

CALL TO ACTION

A Submarine CO's Account of the First Hours of the War on Terror

by CDR Scott Bawden, USN

"For they had learned that true safety was to be found in long previous training, and not in eloquent exhortations uttered when they were going into action."

- Thucydides (History of the Peloponnesian War, ca. 400 B.C)



USS *Providence* returns to port after a six-month deployment

When EM2 Jenkins reported on board USS *Providence* (SSN-719), he looked me in the eye and said, "Captain, I just want you to know that I am big on America!" This proud young professional was right where he wanted to be: on an operational warship getting ready to go boldly in harm's way. To my never-ending delight, for the three years I commanded *Providence*, there was never a shortage of people like Petty Officer Jenkins onboard. That spirit, more than any other thing, is what makes *Providence* the truly great warship that she is today.

Providence was near the end of her six-month deployment, and we

were already counting how many miles we would have steamed by the time we returned to our homeport in Groton, Connecticut. By all normal measures, the deployment was already a resounding success. We were taking stock of our accomplishments, remembering our port calls, planning our future, and carefully navigating our ship toward Bab el Mandeb and the Red Sea. Having completed a busy tour in the CENTCOM AOR, we were ready to chop back into the Mediterranean and eventually set sail for home. We had a plan.

It was dinnertime. I went into the Radio Room after having observed the watch team transition the ship to periscope depth for routine communications and housekeeping. I was going to make a quick check of incoming messages, then head down to the wardroom for chow. I was watching the communications team as it smoothly went through the parallel procedures of sending outgoing traffic, copying incoming, making voice reports, connecting us to the SIPRNET for a quick check of e-mail, and finally logging on to GBS for a few minutes of Headline News. I was hoping to get some baseball highlights.

ET1(SS) Dustin Trask has considerably more time and experience in submarine communications than I have. The worried look on his face got my attention, because his usual style was rock-solid. "Captain, take a look," he said as the first of the message traffic came on board. Instead of the expected routine messages, what rolled out were several accounts describing in detail a coordinated terrorist attack on the United States about two hours before. "Get the XO in here," I remember saying. My Executive Officer, LCDR Tony Gamboa, knew that if I called him to Radio, something big was up. He arrived in seconds. "Captain, this is not an exercise - I'll get the officers in the wardroom," he said after reviewing the first of the messages; then he disappeared. It was immediately clear to me that we weren't going home anytime soon.

In minutes, the officers were in the wardroom. While I gave them time to read the messages, I got on the line to our Fleet Commander and stated our intentions: *Providence* was turning around and returning to the Northern Arabian Sea at maximum speed. Once there we would check in and stand ready for any and all tasking. I asked for any information we could get regarding the

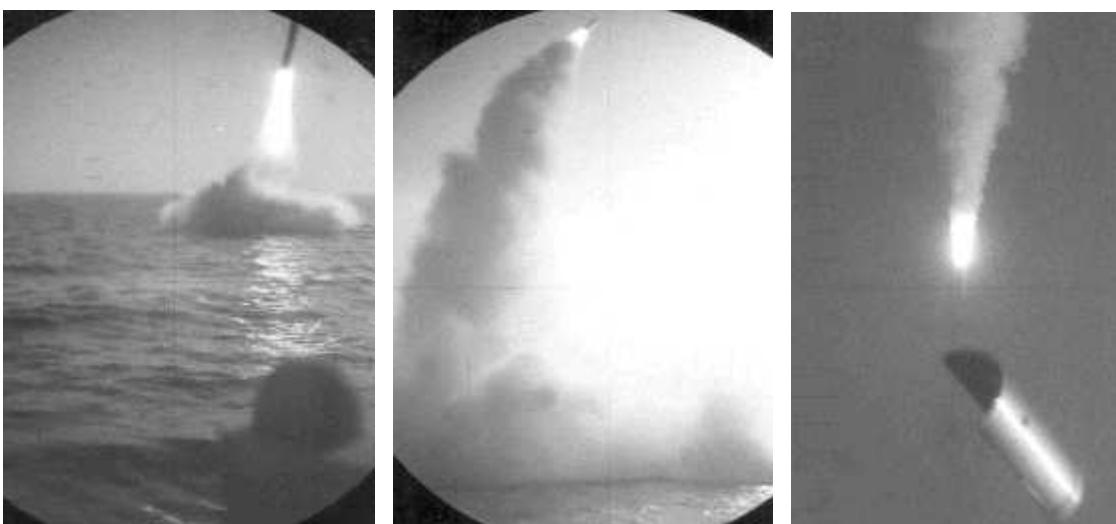
safety of our families. Many members of the crew had friends and family in New York City, and we all had shipmates in the Pentagon. Our commanders concurred with our plan, and we went deep and moved at maximum speed.

Back in the wardroom, now packed with officers and chief petty officers, we started our combat planning based on what we knew. We had to make all preparations to get us effectively and safely to the scene of battle, 100 percent ready to fight and win. We had to think of everything, foresee and avoid all problems, and plan it in every detail. No mistakes and no surprises. This is the art of submarine warfare, and *Providence* knows that art well. We agreed to meet again in two hours and lay out our plan. I passed the word to everyone on the 1MC. As always, unity of command starts with everyone having accurate information and understanding our mission. The word was out.

As we sprinted, I made time to meet with my Sailors in small groups. I already knew we were ready, because we had trained and practiced, and I knew what we could do. Additionally, we had been deployed for many months and had gained significant operational experience. We were at the top of our game. Everyone was concerned about their families, but it didn't stand in the way of duty. Everyone had questions about what had happened and what our role would be, but we all had studied the combat history of our Submarine Force, so we knew what was going to be required - courage and commitment. We talked about America's fighting spirit and I came to understand even better the importance of tough training, which was our standard. I knew we had trained as much and as realistically as we thought possible, and so I asked what we thought would be different, what we had not anticipated, what we should concentrate on now. The answer surprised me: nothing. Turns out I wasn't the only one on board with confidence.

My Chief of the Boat, CMDCM Sheldon McElhinney, brought the chief petty officers back to me in less than two hours. In the room with the officers and chiefs, I watched as *Providence*'s leaders laid out our combat plans efficiently and professionally. The XO reminded me that if our chain of command needed a swift response, we were ready now, and we should be sure to remind them of that. We made preparations to check our already-ready

systems one more time. All departments reported their readiness for combat, and I asked my Supply Officer, LT Eric Naley, how long our food supply would let us remain at sea. He answered, "Just tell me how long you want to stay, Captain." This was the first of many times I confirmed our intention to remain in the area for as long as possible. When it came to combat, we had a lot to offer. We knew that and so did our Battle Group Commander, RADM John Morgan, because we had been working closely with him for more than a year. We completed our sprint and returned to periscope depth. Quickly establishing communications, I will never forget being asked where I thought the front lines would be in this conflict. Our response: "Right about here."



Pictured above are actual photos taken through *Providence*'s periscope as she commenced some of the first Tomahawk strikes in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.

Our mobility quickly put us on the scene. Our ability to communicate efficiently kept the information flowing and defined a new submarine tactical weapon: real-time information. Petty Officer Trask kept us fed with the latest from CNN and the Worldwide Web. For the first time we saw the pictures and watched the video clips of the attacks. We received word that our families were all safe. We copied the latest intelligence and targeting information and kept our commanders informed about the operations of the ever-growing naval presence in our area. Our modern systems gave us superb tactical advantages that allowed us to focus on our first mission - strike operations - and we used our network connections to conduct real-time information sharing with other

warships. This was new for submarines, being so well connected to the outside world. For the first time, we could efficiently provide battlefield information on demand. And we had a crystal-clear picture of the world around us.

On 7 October 2001, *Providence* took part in the opening salvo of the war on terrorism. As we conducted combat operations that day, I was struck by how few differences there were from our normal training. FT3(SS) Ian Seyerley led the missile launch team while my Weapons Officer, LT Jeff Fatora, and my Navigator, LT Joe Baldi, made it all happen under the watchful eye of the XO. Joe became the force's most experienced combat photographer, logging hundreds of frames and miles of tape of our successful Tomahawk launches. Jeff's superb control of our weapons and delivery systems ensured unmatched strike performance.

Throughout the month of October, as Operation Enduring Freedom unfolded, *Providence* became the strike platform of choice for rapid Tomahawk engagements. During developing combat operations, our ability to target and strike quickly enabled us to provide the Battle Force Commander with timely ordnance on target. Now I thought we were really getting into it. This kind of strike warfare was new, and it was something we had not specifically trained for. The key to our success was communications; using everything from established voice and data nets to e-mails, chat rooms, and instant messaging to get information efficiently where it needed to go. With the systems, the people, and the environment all in our favor, short-notice tasking was always met with 100 percent mission accomplishment.

Only after completing all assigned combat tasking and with Operation Enduring Freedom well underway did *Providence* depart the area with the Enterprise Battle Group and finally start the long trip home. We arrived in Italy to a hero's welcome, with USS *Emory S. Land*'s wonderful crew lining the rails and tugs filling the air with water cannons. It was our first indication of the importance of what we had done, and of the incredible support we had from our shipmates and the public.

For the entirety of our participation in Operation Enduring Freedom, we relied on our training for combat success. The fighting spirit of the crew and their unmatched ability were our secret ingredients.

Our day-to-day mission is combat, plain and simple. It flavors everything we do, and I mean everything. With that focus, we were able to provide our commanders with what they needed most: 100 percent on-time mission accomplishment.

CDR Bawden is currently serving as Deputy Commander, Submarine Squadron ONE in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. He served as Commanding Officer of *Providence* from March 1999 to December 2001.

Table of Contents