

The Unique Way the Navy Performs Burials Under the Sea



Chief Religious Programs Specialist Jason Boykin carries the cremains of Master Chief Personnelman Charles Claybourn during a ceremony on board the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp. (US Navy photo/Nathan Wilkes)

The Virginian-Pilot 31 Dec 2017 By Brock Vergakis

NORFOLK -- The [Navy](#) is a tradition-bound military service, and few traditions are as important as burials at sea.

Perhaps the most unique services in the fleet occur on board submarines that spend the majority of their time under water. Submarine Force Atlantic says it is preparing for burials at sea on several Norfolk-based subs in the next few months.

One of those burials will be for World War II submarine veteran Marcus White, who served on seven war patrols in the Pacific theater during World War II and the Korean

War, and was awarded the Bronze Star Medal with the "V" device for valor, signifying it was earned in combat.

White died in June at age 95. The USS Newport News, a [Los Angeles-class attack submarine](#), will commit him and his wife Mary Miles White, who died seven years earlier, to the sea sometime next year. White's son, Marcus White Jr., lives in Chesapeake and said his father loved being a submariner, and that he's fulfilling his father's wishes. The Navy allows active-duty sailors, veterans and their family members to be buried at sea.

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The chaplain for the Navy's Norfolk-based submarine squadron, Lt. Cmdr. Richard Smothers, spoke with The Virginian-Pilot about what makes burial ceremonies on board subs unique and special for those who choose them.

Releasing of cremains

Unlike larger ships such as aircraft carriers that can accommodate caskets, all submarine burials at sea involve cremains. They also must occur at least 3 miles from shore.

Smothers said burials at sea aboard a sub primarily occur in two ways. If the weather is fair, a sub will surface, stop moving and conduct a ceremony topside that involves raising a flag the family can keep, reading any scriptures the family requests and firing a 21-gun salute with seven rifles. A member of the crew will then pour the ashes overboard. Chaplains don't serve on board subs, and the service is usually led by a lay leader on the boat.

Smothers said the sub's commanding officer will usually address the crew from an onboard communications system so everyone can learn about the person who was committed to the deep. If the weather isn't good enough to allow for a full topside ceremony, the cremains can be poured overboard in a smaller ceremony from a ship's sail, the tall structure found on the topside of the sub.

The other option involves releasing ashes underwater through a torpedo tube while the sub is still moving. Smothers said this is a popular option among those who served as torpedomen.

"I know it sounds amazing or strange, but it does happen, and it can be done very honorably, very respectfully," he said.

Smothers said the crew will clean the torpedo tube's surface and place the cremains inside. After the burial, the family will usually receive a letter of condolence and appreciation from the sub's commanding officer and a chart showing the GPS coordinates where the cremains were released.

Custody of the fallen

The Navy accommodates requests for burials at sea when it can, but it's not always a speedy process. A ship's operational schedule takes priority, and it can be months between the time a request is made and the time the burial occurs. In White's case, that also allowed for a traditional memorial service long before his cremains were set to sail from Norfolk.

For a burial at sea on board a Norfolk-based sub, Smothers said a family will first provide their loved one's cremains to Naval Medical Center Portsmouth. A religious program specialist in the submarine force will then take custody of the cremains and examine sub schedules to find the best fit.

If former submariners spent most of their time in a certain home port such as [Groton, Conn.](#), or [Kings Bay, Ga.](#), they'll try to find a sub based there. Otherwise, they'll find the best available schedule. Sometimes family members will be allowed onto [Naval Station Norfolk](#) or another base to watch the sub carrying their loved one's remains depart, which is a rare occurrence for an outsider to know when a sub is departing.

Smothers said a religious program specialist will go aboard the sub with the cremains and transfer it to either the executive officer or chief of the boat, where they will be safely locked away in a state room until the burial. Smothers said the Norfolk squadron typically performs about a dozen burials at sea a year.

Crew connection

The submarine force is a small, tight-knit, all-volunteer community that places a premium on valuing tradition and respecting their forerunners. In some cases, subs will

perform a burial at sea where a sub sank so a former submariner can be committed to the deep with some of his former crew members or the sub where he served.

Smothers also said it's not uncommon for family members to request that someone who holds the same job their loved one did participate in the ceremony.

"I think burials at sea, that's one of the ways we not only just honor those families and their service, but we reactivate our commitment and our appreciation for serving," Smothers said. "It's a real privilege to be a part of. ... Every sub that's ever been part of a burial at sea has thanked us and said, 'Hey, we appreciate being able to do this.' It's an honor."

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