

Navy Submarine S-4 Sunk Off Provincetown 20 Years Ago; Spurred Study of Safety Aids

Twenty years ago this coming Wednesday, six men were imprisoned in the disabled submarine S-4 on the bottom of the sea outside Provincetown Harbor, waiting for the rescuers who never reached them.

They were united in death with the 36 other officers and crew members who lost their lives in this marine tragedy that shocked the nation.

Men of the Navy are saddened at this time each year as they recall Dec. 17, 1927, when the submarine was rammed and went down with all hands. The tragedy always has assumed double significance in Naval annals; first, because of the heavy death toll, and secondly, because it spurred development of numerous underwater safety factors to prevent recurrence of such a tragic event.

Lieutenant-Commander Roy Keller Jones was in charge of the S-4 when she was sunk. Commissioned officers on the submarine were Lieutenant Joseph A. McGinley, Lieutenant Donald Weller and Lieutenant Graham Newell Fitch. Also aboard were Lieutenant-Commander William Calloway of the Naval Inspection Bureau at Washington and Charles Ford, a civilian draftsman. There were 34 members in the crew.

Sunk in Afternoon

It was 3:37 p. m. when the periscope of the S-4 suddenly appeared in front of the Coast Guard destroyer Paulding.

"The visibility was good and the weather was good," an official statement said. "The first intimation of the presence of a submarine was when her periscope emerged from the water directly in front of the destroyer—too close to avoid. Then the helm of the Paulding was shifted and the order for full speed given.

"The Paulding struck the submarine on the conning tower, ripping a long hole in the underwater body of the sub, which rolled over and sank within a few minutes. No one on board the Paulding saw anyone on the sub at any time before or after the collision."

The Paulding lowered a lifeboat which searched for any survivors from the submarine, but found none. The Paulding then dropped a buoy to mark the spot where the sub sank. The Paulding then was filling with water, due to collision damage, but managed to get into Provincetown Harbor. She was beached in the harbor and later was repaired and floated.

During Test Run

When the submarine was sent to the bottom, she was being tested. That same afternoon, the Paulding, commanded by Lieutenant-Commander John S. Baylies, started out of Boston on rum patrol duty. Before turning out to sea, Commander Baylies decided he would swing into Provincetown Harbor.

While the Paulding was passing Long Point, the S-4, it is believed, emerged from a dive and was running with only her periscopes above the surface, her hull being submerged. Lookouts on the Paulding sighted the periscopes, but thought they were stakes marking fishing gear. A heavy sea was running.

Naval experts believe that the S-4 had her periscopes trained on shore marks since she was on a test run and would have been recording the time for her runs. Under conditions existing at the time, experts said, the S-4 could have had the Paulding in sight for six minutes.

At any rate, the Paulding struck the underwater vessel, which rolled partly over, swung clear of the destroyer and sank. A portion of the destroyer's bow below the waterline was broken off and remained in the hole in the sub's hull.

Sent Immediate Alarm

An immediate alarm was sent out by radio. From Wood End Station, a Coast Guard saw the collision and made a notation of her position. This aided in locating the wreck. A salvaging fleet was summoned and divers were rushed to the scene.

News that men were alive in the torpedo chamber was brought by "Tom" Eadie, one of the first divers to descend to the sunken wreck. By means of code messages rapped with hammers inside and outside the hull of steel, it was learned that the persons in the chamber were Lieutenant Fitch and five enlisted men.

Desperate efforts were made to attach air lines and to get air and food to the trapped men. There was no success and the signals finally ceased. The men, inside the hull were officially recorded dead after five days.

Diver working to effect the rescue of the men suffered from the "bends." They worked at a depth of 102 feet. The elements also interfered. Gales and heavy seas delayed rescue work; a single line attached to the sunken sub to

mark its location parted and it was many hours before the vessel was located again. Twice, diver Eadie aided fellow divers who were trapped while working on the sub.

Work Continued

Once it was determined that there was no one alive aboard the submarine, the Navy Department decided to abandon salvage work until the following Spring. Public opinion demanded a continuance of the salvage efforts and the work was resumed. Bodies were removed during the Winter from all compartments save the torpedo chamber.

Compressed air was forced into the hull of the sub after all holes had been blocked. Pontoons were fastened to the vessel by chains and three months after the sinking, the S-4 moved up to the surface. She was towed to the Charlestown Navy Yard.

On Dec. 16, 1937, a single timber cross, erected to the memory of the S-4 dead, was dedicated in the churchyard of the Protestant Episcopal Church of St. Mary of the Harbor in Provincetown. Since that time, it has become traditional to hold services annually on the anniversary of the tragedy.



The raising of a sunken submarine

By John R. Smith - 1927



*Raising Sunken Submarine
w/ Greg del drowned*

the S4 between pontoons