

PRESS INFORMATION BUREAU (DEFENCE WING)
GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

PRESENTATION OF PRESIDENT'S COLOURS
TO EASTERN NAVAL COMMAND - APR 5, 1987

(TO BE PUBLISHED ON OR AFTER FRIDAY, APRIL 3, 1987)

INS VIRBAHU AND THE SUBMARINE ARM

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Virbahu - "The Brave Arm" - the Alma Mater of Submariners is a home away from home. This shore establishment is unique in many respects and adds to the special elan of the Eastern Naval Command.

When the blue print for a balanced Naval Force was drawn up in 1948, the planners had included acquisition of submarines within a ten year period. But it did not find favour with the Government. It was felt that the submarine was an offensive weapon and as India maintained only "Defence Forces", it would be incongruous to go in for acquisition of submarines. The idea was thus shelved.

In 1961, for the first time, four officers were selected and deputed to the U.K. for a submarine course at HMS Dolphin at Gosport. They were Lt Cdr K.S. Subramanian, Lt M.N. Vasudeva, Lt R.J. Millan and Lt A. Auditto. In the subsequent years some more officers and sailors were selected for training in the U.K.

Negotiations were also conducted with various countries for acquiring submarines. A deal was struck with the USSR for acquiring the F-Class submarines. In 1966, the Directorate of Submarine Arm was set up at Naval Headquarters to go into

the various aspects of acquisition and organisation of the Submarine Arm. The first batch of trainees, including those trained in the UK, left for Vladivostok in June 1966. However, the Submarine Arm of the Indian Navy was finally born on December 08th 1967, when the first submarine INS Kalvari, acquired from the USSR, was commissioned at Riga, under the command of Commander K.S. Subramanian.

With the commissioning of INS Khanderi in December 1968, Karanj and Kursura in 1969, the problems of looking after submarines increased greatly. With this in view, the Submarine Headquarters was established in 1969 (the erstwhile Fleet Office building housed the Submarine Headquarters). Cdr KS Subramanian, in addition to being CO INS Kalvari, carried out the duties of Officer-in-Charge, Submarine Headquarters.

In the meanwhile, the Submarine Base was being constructed. On May 19, 1971, INS Virbahu was commissioned by the erstwhile Defence Minister, Shri Jaggivan Ram. This was an important chapter in the growth of the Indian Navy and, of course, the Submarine Arm.

INS Virbahu is now sixteen years old. Much water has flown under the bridge since her commissioning. A tremendous amount of sweat, dedication and vision have gone into this establishment in making her what she is today; an establishment, every submariner and indeed the Navy, can be proud of.

The submarine service in the Indian Navy is purely voluntary, unlike a few other navies of the world. Officers and men volunteering are subjected to stringent selection and

medical tests. Their psychological aptitude for living in confined spaces is also assessed.

After their selection, the personnel are sent to INS Satavahana for the Basic Submarine Course, in the Submarine Wing of this prestigious training establishment. Until 1975, all training was carried out in INS Virbahu with hardly any facilities, aids or extra personnel. Only the initial submarine crews were trained in the USSR.

After training at INS Satavahana, the trainees are sent on board submarines for their sea time. Finally, they appear before a Submarine Board, where the "Dolphins" are pinned on their chests and they qualify as one of the ^{/silent'} /fraternity. INS Virbahu is the overall authority for all submarines. Under its charter of duties, the Commanding Officer is responsible for the formulation of policies covering operations, manning, logistics, refit and maintenance. The Commanding Officer wears a dual hat in that, he is also the Captain S/M of the 8th Submarine Squadron.

December 08th, 1977 saw the Submarine Arm completing a decade of service. To herald the celebrations, a parade was held in the Command Parade Ground. This parade was commanded by Cdr S. Shekhar. Vice Admiral S.M. Sarma, PVSM, the then Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command took the salute. A two-day symposium was held the topic being "Submarine Warfare". Submariners from all over the country came for the celebrations, many of whom had already retired.

Within this ten year span, the Submarine Arm had made rapid strides in all spheres. The 9th Submarine Squadron came into being with the commissioning of INS Vela. Plans for further expansion were afoot and in 1981 the contract for acquiring SSK submarines from West Germany, was concluded.

In December 1982 came the Fifteenth Anniversary celebrations, and this time, with much more aplomb. A parade was held with the Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral O.S. Dawson, taking the salute. On this occasion, specially designed Kalvari crests were presented to officers and sailors of Kalvari's first commissioning crew. Those who had left were specially invited to attend. The highlight of this celebration was the first ever under water postage cancellation. Among those present, was a woman journalist, Maya Char, who became the first Indian woman ever to be on board a submarine when it dived. For both the celebrations, it was INS Virbahu again which rose to the occasion.

On the sports side, INS Virbahu has always done exceptionally well. Apart from this, INS Virbahu officers and sailors have been participating in a number of extra-curricular activities like ocean sailing yachting and cycling expeditions. Last year, 'around-the-country' cycling expedition was sponsored by INS Virbahu.

The first 877 EKM Class of Submarines, INS Sindhughosh was commissioned in Riga on April 30th 1986, commanded by Cdr K.C. Varghese. She arrived in Vishakhapatnam on September 17th 1986. A few hours before she entered harbour,

Raksha Rajya Mantri, Arun Singh , Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral R.H. Tahiliani and Flag Officer Commanding-in-Chief, Eastern Naval Command, Vice Admiral S.C. Chopra boarded her and dived in her. A befitting welcome awaited her ashore. Ships and submarines hooted, the band played, red carpet et al. RRM Arun Singh in his speech announced a new sanction of a Flag Officer Submarines, which is expected to come up very shortly.

The story is not complete without stating that INS Virbahu is the ^{/ most} single/important factor in keeping the Submarine Arm together as a family. Sailors are often heard to call it the "Maa Baap" of the submarines. The tradition and standards set by her reflect ultimately on the dedication and professionalism of the whole Arm. Such is the grave responsibility she is privileged to bear.

The Submarine Arm is fortunate in having amongst them, a set of devoted officers and sailors who have kept this wonderful establishment operating, in keeping with the highest tradition of the service-something every submariner can be proud of.

On December 08th 1987, the Submarine Arm will complete twenty years of glorious existence and it has expanded and grown over the last two decades. What about those who have left, the planners and visionaries - and those who slogged it out and are not here today with us to share the fruits? We in the Submarine Arm, salute them.

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