted to

petty officer third class, on his way to the Submarine School along with thirty-three others. After his first deployment on a fast attack submarine, he was selected for the Navy's Enlisted Commissioning Program at Purdue University. Hard work, attention to detail and pursuit of excellence got him through command and promotion to captain. Jack was known to operationally press the undersea environment and to be demanding of his crew.

Jack noticed that the Sub Base had remained unchanged, the "lower base" being the waterfront and industrial complex; and the "upper base" being the administration buildings, the Submarine School, and the Hospital. The submarine base remained crowded, with little parking and the lower base still looked like a large complex industrial morass. Jack remembered that the base was established in 1868 on 112 acres of farmland. Starting in 1881, the Base was used as a Coaling Station. In 1915 the Coaling Station became Naval Submarine Base New London. Since then, Naval Submarine Base New London has been an icon in U.S. Navy submarine culture and history.

Many of the waterfront buildings were constructed during the late 1800s and early 1900s. Buildings 1 and 2 were built around 1873, and are the headquarters of the SUBRONs. Over ten thousand active duty personnel and over two thousand civilians are employed on the sub base. Of note, the base has over 1,750 buildings; with only 170 buildings constructed since World War II.²

One had to wonder if anyone was thinking of replacing old buildings with new ones. The impact was obvious; there was no vacant land to build on. For every building that was to be built, one would first have to be demolished. Jack asked himself, where would tenants go while construction was ongoing, and how would a military construction project affect submarine maintenance?

After spending fifteen minutes looking for a parking spot, Jack walked into his future headquarters at Building 89. Knowing that navy buildings are numbered sequentially, Jack guessed that his building was constructed well before World War II.

Jack was greeted by the commanding officer's receptionist, and then quickly ushered into Captain Doug Tamarack's office. "Welcome to your future command, NSSF," Captain Tamarack stated. "Leading this complex industrial submarine repair facility will be unlike any other command you have ever been in Jack, (Actors are listed at Appendix A).

"The concept behind submarine maintenance hasn't changed since your days in command Jack. Lower level, less complex maintenance and repair, often called organizational level maintenance, is still the responsibility of each submarine and its crew. Major repairs of propulsion systems and weapons systems, called depot level maintenance, are the responsibility of the shipyards. The NSSF is the intermediate maintenance activity (IMA) for the base. Intermediate repairs are either accomplished by the NSSF or contracted out to the private sector.

“Jack we have undergone a huge change since you commanded *Boise*. The SUBRONs have been reorganized. Also, how submarine maintenance is brokered has changed a lot. New London used to have two SUBRONs of about nine to twelve submarines each. Both squadrons had personnel for operations, maintenance scheduling, admin, training, and safety. So Jack, when you commanded *Boise* you went to the squadron for everything. Not any longer! Now there are three SUBRONs, each with six submarines. When the third squadron was being established, senior leadership recognized that a support staff for that squadron was not attainable. A support staff was created to serve all three squadrons (see Appendix B). This new unit is commanded by an O-5 commander, and is designated as the Submarine Squadron Support Unit (SSSU). Now the three SUBRON commanders (Navy captains) oversee operational tasking of their six submarines and the SSSU provides admin, maintenance job screening, supply, and a plethora of other functions for the commanding officers of the submarines. Submarine commanding officers now forward their proposed repair packages to the SSSU, not to the squadron commanders.

“The people over at the SUBRONs and SSSU will tell you that the new system works pretty well but, for me, here at the NSSF, it is just another layer that I have to work with. What really upsets me is the fact that the SSSU outsources work to other repair facilities without consulting us (Appendix C). This may cause us to lose work and money here at the NSSF.

“Furthermore, the three SUBRON commanders have not really empowered the SSSU. If the SSSU rejects maintenance requirements from a submarine, for instance, because the maintenance is lower level and could be performed by the submarine itself, that submarine’s squadron must approve the SSSU’s rejection. So you have three squadron commanders closely watching the SSSU and competing for services for their submarines.

“The leadership in the submarine force has recognized the requirement for dedicated intermediate maintenance availability periods. But, operational and other scheduling conflicts still crop up.

“Each submarine nominally adheres to a twenty-four month schedule (Appendix D). Six months are forward deployed and eighteen months here in her homeport. NSSF, as the lead intermediate maintenance activity (IMA), is tasked with establishing two five-week dedicated maintenance periods during the eighteen-month homeport period. Jack, this command, the SSSU, the submarine, and the SUBRON commanders establish a four-week planning period followed by five-weeks of intensive IMA.

“Our process works efficiently when these schedules are honored. Problems arise when operational tasking interrupts the two maintenance periods. In today’s climate, repair resources are thin, and we really pay a price when efficiency suffers.”

Jack remembered the *Boston Globe* article and wondered if operational leadership would adhere to the schedule. After all, Jack thought, submarines are national assets, subject to quick tasking.

Captain Tamarack continued. “Let me quickly discuss some of the daily issues nipping at our heels. NSSF employs one thousand people. Eighty percent are Sailors, and they work in the various repair shops. This is their shore duty. These shore duty billets enable our Sailors to improve their maintenance and repair expertise and skills. Upon return to a submarine, these newly acquired skills can be used to improve onboard submarine maintenance and troubleshooting. A great benefit to the captain, crew, and Navy.”

Jack thought that another side benefit might be an increased permeability between the NSSF and submarines.

“However,” Captain Tamarack went on, “most of these eight hundred Sailors are not submariners. Many are surface warfare enlisted personnel who transport these skills back to the surface fleet. Our submariners can roll from sea to shore duty and stay in the New London area. The surface warriors only remain in the area for their shore duty and then are transferred out of area to a surface warfare naval station. Added to this, is the high cost of living in this area. Nuclear submariners get a bonus, but surface designated Sailors do not. Therefore, surface warfare Sailors are financially strapped and have to transfer and relocate out of area after shore duty. Jack you can guess how this affects morale?”

“Regarding personnel at the NSSF, the big picture of where the Navy is going is an initiative called the New England Maintenance Manpower Initiative (NEMMI); which involves privatization—basically shifting jobs to the private sector. The formula provides .63 civilian employees for each Sailor. Next fiscal year 270 civilians from Electric Boat, a sub-division of General Dynamics, will replace about 430 Sailors here at NSSF. You and your staff will have to consider the consequences of this move. Integrating Navy female and male surface warriors, civilians, unions, vendors and contractors will be a challenge to your already full plate. Civilian night work is very costly. Working your Sailors at night will create a second order effect. They are on shore duty and may get out of the Navy. You will still have base operating support functions to fill, duty sections will have to be manned and you will have to provide Sailors to the sub base for the auxiliary security force.

“Well Jack I have a meeting with our ombudsman,” Captain Tamarack stated, “seems like the families believe that we are working our Sailors too hard and NSSF is not what they thought shore duty would be like. See you on the podium for the change of command on Friday.”

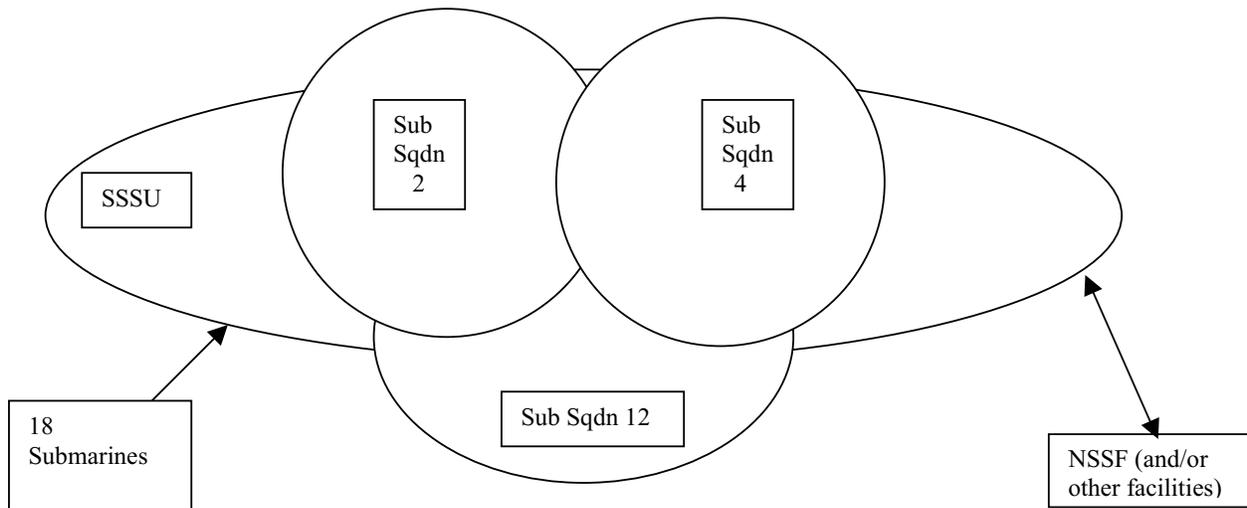
As Jack walked toward Building 1, and his meeting with the commanding officer of the SSSU, he recalled that many of the War College case studies reflected many of the problems he was facing.

Commander Dave Larch greeted Jack at the door and offered him a cup of coffee. Like Jack, Dave had been an enlisted submariner. He had been selected for commissioning through the limited duty officer (LDO) program. Although he had not commanded a submarine, Dave was in command of the SSSU. Quite an achievement Jack thought.

“Well captain,” Dave said, “I broker and schedule all maintenance, provide technical support, supply assistance, admin support, berthing plans, port services, and any other support the eighteen submarines assigned to SUBRONs TWO, FOUR and TWELVE need. Think of my organization as the support unit for those squadrons. I am manned with all the support personnel who used to be assigned to SUBRONs TWO and TWELVE, before the reorganization and establishment of SUBRON FOUR.”

Jack interrupted, “Tell me Dave, how does my command, NSSF, relate to the SSSU?”

“Take a look at my blackboard while I explain,” Dave said.³



“After I have a submarine’s maintenance package ready for intermediate or depot level maintenance, I direct the work to your command, contractors, shipyards, and vendors, (Appendix C). The submarines are my customers, and NSSF is a repair resource. I know Captain Tamarack, your predecessor, does not like the authority I have to divert work away from the NSSF. However, I need to schedule the work to best serve my customers.

“We do not want to send a submarine to an out-of-area shipyard. That takes the crew away from their families and homeport during the turn-around cycle. Nor, do we want to hold maintenance awaiting availability of a particular maintenance facility.

“The cost of repair or availability of a repair facility may require me to reject or defer a submarine’s work request. This does not sit well with the chain of command. Moreover, squadron commodores and submarine force flag officers were used to having support functions attached to their SUBRONs, so that they could better control their squadron. The three squadron commodores closely monitor the SSSU, their submarines, and all three then compete for SSSU services. Although the admiral signs my annual fitness report, I am sure that each commodore has an opportunity to make his input.

“Captain Pine, NSSF is just one of the many organizations that the SSSU has to work with to ensure those eighteen submarines are fully systems capable and ready for sea.”

Jack’s next appointment was with Captain Mac Manzanita, one of the SUBRON commodores. The other two commodores were in Millington, Tennessee, sitting on the line commander promotion board.

“Welcome aboard,” Mac said, as Jack walked into the SUBRON’s spaces, “and congratulations on command of the NSSF Jack, a great accomplishment considering your start as an enlisted man.

“In the old days NSSF was a nonstop, twenty-four hour by seven day, maintenance and repair facility. Now NSSF works Monday through Friday from 0800 to 1600, with no night, weekend, or holiday work. It used to be everything was fixed on our nuclear submarines. Our boss, Admiral Alder, commander, Submarine Group (SUBGRU) TWO (Appendix C), remembers those days when the NSSF worked around the clock and fixed everything. I have to answer the tough phone calls from him when I report that all systems on a submarine are not fully operational.

“The NSSF no longer has the time or work force to accept all the work that is generated by squadron submarines. Therefore, repair cost is rising because NSSF now outsources more repair work to other facilities. Contractors win with low bids, and low bids do not always assure the best maintenance for our submarines. NSSF used to fix almost everything. Now NSSF will not take all the repair jobs we used to send it.

“Sending one of my submarines to another facility from this sub base does not support OPTEMPO/personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO) policy, and I lose training days at sea.

“The average age of the highly skilled submarine civilian laborer at the Portsmouth naval shipyard, in New Hampshire, as well as over at Electric Boat, is fifty-four. The workers from Portsmouth are no longer willing to come down here. Electric Boat is only building one new submarine, and cannot afford to retain and train a large work force. Young workers are looking for jobs elsewhere. The “big six” commercial shipyards have reduced their work force by one-third, dropping from 82,000 employees to 55,000 since 1991. They have been taking on ever more Navy repair and overhaul work, but state that they are at about half production capacity.⁴

“Our concern as operational SUBRON commanders is how will your loss of 430 Sailors, that will be replaced by 270 civilian laborers under the NEMMI plan, affect NSSF’s ability to surge for operational tasking by the fleet commander? Will outsourcing repair jobs to contractors, shipyards, and vendors raise costs to a level that prohibits fixing all the maintenance discrepancies a submarine documents?”

“The admiral’s staff wants to look at the entire process of performing regional submarine maintenance. He understands that maintenance equals submarines at sea.”

“I just have to interrupt,” Jack said. “Thanks for raising so many issues. But, I am really curious, what do you believe NSSF’s working relationship is with your squadron and the SSSU?”

Mac continued. “The SSSU serves the three squadrons. It gives the submarine force another command billet. The three squadrons now compete for services we used to have imbedded in our own organization. In fact, Commander Larch worked for my squadron before the standup of the SSSU. However, problem solving and decision-making is just a phone call away. The other two squadron commanders, your predecessor at the NSSF, Doug Tamarack, and I are all Naval Academy classmates. We solve most issues together.

“Jack, I hate to raise issues without solutions, but I have a meeting with the admiral in fifteen minutes so I must fight the traffic to the upper base.”

As Mac departed, Jack decided it was time to discuss his new command with some of the leadership at NSSF.

Jack’s next meeting was with Commander Stanley Tupelo. Stan was the production management assistant for NSSF’s Repair Department. This would be Jack’s largest department. It included eleven divisions and over 750 employees.

Stan welcomed his new commanding officer and began to describe the submarine repair world as he saw it.

“Captain, I am responsible for scheduling and managing all the repair work that is done when the submarine is at our piers. We have a spider web of customers outside of NSSF. Not only are there eighteen submarines to repair, but also we have demands from the SSSU, shipyards, contractors like Electric Boat, and many vendors to consider. While a submarine is undergoing its five-weeks of dedicated maintenance availability someone has to coordinate the repair jobs by each of these organizations. We here at NSSF are the lead activity. Having a maintenance crew standing around waiting on another maintenance crew from another organization to finish a job is not efficient. Piers are not always compatible with certain work, crane service is a nightmare - too few cranes for too many jobs. Weapons loading can shut down an entire pier.

“With the NEMMI, someone needs to consider creating a three to five year regional plan that would integrate private industry, piers, cranes, and submarine scheduling for the five-week maintenance availability. Building a vision from here in the middle, at NSSF, may jump-start the process. What is the demand for future outsourcing, what will outsourcing cost the Navy, how can we improve efficiency and effectiveness, what are the capabilities of regional Navy repair facilities, and to what level will civilian skilled laborer decrease? Creating a New England regional maintenance team may provide the answers to these and many more questions. You will find that most of the real critical players in all of this don’t work for you, some are your peers and some are your seniors. I often find myself lobbying

various commands for cooperation, people, and work. Everybody has different time lines and priorities that they are following.”

“Stan thank you for your insights,” Jack stated. “Your observations focus on many of my new founded concerns. Yesterday I was thinking of only NSSF and our role in repairing submarines. Clearly there is more to do.”

Jack next met with his weapons officer, Lieutenant Commander Socrates Hemlock. “Tell me Soc, what do I need to do as the future commanding officer to improve NSSF?”

“Captain that is easy,” Soc replied, “get me some cranes. There are not enough cranes on this base to support repairing submarines and loading weapons. Sub base public works owns the cranes and they never attend the SSSU maintenance planning conferences. The crane operators and crane schedulers are civilian employees and they do not have a clue about the importance of my people getting weapons off the trucks and onto the submarines. The SSSU schedules our weapons moves, but weapons loading often interferes with maintenance on submarines tied up to the same pier. I end up having seventy of my people stand around with weapons on trucks while we sort out cranes, piers, and maintenance. Loading a weapon shuts down a large area of a pier and adjacent areas, precluding maintenance on pier-side submarines.”

“Thanks Soc,” Jack said. “It is time for me to meet with the Sub Base Public Works Officer.”

The sub base public works officer (PWO) works for the commanding officer of the base. Jack knew that NSSF was a huge industrial complex that the PWO and Jack were responsible for maintaining and operating. Submarine intermediate maintenance could not be accomplished without the machine shops. Jack looked at his buildings, while he waited for the PWO, and he wondered how much longer these old buildings would hold together.

Commander Sandi Tanoak saluted and introduced herself to Jack.

Sandi stated: “ I have a Sub Base demolition master plan and I have identified buildings for demolition based on two simple criteria—condition and cost to operate. Captain, most of your buildings are cost prohibitive to operate, especially in the winter. NSSF’s heating bill alone takes more from Ft. Knox than Goldfinger tried to steal!”

Jack interrupted, “Sandi I understand that the SSSU is heading up a pier rehabilitation plan.”

“Yes Sir,” Sandi responded, “That is another facility problem this region must get its arms around. I cannot demolish a building until someone moves out, and there is nowhere

to build on the lower base without first demolishing a building. Sir lets walk through all of your buildings and I will recite the deficiencies of each building. NSSF's buildings are old, tired and tremendous abusers of utilities."

While sitting in the commanding officers outer office, his future secretary told Jack that he had a phone call from Commodore Mac Manzanita.

Jack offered, "Mac, how can I help you."

"Sorry, I hate to break the news, but this will happen next week after you have taken command. USS *Indianapolis* (SSN 697) will not be able to be inducted into her five week scheduled maintenance availability period next week. Operational commitments require her to be at sea. I need you to find a period that will not interfere with future at sea periods that I have scheduled, but still accomplish the repair package. Thanks a lot Jack."

So much for uninterrupted maintenance Jack thought as he hung up the phone.

Notes

1. David Abel, "Some Say US Sub Force is Spread Too Thin," *Boston Globe*, 27 June 1998, sec. A, p. 5.
2. Commander, Navy Region Northeast, "Naval Submarine Base New London," available from <<http://www.cner.navy.mil/>>.
3. SSSU Command Presentation, Interview by author, June 1999, Groton, Connecticut.
4. Sydney J. Freedberg, Jr., "Competition Dry Docked," *National Journal*, DEFENSE: vol. 31, no. 26, p. 1886 (26 June 1999).

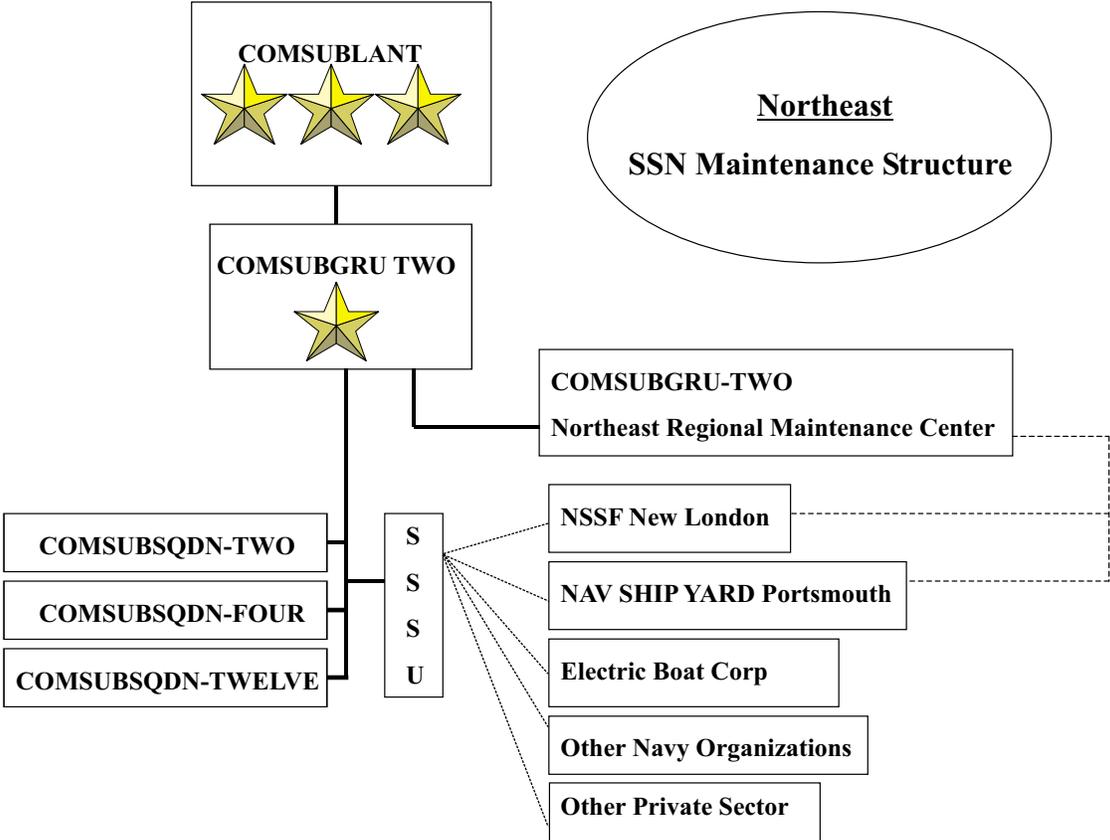


APPENDIX A

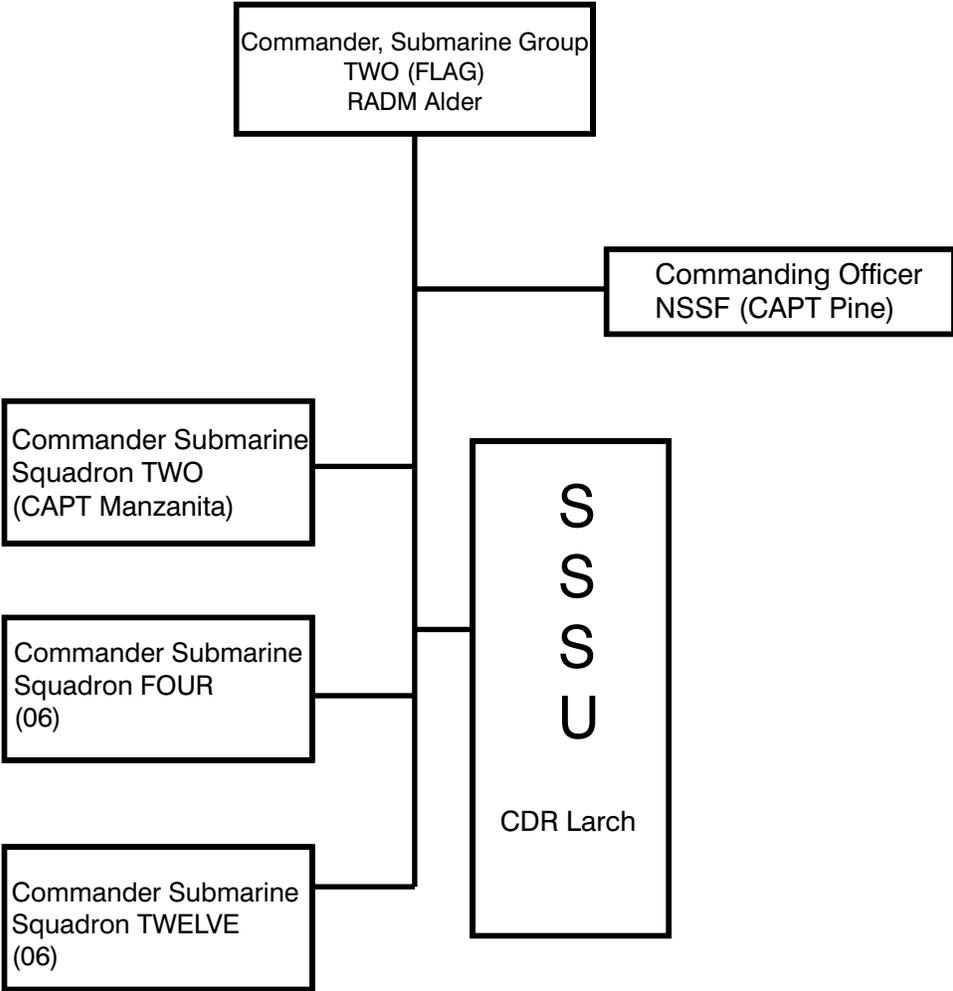
The Actors

Captain Jack Pine	NSSF incoming commanding officer
Captain Doug Tamarack	NSSF outgoing commanding officer
Commander Tupelo	NSSF production mgt. assistant, Repair Division
LCDR Socrates Hemlock	NSSF weapons officer
Commander Dave Larch	SSSU commanding officer
Captain Mac Manzanita	Commodore, Submarine Squadron TWO
Commander Sandi Tanoak	NAVSTA public works officer
Admiral Alder	Commander, Submarine Group TWO

APPENDIX B



APPENDIX C



APPENDIX D

Submarine

Turn Around Training/Maintenance Cycle

