



The Navy's 68 submarines could be anywhere at any time — patrolling the Arctic and the Persian Gulf, or near Russia, China or North Korea.

Their missions are closely-held secrets, but a frigid training exercise offers a glimpse of military life deep undersea.

Inside a Navy Submarine Navigating the Arctic

A Times photojournalist embarked on a nuclear-powered attack sub to see how the Pentagon is training

for a potential war below the frozen sea.



Photographs and Text by Kenny Holston

Reporting from the attack submarine Hampton, underway in the Arctic Ocean

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U.S. Navy sailors aboard nuclear-powered submarines have long trained in the Arctic, learning to hunt their Russian counterparts in case of war. But America's sub force is sharpening its combat skills at the edge of the world as Russia expands military operations there.

One day in March, the black metal sail of a 360-foot attack sub armed with Tomahawk cruise missiles and torpedoes punched through the dense ice of the Beaufort Sea during Operation Ice Camp.

For many of the 152 sailors on board the U.S.S. Hampton, it is their first patrol.

In the sub's nerve center, where sailors navigate the boat and stand watch over sonar, radio and weapons consoles, Master Chief Petty Officer Jacob Green mentors the junior officers and crew members as they carry out their duties.

Everyone calls him "Cob" — for chief of the boat.



Master Chief Petty Officer Jacob Green, the Hampton's chief of the boat, supervising two helmsmen in delicately steering and diving the sub under the ice.

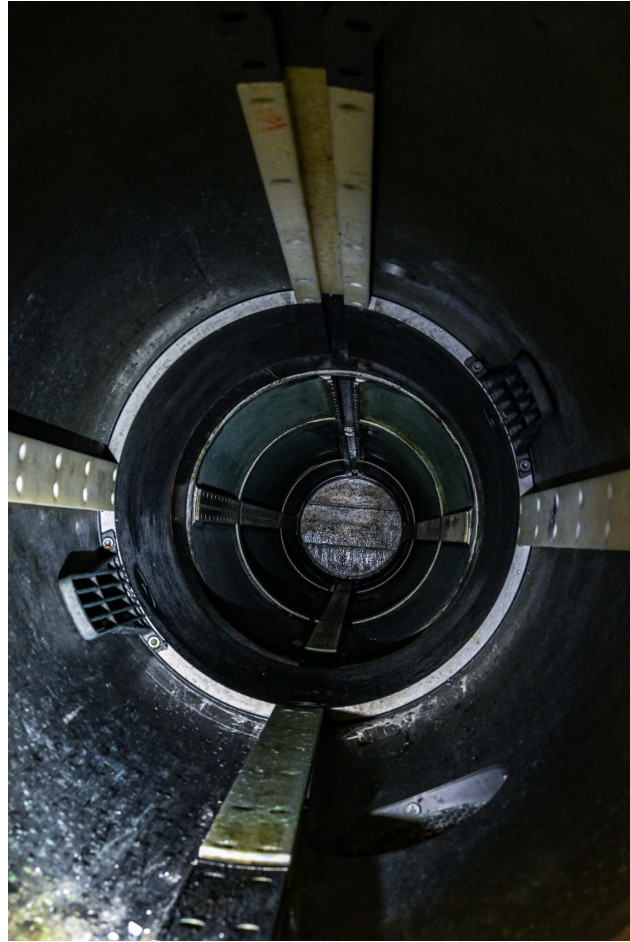
Operating a sub in the Arctic is especially challenging. First, navigation. In some areas, shallow waters force the crew to thread a narrow path between twin threats: the ice above and the ocean floor below.

Ice keels — huge chunks of overturned sea ice pointing downward — are also a hazard here. This was the case when Cmdr. Mike Brown and his crew aboard the Hampton transited through the Bering Strait.

“We operated the boat 20 feet off the bottom with 40, 60 feet of ice above us and we were able to dodge the ice keels,” Commander Brown said.

Second, water condensation that comes from the freezing ocean waters against the boat’s hull creates the risk of small electrical fires on the submarine.

Since a loss of propulsion could mean getting stuck under the ice, keeping the sub’s small nuclear power plant in top form becomes a matter of life or death.



The Hampton has many torpedo tubes and weapons on board. Crew members use periscopes to scan the surface and review digital readouts of underwater ocean sounds around them.

As on any sub, space is at a premium.

Beds often have to be shared as the sailors work in shifts (rotating bunks is called “hot racking”). Cooks frequently bake fresh bread so they don’t have to store premade loaves (the supply officer is called “Chop,” like pork chop). Menus must be meticulously planned for the duration of the underwater mission. In

emergencies, surgeries can be performed on the wardroom table.

The small dining areas for officers and sailors are among the few places where the crew can unwind together and study the minutiae of submarine operations for hours on end.



Officers play cribbage in the Hampton's wardroom to pass the time.

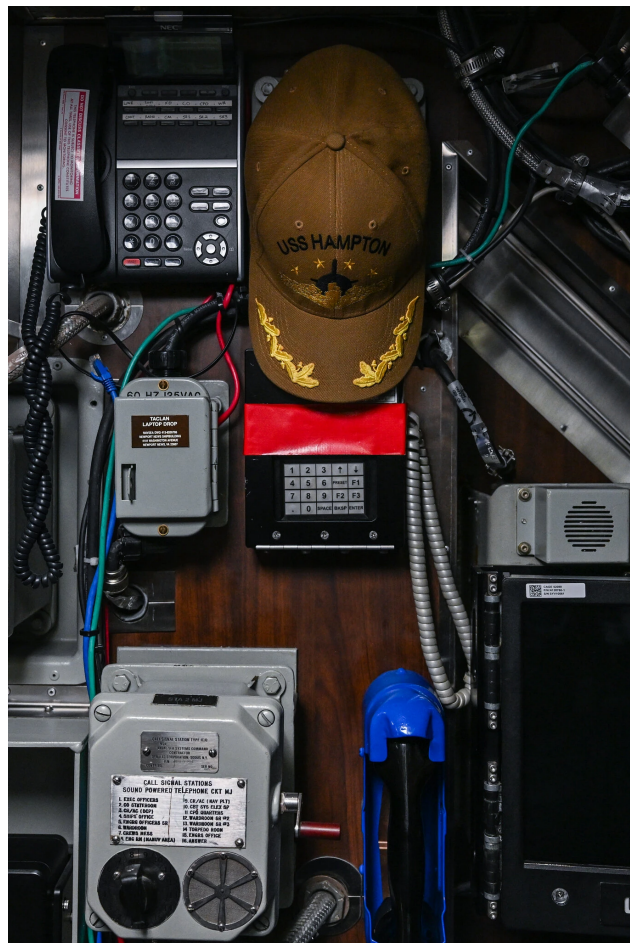


Photos displaying Cmdr. Mike Brown's military lineage hang in the captain's quarters.

Crew members play the strategy card game cribbage to pass time, and so, they say, as not to let time pass them.

But time does pass, and all of the sailors will miss milestones in the lives of their families and friends. When they do finally return home, they will be unable to talk in detail about their efforts at sea because most of what they do is classified.

Some sailors spend their downtime on smartphones, reading old messages or watching TV shows and movies downloaded before the patrol. “Day 31 is sometimes the lowest morale day while underway,” said Capt. Mickaila Johnston, an undersea medical officer. “App downloads expire: Spotify, Netflix, etc.”



The crew of the Hampton remains underwater, in tight spaces with limited food and no outside communication, for weeks at a time.

Being “underway” on a sub, the sailors say, is like working in a small office space with no windows, no way to leave, no Wi-Fi and zero cell service. Crucial military decisions are made entirely on the boat, with no outside communication.

The layout of the boat resembles an elongated maze of extremely dark passageways no wider than the aisle on a school bus. Sailors must turn parallel when walking past each other. The companionways between two

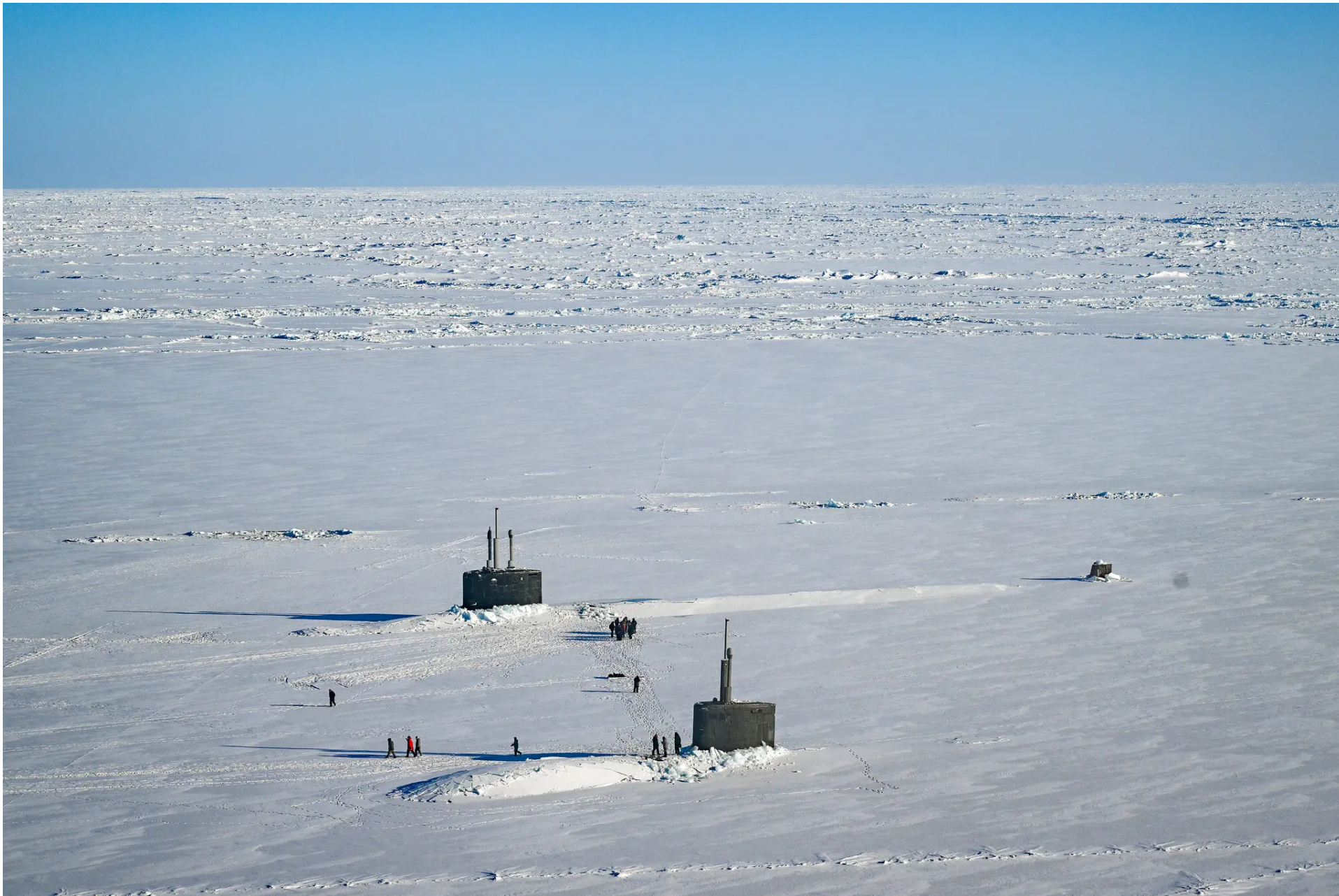
primary decks are so narrow that only one person at a time can use them. Nothing and no one is ever far away.

Commander Brown leads an all-male crew. A ban on women serving in the submarine force ended only in 2010, and many female officers are rising through the ranks aboard subs like his. None are yet senior enough to command a submarine.

On this particular day the Hampton has risen from the depths for Ice Camp — a three-week mission testing the crew's ability to fight in one of the most unforgiving places on Earth.



Specialists working to locate a spot for the Hampton to surface on a large ice floe.



Two Navy attack submarines, the Hampton, right, and the Indiana, broach the ice in the frozen Beaufort Sea.

Several miles away other service members and researchers have built Camp Whale, a clutch of winterized tents and a small command center on a large ice floe that itself moves about a half mile an hour on the frozen ocean.

Life there is rugged. No showers. No running water. The outside air dips to 40 degrees below zero. Above, the northern lights sometimes shimmer after sunset.

Teams are flown by helicopter back and forth between the subs and the camp when physical contact with the subs is necessary.



The temperature at Camp Whale, which was constructed entirely on a giant sheet of ice, can drop to 40 degrees below zero.

“The goal here is twofold,” Commander Brown said in an interview. “It’s geopolitical. It’s also just building the proficiency of being able to operate under the ice. I have a crew full of sailors that by and large have never been here, have never been under the ice. And so one of my primary focuses is to train the next generation of sailors.”

U.S. Navy submarines run classified missions around the world every single day. Attack boats like the Hampton might collect intelligence on enemy warships or eavesdrop on unfriendly governments, while much larger ballistic missile submarines stay submerged for 90 days at a time, carrying enough nuclear warheads to destroy entire countries.



The frigid operation enabled the Navy to examine how to enhance submarines and underwater communications in such an extreme environment.

Before long, it is time to break through the unforgiving Arctic ice again.

As the crew concludes its mission in the Beaufort Sea, the sub heads north before surfacing at the North Pole.

These submariners will then press on, continuing their voyage under the icy sea in silence.



On the Hampton, the crew contends with Arctic operations and daily life.

John Ismay contributed reporting from Washington.

Kenny Holston is a Times photographer based in Washington, primarily covering Congress, the military and the White House. More about Kenny Holston