



USS BASS (SS-164)

FIRE IN THE AFTER BATTERY

This is a recollection of a fire on the USS Bass (SS-164) told by BMC (SS) Jack Stevenson who served on her from 1940 till 1943. Jack is known to his friends and shipmates as "Panama Jack" and resides in Colorado. Jack served in the Navy from 1936 until his retirement in 1958 and had tours as a Chief of the Boat (COB) aboard the USS Cob (SS-164), USS Sennet (SS-408) and USS Sea Cat (SS-399). Jack is a member of the Submarine Veterans of WWII and the Submarine Veterans, Charleston Base.

The Bass (SS-164) was the first fleet type submarine built and was commissioned in 1925. She was 342' long with a displacement of 2,000 tons surfaced and 2620 tons submerged. She had a surface speed of over 19 knots and submerged speed of 9 knots. Her test depth was around 200' and had a range of about 6000 nautical miles with a crew of 50 enlisted and 6 officers. She had an unusual design as the engine rooms were split forward and aft which probably led to the severity of the fire. The forward engine room was used for power and drove the ships generators and the aft engine room was directly coupled to the shafts and was used for propulsion. After the fire she was converted to a cargo submarine and the after engine room was removed and the forward engine room was used to charge the batteries for propulsion. ¹

In the summer of 1942 the USS Bass (SS-164) was deployed on her fourth war patrol from her base in Coco Solo, Panama. In the early morning of 17 August, 1942 with her batteries fully charged she made a trim dive. The electrician was taking readings in the after battery when he heard a gurgling noise coming from the battery blower. He shined his flashlight on the blower and saw smoke coming from the intake. He immediately shouted "Fire in the After Battery" and turned on the lights to alert the crew in the berthing area directly above the after battery. Batteries in the forward end of the compartment started exploding so he headed forward to the maneuvering room and sealing the compartment but shutting and dogging the watertight doors behind him. There were about 16 men sleeping in the crew's quarters above the after battery and crew members were furiously attempting to wake them and send them aft. There was heavy smoke and fire in the after battery and the men evacuated the compartment heading to the after torpedo room. ² remaining men evacuated the compartment through the fire to maneuvering room and continued to the control room to assist in damage control efforts. A single sailor was left not noticed and remained in the After Battery. The ship started to blow fuel overboard and blew the ballast tanks to surface the boat. A rough ride to the surface ensued as the Bass had an unusual profile, with a bulbous, shark-like bow which was intended to add reserve buoyancy—a design which proved a miserable failure, as the "B" class submarines proved to be very poor sea keepers. Heavy smoke spread throughout the ship and crewmembers had donned Breathing Apparatus known as RBAs. After surfacing the Commanding Officer, LCDR Anthony Dropp had the bridge manned and ordered the After Torpedo Room loading hatch opened to evacuate the crew. When the hatch was opened a lot of pressure was released due to the heavy smoke and fire in the aft compartments. Two crewmembers went into the After Torpedo Room and started dragging men to the bottom of the ladder where they were brought topside. A rotation of men was

¹ Fleet Submarine.com SS-164, U.S.S. Bass

employed due to the heavy smoke, fire and high temperatures in the After Torpedo Room. A total of 27 men were evacuated and given Artificial Respiration and oxygen for several hours, but only two men were revived. Another sailor who was trapped in the After Battery was discovered after the fire was brought under control.

The boat was finally able to contact Pearl Harbor and was ordered to proceed back through the canal to Costa Rica. The 26 deceased men were brought below and placed in a small berthing compartment above the generators in the forward engine room. The next day the submarine tender *Antaeus* (AS-21) moored with the boat removed the deceased and replenished our CO2. The CO2 was needed as we were using the savage system and the CO2 to maintain a positive pressure in the After Torpedo to the After Battery due to the extensive damage the boat suffered and prevent a re-flash of the fire. The *Antaeus* (AS-21) escorted us until we reached the Gulf of Dulce, Costa Rica. The boat then transited to Balboa, Panama and remained there when she ordered to Philadelphia Naval Shipyard for repairs. The boat was unable to submerge so she traveled on the surface as part of a British Convoy until mooring in at the Bush terminal on the East River in Brooklyn New York. After a few days we proceeded to Philadelphia Navy Yard and converted to a submarine cargo carrier. The after engine room, all torpedo tubes and the deck gun were removed. The after engine room was made the main storage area. The conversion took about two years to complete due to many experiments. We lived in unbearable living conditions and suffered terrible experiences during this time. Finally, the navy gave up on this experiment and all three ships of this class were decommissioned in March of 1945 and scuttled off Block Island to serve as a sonar target

The 26 young men who lost their life aboard the USS Bass (SS-164) were buried in Corozal American Cemetery, Panama. The legacy of the USS Bass was that during her 15 years of active service in a poorly designed boat that experienced many hardships was that her survivors provided wonderful training to the boats they served on during the remainder of the war.

The following is a list of men that lost their lives during the After Battery Fire of 17 August 1942.

Roy Adair, Torpedoman's Mate First Class	Emery L. Nocks, Seaman
Standley Ambo, Seaman Apprentice	John K. Pittenger, Seaman Apprentice
John F. Barrett, Radioman First Class	Stanley W. Pleva, Gunner's Mate Third Class
Leonardo Blage, Electrician's Mate Second Class	Marion Reid, Seaman Apprentice
Thomas Boychulk, Seaman Apprentice	John A. Robson, Chief Motor Machinist's Mate
Laurence S. Criss, Yeoman First Class	Nelson L. Rowe, Baker First Class
Roswell L. Garland, Fireman Apprentice	George F. Schneider, Seaman
Lewis G. Gibson, Chief Electrician's Mate	George E. Steele, Seaman Apprentice
Donald R. Gymer, Fireman Recruit	Ralph L. Steinhauer, Seaman Apprentice
Joseph J. Larkin, Electrician's Mate Third Class	Carl A. Swanson, Coxswain
Daniel Luyk, Seaman Apprentice	Clyde E. Walters, Chief Motor Machinist's Mate
Robert F. Merritt, Ship's Cook Second Class	Robert L. Ward, Seaman Apprentice
James E. Minor, Seaman Apprentice	Phillip H. Wend, Seaman Apprentice