

SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

BENEATH THE SURFACE:

AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHARACTERIZATION OF AFRICAN-
AMERICANS IN SUBMARINE-THEMED AMERICAN FILM

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BY

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PREVIEW

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To my wife Sharon

An unflagging supporter, an inspirational editor and, as it turns out, an honorary submariner.

Additionally, the results of this research are dedicated to all of the African-American men and women of the United States Navy who struggled and found a path to the summit. No words written here can adequately describe their bravery and perseverance nor can those words communicate the pathways they blazed for all of those that followed.

PREVIEW



SALVE REGINA UNIVERSITY

GRADUATE STUDIES

This dissertation of Stephen Leal Jackson entitled "BENEATH THE SURFACE: AN EXAMINATION OF THE CHARACTERIZATION OF AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN SUBMARINE-THEMED AMERICAN FILM" submitted to the Ph.D. Program in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Salve Regina University has been read and approved by the following individuals:

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ABSTRACT

This research and dissertation examines the inclusion, status, and prominence of African-American characters found in the submarine-themed filmography from 1933 to 2008 and determines whether or not these films accurately represent the contribution of African-American men in the United States Navy submarine force by qualitatively comparing the depiction in film to the historical record. The research is based on primary source demographic metrics to perform a qualitative analysis of the submarine-themed filmography.

In order to understand and defend the thesis the work first established the philosophical framework within which the argument is based. Then the process of undertaking the documentation of the previously uncompiled historical record of African-American participation in the United State Submarine Service was performed. Once these foundational bases were in place, a broad analysis of the entire submarine-themed filmography and an in-depth analysis of a subset of benchmark films was performed. The conclusions gleaned from this research determined that the submarine-themed filmography ignored, minimized, and misrepresented the role of the African-American submariner in the United States Navy.

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It all begins with my family. Isaac Newton's famous quote is so applicable to Sharon; my wife, my friend, and my partner in all things. If I have achieved any measure of success it is because she has helped raise me up to those levels. She has been an unfailing promoter, an insightful critic, and an invaluable supporter. If at times the lines between she and I blur a bit I think that is one of the benefits of spending the better part of a life with the one you were meant for.

My daughter Valerie and my sons Gregory and Alexander also have never been shy about expressing their pride in my writing and research. If any criticism could be laid at their feet it would be the pressure induced by their absolute certainty that their father would achieve the goals he set for himself no matter how lofty or seemingly out-of-reach. Whether they know it or not this faith has lifted me during times when the task felt too large or the road too long.

I would also like to thank two members of what I consider my extended family: Linda Santoro and Leslie Florio. We have absorbed Linda into our family group and she has become, though we might need to occasionally apologize for it, one of us. Just like a sister Linda has provided me with a gentle but insistent pressure to complete this research while always being in the front row of my cheering section. Leslie immediately became one of my best friends when we met in the Master's program at Providence College. We completed that journey near simultaneously and walked the doctoral trail together until family commitments required her to put that part of her life on hold. Even in absence, she has followed, encouraged, and celebrated my progress.

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I cannot overstate the important contribution made by the de facto member of my committee, William Bundy, Ph.D., of the United States Naval War College. Captain Bundy was one of the first African-American officers to command an American submarine, making his insights to the substance of my research without parallel. Dr. Bundy spent many hours counseling, editing and redirecting my efforts and introduced me to individuals that opened doors to realms of research that allowed the development of the primary-source demographic data essential to this project.

One of those individuals was Glenn A. Knoblock, author of the book, *Black Submariners in the United States Navy, 1940 – 1975*. Mr. Knoblock shared his time with me to talk during the formative stages of my research. His book provided detailed data on the participation of black Stewards during World War II that became the basis for that period's analysis.

Another of these important contacts that I would like to thank is Vice Admiral Bruce E. Grooms, United States Navy, Deputy Chief of Staff for Capability Development at Allied Command Transformation, also a former submarine commander. Vice Admiral Grooms spent valuable time discussing and encouraging this project and introduced me to LT Brian D. Maxfield, Data Analyst N133C3 of the Naval Nuclear Propulsion Program. LT Maxfield was invaluable in obtaining the balance of the demographic data I needed and explaining and clarifying this vast body of data.

I would like to thank Commander DeWuan L. Booker, Commanding Officer, NOSC Newport (NRA-643), for his part in obtaining additional primary source documentation, and for taking the time to meet with Dr. Bundy and myself to understand this project's needs and goals.

One of the unique resources available to me was the Submarine Force Library and Archives, supervised by Archivist Wendy Gully. Ms. Gully is always willing and able to find that one piece of information that otherwise eluded me and for that, and for all of her years of support for the research of the submarine service, she has my gratitude.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge and express my appreciation for the members of the Eastern USA Chapter U.S. Submarine Veterans of World War II. The constant support and encouragement of these brave men has been a source of strength and an imposition of responsibility to equal the opinion they have of me. My inclusion into their unique brotherhood has been one of the greatest honors I have ever received. I will carry with me always the warmth of their friendship.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CO	Commanding Officer
COB	Chief of the Boat
CPO	Chief Petty Officer
DSRV	Deep Submergence Rescue Vehicle
EB	Electric Boat Shipbuilding
EM	Electrician's Mate
EMC	Chief Electrician's Mate
EN	Engineman
ENC	Chief Engineman
LPC	Low Population Correction
MM	Machinist's Mate
MPAA	Motion Picture Association of America
NAVPERS	Naval Personnel Manual
OOD	Officer of the Day
R&R	Rest and Recreation
SFM	United States Navy Submarine Force Museum
SS	Ship - Submarine
SSN	Ship – Submarine – Nuclear
SSBN	Ship – Submarine – Nuclear – Ballistic Missile
SUBLANT	Commander, Submarine Forces – Atlantic Ocean
SUBPAC	Commander, Submarine Forces – Pacific Ocean
TM	Torpedoman
USN	United States Navy
USNA	United State Naval Academy
USS	United States Ship
XO	Executive Officer

FORWARD

When Stephen L. ‘Steve’ Jackson approached me to seek advice on his doctoral research, I recognized that he would ultimately tell a story that paralleled my life as a U.S. Navy Submariner and how African American sailors and officers like me were portrayed in motion pictures. He would examine motion picture portrayals of enlisted submariners who I served with during my enlisted years and officers who progressed to command in submarines before and after my own rise to command at sea in submarines. Or, he would expose the lack of authentic and timely portrayals of our service to the nation. When I was then asked to offer a Forward to Steve’s *Beneath the Surface*, I reflected on my exposure to submarines that began in the 1950’s through my more than 46-years of active service and association with the U.S. Navy Submarine Force.

My first exposure to submarines and submariner portrayals was through the tales of *The Silent Service* that were broadcast on television in 1957 through 1958. As most boys my age, I was intrigued by the exploits of submariners in TINOSA, TANG, WAHOO, DACE and other submarines during World War Two, when the U.S. Submarine Service – the Silent Service took the war to the enemy. Submarine officers and crews portrayed in that series of ‘true story’ episodes were smart, brave and creative in operating ships that submerged beneath the waves, launched torpedoes and withstood depth charge attacks. To this day I can hear in my mind the theme song and popular lyrics that were used to announce *The Silent Service*.

“Take her down. Take her down, down, underneath the ocean...”

It never really occurred to me that none of the officers or crew in those TV documentaries was African-American except the possible glimpse of or parts played by African American stewards.

In fact most of the war movies in those days did not portray African Americans at all except in servant roles. However, I was still very much taken by the idea of going to sea in a submarine.

Fast forward to a chilly day in February 1969 when I walked down the pier at Submarine Base New London to join the crew of USS STURGEON (SSN 637) as a Sonar Technician First Class. I had served five years in the Navy when I reported aboard. STURGEON was the second USS STURGEON to serve in the fleet. The first STURGEON (SS 187) was a World War Two boat just like the submarines in *The Silent Service* TV series. That STURGEON made eleven war patrols between December 1941 and August 1944 according to widely available records. The new STURGEON was the first of a class of nuclear attack submarines that were destined to amass a record of significant service during the Cold War. I would make two Cold War deployments in STURGEON - first as a sonar supervisor and then as the leading sonar technician.

By this time I recognized that there was only one African American submariner aboard STURGEON, a Steward's Mate Second Class, who had joined the Navy shortly after the war and had served his entire career in submarines. I would join STURGEON as the second African American in the crew. We were among the very few African American submariners serving in the Navy. My shipmate was one of the older submariners who had been limited to service in the Steward's Mate rating while I was part of an emerging new breed of African American submariners who had either transitioned from being stewards to enter more technical career fields or who had been recruited into the Navy as technical or administrative-support career field sailors.

Our growing demographic of African American submariners were serving in all of the submarine ratings from nuclear mechanics to sonar technicians, electronics technicians,

radiomen, torpedomen, electricians, interior communications electricians, storekeepers, cooks and yeoman. Our numbers were low in comparison to the majority of crew members in any submarine, but we served as trusted members of the crew in true submarine tradition. We were beginning to be portrayed in technical rating submarine roles in movies, but those portrayals were time late in depicting positions that we actually held in submarine crews and officer wardrooms. We were still consistently portrayed in movies and television as Steward's Mates, in supporting roles or not at all in some cases.

After my first patrol in STURGEON, my fellow African American shipmate was ordered off of the boat by our submarine group commodore. As we were about to depart for patrol, the commodore declared that my shipmate had made his last patrol and would serve in submarine shore support staff assignments. He had gone to sea enough and deserved to serve ashore for his remaining time in the Navy.

A few days later, STURGEON departed Groton headed for an independent submarine operation with one African American aboard. I sailed in STURGEON for at sea operations departing in January and returning to Groton in April 1970.

After my tour in STURGEON, I progressed through a submarine career that included earning a commission as a submarine officer with progressive assignments to command of a submarine. In all, I served in seven attack, nuclear attack and fleet ballistic missile submarines.

During my career in the Silent Service, I held positions of responsibility and authority that were not seen in movies until after I completed the majority of my active duty service.

In fact, the 1995 movie *Crimson Tide* starring Gene Hackman and Denzel Washington, starred Denzel Washington as the Executive Officer of USS ALABAMA, an OHIO-class Fleet Ballistic Missile Submarine. I served as a submarine executive officer from 1985 to 1987 when

Richard Henrick, the author of *Crimson Tide*, rode my boat to become familiar with submarine operations at sea.

Retired Navy Captain C. A. ‘Pete’ Tzomes assumed command of USS HOUSTON (SSN 713) in May 1983 becoming the first African American to command a U.S. Navy submarine. Captain Tzomes was in and out of command of a submarine nine years before Denzel Washington portrayed a submarine second in command, the executive officer. There had been five African American U.S. submarine commanders before the motion picture industry portrayed an African American as a submarine executive officer in Henrick’s story about tensions between a crusty old skipper and a naval academy graduate executive officer.

Steve Jackson has documented and put into context an important examination of how African Americans are portrayed as submariners. His work constitutes a deepening of the knowledge base on the lack of accurate and timely portrayals of African Americans in positions of critical authority and responsibility in one of the most exacting professions in the Navy and possibly in human endeavor.

Retired Pacific Submarine Force Commander, Vice Admiral Al Konetzni wrote in his forward to *The Depths of Courage*:

The submarine veterans of World War II have provided their successors in the submarine force powerful traditions that continue to serve the force well. [The] first of these is the tradition that demands “forceful backup” of each crew member – a tradition that makes it known that each and every crew member regardless of seniority is critical to the safe operation of the ship. The second is the tradition that submariners take care of one another. Life in submarines is one without physical or psychological privacy. Our veterans have instilled in us all a realization that this lack of privacy demands complete mutual respect of others.

Americans form their opinions through reading fiction and actual accounts of human endeavors. They form opinions on the value and participation of ethnic and racial groups based

on their portrayal in the media, movies and books. Therein lays the importance of Stephen L. Jackson's *Beneath the Surface* in setting the record straight. Americans deserve to know the actual contributions that African American submariners have made in war and to the enduring traditions and highly professional performance of the Silent Service today.

William F. Bundy, Ph.D.

U.S. Navy Submariner

May, 2015

PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

Exploring Beneath the Surface: Thesis, Methodology, & Film Theory

Introduction

There are many types of cultural media that inform, entertain, and educate but none is more pervasive than the motion picture. Its methods of communicating narrative make it an irresistible conduit for the sights, ideas, images, and relationships that the flickering frames display to a waiting audience. What they first see are the beautiful and terrible pictures that have been crafted by the producers, directors, and editors of the motion picture. However, what they learn often lies beneath the surface. Motion pictures take audiences to places they would never experience.

There are many places where due to their distant location, dangerous surroundings, or bureaucratic prohibitions, ordinary people cannot go; the American military submarine is one of those places. The “boats” as they are called, have always been home to an isolated community of individuals closely interacting to perform their mission and protect their members in relative anonymity. As such, they formed a uniquely integrated and slightly mysterious organization that the majority of the general public could not access. The only means that the uninitiated had of understanding life on the boats was through the medium of the motion picture. Movies told the story, with varying levels of accuracy, of the kind of people that inhabited these underwater machines and the tale of their unique sub-aquatic life. Since the possibility of personally verifying what the screen portrayed was virtually impossible, the audience of submarine-themed movies had no choice but to accept as reality the message of these films.

As a social artifact, what is selected and what is rejected in films is central to what reality is being delivered to the motion picture viewer. One aspect of service aboard United States Navy submarines that was manipulated by those who produced submarine films has been the participation of the African-American sailor onboard these undersea warships. The admission of the African-American crewman to the “Silent Service,” as the submarine force is called, was prohibited for nearly twenty years and was later discouraged and curtailed. The demographic distribution, representation in the variety of naval occupations, and the significant contribution of these men has rarely been accurately portrayed in films on the general subject. This departure from accuracy may have influenced audiences and potential submarine sailors about how these strange machines operated, and what kind of people were found onboard. They may have also given the false impression of the varying degrees of welcome that an African-American man could find onboard the boats.

Thesis Statement

This research will show that motion pictures of the twentieth-century from the period 1933 to 2008 did not accurately represent the contribution of African-American men in the United States Navy submarine force. These films ignored, minimized, and misrepresented the role of the African-American submariner. The earlier films, from the 1930’s through the 1960’s, often completely ignored the fact that some racial minorities served onboard submarines during this period. Since the medium of the motion picture has been the primary source of information for the general public about life on the boats, audiences viewing these films, including the population of potential future submarine sailors, may have received the message that black men were not found, and perhaps, not welcome, on submarines. Later films, especially those released

after the 1980's, tended to over emphasize both the demographic contribution and the placement in the command structure of the black sailor even when depicting earlier time periods. While racial inaccuracies may follow the prevailing attitudes within the decade of a film's release, deviations from historical accuracy, both in under and over representation, may provide the most illuminating sources of insight into the motivations of the producers.

The motivation for this deliberate deviation from historical accuracy will not be easy to determine. It is expected, though, that that type of representation, the time period of the film's release, and the specific theme of the submarine film will provide clues to the reason for the inaccurate characterization. For example, certain films released during World War II seem to have completely removed all non-white sailors from the crew in an attempt to provide a stark and unequivocal contrast between the white, virtuous, American defenders and the non-white, evil, Japanese "others" even though it would have been typical to have about two black men serving onboard each of these boats. The film *Destination Tokyo* is the best example of this type of racial exclusion in submarine film and is one of the films that will be examined in close detail.

On the other hand, certain films, especially of the later Cold War vintage, seemed to have deliberately overrepresented black submariners possibly to send the message of the new openness and inclusivity of the submarine force with regard to race. The film *Crimson Tide* is the best example of this type of inaccuracy in that African-American sailors appear in most scenes, in virtually every occupation, and in every level of the rank structure. In many of the critical and impactful scenes, black enlisted men and officers are present in percentages that often approach or equal 50 percent. This overrepresentation both support the character of the Executive Officer, played by the actor Denzel Washington, but also gives the strong impression that on submarines key positions are competently manned by black men. *Crimson Tide* has a

subplot of the transition from the “old guard” navy, as evidenced by the “by the book” Captain, and the new, educated, “thinking” navy exemplified by the educated and thoughtful Executive Officer. The high percentage of black men onboard may have also been done to reinforce this concept of transition to an enlightened, racially diverse submarine crew. These two films seem to provide their own answers to the question of why they deviated from the historical record. It is expected that the other films in this study, while they may have more subtle evidence for their selected method of depiction, will provide hints to the producers’ motivations and trends in effect in broader society.

Though there has been research done and books published on the portrayal of African-American men in film, apparently there has been no study of the specific niche of submarine-themed films. Though the filmography of these films is limited compared to other genres, initial research has identified over one-hundred films that meet the primary criteria of being at least partially themed about a military submarine. This number is considered sufficient for valid statistical analysis. The advantage of this comprehensive but manageable number of films is that the entire filmography of submarine-themed films can be viewed, strengthening any assumptions that are made or relationships that are identified.

While it will be important to understand how African-American men were portrayed in these films, it may also be possible to determine the impact these films continue to have on the general viewing audience and the population of future black submariners. If the message to an audience that has no better source of information is that black men are not found and apparently not welcome onboard submarines, then this mechanism would act to inhibit these men from seeking what otherwise might be a fruitful and mutually beneficial occupation in the boats.

Methodology

The methodology of this research will be characterized by two phases. In order to obtain an historical reference against which to compare the film characterizations the historical record of African-American demographics in the American submarine service will be obtained. This quantitative analysis will seek primary sources on which to base this history. With this foundation established a qualitative assessment of the submarine themed filmography will then be undertaken with the knowledge that all comparisons of what has been depicted in the film to what the actuality was are based on the best information available.

In order to determine whether or not a certain film either accurately depicts or misrepresents the contribution of African American sailors in the submarine service during the reference time period it was necessary to determine what the actual racial and occupational demographics were for that period. Initial research quickly revealed that this information was not readily accessible; it would have to be reconstructed. To begin this daunting task Professor William Bundy of the United States Naval War College volunteered his assistance. Professor Bundy, a former navy submarine commander and one of the seven African-American men to command a United States sub in the service's first century known as the "Centennial Seven," provided invaluable service in identifying three men who provided conduits by which this information was retrieved. These men were Glenn A. Knoblock, author of the book, *Black Submariners in the United States Navy, 1940 – 1975*, Vice Admiral Bruce E. Grooms, United States Navy, Deputy Chief of Staff for Capability Development at Allied Command Transformation and another member of the "Centennial Seven," and Commander DeWuan L. Booker, Commanding Officer, NOSC Newport (NRA-643). Through their combined efforts, these men facilitated the compilation of a body of actual racial and ethnic relevant demographic data on submarine crews. While the

resultant data is by no means comprehensive of the actual detailed historical record, it provided an accurate and heretofore uncompiled basis from which logical and reasonable extrapolations could be made to span those eras for which data did not exist.

Submarines and the films associated with them are an area of special interest to me for several reasons. First, as a former member of the Navy submarine service and qualified in submarines in 1979 on the USS *Los Angeles* (SSN688), a nuclear –powered fast attack submarine, I have a unique perspective and insight into the reality of submarine life and an ability to competently assess the relative accuracy of submarine-themed films. This body of films is also an excellent platform for research since it depicts an exotic, isolated community, and contains a relatively large population of films that is at once large enough to allow a valid qualitative assessment based on statistical data observation to be made yet small enough to allow for viewing and analysis of the entire length of all of the films.

This detailed metric and qualitative analysis of the filmography examines films that feature the activities of American military submarines that were released from the 1930's to the current day but will be limited to films that are still available for viewing via DVD, VHS, online digital subscription services, or through other archival resources. Films that are known to exist but are not available through any of these mediums will not be considered; it will be assumed that they were lost or did not exert enough impact on their audiences to persist. Additionally, the selected films must have the submarine included in a relevant and meaningful way. In order to access the level and quality of interracial interactions interior views of the submarine are essential to analyzing these films for this project.

As an adjunct to the detailed and statistical analysis of the filmography, a comparative analysis will be conducted of works of literature and their associated films. Five film/book pairs

have been initially selected for study. These are *Run Silent, Run Deep*; *Ice Station Zebra*, *Up Periscope*, *The Hunt for Red October*, and *Crimson Tide* authored by Edward L. Beach, a former Navy submarine commander, Alistair MacLean, Robb White, Tom Clancy and Richard P Hendrick respectively.¹ These titles were chosen because the publication of these novels preceded the release of their film and therefore were the source of the information for the screenplay. These five are significant since they were very popular as novels and spawned important and popular films. Several works of literature, also associated with popular submarine films, were written from the screenplay and are unsuited for this research since they were created from the film and were not source material for the film.

Each novel will be closely read after the review of the associated film. Particular emphasis will be paid to the ways in which the book differs from the film in the representation of African-American men onboard submarines. The inclusion as well as the deletion of relevant black characters will be of particular interest. This portion of the research may provide insight to the actuality of racial modification of these narratives if the racial demographics vary significantly from source literature to final film. These books will be examined to ascertain the level of accuracy of the depiction of onboard racial demographics and whether the participation of black men on subs was under, over, or accurately represented.

The backbone of this research will be the analysis of the available body of submarine themed motion pictures. This analysis will be primarily accomplished in two ways. First, a development of the historical record of the contribution of African-American sailors on submarines will be conducted using primary source documentation and other best-available information. Second,

¹ Edward L. Beach, *Run Silent, Run Deep* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1955); Alistair MacLean, *Ice Station Zebra* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1963); Robb White, *Up Periscope* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1956); Tom Clancy, *The Hunt for Red October* (Annapolis, Maryland, Naval Institute Press, 1984); Richard P Hendrick. *Crimson Tide* (New York: Avon Books, 1995).