

Aaron Rohde/Staff photographer

FORMER SEAMAN STEVE HOGAN chats with fellow shipmates after he came all the way from Florida for the Albacore reunion in Portsmouth, starting Friday.

USS Albacore shipmates reunite after 50 years

By GRETYL MACALASTER
Democrat Staff Writer

PORTSMOUTH — Robert Seeley and David Pinkham remember the days, 50 or so years ago, when submarine sailors were viewed as heroes in the Port City.

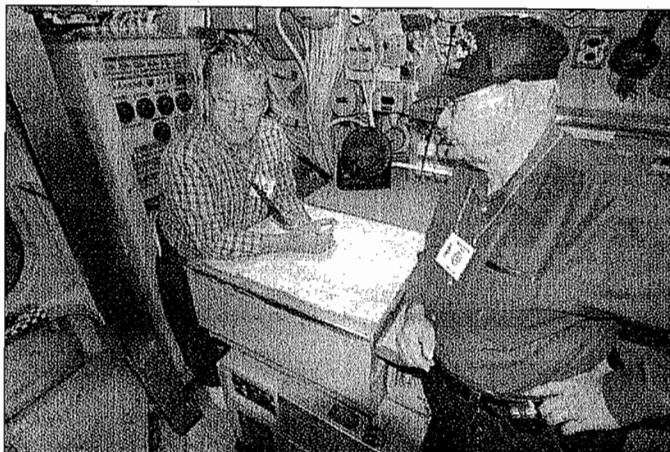
Both men remembered when they and other USS Albacore crew members were continually welcomed with open arms whenever they hit downtown for a night of raucous fun following long stretches aboard the submarine.

Now making their homes in Connecticut, Seeley and Pinkham at the time were two of about 40 Navy men stationed on the submarine when it was commissioned in Portsmouth Harbor in 1953.

They are now part of a group of former crew members taking part in a three-day reunion in Portsmouth this weekend. Of the original crew, referred to as "plank owners" and comprised of 32 enlisted men and four officers, only six are still alive, five of which are attending the reunion.

Activities planned for the men include a clambake, open boat tours, and dinner at the VFW.

The Friends of the Albacore, a non-profit set up in 2003 and largely made up of former crew members, organ-



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DAN MOSS and Robert Freytag pause for a minute while they reminisce about the time each spent serving aboard the submarine, in the same spots they stand in today on the USS Albacore, during a reunion at the submarine in Portsmouth Friday.

ized the event to bring a close-knit group of sailors back together, some for the first time in 40 years and others who are seeing the Albacore out of the water for the first time.

The USS Albacore has been out of commission since 1972 and was

brought to Portsmouth in 1984. One year later, it was moved to its current location off Market Street and is open to the public for tours.

Retired Lt. Cmdr. Austin "Butch" Jordan, who serves as the vice-chair

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of the Friend of Albacore, qualified on the Albacore and retired from the Navy after more than 20 years of service. Friday was the first time he had seen his good friend and former shipmate Bruce Greif in more than 35 years. As they joked with each other like young men who had never left the boat, they commended each other on the great

things they had achieved in the rest of their lives.

"I'm nobody special. I'm just one of the Albacore crew, just a submariner. We're all brothers" Jordan said.

During World War II, submarines played a large role in the defeat of the Japanese military. After the war, the Navy decided to expand its submarine capabilities. The Albacore was designed as an experimental sub to test new equipment and ideas and never carried a weapon. Every

submarine in the world is based on the teardrop design of the hull introduced on the Albacore and at the time it was built, it was the fastest submarine in the Navy's fleet.

Pinkham, originally from Dover, never imagined he would be sent back to the Seacoast to test submarines. After serving on diesel boats during WWII he was sent to Portsmouth to work on the Albacore.

The WWII subs were "much slower and less maneuverable,"

he said.

He shared stories with those around him of World War II and the great times he shared with crewmates aboard the Albacore.

"I jumped ship in Subic Bay (Philippines) to search for my brother" Pinkham related, "I was too late, but I never got in trouble."

Pinkham served along with his four brothers in WWII, one of which survived the Bataan Death March and three years as a POW of the Japanese.

After serving in WWII, he was stationed in Portsmouth to serve on the Albacore, an experimental submarine that was considered the fastest and most innovative boat of its time.

"Submarine sailors were heroes in this town" Seeley said.

The submarine was decommissioned in 1972 because of constant problems with the engines.

"It was supposed to be an engine marvel and it was an engine disaster" Seeley said.

Greif first heard the Albacore

had become a museum after his wife met people from the Portsmouth area on a bus ride out west. They sent pictures so Greif could see how the Albacore was being honored as a Portsmouth icon.

"I won't say it's the best, but it is close to the best thing Portsmouth has put out" former Capt. Tom Poole said.

"Every submarine in the world owes its history to the Albacore" Ralph "Bill" Naples said. "It was the highlight of my Navy career.

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