

Surface at the Pole

By Commander James Calvert

Book review September 5, 2018

Book Reflection. I recently read an abbreviated version of Surface at the Pole written by Commander James Calvert, U.S.N. It was nourishment to this retired submariner's bones. It tells of the historic adventures of the nuclear submarine, U.S.S. Skate, the first vessel to surface near the North Pole, in both arctic summer and in arctic winter. The submarining details are accurate without being technical. CDR Calvert (with his editors) did a great job with this adventure travelogue.

The book would not be a likely candidate for a Pastor Tidbit, but for this: the Commander was a religious man and participated in worship services that took place on the U.S.S. Skate. One September Sunday morning in 1958, U.S.S. Skate was under ice and heading for the North Pole. Religious services were about to commence, when the Commanding Officer is informed that there was an opening in the ice (a polynya) that was large enough for his submarine to surface. "We'll have church later. Call away the Plotting Party," was CDR Calvert's response. It would be a historic first, the most northern surfacing of any submarine. Once surfaced, the submarine had opportunity to ventilate fresh air throughout the ship, while those on the bridge could take in the arctic beauty as well as a sense of smallness in midst of seemingly infinite ice.

After submerging, CDR Calvert returned his attention the responsibility and privilege of worship. The text for worship that morning came from Psalm 139.

*⁷Where can I go from your Spirit?
Where can I flee from your presence?
⁸If I go up to the heavens, you are there;
if I make my bed in the depths, you are there.
⁹If I rise on the wings of the dawn,
if I settle on the far side of the sea,
¹⁰even there your hand will guide me,
your right hand will hold me fast.*

I suspect that few of us have had a better setting in which to contemplate this wonderful promise from God, that he is with us no matter where we are and, even in the most desolate places, he is on our side.

[As an aside, in the early 1980's, I served as the Protestant Religious Lay Leader on board the U.S.S. Nathanael Greene, SSBN 636.]