

Lost Submarines - July

USS S-28, lost 3 July 1944:



The keel of USS S-28 (SS-133), which would see action in World War II, was laid down in April of 1919, just months after the end of the first Great War. Commissioned on 13 December 1923, she spent most of her first sixteen years of her life taking part in various exercises. She was in the midst of being overhauled at Mare Island Naval Shipyard in California when the bombs fell on Pearl Harbor. After returning to sea, she spent a few months continuing the training activities that had occupied her time before the outbreak of war, but before long she and several other S-boats were sent north to Alaska to defend the Aleutians against a possible Japanese invasion.

Although the Japanese bombed Dutch Harbor just days after S-28 arrived in the area, the sub saw little action. She launched her first torpedo on 18 June; it missed, and the boat was subsequently attacked—although not damaged—by her intended target. She would not take another shot until her third war patrol, in October, but a ground in her fire-control circuits caused a torpedo to fire accidentally. The target escaped unharmed. The next three war patrols were even less inspiring—no enemy vessels at all were spotted.

S-28's seventh war patrol got off to a similarly unpromising start when, on 15 September 1943, her port main motor began smoking and sparking; it took crewmembers fourteen hours to fix. Four days later she launched a spread of torpedoes at an enemy ship; all missed and the vessel began dropping depth charges. Although S-28 was unharmed, it must have been a frustrating experience. But the situation was about to improve. Just hours later, the boat fired a spread of four torpedoes at what turned out to be a 1,400-ton gunboat. Within three minutes *Katsura Maru Number Two* was sinking by the bow.

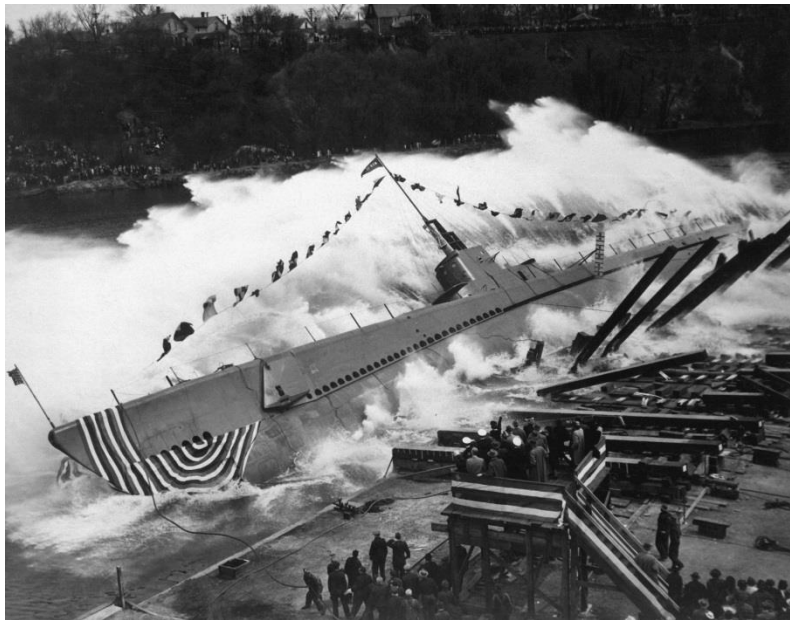
At the conclusion of the patrol, S-28 turned south and made her way to Pearl Harbor for overhaul. For more than six months after work was completed, she remained in the area for training. On 3 July 1944, she ventured into the waters off Oahu with the Coast Guard cutter RELIANCE to conduct antisubmarine

warfare exercises. The final exercise began at 1730, but soon after RELIANCE began to have trouble communicating with the sub; the last contact was made at 1820. Then there was silence.

RELIANCE called for assistance, but the search was in vain. An oil slick appeared in the area two days later, but the water was so deep that an investigation was impossible. The cause of her loss has never been determined.

S-28 received one battle star for her wartime service. Forty-nine men went to the bottom with her.

USS ROBALO, lost 26 July 1944:



USS ROBALO (SS-273) was built at Manitowoc Shipbuilding Company in Manitowoc, Wisconsin and commissioned on 28 September 1943. She was soon on her way to Pearl Harbor. Her first patrol, 57 days long, yielded only a single unsuccessful attack. Perhaps hoping for a better performance in subsequent outings, naval authorities gave command of the boat to a new officer, Lieutenant Commander Manning Kimmel.

Kimmel's first patrol, ROBALO's second, was certainly much more dramatic. Over the course of 51 days, the crew launched twenty torpedoes in four attacks. During one of these engagements, as the boat was trying to disrupt Japanese tanker traffic in the South China Sea, an enemy aircraft zeroed in on her, dropping bombs that damaged the conning tower and the periscopes and completely destroyed the radar. When the boat dove to escape the attack, water poured into the main induction. By the time the crew

managed to level off, they had descended to 350 feet. Kimmel, undaunted, continued the patrol. At its conclusion the boat put in at Fremantle, Australia, for repairs. There was some discussion of relieving Kimmel—several officers believed he was too aggressive—but he was ultimately permitted to take ROBALO out on her third patrol, which began on 22 June 1944.

The plan for the patrol was relatively straightforward. The boat would transit both the Makassar and Balabac Straits to make her way into the South China Sea, then remain on station from approximately 6 July until nightfall on 2 August. The Balabac Strait, which separates Palawan Island from Borneo, was known to be mined, but a number of subs, including ROBALO herself, had made it through successfully. Kimmel surely believed he could transit it without incident. On 2 July ROBALO transmitted a message stating that she had sighted an enemy battleship, along with aircraft and two destroyer escorts, in the waters east of Borneo. She was never heard from again. The Navy declared her presumed lost.

But on 2 August, the day on which ROBALO's patrol was supposed to end, an American prisoner-of-war being held at Puerto Princesa Prison Camp on Palawan Island picked up a note that had been dropped from the window of a cell in the area where he was working. He passed it along to a yeoman, also a prisoner, who in turn got it to the wife of a local guerilla leader, who himself passed it on to Admiral Ralph W. Christie, the commander of submarine operations in Perth and Fremantle. The note indicated that ROBALO was about two miles off the western coast of Palawan Island when, on the night of 26 July, she hit an enemy mine and sank. Some number of crewmen, perhaps as many as seven, managed to swim to shore, but they were soon captured by the Japanese. At the time the note was written, four survivors remained—Quartermaster First Class Floyd George Laughlin, Signalman Third Class Wallace Keet Martin, Electrician's Mate Second Class Mason Collie Poston, and Ensign Samuel Lombard Tucker.

Less than two weeks after the note was recovered, the ROBALO survivors were probably loaded onto one or more Japanese destroyers for transportation to another prison camp. Tragically, the two most likely ships, *Akakaze* and *Yunagi*, were sunk by USS HADDO (SS-255) and USS PICUDA (SS-382), respectively, in the final days of August. None of ROBALO's crew would survive to return home.

ROBALO's crew of eighty-one men were lost either with their boat or in the weeks after her sinking. The sub earned two battle stars for her wartime service.

USS GRUNION, lost 30 July 1942:



On 11 April 1942, USS GRUNION (SS-216) was commissioned at Electric Boat Company in Groton, CT. It would have been difficult to imagine on that day of new beginnings that the new sub had less than four months to live.

On 24 May, GRUNION set off for the Pacific, pausing before passing through the Panama Canal to rescue sixteen survivors of an American transport vessel, USAT JACK, which had been sunk by the German U-boat U-558; sadly, she was unable to find thirteen others who were reported to have made it off the ship alive. She dropped the men off at Coco Solo, a Navy Base in the Panama Canal Zone (where future senator John McCain would be born in 1936), and continued on to Pearl Harbor for training.

Although we tend to think of World War II subs prowling the warm Pacific, several boats headed north into much cooler waters. GRUNION was among them—her first war patrol was to take place among the Aleutian Islands off the coast of Alaska. Although she was attacked by a Japanese destroyer off Kiska Island, the sub bounced back, sinking two patrol boats. But as July drew to a close, she reported heavy antisubmarine activity and her superiors, loath to lose their new boat, called her back to Dutch Harbor. But no response to the order came and searchers in the area turned up nothing. On 5 October, 69 years ago today, GRUNION was reported as overdue and presumed lost. Examinations of Japanese records after the war showed no antisubmarine attacks on American subs in her area at the time of her loss, leaving the cause of her demise a mystery for over sixty years.

GRUNION's commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Mannert Abele, was survived by three sons—Bruce, John, and Brad—all of whom became committed to the search for their father's final resting place. John, the founder of Boston Scientific, was able to contribute the funds that kept the effort alive. But it was largely fruitless until Yutaka Iwasaki, a Japanese sailor who had been aboard a troop transport, *Kano Maru*, at about the time GRUNION was thought to have gone down, came forward to talk about his experience on or about 31 July 1942. On that day, an American sub thought to be GRUNION fired four torpedoes at the transport, only one of which detonated, then came to the surface

to dispatch their victim with gunfire. But, Iwasaki claimed, *Kano Maru* returned fire and sent the sub to the bottom with a single direct hit to her conning tower from the ship's three-inch deck gun. (American investigators advanced another theory: GRUNION was sunk, indirectly, by one of her own torpedoes. Three of the four fish GRUNION launched, these investigators claim, bounced off the enemy ship without doing any damage. The fourth circled back and plowed into the sub's periscopes. Although it did not explode, the combination of the hit and a jammed rear dive plane sent GRUNION spiraling into the depths.)

Armed with Iwasaki's information, Abele's sons redoubled their search efforts. In August of 2006, Bruce received sonar images from *Aquila*, the vessel conducting the operation, depicting what the *Boston Globe* described as "a smooth, oblong object with features that could be a conning tower and periscope mast." On 3 October 2008, the U.S. Navy confirmed what the Abele brothers had come to believe: GRUNION had been found. She had imploded about one thousand feet beneath the surface, then hit the bottom hard enough to shear off fifty feet of the bow. The remains of the boat slid down the side of an extinct underwater volcano, finally coming to rest on one of the mountain's outcroppings. Today, the sub and her crew of sixty, recipients of one battle star for their brief wartime service, lie undisturbed in 3,300 feet of frigid Bering Sea water off the coast of the Aleutians.