

My Rickover Encounter

The Sand Lance had five reactor operators that qualified RO initially: Jim St. John, Charlie Backes, Newell Crary, Bruce Ward, and John Walsh. As part of the initial engineering testing that goes with a new submarine each shift had to have their qualified reactor operator and shift perform a fast scram recovery. For you forward types this involved an emergency shutdown of the nuclear reactor and a subsequent fast startup. For all submarines built during this timeframe, Admiral Rickover personally observed these fast scram recoveries. This is about my turn in the barrel, so to speak.

Three of the RO's were selected to perform the fast scram recovery while we were at sea. The admiral had come on board with all his accompanying fanfare and needs. A time was selected and the RO's taken to Machinery Room #2 to await their turn. I do not remember which position I was in, but I do know I was not the first.

I am sure many of you remember how large Maneuvering was (or wasn't) especially the engineering types. When my turn came up they called me into the Maneuvering Room. Maneuvering normally held four watch standers: The Engineering Officer of the Watch, (EOOW), the reactor operator (RO), the electrical plant operator (EO) and the steam plant operator (Throttleman). When I got to maneuvering there must have been twelve people in the space normally used by four. I managed to squeeze in the room and relieved the watch. Admiral Rickover was in the chair normally used by the EOOW and the EOOW was standing. Also, this was not just the RO that was tested, but the whole shift. So all four watch stations were being relieved. When things settled down a little someone in Machinery #2 opened the scram breaker for a partial scram which allowed us to do a fast scram recovery.

When the reactor is shutdown one of the first thing each watch station is required to do is to reduce electrical loads to minimum to keep the reactor as hot a possible. If the reactor gets below a certain point the RO is required to do a full scram and we all are in deep dodo. Part of this rig for reduced electrical in the engine room is to shut off the vent fan supplying the Maneuvering Room with cool air. The temperature goes from 72 degrees to 98 degree in about five minutes.

Here we are with the reactor shutdown, the boat rigged for reduced electrical, and a nervous reactor operator asking permission to restart the reactor. This permission is granted by the EOOW and a fast scram recovery is started by ME. A normal reactor startup is not all that eventful; but with Admiral Rickover at my right elbow and not enough room to breath, things got a little tense. My job was to withdraw the control rods in a manner that led to a controlled, critical reactor and to do a plant heat up within limits. This I was doing when I started “bumping” rods out to control the conditions. Someone, namely Admiral Rickover, did not like the way I was bumping rods and he yelled “You’re breaking the machine.” I got control of myself and the plant and completed the startup back to initial condition with Tave (read T average) in the green band, the turbines on line and making a 1/3 bell. At that point I was relieved, in more than one way, and got the hell out of Maneuvering.

I think I have told that story about a hundred times over the year about how I got yelled at by Admiral Rickover.

Charlie Backes
USS Sand Lance 1970-1972