

S-4 collision

(Continued)

spot. Cross-bearings were taken.

Meanwhile, Gracie and his crew had run from the station to Long Point to where the 36-foot motor lifeboat was moored. Within minutes Gracie was at the spot of the collision, grappling the bottom for the sub. His efforts were hampered by fading light and the storm, which was rising to gale proportions.

After recovering from the confusion of the initial blow, the men aboard the sub rushed to emergency stations. Their efforts were hampered somewhat by the extra test equipment on board.

The 231-foot sub was not dealt an immediately fatal blow by the Paulding. The S-4 was double-hulled and cut into five separate air-tight compartments by heavily reinforced steel bulkheads.

Simonds had been watching the sub run through its trials.

Gracie wondered aloud where the sub was now. Taking the telescope, Gracie focused on the oncoming shape of the Paulding. Moving the telescope to the east, Gracie spotted the S-4's periscope cutting the water. It looked like any one of the thousands of white-caps dotting the sea surface.

For a second Gracie stared, watching the two ships come closer and closer. Then, dropping the telescope, Gracie leapt for the stairs. "My God, Frank, there's going to be a collision," he yelled.

On the Paulding, Ensign Phanemiller was officer of the deck. The captain was in the chart house at the rear of the bridge. The junior officer was studying the position of the Nantucket Lightship, apparently off her station. The S-4 went unnoticed until her two periscopes were spotted simultaneously by the quartermaster and Ensign Phanemiller.

The damage to the hull was in the battery compartment, the largest single room aboard, but the least important in terms of life functions of the submarine.

Still intact were the sub's power and her control room. But the damage to the battery compartment separated the sub's crew. Trapped in the forward torpedo room were six men, including Lt. Fitch.

The remaining 34 men clambered into the control room. The door to the battery compartment was closed. Diving to the mud off Wood End, the sub still had control over electricity, engines and vital air supplies.

From the control room, there was still a lot the men of the S-4 could do to save themselves.

On the way to the bottom the order was given to blow all ballast tanks. Compressed air whistled through valves to force water out of the tanks and possibly refloat the S-4

before she dropped too deep.

But the forward ballast tank was punctured. The precious air rushed out to sea. The S-4 continued her mortal plunge to the bottom.

The S-4 struck bottom bow first, ploughing a trench in the mud. With the bulkhead to the forward part of the sub sealed the men in the control room had no way of knowing the fate of the six torpedomen. There had been no choice but to seal them off from the rest of the sub when water started filling the battery room.

Things did not seem so bad. Only half the air aboard the S-4 had been used in trying to blow the ballast. There was hope they might be able to raise the stern half of the sub themselves. In his book Ellsberg said the crew of the S-51, sunk in even deeper water off Delaware six years earlier had been able to do the very same thing.

Suddenly a stream of water burst over the live contacts of the starboard switchboard in the control room. Wild sparks darted from the switches. Water from a sheet metal ventilation duct designed to carry exhaust gases out of the battery storage room was shorting the circuits.

The order was given to close the forward ventilation valve. The valve was lever-operated and designed for quick closing. Quickly someone rushed forward to flick it shut. But the valve would not close.

The men in the control room never knew what killed them. When the water rushed into the battery room, the duct shielding the ventilation valve collapsed. As the water rose beyond the control room bulkhead, a green baize curtain from the captain's quarters floated up and jammed in the valve head. No effort from the other side of the bulkhead could close the valve with the curtain stuck in it.

With the water rising inside, the 34 men in the stern of the S-4 retreated to the refuge of the engine room. Here the men had no access to the banks of stored air. Here there was utter darkness and cold. The tiny, rank engine room became their home. Long before they could have expected help to come they suffocated.

At the other end of the sub, Lt. Fitch and his torpedomen were in better condition. They had enough air for three days. Blankets and bedding from forward bunks helped shield them from the chill of the 34° sea.

After grappling for four hours in the darkness and rising fury of the storm, Gracie found the hull of the S-4. The Paulding, meanwhile, a gash in her hull and in danger of sinking herself, sought the safety of the harbor. Her wireless sent messages for help. Navy bases in Boston, New London and New York sprang into

action. From New York, a barge was dispatched with the pontoons and the crane used to lift the S-51. It would take three days in heavy headwinds to get to Provincetown.

From Portsmouth came the USS Bushnell, mother ship of the S-series subs. The crew of the rescue vessel USS Falcon, on liberty in New London, was hastily assembled and sent to Wood End early the next morning.

All through the night Gracie and his men rode the line connecting the S-4 with the rest of the world. But at 3 a.m. their grappling iron shook free from the sub.

By now the gale was in full force. Eight to 10-foot seas were sweeping in from Massachusetts Bay. Undaunted, Gracie began searching anew for the sub. He would not find it again until late the next morning.

The Falcon was standing by with divers ready to go when the sub was found again.

At 1:38 p.m., 22 hours after the wounded S-4 had hit the mud off Wood End, Chief Gunner's Mate Tom Eadie, who was later to win the Congressional Medal of Honor for a heroic rescue of several others divers during the salvage efforts, went over the Falcon's side.

The Falcon was moored directly over the S-4, held there by fore-and-aft anchors and a hauser running perpendicular to her attached to two Navy minesweepers moored off her sides.

Eadie, clad in his steel-helmeted, deep-sea divers gear, landed on the deck of the S-4. Besides his 60-pound helmet and an 80-pound weight-belt, Eadie moved about in 30-pound lead shoes. The water was cloudy. The light was bad. A vicious crosscurrent swept the deck.

His heavy shoes sharply clanked on the steel plates of the S-4 as he walked the deck. From the bow he thought he could hear noises. He worked his way forward, signaling at each compartment. Finally he rapped on the torpedo room. Six sharp raps returned.

He reported the signal over the telephone in his helmet. He left the trapped men, giving them a last rap for encouragement.

Above, the storm continued to rise. It was clear by now that the storm was going to be a major gale. There was little time left before darkness and the ocean's fury made further rescue work impossible. A decision had to be made.

Should the next diver attach an air line to the external ballast fitting or to the emergency air hole of the torpedo room? The choice was between trying to raise the sub or trying to save the six men known to be alive.

The choice was clear. If anything was going to save the 34 men in the after

section who might still be alive but unconscious, it was raising the ship. There was always hope that a second air line could be attached to the torpedo room later.

The decision was in the hands of Rear Adm. Frank H. Brumby, who was in charge of the rescue mission.

At 3 p.m. Chief Boatswain's Mate Bill Carr went over the Falcon's side carrying the air line, the last hope for the six men left alive on the S-4. With the Falcon pitching and rolling in heavy seas, it was nearly impossible for Carr to make the connection. It took him 90 minutes in the icy water.

The Falcon moved aside to avoid being struck by the S-4 when she rose. All compressors were brought into action. For an hour they rammied air down the hose into the ballast tanks of the sub. But when air began to bubble up from the bottom, they knew the ballast tanks were ruptured. There was now no hope for anyone except the six men in the torpedo room.

The Falcon was quickly brought over the S-4 again. The best diver aboard, Chief Torpedoman Fred Michels, was quickly lowered over the side with another air line. He carried a strong lamp for working in the dark.

Ellsberg said that such a dive at night in a raging sea had never been tried before. Michels missed his mark while sliding down the line to the sub. He landed waist-deep in mud. It took 13 men pulling on his lifelines to free him. A second attempt landed him on the midsection of the crippled sub where he soon became tangled in wreckage from the collision.

Sprawled face-down on the deck of the sub, air hose and telephone malfunctioning, it took him an hour to get a message to the surface.

The weather now was even worse. But Eadie, in a characteristic act of heroism, went over the side to help his fellow diver. Through luck or divine intervention Eadie landed safely on the sub. Michels was brought to the surface unconscious.

With rescue efforts now made impossible by the storm, there was nothing that could be done for the trapped men except pass messages through a telegraph transmitter attached to the torpedo room hull.

The messages broke the world's heart. But more than anyone else, the people of Provincetown were plunged into a frenzy of despair, frustration and anger.

For people who had long been associated with the sea and all the calamities it could bring, the plight of the six torpedomen, especially just before Christmas, struck closer to home than the mud off Wood End.

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This is the second of a two-part series.

On the night of Dec. 19, two days after the S-4 was rammed by a destroyer off Wood End and sunk in 110 feet of water, the USS Falcon, a Navy diving rescue vessel, left her mooring above the sunken sub and steamed off toward Boston.

Aboard the Falcon was Chief Torpedoman Fred Michaels, a diver who had been pulled unconscious off the S-4 earlier in the day by a fellow diver, Chief Gunner's Mate Tom Eadie, who later won the Congressional Medal of Honor for the rescue.

Michaels was in dire need of medical attention. Because a major gale was blowing and no further rescue efforts could be made until morning, the Falcon was dispatched to Boston to save Michael's life.

Meanwhile, the six trapped torpedomen in the S-4 were reporting "bad air." Chances of their rescue were diminishing every minute.

When the people of Provincetown saw the lights of the Falcon disappear to the northwest, they wondered why the Navy was pulling out with at least six men known to be alive inside the sub. Some interpreted the withdrawal of the Falcon as an act of cowardice. Rage and despair among townspeople began to mount to match the gale outside.

These feelings were honed by the presence of newsmen from all over the country. The entire nation waited breathlessly along with townspeople for word on the fate of the trapped men.

The presence of strangers everywhere made it difficult for the town to rest and impossible to ignore what was happening offshore. Not all the strangers were newsmen. Some were the friends and family of the lost crewmen. Women wept openly for the lost and trapped men and their families. They knew all too well the grief of losing men at sea.

At Wood End families of the crewmen kept all-night vigils. A fire, the symbol of eternal hope, was kept burning on the beach during the gale that raged for three days after the S-4 went down.

But nothing contributed more to the anxiety of those sitting helplessly on shore than the messages coming from the six men still alive in the forward torpedo room.

These messages were sent by a device called an oscillator that had been attached to the sub by a diver Dec. 18, the day after the sub sank.

From the start the trapped men asked their would-be rescuers to hurry, that the air inside the torpedo room was turning bad. They also told the Falcon and Bushnell that water was slowly leaking into their compartment.

The trapped sailors were assured that