

- July 10, 1969 -

Dec-14, 1967

Memorial Service Sunday For S-4

Sunday will be the 40th anniversary of one of the worst disasters in Cape Cod waters, and one of the worst in U.S. naval history, the sinking of the submarine S-4 off Wood End with the loss of all hands.

Prayers for the 40 who lost their lives in the disaster will be said Sunday morning at the Church St. Mary of the Harbor, Episcopal, in whose churchyard a cross commemorating the tragedy was placed recently.

The Rev. Ernest Vanderburgh, vicar of the church, will say prayers for the men who lost their lives in the collision of the Navy submarine and the Coast Guard cutter Paulding at approximately 3:37 p.m. December 17, 1927.

A brief history of the disaster states that the S-4 had just left Provincetown Harbor for diving tests and was coming to the surface when the cutter, presumably chasing a rum runner, "went over the submarine."

Three months later to the day, March 17, 1928, within eight or nine minutes of the anniversary, the submarine was raised by six huge pontoons. Salvage efforts had been attempted during the previous three months, but were halted by bad weather.

Newsman's Story Of Sub Disaster

by JACK JOHNSON

The submarine S-4 was sunk with a loss of more than 40 men just outside Provincetown harbor in December, 1927—she came up under the bow of the Coast Guard patrol boat Paulding, which was returning from rum patrol in the prohibition era, and instantly was rammed to the bottom.

It was at a time when I was about to give up a whim to become a fiction writer and about to decide to leave Provincetown and return to New York City to get rehired in newspaper work when the call came from City Editor Edward Dunn of the old Boston Post ("The Breakfast Table Paper of New England") to hire a fisherman, get aboard the Paulding in Provincetown harbor and get the story.

Tony Marshall's poolroom, next to Doc Hiebert's, was the favorite place of relaxation for the fishermen, so I hastened there and had Mr. Marshall point out a capable boat handler. He selected dory fisherman Manuel Zora. (Later the famed Captain Manny Zora. Ed.)

A Black Night

It was a black night, with a boisterous gale whipping up the harbor. As we trudged down Railroad Wharf, Manuel Zora grumbled at the risk he was taking with his boat. I was warned that when we came alongside the Paulding I must jump to the gangway, he wasn't going to take the chance of having his boat smashed and sunk.

I'd been told there was a great gash in the ship's bow, she might be beached at any time. She was still at anchor well inside Long Point when we hove to and I yelled up to the officer on deck I was a newsman and sought permission to come aboard. What his response was I cannot recall. It may have been simply "Shove off!"

Manny Zora's grumbling was getting stronger and he was about to head back to the wharf when I begged, or implored, with all the persuasiveness I could summon, for him to circle his boat over the bouncing waves for just a few minutes. My hunch played true, for in less than 5 minutes we heard the welcome shout, "Come alongside".

I made the jump to the gangway

easily — generous Manny brought his power dory closer than I expected. The deck officer led me to Captain Bayliss in the pilot house. I recall distinctly his very grave expression — understandable, considering the weight of the tragedy on his mind.

The Skipper

My first approach was to gain his confidence by stressing the importance of accuracy or reliability in reporting to the world his account of what happened — the first eye-witness version of the disaster — and by earnestly assuring him I would conscientiously report his words correctly.

Captain Bayliss answered questions as long as I could think them up, quietly and under noticeable strain. Throughout, there was no indication the interview was to be limited.

When I climbed the ladder back onto Railroad Wharf, Mark McIntyre, bouncy reporter for the Boston Daily Record — a former Navy man — was using the headlights of his car to talk with the Paulding by blinker code. He was one of the first, if not the first, of the Boston reporters to arrive at the Cape's tip.

Provincetown is a generous town — again I experienced this when I was permitted to take over the nearest phone at the end of the wharf, to give to the Boston Post the first on-the-scene report of the submarine S-4 disaster.

A Big "Beat"

The city editor who assigned me to the story — the biggest story I ever covered in a long coast-to-coast newspaper career — wrote this letter acknowledging how I performed on that gale-swept, tragic night:

"To Whom It May Concern:

This is to state that Jack Johnson, formerly of Provincetown, Mass., was the first reporter to interview the Commander of the U.S. ship that sank the submarine S 4 in Provincetown's outer harbor.

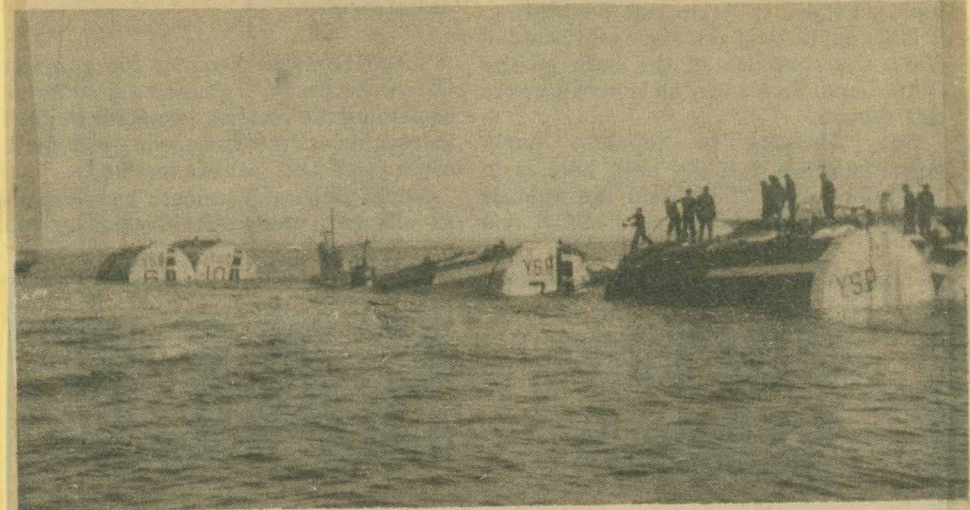
At the time I was the City Editor of the Boston Post. We received news of the sinking of the S 4 very soon after the accident. I immediately called Mr. Johnson who was the Post's correspondent in Provincetown and directed him to obtain a boat and try to get an interview with the skipper of the ship that sank the S 4. What I wanted chiefly was the story of how the accident happened and what was being done to aid the crew of the S 4.

Mr. Johnson got a boat and secured the interview, which was the first and only interview that night obtained from the Commander of the ship that sank the S 4.

Mr. Johnson sent the interview to the Post that night and enabled the Post to score a big beat which the news services sent throughout the country.

Sincerely,
Edward J. Dunn"

S-4 sunk 50 years ago



S-4 conning tower breaks surface [center], raised by Navy pontoons

By Jim Gilbert

For a week the Submarine S-4 had been working out of Provincetown pacing itself off Wood End in a mile-long deep-water trial course.

The Navy required trials for all subs after major repairs and refitting. Aboard the S-4 was her regular crew of 37 commanded by her young captain of two years, Lt. Cmdr. R.K. Jones of Baltimore, Md. Also aboard were two observers from the Navy Trial Board in Washington.

The year was 1927, a week before Christmas, exactly 50 years ago Dec. 17. It was to be a Christmas Provincetown never forgot. Forty men were trapped alive when the S-4 collided with a destroyer and died that week in the most bitterly tragic marine disaster to strike Provincetown.

The sinking of the S-4 touched a nerve deep in the soul of Provincetown that still tingles today when people remember the S-4 and the agonizing days that followed while trapped sailors waited helplessly and hopelessly for rescue.

At noon Dec. 17, the S-4 left her tender inside Long Point and began steaming under diesel power toward Wood End. The wind was already blowing a steady 25 knots from the northwest. The exposed ocean outside the shelter of Provincetown Harbor was flecked with whitecaps.

Since prohibition was still in effect and it was the week before Christmas, rumrunning was at its seasonal peak. The waters of Cape Cod Bay, in particular off Provincetown, were notorious for harboring rumrunners. To combat the rumrunning, the Navy had turned over a fleet of 25 destroyers to the Coast Guard, including the speedy USS Paulding.

The Paulding, steaming at 18 knots, was on routine patrol that day. She left Boston Harbor at 9 a.m. and by noon had

completed her search of Boston Harbor and was headed for Provincetown through the rising storm.

The submarine's deep-water trial course was about a half-mile off the Wood End Lifesaving Station. The course was marked by two white buoys a mile apart.

About 1 p.m. the S-4 shut down her diesels and amid a clamor of horns and whistles, slipped into quiet electric underwater power. Twenty feet below the surface the S-4 plied the water between the two marks. With only her periscope above water the sub and her men were oblivious to the four-to-six-foot waves on the surface.

Just after 2:45 p.m. the Paulding finished her open water patrol and headed for a sweep of Provincetown Harbor and Cape Cod Bay. At 3:33 p.m. the quartermaster aboard the Paulding raised his glasses to read the flags flying from the Wood End Station.

In the Wood End Coast Guard Station, Stationmaster Emanuel Gracie was making his rounds. Arriving at the lookout tower, Gracie asked Frank Simonds, who was on duty at the time, what was happening.

Cmdr. Edward Ellsberg, a Navy diver who was part of the diving team that tried to rescue the trapped men, who later wrote an account of the tragedy called "Man under the Sea," reported that Simonds replied, "Not much, sir."

"Hard astern! Full right rudder!" he commanded. But it was too little, too late.

At the Wood End Station those still in the lookout tower saw the bow of the Paulding heave and rise out of the water. For a moment the stern of the S-4 was clearly visible above the waves. Quickly the sub slid below the surface.

The Paulding was stopped dead in its tracks by the collision. A lifeboat was lowered and a buoy dropped to mark the