

Aboard the Big Sam

**Patrick “Rick” Owen Lyons
and His Service in the U.S. Navy**

By Sally Lyons McAlear

Patrick “Rick” Owen Lyons was born on April 7, 1943, in Springfield, Missouri. He was educated at St. Joseph Elementary School and Reed Junior High School in Springfield and attended Willard High School (in nearby Willard, Missouri) for two years and Hillcrest High School in Springfield the last two years—being a member of the Class of 1961. On October 13, 1961, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy in St. Louis, Missouri, for a period of four years. Following an immediate flight to San Diego, California, his recruit training (boot camp) began the next day. Several days later, on October 19, he briefly described his days in a letter home to his parents:

We’ve been getting up at 4:00 a.m. and going to bed at 9:00 p.m. . . . Camp Nimitz is supposed to be the hell hole of the USNTC [U.S. Naval Training Center]. You have to watch everything you do around here. Almost everything you do is wrong, and you get chewed out for it. We’ve got one of the nicest officers for a company officer . . . I can’t see much of California from here, but what I can see is beautiful. It’s everything they say about it and more. It’s sort of mountainous around here, and a deep blue mist hangs over at morning and night.

Apparently, he was feeling sorry for himself—while at the same time trying to aggravate his older brother, John (a bank teller)—when he gave more details later that month:

Tell John that he is lucky having a good job. Tell him also not to feel very tired when he gets home from work because he has it easy . . . We start marching right after breakfast and keep marching till about 10:00; we then go to different classes till noon. After lunch, we start marching again, and sometimes we have a few classes in the afternoon. Finally, after we are about half dead, we march to the mess hall to eat supper at 4:00, the same time John gets off work. After a hurried supper, we come back to the barracks and start our washing and other things. After all this, we hit the sack at 9:00, and believe you me, you’re looking forward to it.

He learned to play the guitar while in boot camp and quickly became very accomplished. Fortunately, he was granted leave that Christmas, and he brought his guitar home—much to the delight of his family.



Home For Christmas Leave in 1961
Left-Right: Sally Lyons (sister), Rick, and Merle Lyons (mother)
Lyons Family Photo Collection

He completed boot camp on January 18, 1962, and requested submarine school. In a letter home dated January 15, he related the following: "My new duty station will be right across the street in the Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) division. My school is in sonar. They say that a very large percentage of sonarmen do get stationed aboard subs, that is if they pass their physical and everything."

A couple of weeks later, he wrote about seeing a sub up close for the first time:

I am going to put in a request for subs. I don't know whether I'll get it or not, though . . . If I do get subs, I will have to go to New London, Conn., for sub school, which they say is pretty hard. And after that, I still won't be a qualified sub man till I spend nine months on a sub and pass a test at the end of that duration. During that time, you have to learn every other man's job and know what every little knob, handle, gauge, and button does. That might not be as easy as it sounds, either. I went all through a sub that pulled in the other day. I was really surprised; they are nothing like the movies show them to be. This was a fairly big sub, and it looked huge from the outside, but from the inside, it is way smaller than you would ever have imagined. It all amounts to about eight or 10 compartments loaded down with instruments, instruments, and more instruments. There are all kinds of levers sticking out from the bulkheads and all kinds of scopes and big gauges. I believe if they turned me loose on all those knobs and switches, that it would take me a steady 24 hours just to flick them off or on. There is a crew of 90 men on this sub, but by looking at the room inside, you would believe that it would hold no more than 20 at the most. The galleys really surprised me. They have two kitchens and they measure about eight feet by three feet. They stack the sleeping bunks up about five high. It looks like there are about 14 or 16 inches between one bunk and another. They have two tiny restrooms. They don't have much water, so hardly anybody ever takes a shower and when they do, the rest of the crew calls them chicken. This is out at sea, of course. I got all this info from one of the crew as he was showing us around. Also, you don't wash clothes aboard, and sometimes you wear one set of dungarees for as long as two or three weeks. They all admit they are scrounges, but they say they are proud to be that way. They say that the sub Navy is the proudest of all, and they are all crazy about sub life.

He was next assigned to the Fleet Anti-Submarine Warfare School at the Naval base in New London, Connecticut. He described his first experience aboard a submarine in a September 20 letter to his parents:

This school is harder than sonar school. It's all memory work now, where in sonar school, you could work things out. I never realized there was so much to a sub. There are all kinds of levers and controls and where you have one, you might have a couple more located elsewhere for safety. You get fairly snowed under when you learn hundreds of these per week . . . Yesterday, we got up at 5:00 in the morning and went aboard a sub for our first cruise. We went out to Long Island Sound near Orient Point and spent the day going under and then back up again (16 dives in all). It was really exciting the first time. By the sixteenth time, though, it became quite boring.

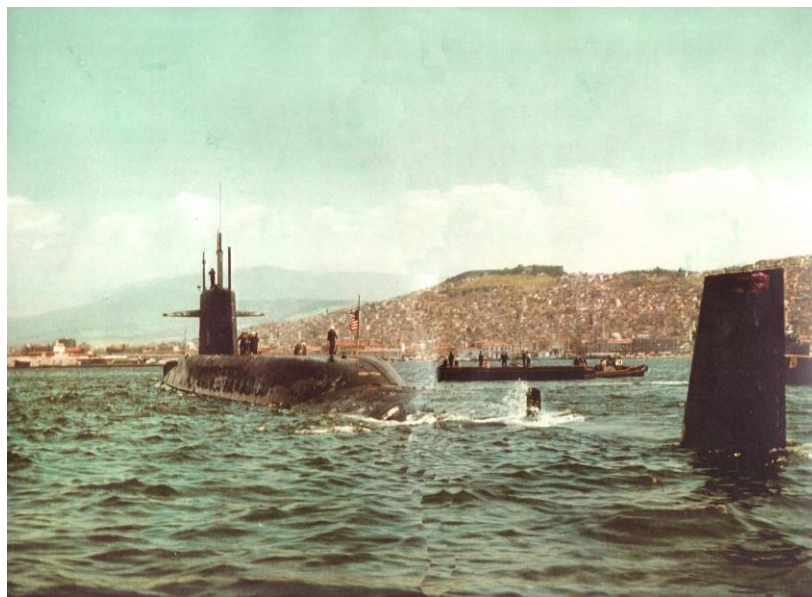
That training concluded on October 31, 1962, and on December 5, he was assigned to the Blue Crew of the USS Sam Houston (SSBN 609)—Polaris submarine, qualifying as a sonar technician. The Navy assigned duplicate crews to each Polaris sub, a Gold Crew and a Blue Crew, which alternated in running the ship. For each crew, it meant three months in New London to rest and take classes, alternating with a three-month duty tour from the submarine base in Holy Loch, Scotland. That duty tour included a 60-day submerged patrol. Rick wrote a letter home about this assignment giving the following information:

I guess you are wondering by now what kind of sub I'm going to be on, so – to start off, it is an atomic-powered, Polaris missile-firing sub commonly known as or referred to as FBM (Fleet Ballistic Missile) or SSBN (Ship Submersible Ballistic Nuclear). It is the SSBN Sam Houston—609, and it is the second sub in the new A-2 Class—which is the USS Ethan Allen-SSBN 608 class. The first class of Polaris subs was of the George Washington class. This included the Patrick Henry, Robert E. Lee, etc. They were actually a “Skipjack” class of boat with the missile compartment added. It fires the “A-1” missile, which has a maximum range of 1,200 miles. This might seem complicated to you, but if you stop and think a minute, you will recall that the Skipjack (like the postcard sent home) is the world's fastest submarine and was the first sub (nuclear type) to employ the albacore-type hull, which is the whale-shape or teardrop-design hull for greater underwater speed and maneuverability. The type boat I will be on is built from the ground up for its primary purpose. It also fires the Polaris A-II-type missile with a maximum range of 1,500 miles.

Rick was aboard when the Big Sam made history by being the first Polaris submarine to surface and make a port call during a patrol in the Mediterranean Sea. This occurred at Izmir, Turkey. On March 30, 1963, the Defense Department announced that the first of three Polaris submarines would be stationed in the Mediterranean. The underwater force preceded the removal of 45 obsolescent U.S. land-based missiles from Italy and Turkey. Dismantling of 15 Jupiter missiles in Turkey and 30 in Italy was expected to be completed early in April. Rick's parents were excited when they spotted the following article in the *Springfield (Missouri) Daily News* on April 15:

Turks Are Pleased By Arrival of Sub

Izmir, Turkey (AP) – The U.S. Polaris nuclear submarine Sam Houston arrived in this Aegean port city Sunday for a two-day courtesy visit. The arrival of the big vessel, first of three U.S. Polaris nuclear subs to be stationed in the Mediterranean, created a festive mood here. Several thousand Izmir residents, including high ranking Turkish military officials, were at the quay as the Sam Houston pulled in.



**USS Sam Houston on a Courtesy Visit at Izmir, Turkey
April 14, 1963**
United States Navy Photograph – Shared by Howard Dobson

Soon after that historic mission, a letter arrived from Rick with a description of that experience:

I guess by now you've heard that we're in the Med and on the way to Turkey. We received a radio message about five days after we passed through the Straits of Gibraltar that the U.S. public had been informed that the first Polaris sub was now on patrol, though not naming the sub. Then today, we found out that Paris, France, announced that the Big Sam would be pulling into Izmir tomorrow morning. So you should know the whole story by now if you haven't known already. The whole crew was told in a roundabout way that we would be in the Med and probably visit some port. This was about two weeks before we left New London, but that info was stamped secret . . . I started standing sonar watches the day we left Holy Loch and have been since . . . We're going to pull into Izmir tomorrow morning about 10:00 a.m., and we'll stay there until the next morning; then we'll take some Turks out for a joy ride that day, and that evening, a small boat will come out and get the Turks, and we shall tarry on. I'm kind of anxious to see the reception we'll get, if any. I imagine all the nosy Turks and big-wig Turks will greet us. But it should be interesting anyway. I'll write again as soon as I get back to Holy Loch.

Rick's parents soon received a letter from Captain William P. Willis, Jr., commanding officer of the Blue Crew, reporting that their son had participated in a significant event. He stated the following: "The presence of SAM HOUSTON in the Mediterranean Sea marks another milestone for Polaris and gives added assurance that the United States is truly dedicated to its mission of preserving peace through deterrence. You have every reason to be proud of your son's contribution to the fulfillment of that mission."



**USS Sam Houston's Arrival at Holy Loch, Scotland
After Historic Mediterranean Sea Patrol
July 9, 1963**
United States Navy Photograph – Shared by Howard Dobson

Rick must have known his family would worry about the danger he might be in aboard a Polaris submarine during the Cold War. The USS Thresher sank on April 10, just four days before the USS Sam Houston surfaced in Izmir, and it was very much on Rick's mind in his next letter:

From what we've heard, it happened on the initial deep dive . . . The Thresher is the lead ship of the Thresher-class subs, and it is defined as the truest submersible ever yet produced. It can dive deeper and can handle better than any other class sub. It's the quietest sub, and it had a complete isolated mechanically sonar system so secret that the gear is code named and the code is secret itself. To make a long story short, it stuns me – because of all subs, it shouldn't have happened to it.

He further tried to put their minds at ease regarding the danger involved in submarine service in a September 6, 1963, letter from Holy Loch by saying:

Don't worry about any danger involved. I've never, anywhere—here, San Diego, or New London—seen a sub to compare in workmanship to this boat. I've never seen a better crew; they know this boat inside and out and on the other side like the back of their hand. The boat is in excellent shape; so is the crew. Sea trials more than proved this. We really put this boat through the paces—violent maneuvers, full speed for two days and nights, four test missiles, two torpedoes, etc. The tender personnel say this is the best-built boat running and the sharpest, and of the four others I've seen here, I think the same.

Rick was listed in the October 26, 1963, issue of the "Plan of the Day" sheet handed out to crew members. He was congratulated under the heading "Qualified SS and Sam Houston." He had qualified on all of the submarine's systems and had the designation of SS (submarine specialist) added to his rate of rank.



**Rick Being Awarded the Coveted Silver Dolphins Badge
for Qualifying on all Areas of the Submarine—October 1963**
**Left-Right: Unidentified; Captain William P. Willis, Jr.; George Stratton;
Rick Lyons; Ralph Reeves; and Melvin Holliday**
Lyons Family Photo Collection

In January 1964, Rick flew with the Blue Crew to Scotland for another patrol, reporting that their flight was on a commercial airline equipped with windows and five stewardesses! He related the following about the Sam Houston's preparation for the patrol out of Holy Loch:

The boat right now is tied alongside the Proteus; the Hunley is here also, but the two tenders are sharing the load until the Proteus leaves next month. Everything so far has been nice and smooth. I'm working in sonar now, so I don't have anything to do with topside. Last time I was over, I was working topside, working in sonar repairing the gear, working on spare parts for sonar, and trying to get qualified. This time, I am still the spare parts petty officer for sonar, but besides this, I have a couple of pieces of sonar gear to check and calibrate, and that's it. This coming Tuesday morning, we will change command with the Gold Crew and then begin.

After that patrol, he wrote home again from Holy Loch expressing his relief that the patrol was over:

We finally pulled in yesterday and am I ever glad. It seems like we've been out for years. Everything was nice and smooth until about half the patrol was over, then everything started getting dull, and about 10 days ago, channel fever set in, and it made things miserable. With channel fever, you can't sleep, and you're irritable and nervous. Yesterday, I went up and took a look at the "good ole world" again. It sure is a sight to see. It seems really odd to see more than 20 or 30 feet at the most. Besides being dull, the patrol went pretty well.

On August 4, 1964, Rick wrote that he had been back in Holy Loch two and a half weeks preparing to leave on another patrol that would start the following day. He included an interesting story in that letter:

I've only left the boat twice—once when we were on the tender and then yesterday. Yesterday morning, we were out on sea trials, and we were moored or anchored in Loch Fyne awaiting some sound runs back and forth in the loch. Anyway, after we surfaced, the Duke and Duchess of Argyll came aboard for a visit, and after they left, the captain made arrangements for us, if we wanted, to go over and see his castle, the Castle of Inveraray. So I went, and it was well worth the trip. Part of the castle is blocked off for visitors, so we didn't get to see it all, but what we did see was something else. I'm going to try to go to Edinburgh to see the castle up there when we get back. It's really supposed to be something.

Rick wrote another letter home on December 23 of that year before departing on another patrol. This would be the only year he would not spend Christmas at home. He gave a humorous description of the flight over to Scotland:

We had a nice flight over (TWA), one of the best I've been on. The stewardesses were European, and they naturally had the European charm, and they blended right in with the crew. That's not an easy feat because out of the 130 guys, there are about 100 who were busy doing industrious things like yoo-hooing in the passageway, throwing things, hunting down chow (wherever it might be), stalking out and then tracking stewardesses en route down the passageway, throwing side remarks at them as fast as they could, and then there were always that certain few, who after take-off, are so disrupted and nerve shattered that they wouldn't be able to survive the duration of the flight—that is, not without just one

little sip. Anyway, it was a nice flight. About midway over the Atlantic, the stewardesses wanted us to play the guitars, and so the guys finally hounded us into playing. It finally turned into a jamboree with about four or five guys singing, plus the four stewardesses, and one of them had the mic for the intercom in her hand, so it went all over the plane.

Rick wrote a letter on January 13, 1965, from Holy Loch the day before the crew departed on their next patrol. He had some free time before leaving, which he recounted:

I've really been traveling around a lot this trip over. I've had more liberty this upkeep than all the previous combined. I've been to Glasgow about 10 times including Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, and New Year's Eve, and I've spent one weekend up at Edinburgh. I revisited the castle and went to the Palace of the Holyrood House, which is still the official residence of the Queen of England when she visits Scotland. The city itself is the most beautiful I think I've seen.



**Rick with "Santa" (David Jenkins) – Aboard the USS Sam Houston
Taken in Holy Loch Before Departing on Another Patrol
Christmas 1964
*Lyons Family Photo Collection***

Rick looked forward to leaves. He toured Europe twice, and during one of those leaves, he visited the ancestral home in Kilgarvan, County Kerry, Ireland, of his paternal grandfather, who had immigrated to the U.S. in the 1880s. One leave was from mid-March to mid-April of 1965, and for the first part of that leave, he travelled with his friend and fellow Sam Houston shipmate, John Burns. In Berlin, they were there just long enough to see the Berlin Wall just before getting orders from the military to leave immediately. Berlin was deemed too dangerous for a couple of submariners with high-security clearances! They headed back to Frankfurt – then on to Copenhagen. He later went to Amsterdam, then

on to Paris via Germany and Switzerland. He spent the morning of his 22nd birthday in Paris and that evening in London.

One of the things Rick loved best during the Navy years was learning to play the guitar, and he truly had a natural talent. In one of his performance evaluations, Captain Daniel P. Brooks stated: “Lyons is a fine guitar player and has substantially contributed to the morale of the crew at impromptu songfests and at ship’s parties.”



Crew Members Enjoying a Music Jam Session While on Patrol—1965
Left-Right: Jim Kujat, John Burns, and Rick Lyons
Lyons Family Photo Collection

Rick was scheduled to be discharged in the fall of 1965, but an error was made on the number of days he had been granted in leaves. The Navy insisted he had another leave coming and encouraged him to take it—even though he disagreed with that, and his own records showed he had taken all of his leaves. However, he did as they insisted and took another leave for most of September 1965 – also in Europe. When it came time to complete the papers for his discharge, they told him he had taken too much leave and that he owed the Navy a little more time! Of course, this news was very upsetting to him. Because there wasn’t enough time for him to go on another 60-day patrol with the Sam Houston, he was assigned for a short time to the USS Dogfish—SS-350. He received his honorable discharge on February 11, 1966 – too late to start the spring term at Southwest Missouri State College—now Missouri State University—in Springfield.

Rick returned home to Springfield soon after his discharge and began his college education that summer at MSU, taking general education and pre-electrical engineering courses. He had been impressed with the engineers who came aboard to work on the sub, and that impacted his decision to pursue an engineering degree. He was a member of Kappa Mu Epsilon Mathematics Honor Society and Young Democrats as well as being named to the Dean’s Honor Roll each semester for the two years that he attended MSU. He was pre-enrolled for the fall semester of 1968 to attend the Missouri University of Science and Technology (formerly the University of Missouri-Rolla and earlier known as the Rolla School of Mines), where he intended to complete an undergraduate degree in electrical engineering. His long-term plans were to next complete master’s and doctorate degrees in electrical engineering at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Tragically, those plans were cut short when he was killed in the crash of a small plane near Springfield on August 9, 1968, at the age of 25.

During his brief adult life after returning home from the Navy, Rick experienced great enjoyment from playing his new 12-string guitar—spending hours with his brother learning new songs and entertaining family and friends. He also enjoyed motorcycling with his family on their trail bikes (in search of log cabins in rural areas of the Ozarks), and he loved driving his new red 1966 Mustang 289 GT.

He was survived by his parents, Lawrence and Merle (Edmonds) Lyons; his older brother, John; and his younger sister, Sally; his girlfriend, Sherma Ledbetter; several aunts and uncles, cousins, and many friends. He was a member of St. Agnes Cathedral in Springfield. His joy of life, love of family and friends, energy, talents, and sense of humor has been forever missed by those who loved him most.

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