

THE SNEAK ATTACK ON PUGET SOUND

This narrative was given to me by Norman Hosking, who boarded Sea Devil, just after they finished this operation. Sea Devil did this in 1951. This was printed in "The Male Magazine and later made as a part of the TV series "Silent Service," but it is the first I have seen or heard of this mission. It is thrilling just to read about the operation. If you have ever been in the conning tower during an approach during battle stations or in the fire control tracking party, you can relate to this event. This really explains the tenacity and courage of the crews from WWII all the way through the cold war. I hope You enjoy it as much as I did.

THE SNEAK ATTACK ON PUGET SOUND

By Capt. W. J. Ruhe USN (Ret.)

"The Sea Devil is clear of all traffic," Jim Barrett, the Officer of the Deck reported.

"Go ahead and take her down, but make it easy because it's shallow all through this area," I ordered, then slipped down into the conning tower and raised the periscope as two loud honks on the diving alarm signaled the start of the dive.

The lookouts started dropping down through the upper hatch and slipped on down into the control room. Barrett, the last man, pulled the upper hatch shut and swung on the end of the lanyard, holding it firmly while the quartermaster reached over his shoulder and turned the locking handle on the hatch.

"Level off at periscope depth, and watch the fresh water pockets," I told Jim as he headed on down to the diving station.

Admiralty Inlet, the narrow entrance to Pudget Sound, was a tricky place for a sub to operate. The shallow water, heavy currents and the flow of fresh water seaward made depth control a difficult job for a practiced submariner. Though Jim was a reservist and a lawyer by profession, submarining was an art he had pretty well mastered.

It was a tough problem we'd been handed that October morning in Seattle. Captain Frahe, the War Plans Officer of the 12th Naval District, had outlined the job to be done and prefaced his remarks with an ominous, "To attempt to penetrate Puget Sound with a submarine is possibly too hazardous an operation but Admiral Allan E. Smith, the new commandant, wants to know just how good are the present plans for defending Seattle from submarine attack. The way to properly test these defenses is with a submarine your submarinee, the Sea Devil."

"What if we go aground, or hit the bottom too hard?" I quickly asked, hoping that in the interests of defense there might be some latitude given for the risk taken.

"It's your responsibility, if you think it's too dangerous, then we can't use the Sea Devil." Captain Frahe said, with a challenging smile.

Other harbors, with such natural barriers at their entrance, had been penetrated in World War II submarines Scapa Flow, Singapore, Sydney and Pearl Harbor. In each case, a resourceful enemy was able to devise a new strategy, which caught the defense unaware.

It was a challenging thought. How would an enemy slip past the defenses into Puget Sound and unload his torpedoes into the many ships in the harbor at Seattle?

“The current is checking strong, at three and a half knots, to the west,” Bob Gulmon, the navigator, announced.

The clear, loud echoes being returned from the steep shoreline over the loudspeaker, of the sound gear, indicated excellent sound conditions. “We can’t go through this entrance without being heard by the patrolling ships,” I noted.

“Hold your depth, you’re varying as much as six feet,” I yelled down at Barrett, who was directing the trimming of the boat at the diving station below.

“We’ll have to make more than three knots there s a lot of fresh water here.” He yelled back up.

Studying the chart at the inlet there appeared to be but one safe way to enter and that would be along the north shore where the water dropped off sharply to a depth of 120 feet. But with the scope raised at all times, the Sea Devil might creep along the south shore, close to the shallow water reefs which dotted that side, of the inlet. The patrol ships and planes would hardly expect a sub to run submerged through such dangerous water. The skippers of the patrol ships involved in the defense had seemed quite confident at the conference that morning. Because of the narrowness of the entrance, the excellent sound conditions and the heavy currents, I tended to agree with them.

After surfacing, I called all of the officers to the bridge and explained our assignment. “If we can get through undetected they’ll take a new fast check on their defenses. That’s good. What we just saw on our submerged run shows that we’ll be picked up, by any ship patrolling, at the entrance. The only safe place to enter is so narrow we’ll be pinpointed. But if we can keep the scope up and navigate continuously, we might risk going along the south shore past the reefs.”

“Why not follow a ship through like Gunther Prien did at Scapa Flow?” Charley Harmon, the redhaired, quick-thinking communications officer suggested.

“That’s the sort of idea we need, but all ship traffic is going to be stopped when we try to get through.” I recalled how Prien, the German submarine skipper, had followed a merchant ship into Scapa Flow back in 1939 and had sunk the British battleship Royal Oak. He’d hidden the sound of his own screws in the heavy beat of the large ship.

“Why not put a sea gull on top of the scope to disguise it?” Jim Barrett offered, then retracted with, “but not with such poor depth control. A gull on top of four feet of periscope would be a giveaway.”

“Why not disguise the conning tower like a fishing boat?” Bob Gulmon, my valuable right-hand man suggested. “This area is full of fishermen, just like the Jap coast during the last war. They’ll be here, come another war, so we’d be strictly honest doing it.”

It was a tantalizing idea, but lashing the Sea Devil to a fishing boat would only result in a demolished boat, which I couldn’t afford. But there was a way we might get by; a method that a resourceful enemy might use.

Once the idea was generated the plan evolved quickly. The crew was sworn to secrecy and a dispatch was sent to the commandant that the Sea Devil was ready to take part in the penetration exercise on November 1, 1951.

Two weeks before the exercise I had a lot of qualms about endangering the boat, so I begged a plane from the Port Angeles Coast Guard, to look at the inlet from the air. The Straits of Juan de Fuca looked like a nice broad carpet of dark green highway stretching 70 miles from the Pacific Ocean to the narrow three-mile-wide funnel at the entrance to Puget Sound. Below the entrance the Sound opened out to the south towards the harbor of Seattle at its lower end.

Protection Island, the name suggesting part of our strategy, lay to the westward of the lower lip of the funnel. The deep greenness of the water south of the island confirmed the idea that we could approach the entrance by crawling around the protected side of the island.

By Thursday morning, the 29th of October, all plans had been completed. A 12-foot dory was borrowed from the Coast Guard. A 10-horsepower outboard motor was rented to power the small "fishing boat" we were going to lash to the periscope as a decoy. The three men chosen to act as fishermen outfitted themselves, with flannel shirts, coonskin hats, and assorted fishing equipment. A vast amount of supplies were collected for their overnight stay on Protection Island. Lieutenant Stuart Steen was chosen to head up the "special mission." Big and rugged, he could easily stand a freezing night on the island and, if the outboard stopped, row the dory back into position by the Sea Devil's scope. Bill Brincken, the sub's clever firecontrolman, was an outdoor man with a keen mechanical sense. He would insure that the wilderness of the island and a balky moor would not get the best of the expedition. Bob Whehner, the gunner's mate, sold his way into the crew by offering to take pictures and make sketches of what was happening topside. He would then flash these sketches in front of the periscope for me to study, down there in the submerged submarine.

That afternoon the Sea Devil left port and sailed to the southern side of Protection Island. With the three-man crew in the dory and all provisions stowed, the Sea Devil was slowly submerged, the dory floating off. Checking the men and the boat through the periscope, all details seemed complete. The provisions had been carefully checked from a list drawn up by Perske, the cook. But one item was forgotten which almost ended the expedition prematurely.

The boat was loaded with a vast amount of equipment which seemed to take care of every emergency; sleeping bags, a five-gallon can of gas, charts of the area, a carbine, binoculars, hatchet, matches, cooking utensils, sketching pads, flashlights, camera, a small box of brandy shot-bottles; even Stu Steen's hip pockets were crammed with toilet paper. "They're sure well prepared." I decided, as the outboard roared into action and the dory headed over to Protection Island. Meanwhile the Sea Devil continued into Admiralty Inlet for a last check of the area.

By the following morning we were back in the Straits to the west of Puget Sound ready to start the penetration against whatever defenses had been planned.

At noon the Sea Devil submerged to periscope depth, following receipt of a message to start the exercise. A look through the scope showed two planes circling over the entrance far to the east. There were no patrol ships in sight. If there were any ships, we'd see them once we cleared the south side of Protection Island. Down the broad strip of the Straits the Sea Devil moved, staying at 100 feet, except for a momentary periscope look from 60 feet every half hour. A plane could spot the submerged submarine when at periscope depth. Courses were steered to swing south eastward around Protection Island. On the third quick look I was amazed to find myself staring at a fisherman in a large fishing smack a few feet from the scope. He was leaning on the pilot house door wondering

what the queer looking pole was that suddenly popped up close alongside his boat. I pulled the scope down fast.

On south, through the narrow channel along the southern side of Protection Island, the Sea Devil glided. From there on it was necessary to keep the scope up. The navigation had to be precise, but the planes wouldn't be searching for a sub in such a tight spot.

Speed was increased to six knots to make our rendezvous with the men in the dory at 2:45 P.M. The heavy throbbing of the sub's propellers was well masked by the island so that the patrol ships off the entrance could not hear the oncoming submarine.

A fishing fleet, close to the shore across from Protection Island, was passed as we turned northeast and broke free of the cover of the island. Their presence would make our ruse more effective.

As we changed our course, three patrolling ships loomed into view. Closest to the Sea Devil was a DE (destroyer escort). A ship designed in World War II to hunt down and eliminate German submarines. Beyond was a Patrol Chaser, and further out was another DE. The pinging of these searching ships was dimly heard on our sound gear. This was more than we had expected, and meant that even by hugging the reefs we would pass near to at least one of them. At such close range a patrol ship was bound to pick up a sharp echo of the sub's hull.

When close to the rendezvous, a mile off Point Violet, the eastern tip of Protection Island, the tiny dory was picked up through the scope at the same instant that the sound of an idling outboard motor was heard on our sound gear.

Stu spotted the periscope close to his boat, glanced at his watch, and smiled at our promptness. The outboard roared into action as he steered the dory alongside of the periscope. Brincken, standing in the bow, lassoed the scope and snubbed it to the starboard side of the dory. The submarine was now towing the dory.

Wehner waved his hand in front of the scope to attract my attention and held up a sketch showing the pattern that the three ships were making in their outline patrol of the entrance. He held up a second sketch showing the time that each ship made its turns, and the time it took to complete the angular figure eights that they were weaving. I relayed this information to Gulman who plotted it on a chart of Admiralty Inlet. From this we were able to calculate when our sub would pass the closest DE, so as to have him steering away from the Sea Devil at that time. Wehner was making our run far easier.

In the dory, Brincken was holding on to the towing line with both hands and playing the boat like a young bucking steer. The dory was jumping across the low swells and slewing right and left, but Stu unconcernedly was steering with one hand and dangling a fishing pole with the other. Wehner was keeping his body between the scope and the nearest DE so that no lookout could accidentally spot the periscope. More and more sketches were flashed which kept me posted on the movements of the patrol ships. While a new sketch was being prepared, sets of bearings on landmarks were taken to insure accurate navigation past the shallow reef off the lower lip of the entrance.

"I'm losing depth," Charley Harmon shouted up from his diving station. "I'll need more speed to hold her up."

The Sea Devil had hit a fresh water pocket and was sinking rapidly. I gave a quick twist to the scope to indicate to Brincken that the scope was going under but we'd be right back up to pick up the tow as quickly as possible.

At 75 feet the downward motion was checked and the Sea Devil was eased back up to periscope depth. My first look showed everything bad. The dory was far astern and Stu was working frantically, yanking on the lanyard to get the outboard started. The DE ahead had turned directly for us. The sound man at my elbow reported that the DE was pinging on us. "He's stopped sweeping his sound gear back and forth. He's got contact on us," the sound man reported. The spluttering and dying cough of the outboard could be heard over the sound gear.

Without a disguise for the periscope, and too close to the reef to proceed blindly ahead, there was only one course left; head away from the entrance.

"That's the end of a good plan," I told the men in the conning tower. "We shouldn't have trusted a tricky piece of gear like an outboard."

But then, as if enraged by our lack of faith, the roar of the outboard filled the loudspeaker of our sound gear. A quick look showed the dory heading for the scope, and the DE aiming straight for both of us.

When Brincken lassoed the scope once more, a new problem developed. Because of our high speed he could scarcely hold onto the line. The dory charged into each wave, violently jerking the snubbing line, threatening to yank Brincken overboard at any instant. Heavy spray piled over the bow and obscured the lens of the scope. By sharply lowering and raising the scope through a few inches, I was able to signal Wehner to wipe off the lens. He placed his body in front to shield it from further spray.

The steady ping-ping-ping of the DE's sound gear was aimed squarely at us. He had a good contact.

".....900 yards, closing...800 yards, closing....700 yards, still closing." The radar man droned.

"We're less than 100 yards from the shallow spot off Middle Point." Gulmon excitedly announced.

"At 500 yards range we'll give up and head away from the reef" I told him.

There was just time for one last look through the scope. Both Wehner and Stu were anxiously looking first at the scope, then at the onrushing DE. It appeared in the skipper's enthusiasm he would run right over the dory.

"500 hundred yards." The radar man droned, but Wehner was waving his hand in front of the scope violently. Cautiously he pulled his body clear of the lens and let me catch a glimpse of the DE heeling over to port as she turned away from us.

A look at the soaked man in the small boat, at Brincken's body being whipped around as he bravely hung on to the rope, and I decided we could make it through the exercise without the dory.

The last quick twist of the scope meant. "You're on your own now." To the men in the dory, and the Sea Devil was eased down to 90 feet.

Eastward into Admiralty Inlet we headed, leaving the line of patrol ships to westward.

When well south of the entrance, deep into Puget Sound, we surfaced and sent out a radio message. "Surfaced, south of Port Townsend."

That evening, as the patrol ships passed the Sea Devil going south to Seattle, many black, questioning looks were thrown at us. Each skipper was still wondering through whose area the Sea Devil had slipped without being detected.

We waited until the ships were out of sight before we sent a searchlight signal to our dory to join us.

When the three men were pulled back on board, stiff and frozen from the cold spray and freezing rain that had poured over them for over four hours, they were too numb to mutter more than "We made it." But down in the wardroom, thawed out with steaming coffee and brandy, they told of the near failure of their mission on the previous night.

"After we had unloaded our provisions on Protection Island, we discovered the cook had failed to include water. We explored the island and realized that there was no water to be found." Stu related. "So we took the dory over to the mainland and got a bottle full of water at an unpainted, boarded-up summer resort. The old caretaker there said that an old woman up the road had seen a ship sink south of Protection Island that afternoon, and that everyone was on the lookout for survivors."

As Stu sipped some coffee, Wehner continued. "It was the Sea Devil flooding down so we could get the dory off the deck that she saw but we couldn't let on. Later that night, when we were sitting by the fire after we had eaten, the Coast Guard flew out a plane over the island which threw a searchlight on us. Later they sent out a converted PT boat which came close inshore to rescue us. They asked us over a loudspeaker if we needed help, but we waved them off with our arms. We broke out the medicinal brandy at that point and each had a shot to quiet our nerves."

Saturday afternoon, back in Seattle, I met with the skippers of the three patrol ships. The skipper of the DE that had the patrol in the southern sector of the entrance related how he'd picked up a good submarine contact close to the reefs. He decided that it must be a small dory with three fishermen in it because no sub would risk running so close to the reefs in the heavy currents at the entrance. "I wasn't going to run my DE aground on a hunch like that," he explained. The other skippers, having neither heard nor seen anything unusual that afternoon, wondered how the Sea Devil had slipped past.

I told them of the strategy we'd used, along with all the preparations. They kept watching me closely to see if the story was being fabricated. The face of the skipper who'd let us slip through grew flushed and glowering.

At the end of the story he snapped. "All right, you've told us how you did it-but for my money that's movie stuff. Now tell us what you actually did!"

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