

everything possible was being done. On Dec. 18 they were told that an air line was being hooked up. It never was.

In trying to connect it the next day diver Michaels nearly lost his life.

It was pitch dark below. Mud leaked into the sub with the seawater. By the next day it was 18-inches deep. The air was so bad the men donned gas masks to give them extra hours of life. They retired to their bunks to preserve the precious little oxygen left.

The air was "bad" in submarine parlance because as the men exhaled, their flooded compartment began to accumulate dangerous amounts of carbon dioxide, which is lethal.

On Dec. 18 the men tapped a message that their oxygen bottle had run out. "Can you send a couple?" they asked. There was no way it could be done. To keep the men in the sub occupied, the operators kept up an intermittent conversation, asking the men to concentrate harder on their signals.

Later that day the men were told: "Two cranes are on their way."

"From where?"

"From New York."

The operators asked if the air would hold out until evening. The men responded: "It will last until six tonight."

The wind was still blowing 35 to 40 knots that afternoon. "Is there any hope?" the men asked.

"There is hope. Everything possible will be done."

To the people of Provincetown and to the rest of the world, rescue operations seemed agonizingly slow. In the harbor stood a large crane, sent unsolicited by a salvage firm in Boston the day after the sub went down. It stood idle while a Navy crane bucked stiff seas and strong headwinds on its way north from New York City.

Dramatic headlines ran in newspapers across the country denouncing the Navy for "wantonly" letting the crew of the S-4 die. The parents of Cmdr. Roy K. Jones, captain of the S-4, claimed the Navy "crucified" their son and his crew.

They accused the Navy of "indifference" and "inhumanity" in their handling of the situation. Congressmen called for full investigations.

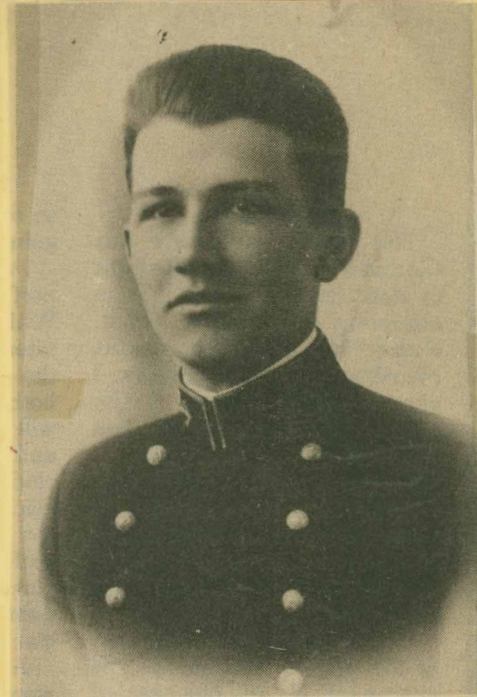
But what townspeople could not see were the dramatic and heroic efforts being made by the Navy. Besides Eadie, two other divers were decorated for heroism, winning Navy Crosses for their work in trying to save the submariners.

Cmdr. Edward Ellsberg, a Navy diver who later recounted the S-4 tragedy in a book on Navy divers called "Men under the Sea," actually volunteered for the mission. He left civilian life temporarily to lend a hand. He was at the time the most knowledgeable person in the country on submarine rescues, having been in charge of the S-51 rescue mission two years earlier.

Ellsberg was quickly sworn in as a reserve officer and shuttled by train from New York to Boston, where a destroyer lay at ready to take him to Wood End.

Arriving at Provincetown, no Navy boats were able to put him aboard the Falcon because of the raging storm.

But Ellsberg wanted to get aboard. He



Cmdr. Roy K. Jones, captain of S-4

asked the Coast Guard to send him the 35-foot lifeboat used earlier to grapple for the sunken sub. Since Stationmaster Emmanuel Gracie was in bed recovering from his trials of the day before, a younger, unidentified, lifesaver was persuaded to take Ellsberg out.

After reaching the Falcon, the lifeboat circled three times looking for some way to get Ellsberg aboard. One side of the ship was as bad as the other.

Seeing no other alternative, Ellsberg ordered the lifeboat as close as possible. Each passing wave was breaking over the exposed decks of the Falcon.

If the lifeboat came too close to the Falcon, it would have been smashed to bits. So fierce was the sea that nobody aboard the Falcon was even aware of the lifeboat's presence.

Ellsberg waited for the right moment, then leapt from the 35-footer onto the Falcon, landing spread-eagled across the ice-covered deck.

Meanwhile, the messages from the sub were getting weaker and weaker. By the time Ellsberg got aboard the Falcon, more than half of their air supply was gone.

Three times in the next two days divers got stuck in the mud around the sub. Each time, heroism and luck saved them.

The mud was a fine silt. In an exploratory dive, Ellsberg himself was totally engulfed in the mud after slipping off the

sub. A strong current swept the area. Any movement by the divers raised a mud fog that virtually blinded them.

The divers were connected to the surface by two lines, a lifeline and an air hose. If either line was too slack, it fouled the wreckage. If not slack enough, the rocking Falcon pulled the divers off the sub's deck.

In Provincetown, however, frustration was reaching the boiling point. To fishermen the weather seemed calm enough by Dec. 20 to begin serious rescue operations.

They demanded a meeting with the Navy to find out what was being done. The Navy sent some officers to explain the rescue operation. After they finished the fishermen got up to leave.

"Where are you going?" a Navy officer asked. They replied that it was time to go fishing. The weather may have been too rough for the Navy, but it wasn't too bad for the fishermen of Provincetown.

Francis "Flyer" Santos was a boy of 13 when the S-4 went down. He said he didn't remember the town being as angry as Mary Heaton Vorse reported in her chronicle of Provincetown, "Time and the Town." But he did remember that the fishermen were confident they could do what the Navy could not. They wanted to mass their boats, hook onto the sub and drag it to shallow water.

He said, however, that such talk was "foolishness." The sub, sunk in 10 to 20 feet of mud, could not have been freed.

"What could they have attached their lines to?" he asked. Years later, when a "V"-series sub steamed into Provincetown, Flyer was one of the first to run down to the pier and check it over.

He said the first thing he looked for were the large eye bolts attached to the bow and stern that he knew he would find. Seeing them, he knew future sub crews might be spared the agony of the men on the S-4.

But, 50 years after the tragedy, when people talk about the S-4, they still wonder whether the Navy did everything it could or whether the fishermen could have raised it themselves had they been allowed to try.

In his report to the Navy Cmdr. Ellsberg contended that despite the valve that was fouled by the captain's curtain, trapping and killing the 34 men forward and all the other mishaps, some if not all the men might have been saved if it were not for the three-day gale.

Three months after it nosed into the soft mud off Wood End the S-4 was raised. Some of the bodies had been removed by

divers. But the bodies of the men in the forward torpedo room were untouched until the sub reached drydock in Boston. There a special team went below to investigate.

The sub was refloated using pontoons sunk to the bottom. Divers dug deep tunnels under the sub to run heavy one-and-one-half inch chains under it.

The water in the pontoons was displaced with compressed air. With a great surge



Wood End Stationmaster Emmanuel Gracie on duty

the sub burst into the calm March sunshine.

Investigators waded through several feet of mud inside the sub. Bodies, thrown from their bunks during the sub's ascent, were strewn everywhere. All were wearing masks. One sailor was naked.

Several partially-used bottles of oxygen were discovered. Presumably the bottles could not be found in the dark by the trapped sailors. No messages for loved ones were found.

The men trapped in the torpedo room, like the rest of the crew, died from carbon dioxide poisoning. When the air in the sub became contaminated, the men simply lapsed into a coma and died.

Admiral Bumbry took complete responsibility for the rescue effort during the investigation. Everyone involved in the rescue was called to testify.

The medical officer of the rescue mission, Lt. O.J. Flotte, testified that he made air tests Dec. 21 when oxygen lines were finally connected to the sub. The air was seven percent carbon dioxide. Three percent is considered highly dangerous, Lt. Flotte testified, seven percent was assuredly fatal.

Flotte also said it was impossible to connect the air to the sub any earlier because of the storm. He said sending divers down in those conditions was "suicide." If an air line had been connected, the six men might have survived another 72 hours, he said, depending on their food, activity and condition. Exposure and lack of nourishment hastened the end.

The tragedy catalyzed Congress into improving the Navy's submarine rescue program. At the time the S-4 sank there were only 10 pontoons and one crane for the entire Eastern Seaboard.

The S-4 was refitted and turned into a

floating laboratory for developing safety devices.

The tragedy spurred other programs. The Momsen "lung," a device that allowed trapped submariners to rise safely to the surface, was developed because of the S-4.

A memorial was raised to lost men at St. Mary of the Harbor Church in the East End of town. Every year a ceremony is held and prayers are read to the lost men of the S-4. For years each Dec. 17 the Navy flew over Wood End and dropped roses in the ocean that had taken the lives of the 40 sailors.

Despite the rancor raised against the Navy by press reports of its inability to save the crew of the S-4, the Navy inquiry ruled the sinking a "tragic accident."

The final message from the sub said it all.

When all hope for rescuing the men was lost, Adm. Bumbry had the radio operator send a message to the men trapped in the sub:

"Lt. Fitch. Your wife and mother constantly praying for you."

All through the last night the message was sent. Finally, around dawn, about 70 hours after the sub was rammed, came the barely audible taps:

"We understand."