

# No Dolphins But What an Experience!

On May 22, Olivia Logan, *UNDERSEA WARFARE*'s managing editor, boarded USS *Mississippi* (SSN 782) for a four-day, three-night media embark as the submarine traveled to Pascaguola, Miss., for her commissioning. Olivia may not have qualified for dolphins by the end of her ride, but she came away knowing a lot more about how submariners live and work. This is her account of her experience underway on the Navy's newest submarine.

## By Invite Only

I received an invitation to embark *Mississippi* from Commander, Submarine Forces Atlantic, Public Affairs just three weeks before the trip. I had wanted to ride a submarine since my first day at *UNDERSEA WARFARE* Magazine, but I never thought my wish would come true. I thought these sorts of trips were reserved for "distinguished visitors," and I am anything but. However, thanks to the kindness of Submarine Group Two Public Affairs Officer Lt. Cmdr. Jennifer Cragg, who recommended me for the trip, I was one of the media people selected to experience *Mississippi*'s last couple of days underway as a pre-commissioning unit.

## Leaving Port

It was a gorgeous day when I met the sub in Port Canaveral, Fla.: sun shining, temperature in the 80s, and calm, sparkling water. But the most beautiful sight of all was PCU *Mississippi* gliding down the channel. The only submarines I'd been on before were tied up at the

pier, so my first sight of one underway was breathtaking.

It took less than an hour for *Mississippi* to tie up, welcome the media group aboard, and depart Port Canaveral, also known as "PCAN," pronounced just like the pie. As I climbed down through the hatch into the boat, the typical submarine smell of amine filled my nose. That, and the scent of freshly baked bread, which brings me to our first order of business: eating lunch. I had recently eaten breakfast, so I wasn't all that hungry. Still, knowing submariners have some of the best food in the Navy, I couldn't resist. Soup, sandwiches, potato wedges and cake were on the menu. "Whew!" I thought to myself. "This is going to be a long couple of days of eating." I regretted not packing any pants with an elastic waistband.

## Orientation

Stuffed and satisfied, we shuffled into the wardroom for a ship familiarization briefing, where we met Chief of the Boat Bill Stoiber and our media hosts, Damage Control Assistant Lt. Andy Weller, Chief



Fire Control Technician Nate Holmes, and Chief Electronics Technician Askia Locure. I was slightly nervous about the embark. After all, underwater travel was completely foreign to me! But I knew within a couple of minutes of speaking with our media hosts that we were in good hands.

Next, we were shown our berthing unit, the place where we were to sleep—or try to, anyway—for the next three nights. The last time I shared sleeping space with several other people was as a teenager in a cabin at camp. But submarine racks are nothing like bunk beds. Although I'm rather petite, they still made me feel slightly claustrophobic. And propping up my rack to access the under-bed storage was quite a feat. I couldn't understand how a mattress and steel frame could be so heavy! A word to the wise: When lowering the rack back down, make sure your fingers are clear, or you'll be in for some serious pain!

## The Fun Begins

After unpacking our things and getting settled, we each had an opportunity to go up to the bridge. At this point, we were



about 30 miles off the coast of Florida. It was important for us to do bridge tours right away, because the boat would only be on the surface for about five hours.

The procedure for going up on the bridge reminded me of indoor rock climbing, with the donning of a safety harness, instructions from crewmembers about where to put my feet and how to hoist myself up, and the uneasy feeling I could fall to my death at any moment! (Sure, I knew the harness would keep me safe, but it was still a long way down!)

Being on the bridge was one of my favorite experiences on *Mississippi*. Seeing nothing but ocean for miles in every direction, feeling the wind in my hair, and knowing I was riding on top of a huge, black beast made me feel—as Jack said in the scene on the bow in the movie “Titanic”—like “the king of the world!”

### Dive! Dive! Dive!

After the bridge tours, we went to the control room as the boat prepared to rig for dive. I was surprised by how anti-climactic the dive



Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Todd Frantom

(Top) USS *Mississippi* approaching the dock in Port Canaveral, Fla. (Above) Olivia gives a thumbs-up next to Senior Chief Petty Officer Thomas Driscoll as she experiences *Mississippi* going through angles and dangles.

was. I expected it to be similar to an airplane taking off, but instead of feeling speed and an extreme angle, I felt only slow movement and a slight down angle. Had it not been for the images from the photonics mast and the pilot's commands, I wouldn't have even known we were slipping under the water.

While the dive process was not all that interesting, seeing the men at the controls and consoles do their job certainly was. The control room definitely made me appreciate what it means to be "on watch." Throughout my stay on *Mississippi*, I was constantly cold.

I'm always cold on land, too, so that wasn't unusual, but after observing the control room, I wondered if the temperature weren't deliberately set low to keep everyone awake. I was impressed with the crewmembers' ability to stay alert for six hours at a time in a dark, quiet room—especially the sonar guys, who must listen intently for those six hours.

### Down Time

Before I knew it, it was time to eat again. It was Taco Tuesday in the Gator Pit, as *Mississippi's* galley is called, and the only

thing missing was the margaritas! Chicken tortilla soup, tacos, fajitas, Spanish rice, refried beans, and cornbread, followed by toffee bars and ice cream for dessert. Ay, carumba!

After dinner, it was time for me to learn cribbage, a traditional submariner game. With Chief Locure assisting me, I won my first game. However, without his help, I was a horrible novice, so I soon let a more experienced cribbage player take my spot. I asked if there was another game we could play that was a little easier on my brain, to which Chief Holmes replied, "Bananagrams!" But I was exhausted by the day's events, so I asked him for a rain check and left the wardroom to get ready for bed.

### Scrub a Dub Dub

Before turning in, I took my first submariner shower. I used to vacation on a house boat, so I was familiar with the idea of not letting the water run any more than necessary. I was impressed with the water's temperature and pressure, but I was not a fan of the squeegee and the sponge. After showering, you're required to squeegee the shower walls, and after using the sink, you have to sponge up every remaining drop of water. This ensures the head (or bathroom) remains clean for everyone. I thought I was pretty big on cleanliness, but submariners are on a whole other level! I couldn't believe how much cleaning was going on all around the boat, and the amount that had to be done on hands and knees with a dust pan and brush or a rag was amazing! I know who to call next time I need my apartment cleaned!

### Day Two

The next day was packed with activity, including interviewing *Mississippi's* executive officer, Lt. Cmdr. Daniel Reiss, and COB Stoiber; watching a damage control demonstration; touring the control and torpedo rooms; experiencing angles and



Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Todd Frantom



(Top) Olivia stirs diced chicken with buffalo wing sauce for her buffalo chicken pizza while Seaman Michael Proctor supervises.

(Left) Chief Holmes (left) and Chief Locure (right) take a break from hosting the media and other duties to play cribbage with Submarine Squadron Four Command Master Chief Todd Schultz (center).



Photo by Petty Officer 2nd Class Todd Frantom



Photo by Olivia Logan

(Left) Sailors sweep *Mississippi's* decks after every meal, just one of the many routine cleaning chores that keep the submarine in pristine condition.

(Right) Seamen Devin Williams receives his dolphins from his mentor, Petty Officer 1st Class Darrius Jenkins.

dangles—and finally, dinner in the wardroom with *Mississippi's* commanding officer, Capt. John McGrath.

In the control room, I had the opportunity to listen to sonar sounds, one of which was biologics, or sea life. One of the crewmembers joked about having biologics for dinner when seafood is being served.

In the torpedo room, I took my hosts up on their offer to let me climb into a torpedo tube and sign my name inside. This was, thankfully, before we shot water slugs. I'm not so sure I would have been so eager to climb in there afterward! I particularly liked the torpedo room because it also serves as a hang-out area for the crew. As the only large, open space other than the galley, it's a great spot for people to gather.

Experiencing angles and dangles was also pretty thrilling—especially since by that time we were back in the galley, where something managed to come loose with a crash.

### Day Three

Day three featured an interview with Capt. McGrath, a tour of the machinery room, a demonstration of the lock-out trunk, sitting in the co-pilot's chair, a dolphin-pinning ceremony, and pizza night! While I wasn't permitted to pilot *Mississippi*, I did get a chance to sit at the controls and imagine what it would be like to actually know how.

The dolphin-pinning ceremony was really neat. The sense of pride when a crewmember receives his dolphins is very evident. But unlike most celebrations, the crew can't stay

around for ice cream and cake. After a few congratulatory hugs and handshakes, it's back to the grind.

Later that evening, I buttoned up a chef coat, put on a cook's hat, and got to work in the Gator Pit as a guest pizza-maker. I was allowed to make any pizza I wanted, provided the galley had the ingredients. I decided on buffalo chicken pizza. I began with a bleu cheese dressing base on the dough, sprinkled it with shredded mozzarella and breaded chicken tossed in buffalo wing sauce, and then drizzled bleu cheese dressing and wing sauce all over. I can barely cook for myself, let alone a galley full of hungry men, so I have to admit I was anxious waiting for the pizza to come out of the oven. Luckily, the culinary gods were watching over me, and my pizza was a huge hit!

### Back to Land

On Friday, May 25, we surfaced around 0100 to begin the 10-hour journey into Pascagoula, where my voyage on *Mississippi* would come to an end. At around 0500, the media group took our last trip to the bridge to see the view under the night sky. Then the whole ship was abuzz with preparations for entering port, so I packed my things and stayed out of the way in the wardroom until further instructions.

The COB had one last treat for us. We were permitted to go topside while *Mississippi* traveled the Pascagoula River channel and prepared to dock. The feeling while topside was similar to that on the bridge, except this

time we had a crowd waving and cheering at us! Now I know what a homecoming is like!

As I think back on it now, my favorite part of the embark was interacting with crewmembers, hearing their life stories, and seeing submarining through their eyes. The Submarine Force is made up of incredible people, and my trip allowed me to meet them first hand. Take the COB, for example, who, after spending time out to sea, comes back to land and serves in a different way, as a volunteer firefighter and EMT. Then there's Petty Officer 1st Class James Pearson, the ship's community service coordinator, who grew up underprivileged and has made it a priority to give back to the community. There's also Seamen Devin Williams, a culinary specialist, who, despite losing his grandfather this year, finished his qualification card 384 points ahead and received his dolphins the day we pulled into Pascagoula. These men are extraordinary, and I'm humbled to have had the opportunity to spend a few days in their company.

I left the ship not only with a new understanding of the unique world where submariners live and work, but also with a new appreciation of what it means to wear the submariners' dolphins. A huge thank-you to *Mississippi's* crew for being such great hosts, and also to Commander, Submarine Force Atlantic; Submarine Group Two; and N97 for making my experience possible! And for the record: Chief Holmes and Chief Locure, you still owe me a game of Bananagrams!