

THE MESS COOK

by Dan Gillcrist

“Permission to come on the bridge!” the mess cook shouted up through the conning tower hatch. The OOD (Officer Of the Deck - the watch conning the submarine) stepped over to look down the hatch and saw the new kid on the boat looking up at him. The OOD had already cleared dumping the garbage over the side with the old man. It was a moonless night, and they were getting ready to change course and head north anyway. Besides, the garbage bags were mesh and weighted, and should leave no trace that they had ever been in this particular acre of the Pacific. All things considered, you never wanted to leave a trace of evidence that you had been there. Even if the Japs found a bag floating about two days from now, they’d have a hard time figuring where you had gone, anyway. It was all extra caution but a good practice beginning at Papa Hotel, the last buoy at Pearl, and not ending until they returned in a month or two, hopefully with a broom lashed to the number one periscope.

“Permission granted,” the OOD said as he reached over to help the mess cook struggle with the garbage bags. The kid passed up the two he had and then scampered up to turn around and help his mate with the two he had. When all four bags were on the bridge, the OOD said, “Move them aft to the cigarette deck before you throw them over the side. Hey, and throw them off to port, it’s the lee side.” The two dragged one bag at a time aft. There wasn’t enough room to move more than one at a time in the narrow space between the sail and the rail. “I know you two know this, but be sure you clear that life

line on the main deck and the tank tops if you can. We don't want that bag breaking and scattering that shit all over. This stuff has got to sink. Got it?"

"We'll do it right, sir," said Billy the older of the two...he was 19 years old and on his second war patrol. They did it together, one bag at a time. One of those one-two-three- heave things. The OOD had not seen it done quite this way before and was pleased with the results - they cleared the tank tops nicely and at 18 knots, the spots where the bags hit the water disappeared in an instant.

"Can we stay up a bit, Mister Cavanaugh?" It was Billy again. The OOD said, "Sure, but stay alert in case we have to clear the bridge." Cavanaugh liked this young sailor Billy Toomy, and he knew what a lousy job mess cooking must be. But he knew that it was the bottom of the ladder. "They all started there," he thought to himself. It was a right of passage for youngsters who volunteered for sub duty. He couldn't blame them for wanting to be "up" on a night like this in the South Pacific. The air was balmy, and the phosphorescence in the bow wave was beautiful. The continuous sound of the bow wave added to the whole sense one got on the bridge of a submarine in the tropics at night. Cavanaugh thought, "If you could, somehow, can these elements and sell them to insomniacs, you'd make a killing."

Danny Cavanaugh was a good officer. He knew the job of OOD cold and took pride in doing it well to protect those in his charge, which, on a sub, was the whole package - 88 men 8 officers and the boat Uncle Sam provided. He got a whiff of cigarette smoke and caught himself before he gave them his little lecture about palming the matches and all that stuff. They knew what not to do on a bridge at night in a war. So he let them

alone back there. After a few minutes, he turned and asked the port lookout if all was well, and then did the same with the man in the starboard sheers. He was always concerned that a lookout might fall asleep standing there, and said something to them often enough to keep them on their toes. War patrols were, after having seven of them behind him, definitely not a walk in the park. Cavanaugh wanted everyone focused on their jobs, even the mess cooks.

After awhile the two mess cooks walked forward to the conning tower hatch and asked permission to go below. Cavanaugh nodded and said, "Granted." He knew they'd be up at 5A.M. or so and wanted to get some sleep. He was comfortable with the idea of going to sea on a war patrol where there was considerable risk with seasoned men like chiefs and the petty officers. They had been around, knew what it was all about and were grown up men for the most part. But to see kids like these two leave the safety and comfort of Pearl for a war patrol somehow mystified him. Basically, they peeled potatoes and did the dishes, and looked too damn young and innocent to be out here! He couldn't quite get comfortable with it all.

Cavanaugh was standing the 8-to-12 watch and looked forward to getting a little sleep himself. In 15 minutes his relief would be up to take over at 2345.

The waterproof 1MC speaker on the bridge came to life with, "Bridge, radar, contact bearing 193 degrees - range 14 miles. Its pretty faint, but I'm pretty sure about it."

“Very well radar, notify the captain right away, and keep me informed.” He turned to the port lookout and said, “Keep a sharp eye out for a contact off the port bow.”

“Permission to come up!” It was his relief, a lieutenant Academy class of '44 named Pete Vaccaris whom he knew from the baseball team. He was a class behind Cavanaugh.

“Granted.” Vaccaris came up the ladder and put his cup of coffee on the little chart table they had welded there in the shipyard. On the way up to relieve Cavanaugh he had stopped in the conning tower to check the charts and the boat's position. The OOD informed his relief of the course, speed and the other conditions of the boat which he should be aware of, like the stage of the battery charge which was going on. When he had completed the change of the watch, Vaccaris said, “I relieve you. Have a good sleep, Danny.”

Lt. Daniel Cavanaugh was the gunnery officer which on a fleet boat meant his primary responsibility concerned the torpedoes. He went below and walked forward to wake up the lead torpedoman to inform him of the contact so he would have his ducks in a row in the likely event they made a run at dawn. In forward battery he looked in on the captain who was putting on his shoes. “Let's have some coffee and talk about this contact Danny.”

It was first light and they had been on the bridge since 2A.M. The captain, Cavanaugh, the exec and the OOD. The contact was hull-up on the horizon, and it looked like a tanker, certainly Japanese. It was on a course straight for the sub. The captain said

to the OOD, "Pete, lets dive the boat, and when you get leveled out at periscope depth, go to battle stations torpedo."

The OOD waited for the other officers to go below before he shouted to the two lookouts, "CLEAR THE BRIDGE, CLEAR THE BRIDGE!" Then he hit the klaxon twice and announced over the 1MC, "DIVE, DIVE!" It occurred to him that it was always exhilarating to hear the loud rush of air as the main ballast tank vents opened just before dropping down the hatch, after his lookouts. He pulled the lanyard behind him while the helmsman climbed the short ladder to dog down the hatch seconds before it was covered by the sea.

The OOD, now the diving officer, dropped into the control room to hear the Chief of the Watch shout, "GREEN BOARD - PRESSURE IN THE BOAT, sir."

"Very well." The boat was heavier than usual so the dive was quick. The captain's policy on war patrols was to "ride the vents" which meant the ballast tanks were partially flooded. As he went through the whole diving procedure the captain climbed the ladder into the conning tower to make his approach to the target. This was easier than usual since the target was still coming straight for them. While he was on the periscope, the XO (Executive Officer - second in command) took bearings and read out ranges from the back side of the periscope, Lt. Cavanaugh cranked them into the Torpedo Data Computer,(TDC). In 15 minutes they were ready to shoot.

"Torpedo room, Conn, flood tubes No.1, No.2, and No.3." All his orders were repeated. He turned to Cavanaugh and told him there would be a spread of three Mk 14s.

“Open outer doors on tubes 1, 2 and 3.” Everyone thought they were due for another little Jap flag on the side of the bridge.

The captain raised the periscope once more, nodded at Cavanaugh and said, “Final bearing and shoot”. The sailor on the sound powered phones in the cramped conning tower was repeating all the commands to the forward torpedo room. “Bearing - mark.” The man on the TDC replied, “Set”. The captain said, “SHOOT” and the sailor on the phones pushed the buttons on the panel near him for tubes #1, #2, #3. Cavanaugh hit his stop watch as the captain raised No.2 periscope to watch the strikes. Shortly, he saw the eruption at the bow of the target, but only one. The other two fish appeared to have straddled the tanker, passing to port and starboard. The sound of the blast then hit the boat and everyone cheered except the captain who at that instant saw through the billowing smoke falling away to the tanker’s port side, the bow of a Japanese destroyer. From the looks of the smoke the destroyer was making and the bow wave the sub captain estimated it was approaching at flank speed.

The captain shouted down the control room hatch, “Take her down to 100 feet! Right 15 degrees rudder, all ahead full and rig for depth charges! We’ve got a destroyer, gentlemen. It must have been exactly behind the tanker.” The destroyer had seen the two wakes pass down its sides and decided to backtrack the torpedo wakes to the sub. The destroyer captain decided that the sub was not likely to just sit there, and set a course to depth charge to the left of the torpedo tracks.

He thought of playing goalie on his college's soccer club during a penalty kick. He always had to choose to cover one side of the net or the other - sometimes he got lucky. The sub captain, regrettably decided on heading toward the left side of the track.

The destroyer made a classic depth charge run, mortaring depth charges off both port and starboard and dropping them off the fantail. While the depth charges fired to starboard and those rolled off the fan tail were well behind the sub, those fired to port were on the money. The fourth depth charge appeared to the Japanese destroyer captain to have been a dud, and he pounded the chart table in anger. In fact, the reason it didn't explode was that it had dropped directly onto the sub's cigarette deck and was trapped there by the railings.

Depth charges are exploded by hydrostatic switches. A setting is made aboard ship so that the depth charge goes off at a certain depth. The switch measures water pressure as the charge sinks exploding it at the pre-determined depth. The Japs had set this one for 150 feet and the sub was then only at 100 feet.

With depth charges going off all around, the captain again shouted down the hatch, "Take her to 200 feet!" As they passed 150 feet, the depth charge trapped on the cigarette deck exploded, killing everyone in the conning tower. The captain, the XO, Cavanaugh and the sailor on the phones. The explosion crushed the main induction and flooded the forward engine room whose flapper valve had been jarred open. Lt. Vaccaris quickly shut the badly damaged hatch to the conning tower but not before several tons of sea water dropped into the room. He only managed to slow the flooding through the hatch. The control room, beneath the explosion, began to flood quickly. The diving

officer, bleeding badly from the head, ordered the safety tank and bow buoyancy blown, not even aware yet that the forward engine room was completely flooded. The bow planesman had an up-angle on his planes. They did everything to reverse the downward motion of the boat.

The Chief of the Boat, holding on to the gyro table, quickly realized it was hopeless with the conning tower and forward engine room flooded and his control room with water up to their waists and rising fast. In spite of his overwhelming fear, he noticed how cold the water was. The diving party, Vaccaris, the chief of the boat, the electrician, manifold operator, helmsman and the two on the planes, just looked at one another. The planesmen seemed to be frozen to their wheels. The sailor on the bow planes began, “Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with Thee. Blessed art thou among women...” The salty old Chief of the Boat said, “Your all good men, and I’m proud to serve with you.” They started to tread water as their heads began hitting the overhead. In the few short minutes they had been breathing the remaining air, compressed by the incoming sea water, they had become intoxicated with nitrogen narcosis. It was a godsend. Each took a deep breath, his last. There was no place to go, no salvation. In the dim light of a battle lantern, each finally exhaled and stopped thinking of home. Only the open, terrified eyes of dead men in the control room could have seen the ships main depth gauge pass 412 feet, its official “test depth.”

The young mess cooks battle station was in the forward torpedo room. The boat now had an up angle of 20 degrees due to the flooding aft and he was unspeakably terrified, but said nothing. Those in the room had lost contact with the rest of the boat,

the lighting was very dim, supplied only by battle lanterns, one over the tubes and another on the after bulkhead. No one screamed, there was no flooding and they each expected and had faith that the now dead diving party aft in the control room would somehow turn the situation around. They waited in silence holding on to whatever they could to keep from sliding aft. The old first class torpedoman noticed the depth gauge between the tubes pass 600 feet. He knew it was hopeless and chose not to say anything to the others.

The sonarman was wedged in his little “shack“ directly across from the head when it happened. The sea water flushing valve in the head blew across the room with such violence and noise that everyone in the room looked as the two-pound valve went deep into his belly, pinning him against the pressure hull. The other sonarman leaned over to look at the source of the sound and was struck, full in the face with a stream of sea water with a force no one had ever seen before. Both of his eyeballs were blown out and the extremely high pressure stream broke the bone behind where the right eye had been, and liquefied his brain.

Some still had hope, in spite of the sonarmen, until there was an enormous explosion knocking them all to the deck to slide forward down around the tubes as the boat pitched from 20 degrees up angle to 45 degrees down in a matter of seconds. The bulkhead between the flooded control room and the forward battery had failed profoundly, causing the boat to assume a vertical attitude and speeding up its decent. The mess cook was wedged between the tubes as all the bunks crashed forward, crushing two men. He fought to pull himself up and aft and grabbed on to the starboard mine table for

support. The port mine table was the support for the first-class torpedoman - an old salt who had always been nice to the mess cook. As he smiled at the kid, the mess cook heard what sounded like a 20mm firing and saw that the torpedoman had only half a head. The brass sight glass had blown off the No.1 tube door right in front of the torpedoman and struck him on his smiling face. In all the excitement of the torpedo attack, no one had remembered to shut the tube's outer doors. The stream of water from the hole where the sight glass had been hit the torpedoman's body with such force that it propelled him into the overhead, impaling him onto the valve ends of the pair of oxygen bottles strapped up there. The boat was passing 800 feet.

Numbingly cold 45-degree water was quickly filling the compartment and the mess cook, in the dimness and the horror, realized that he was the only one left in the room. He thought of his mother and how sad she will be not to have a son anymore. He then heard a very loud boom but a little distant. It was the implosion of the after engine room, the maneuvering room and the after torpedo room. The three bulkheads collapsed simultaneously, like dominos, instantly and mercifully crushing everyone and everything in the compartments. The enormous force was enough to detached the three compartments and they now fell separately through the ocean.

The mess cook screamed out, 'MOOOOTTTTHHHERRRRR!' and at that instant, passing through 930 feet, the 67 tons of sea water pressure behind the No.2 tube door he was directly in front of, caused the tube locking ring to shear off. The door exploded into the room, filling the compartment in less than a second.

Nine thousand miles away, to the east north east, in a little town in Iowa, a pretty 38-year-old woman sat, bolt upright in her bed - she knew not why. Clutching the sheets to her breasts, she cried out, "Holy Mother of God!"

The horror was over for the crew, finally. The two parts of the boat, now completely collapsed like tin cans, still had over two miles to go before they reached the bottom of this nameless trench in the Pacific. They landed violently, at over 55 knots, 800 yards apart, two tombs of honor on that sunless desert bottom.

Author's Note (March 2000)

To be sure, there were submarines - German and American - which were attacked on the surface. They were rammed, attacked from the air or taken under gunfire. In these cases there were often survivors who escaped by leaving the submarine before it sank. The vast majority of sinkings, however, occurred at depth when the submarine was attempting to evade its pursuers on the surface. In all of these cases the submarine was mortally wounded, usually from flooding, and then it sank with its unaffected compartments still intact only to implode under enormous forces at crush depths. Each of these compartments were filled with men who knew what was about to happen to them and who were utterly powerless to change the outcome. In all these cases there were no survivors - no eyewitnesses to tell the story.

I have discovered that the public generally has the notion that submariners who died at sea died from drowning, and that since drowning seems to be some dreamy loss of consciousness, death on a submarine is believed to be quick and painless. This of course is simply not true. The point of this story is to correct this misconception and to call attention to the notion that the German and American submariners of W.W.II showed exceptional courage. They all volunteered for submarine duty, and then going back on patrol over and over, knowing that it was extremely dangerous.

The second purpose of this story is to try to provide some level of advocacy for all those submariners who died. All other military units have living survivors who, thankfully, remind us of their fallen comrades. Each year for the last 55 years there are thousands of reunions. Survivors from Stalingrad and Tobruck to Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima meet to commemorate what was done and remember their friends who were killed.

Thousands of books and newspaper stories serve as reminders for us. This is a wonderful thing and it transcends all political borders. There are even reunions involving both adversaries at a particular battle!

*“To find the life of battle good,
And dear the land that gave you birth,
And dearer still the brotherhood,
That binds the brave of all the Earth.”*

However, since there are no submarine survivors to attend such reunions, there is very little public awareness of the price they paid.

It is a little known fact, therefore, that the submarine services of Germany and the United States experienced the highest death rate of ANY of their other military branches. While the estimates vary slightly, they are overwhelming when examined. Of the 39,000 German submarine sailors and officers, who put to sea, it is estimated that an astounding 32,000 never returned. Of the 16,000 American submariners who made war patrols, 3,500 died - almost one out of four!

With respect to the American submariners, they represented less than two percent of the Navy, and yet accounted for the sinkings of 55% of Japan's naval and merchant fleets! Less than two percent of one branch of the United States Armed Forces accomplished this incredible feat.

The year 2000 is the 100th anniversary of the submarine. It is also a time, long overdue, when we commemorate the sacrifices of the World War II submariners - German and American - who gave their lives to the sea.

Sailors, Rest Your Oars