

U.S. SUBMARINE WARFARE IN WORLD WAR I

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When the US entered the war in 1917 our allies had been in the fight for nearly three years. They had for those three years been climbing the learning curve of submarine and anti submarine warfare. We were watching, learning some and not much else. For these three years, our submarine design had gone from the E and F Class which had been started in 1909 and were only now one to two years old through the O and R classes which were authorized and being laid on the ways.

This great advance in submarine technology would not be able to be translated into operational first line submarines able to go to war for the US until late 1918 at the soonest and most likely it would be into the 1920/21 time frame. Thus, the US would have to go to war with what was available. That consisted of the A and B classes now at Manila Bay, the three D-Class which were not ocean going boats, the F-Class and the E-Class which were small but capable of making the crossing (the F-4, of course was not available, having been lost in 1915 off Honolulu), three H-Class were operating off the west coast with the F boats, the K-class whose 8 boats were split between east and west coasts, the L-Class which were just now coming on line and the N-class which were also just being commissioned. The boats in which there were the most experienced crews were the K boats followed by the E and F boats on the west coast so this set was chosen to get up to speed and transit to the advanced base at Punta Delgada, Azores and Queenstown, Ireland to take their place alongside the British boats.

The summer of 1917 was spent in fixing the boats and in training for what we could foresee would be an antisubmarine war. By November we had a flotilla ready to go to the Azores to protect shipping around the islands from the actions of German raiders and submarines. The K-1, 2, 5, 6, and E-1, constituting SubDiv Four assembled at Newport, Rhode Island for the haul across the Atlantic. All except the E-1 were to make the trip, with that boat following the next month. The four K boats, plus the tender Bushnell sailed from Newport to Provincetown then to Halifax. After fueling and replenishing supplies they set off for Punta Delgada. The crossing was horrible. The storm they hit the second day out scattered the group and it was not until after the 27th that they all assembled again in the Azores.

Instead of snuggling up alongside the tender and getting fuel, supplies, showers and sleep, they found themselves looking at the stern of the Bushnell as she steamed back to the states to convoy another flotilla over to the war zone. The boat crews tried to make them selves at home alongside a breakwater, living in a series of arches that were closed off only on the seaward side. Of course, the sailors, being our forerunners, set tradition by making themselves at home by acquiring as much as they could to close up the shelters and making the best of a poor situation. On the first of November as the K-2 left for her first patrol, the seas rose outside the breakwater and soon the troops were taking green water over the arches and into their caves. It was not nice.

The next trip starting on the 4th of November consisted of the little E-1 and seven L-Class (L-1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11) These vessels formed the Fifth Division. Their trip was even worse than the first trip. The

group was split up in a storm two days out. It was so bad that L-9 barely made Boston and many of the others made for Bermuda prior to crossing to Punta Delgada. When they arrived in the Azores they found the other boats barely able to keep things together but making regular patrols in the area of the island and out to 200 miles. This was a big area for the five small boats but they tried to keep up a good duty cycle. They had no support, no spares, and no supplies. The commanding officers give great credit to the spirit of the crews as they battled heavy seas and no enemy.

The Fifth Division after spending a few days in the Azores got underway for Queenstown. As in their transit across the Atlantic, the division slammed head on into a storm. It took eight days to cover the transit through the storm. The L-10 was separated from the remainder of the division and held forth against the storm finally making Queenstown. It was on this transit that L-10 lost a man overboard. GM1 R.A. Leese became the first US submarine casualty in a war zone. Lieutenant E. W. F. Childs of the L-2 became the second when he went down with the HMS H-5 also operating out of Bantry Bay.

While the Fourth Division and Fifth Division were setting up operations around the Azores and in Bantry Bay, Ireland, the F-boats were training off the west coast in preparation for transiting around to the east coast. On 17 December 1917 while performing an engineering trial the F-3 accidentally rammed the F-1 which flooded quickly and sank taking 19 shipmates with it. The war was turning costly.

In Bantry Bay the US sailors were practicing against their British counterparts. Each day, a British observer would take his place on an American boat and they would go out into the bay and make practice torpedo runs on surface ships and other submarines. Captain Naismith of the Royal Navy who had done so much with his British boat in the Sea of Marmara and in the Baltic took the training in hand. Through February and into the early part of March, the US boats practiced under the eye of the Royal Navy. Then on the 6th of March the first L-boats now with AL designation to differentiate them from the British L boats started to make their regular patrols in the area south of Ireland and the western approaches. It was thus that by the end of the first year of our involvement in the first World War, (April 1917 to April 1918) we had not yet engaged the enemy, but we were making our presence felt. The fact that submarines were doing ASW patrols kept the German warning of a 200 mile war zone of exclusion around the Azores, simply that, a warning, not a fact. The effort was not without cost. The US Submarine Force had lost 21 men and one submarine. These were America's first wartime submarine losses. The boats were small and bad compared to the creature comforts of the W.W.II fleet boats. No bunks, no head, transits across the ocean with no bridge. Bad engines, bad batteries, bad water and no support. No Hawaiian Hilton and relief crews to greet them on their return. When we bitch about long runs on Sturgeons or long patrols on boomers we should thank those who went before and set our tradition of getting the job done regardless of the conditions.

Spring 1918, the second year.

By January of 1918, we had deployed the submarines from Hawaii were sent to Key West to take up patrolling the Gulf of Mexico. This was the Third Division, consisting of the K-3, K-4, K-7 and K-8. The Sixth Division of the L-5, L-6, L-7 and L-8 were readying for deployment to the Azores. The Fifth Division was at Bantry Bay in Ireland . The Fourth Division was at Punta Delgada in the Azores keeping watch on the ships convoying north. N boats and the G-2 were operating out of Block Island covering the approaches to Long Island Sound. O-4, O-6 and E-2 patrolled from Cold Spring Inlet and from Norfolk These were all ASW patrols looking for German submarines. The most danger they faced, however, by the boats along the east coast of the US was from the ships in convoy and escorts than from the few U-Boats which made the trip to the western Atlantic.

The O-6 patrolling out of Cold Spring Inlet was trailing a convoy from about two miles astern.

They were to follow the convoy and be on the lookout for U-boats lurking about and making a stern approach. The ship's log then notes:

"At 3.05 p.m. the last ship fired at us, the shell landing close alongside one to two feet to port and exploding. This ship had a three flag hoist up, which we could not make out, but took for recognition signal. We had hoisted the answering pennant and made reply. Send men on deck below to get ready to submerge, and stopped engines. I stayed on the bridge and began waving a flag. The next shell landed just forward of the bow and ricocheted over the bridge. Went below and submerged. The next shell hit the conning tower and about the same time one hit the steering stand. The next one hit the engine intake pipe. All started to leak. Secured lower conning tower hatch and flapper valves of others. Voice pipe from conning tower leaked badly. Valve would not close. Plugged voice pipe with potato masher and kept some of the water out. Headed away from firing ship until starboard motor controller shorted and blew circuit breaker, wireless started to spark and short circuit, when I blew tanks and sent men on deck with flags. Starting the engines we started from the firing ship. One destroyer gave chase. After getting tanks dry and reaching a position beyond the range of firing ship, I stopped engines and sending everyone on deck with life preservers and all available flags attempted to signal destroyer. She then swung broadside to and fired several broadsides, all falling short. Began signaling with whistle. The destroyer finally came within hail. and turned out to be the USS Paul Jones (DD-10)"

The O-6 wasn't the only boat shot at and hit. Luckily none were sunk. The L-1, now called the AL-1 so it would not conflict with the British numbering system, made contact with a German submarine in May of 1918 and fired two torpedoes. The US boat broached and was spotted by the German boat which was on the surface. The German boat twisted avoiding the torpedoes and ran off, firing her deck gun at the struggling AL-1. A few days later, the AL-11 fired two torpedoes at another U-boat a few miles away from the position of the AL-1's encounter. One broached and sank, the other detonated 200 yards short of the U-boat.

Lt Van de Carr of the AL-10 made an understandable error which was repeated in both wars, sometimes with unfortunate consequences. He was operating on the surface in his patrol area in March when at 1700, he spotted a vessel in the distance which he thought was a German submarine. As he got closer and was starting to set up an attack, he realized it was the topworks of a destroyer and it had spotted him. He dove to over a hundred feet but overshot and went deeper. The destroyer dropped depth charges. The first knocked out all the lights. The boat and the destroyer then played a cat and mouse game with the destroyer stopping, listening then charging over the boat dropping a depth charge. Some were very close by the 300 # charges.

Van de Carr decided to surface and announce his presence via the proper recognition signals. He got lucky. The destroyer was looking the other way when he surfaced and by the time they spotted him, the smoke bomb was up and recognized. The destroyer captain tried to make up by inviting Van de Carr to dine with him aboard. It must have been interesting for Van de Carr found out that it was his classmate from the Academy.

By far, the most peculiar engagement was the run in AL-2 had with the UB-65. On 10 July 1918 the AL-2 was just south of Fastnet spotted a surface submarine. After watching it for a while, it disappeared and the OOD and lookout wondered if it was indeed a sub or just a floating piece of wreckage. Just at dusk, a torpedo exploded some 50 yards from the boat's stern. The lookout reported seeing a periscope just on the other side of the geyser. The torpedo unseated the ventilation blowers and unclutched the engines.; What other damage the detonation caused was unknown but soon the crew smelled gas.

The captain ordered the rudder hard over and sounded the klaxon for dive. He hoped to come around full circle and ram the German sub. The crew had made no detailed examination of the boat to determine what damage the torpedo caused but stood to their positions as the captain commanded them to dive the ship. They missed ramming but were close enough to hear the enemy screws through the hull. The C-Tube operator reported the position of the submarine and they brought AL-2 around to give chase. Then, the C-Tube operator reported there were two subs out there. The one ahead was slowing. The other sub started to signal on its oscillator. The first boat went silent and the second signaled a couple more times. AL-2 turned toward the second boat and started to give chase underwater. The German, however, drew away with faster underwater speed and disappeared. AL-2 returned to the position of the loss of the first German and signaled on their oscillator with the same frequency and code the German boat had used.

German records recorded the UB-65 a loss in the area in the time frame of the incident. It is assumed the German boat suffered its demise in one of two ways.. Either it fired a torpedo and it went off prematurely and caused fatal damage to itself. Or, in the other option the other German boat had fired at the AL-2, missed and hit the first boat. Either way, the UB-65 was a loss in an engagement with AL-2. Records show that AL-2 was credited by the Admiralty with the destruction of the UB-65 and the US Navy awarded Lt. P.F. Foster with a medal for the action. Thus, for the record. the first US Submarine to be officially credited with the sinking of an enemy submarine was USS AL-2 under the command of Lt. P.F. Foster on 10 July 1918 just south of Fastnet Island. As Carroll Storrs Alden wrote, "the crew, though fully convinced that their plight was desperate, and expecting momentarily the order 'Abandon Ship', remained at their stations and instantly obeyed the order for 'Crash Dive'--this is all evidence of a finely organized ship, [and] of officers and men that measure up to our highest naval standards."

World War I was the first war the US Submarine Force took part in It did so with a determination and sense of sacrifice that set a tradition for the Force. The effort was small compared to the efforts during World War II and the following years of the cold war. The losses of WW II and the attendant successes overshadowed the effort in 1917 and 1918. In fact, the sacrifices made by our shipmates during this first submarine war have been largely forgotten by those who followed.