

Story #10 Vol V Polaris Missile & USS Butternut AN-9

We hear many words and terms that don't have much meaning to us at the time, but that later will come to life because of some future conversation or incident. Recently that happened to me with the words Polaris Missile. To me it was just another missile that was shot into the air. Then the following e-mail enlightened me.

"Not sure if you have this picture in your collection. I came across it in recent house relocation. Best regards
Jesse Hendelman (Long retired Lt USNR)"

A few months ago I had also received another e-mail picture from Jesse.

One picture showed a dummy missile being launched near the Net Tender USS Butternut AN-9 in May 1958. The other picture taken in the spring of 1958 showed Butternut towing what I found out to be a missile tube with a dummy missile inside. Both of these pictures were taken in the waters of the Pacific near San Clemente, California. One picture reads, Operation Pop-Up, First underwater ICBM launch in history, Spring 1958, Dummy Polaris fired from underwater launch tubes at San Clemente Island, CA, Mission control aboard USS Butternut AN-9. The other picture reads, USS Butternut May 1958 San Clemente Island, California.

It was then that I learned that USS Butternut AN-9 played a part in the early stages of the development of the Polaris Missile.

I then went to the internet and found information on the Polaris, the first Submarine-Launched Ballistic Missile deployed by the U.S. Navy and which resulted in one of the most important assets of the U.S. Nuclear armed forces ever since.

All U.S. military services, including the navy, experimented with ballistic missiles in the immediate post-war years, mainly by using captured German rockets. It soon became clear that the hazard involved with liquid-propellant rockets ruled out this technology for shipboard use. In the 1950's solid-fuel rocket technology came into play. It climaxed with the navy being allowed to develop a new program in 1956 named Polaris. From the beginning Polaris was planned for launch from a submerged submarines instead of from a surfaced vessel. This made the missile undetectable before launch and provided a more stable platform.

Polaris missiles did not receive a formal designation, but instead were known by simple letter number combinations, starting with A-1.

The first flight test of a Polaris AX test vehicle (dummy missile) was made in May 1958 and was fired by USS BUTTERNUT AN-9. Earl Garner stated that they were working with the Naval Ordnance Test Station at China Lake, CA and that it was their most remarkable and career satisfying assignment.

They would tow the test vehicle (dummy missile) and launcher (missile tube) from Long Beach to the launching site at San Clemente Island. Both Earl and Eddie Pinson stated that they would travel at 2 or 3 knots, so it was a slow trip. When they arrived at the launching site the missile tube with the dummy Polaris inside would be lowered down and the divers would secure it to the launching pad. The missile was then fired by Butternut.

Five more test flights were made with the Polaris AX test vehicle until April 1959. In September 1959 the first Polaris A-1X tactical prototype missile, which included the inertial navigation system, was successfully launched and tests of the A-1X continued through 1960.

The navy had now built its first ballistic missile submarine, the USS George Washington SSBN-598. On July 20, 1960 the first successful underwater launch of a Polaris missile was accomplished by this ship. In November 1960 the Polaris A-1 Submarine Launched Ballistic Missile became operational on SSBN-598. On May 6, 1962 the submarine USS Ethan Allen SSBN-608 successfully launched a Polaris A-1 with a live nuclear warhead in the United States nuclear test range in the Pacific. This was the first and only full live test of a U.S. strategic missile

Jesse Hendelman, Earl Garner and Eddie Pinson all stated that LT Mike Trens, the skipper of USS Butternut was instrumental in designing a method to catch the unfired missile, so that it would not fall back down on the launch pad. The missiles were fired with compressed air and at first were only powerful enough to break the surface. Evidently improvements were made. The picture we have shows the missile out of the water heading straight up. Various launching and recovery methods were evidently attempted, so I will not try and explain the different procedures. We will let Earl and Eddie to that at the reunion.

Earl Garner tells about an incident when the crane barge they used broke from its moorings during a Pacific storm. They gave chase, but the huge crane, acting as a sail, propelled it faster than Butternut could go. It was finally stopped off Mexico by a seagoing tug

Eddie tells the story about a missile sitting on a barge and two yard Birds were sitting leaning against it eating their lunch. Eddie states that the darn thing fired off and burned the heck out of them. He went over with the Doc and when Doc touched one of the guys hands-the skin just pulled off his fingers.

The 2 pictures sent to us by Jesse Hendelman indicate that he was the Executive Officer and Mike Trens the Commanding Officer of USS Butternut. These excellent pictures will be sent to LeRoy Jones, our photographer. He will no doubt enlarge them so they can be displayed at our display table at the next reunion.

Later improvements were made to the Polaris A-1 missile, with the A-2 version deployed in June 1962 and the A-3 version becoming operational in September 1964. The final Polaris A-3 was withdrawn from service in October 1981.

Polaris began to be replaced in the US Navy by Poseidon beginning in 1972. In the 1980's both were replaced by Trident 1. Jesse Hendelman , who served as Executive Officer on Butternut from April to August in 1958, was then discharged and became a project engineer at General Dynamics Electric Boat where he helped with the Polaris and later Trident missile programs.

The Polaris Missile program, followed by the Poseidan and Trident programs led to the collapse of the Soviet Union and won the Cold War. Just knowing the existence of these powerful war weapons on the bottom of the ocean would deter any provocation against our nation.

Anyone who served aboard USS Butternut AN-9 during this period was part of an important segment of our history. 2 known members, not mentioned, who receive our e-mail and were aboard during this time were Richard Beckett and Gary Jensen.