

## *BLUEGILL ON PATROL*

A story of cutlasses, gunfire-and depth-bombs.

by REAR ADMIRAL R.W. CHRISTIE, USN

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NEW LONDON was plenty cold in the winter of '16-'17. New London is always cold, but it was a little colder that year to me, a young ensign, when a nickel was a nickel and the sub base was a long way from Glenwood Park. A nickel had to be considered in an ensign's budget.

The submarine base wasn't much in those days and not much different from the coaling station it had been for so many years. The submarine school, then in its second session, was housed in a two-story brick building, formerly the Marine Barracks. The forty-four officer students were mostly ensigns a year or two out of the Academy.

Lieutenant Eric Barr commanded the submarine E-1, which was stationed at the sub base as school boat. She was small but modern, with Diesel engines and a Goertz periscope which marvelously could be rotated around the horizon. A little later, after our entry into World War I she battered her way through an Atlantic hurricane to the Azores. But this is a story of another war, another submarine, and another Eric Barr. . .

When Eric Jr. reported to me with his new *Bluegill* in Fremantle, West Australia, in early '44, I found her to be, like all the new submarines, clean, fit and ready, with up-to-the-minute radar devices and other war-developed improvements, including, of course, the indispensable ice-cream maker and washing-machine-luxuries, to be sure, but worth their weight and space, and like the air-conditioning machinery, essential to physical fitness and morale on the long patrols, The greatest tonic to a submarine crew is the sound of torpedoes exploding against the bottom of enemy vessels, but creature comforts helped to maintain the efficiency and, hence, effectiveness and meant more tons of enemy shipping sunk . . .

*Bluegill* carried extra weapons. Like others of her class, she had ten torpedo tubes, a five-inch gun, forty-millimeter, twenty-millimeter and fifty-caliber anti-aircraft weapons. But she had something else-six Navy cutlasses, relics of the days of hand-to-hand combat and boarding parties. These, said young Eric, were a gift from the old man who thought "they might come in handy some day." And so they did. Now I don't mean that the old man was of the days of iron men and wooden ships, cutlasses and boarding pikes. On the contrary, he was a very active part of the Navy in World War II in command of the V-12 organization at the University of Washington, Seattle. But he believed in preparedness and in keeping all weapons ready for all possible eventualities. And young Eric was like his old man. He believed in readiness with all weapons to take advantage of the wily Jap whenever and wherever. His five patrols in command of *Bluegill* covered the Solomons, the Admiralties, Philippine waters, Macassar Strait, Java Sea and the South China Sea. On his first patrol, he sank the fast freighter *Asosan Maru* of 8,812 gross tons with three torpedo hits which capsized and sank her before they could get their boats out. His second, of forty-nine days' duration, was marked by tough enemy opposition by aircraft and surface patrols. He was forced down by enemy aircraft forty-nine times. Two heavily escorted cargo vessels of about five thousand tons each were sunk by torpedoes, and one of the numerous and hated "Chidori's" was blown out of the water. These "Chidori's" and "Otori's" were of very shallow draft, fast, handy, well-manned and well equipped for antisubmarine operation. They were almost impossible to hit with torpedoes. These vessels were the "A" squad of the Japanese anti-submarine effort. They roamed the Java Sea and

Macassar Strait too freely for the comfort of our submarines.

You see, it is really quite simple to avoid a torpedo. Changes in speed or course make it difficult for the attacking submarine to solve the problem of maneuver into a position favorable for attack without being detected. Likewise, radical and timely changes in speed or course made after the torpedoes are fired may make them miss. The reluctance of some ship captains to zigzag cost them their ships and their lives in both the Atlantic and Pacific . . .

*Bluegill* proved herself on this patrol to be well handled, aggressive and lucky. "All depth charges are close, and any is too many," say the submariners. She pressed home her attacks in glassy calm seas where even a few inches of periscope exposed at dead low speed made a point of aim for the depth-charge counterattacks. Sixty-eight blockbusters were *Bluegill's* ration this time, served up hot by Mr. Nip, but the score was ten thousand tons and one Chidori in *Bluegill's* favor.

Patrol No. 3 of sixty-eight days was broken by a brief stop in our advance base at Mios Woendi in northern New Guinea for refueling and rearming. Part one was very active and successful. Five vessels were sunk and three damaged. The *Arabia Maru* of 9,500 gross tons and a four-thousand-ton transport were sunk in a daylight submerged periscope attack of six torpedoes for four hits. In a counter-attack lasting one hour, *Bluegill* escaped serious damage. Such is official language. Behind that officialese is encompassed the emotions of many lifetimes-drama, near tragedy touching some seventy-five young men. Fear - someone has said, the man doesn't live who hasn't felt fear. I say the submariner who does not fear the depth-charge does not exist. That is an emotion common to all. The difference lies beyond that emotion. One man, through training, has acquired a confidence that raises him to heights unrevealed and unsuspected, where the next man may dissolve in a panicky reaction. The shape of his head or the size of his biceps is no key to his reaction. The key word is *character*. "Heart" or "guts" mean the same thing.

There is a difference in being depth-charged in a submarine - there is nothing else quite like it. For one thing, you are in surroundings that, regardless of experience, are unnatural and abnormal. Then, you are motionless-in a state of suspense. Too much time to think. Too much opportunity for the imagination. The only two officers I knew personally who simply could not stand it were men who had seen recent service in destroyer escorts in the Atlantic anti-submarine campaign against the Germans. Their knowledge of the power of the destroyer escort against a submarine kindled too vividly their imagination of what was about to happen.

LET'S read it in the official language of Eric Jr.: "We've been spotted! Target has swung hard left, heading for us. Take her deep fast. Rig for depth-charge attack and silent running. Destroyer is shifting to short keying and speeding up. Stand by. Depth charges Nos. 1, 2, 3-close, too close. Depth charges 4, 5, 6, 7, 8. Emergency lighting failed; using flashlights. Depth charges 9 to 28, saturation bombing. Left full rudder, all motors ahead full under cover of the noise. Didn't do any good- force of explosions knocked us down one hundred feet. Bow planes, stern planes and rudder batted back and forth. Clutches to planes knocked out. Depth charges 29 to 47-all single and aimed. QP sonic out of commission, air-line forward ruptured, alcohol fumes in the after torpedo-room from ruptured stowage tank. Boat too heavy to hold. Must speed up. Sanitary tank flooded into the boat. Electrical grounds all over. Forward torpedo-room reported flame through torpedo loading hatch."

*Bluegill's* experience was a typical experience in this area at this time, and by no means the most severe. The Japs were pouring men and equipment into Mindanao through Davao, and all shipping in the

gulf was well escorted. We were inclined to doubt the report that flames were seen inside the boat in spite of the fact that several cool-headed and experienced men reported that they themselves had seen it. We thought that any charge that close must surely tear open the hull. But there have been too many similar reports - we must believe it. In the submarine *Kingfish*, one officer and two men swear they saw flames coming through the main shaft stern-tube bearings after a specially heavy depth-charge explosion close aboard.

The Golden Age of submarine warfare in the Southwest Pacific had definitely come to a close with the end of 1944. Two-thirds of the Japanese merchant fleet had been destroyed, and the remaining bottoms were mostly small stuff, sea trucks and the like. In addition, the submarine hunting-ground was now restricted. Acquisition of air bases in the Philippines and in the Marianas permitted our planes to cover ocean areas previously reached only by submarines.

On *Bluegill's* fourth, no enemy vessels were sighted and the patrol was therefore designated "not successful for the submarine combat insignia." But she gave valuable assistance to the operation of American forces in the reoccupation of the Philippines through reconnaissance. She was out fifty-three days, steamed 12,131 miles, burned 142,725 gallons of fuel-hardly a pleasure cruise . . .

Largely through the initiative of Captain Bill Jenkins of the Australian Imperial forces, liaison was established between our submarines and the specially trained "Commandos" of the Australian Army. These men, some British, some Australian, and some former residents of Malay, Borneo and the Dutch East Indies, had one thing in common - guts. This specialized training was most thorough and included all the tricks of the trade on the water, in the water and in the jungle. We thought so well of them that when it was suggested that they accompany the submarines on patrol we agreed heartily. [You'll hear of Bill Jenkins and his brood in the story of the *Harder* later on in this series.] They were put ashore in enemy territory to contact guerrilla leaders, to act as coast watchers to send us information on shipping and other enemy movements and to destroy shipping in ports or roadsteads inaccessible to submarine gun or torpedo fire.

TWO of these men, Lieutenants Cecil H. Anderson and Clifford J. Owens of the A.I.F., joined *Bluegill* when she left Fremantle 12 March 1945 on her fifth war patrol. She was assigned the Cape Varella area of the Indo-China coast in coordination with two sister ships, *Blueback* and *Blackfin*. In the forenoon of 28 March *Blackfin* sighted a convoy consisting of two *Marus* and eight escorts. Such a heavily escorted convoy indicated that they were valuable ships, but also posed a very difficult approach-attack problem. *Blackfin* made the first attack - got through the outer screen but was spotted by the inner screen and suffered a particularly heavy counter-attack which, however, drew off the escorts. Then *Blueback*, coming in from the flank, tumbled more of the interference, leaving the field clear for *Bluegill* which hit a large tanker with two torpedoes. In the inevitable counter-attack, *Bluegill* suffered and survived 112 depth charges. Her teeth rattled and her bones quaked. The mercury spilled out of the compass bowls, torpedo-tube doors were jarred partly open, fifty-six light-bulbs were broken, over a bucketful of miscellaneous bolts were picked up from the deck. And after four hours of this inferno, she cautiously came up to periscope depth to find her tanker not sunk but hard aground on the island of Hon Doi.

Here was work for the boys in the back room, Anderson and Owens. All they had to do was launch a rubber boat from a submarine, paddle about three quarters of a mile in a fairly tough sea, black as indigo, board an enemy vessel, - possibly manned and waiting to capture or kill, - inspect the vessel if abandoned, set explosive charges to complete the destruction and, not the least difficult, paddle back to

the submarine somewhere out there in the blackness. Their report is, from its laconic tone, almost funny:

"Wreck reached at 2245.  
No one aboard.  
Papers collected.  
Set incendiaries and limpets.  
Returned."

The vessel was identified as the *Honan Maru*, a converted tanker of 5,700 gross tons. The delayed action explosives placed by the boarding party blew the vessel into bits. A machine-gun found in the chart house was a Colt-Browning manufactured in Hartford, Connecticut. And, ladies, a box of Kayser silk stockings made in the U.S.A. was in the captain's cabin.

Well, we haven't used *Bluegill's* "secret weapons" yet-the cutlasses-but the commandos have had a trial spin and of that trial spin was born the idea which resulted in the capture of an island on the next patrol.

*Bluegill* was on her way north through the China Sea to keep a date with a flight of Allied bombing planes. Her task was the rescue of aviators from planes crash-landed or planes abandoned. This air-sea rescue service, invaluable to our heavy bombers on missions over enemy waters, was called "life-guarding." To this rescue service rendered by our submarines throughout the war, over five hundred aviators owed their lives. It was supplementary to the famous "Dumbo" service which was made up largely of long range flying boats, the Catalina and the Mariner. The submarines could reach areas untenable to the "Cats," and at this stage of the Pacific War the "lifeguard" submarines were a downed aviator's only hope in areas so far from Allied bases and so close to enemy bases.

With a little extra time on her hands, *Bluegill* jogged to the eastward to take a "look-see" at tiny Pratas Island, a dot in the vastness of the South China Sea 180 miles southeast of Hongkong on the air line from North Luzon. Its location gave it value as a weather station and for detection of Allied planes headed for the Japanese-held Chinese and Indo-Chinese coast.

*Bluegill* dived. Unseen by the enemy from her point of vantage below the waves, she studied the island at leisure with her 6-power periscope. She spotted a lighthouse, radio towers, a radar installation, a flagpole displaying the Jap colors, barracks and other buildings. Gun emplacements were suspected rather than seen. There appeared to be two usable landing beaches but according to Anderson and Owens the surf conditions were bad. To draw enemy fire and learn something of their strength, young Eric decided to ease out to the extreme range of his 5"s, come to the surface after dark and lob over a few steel-jacketed calling-cards. This he did, with a "Battle Surface" - a maneuver which brings the vessel to the surface as quickly as possible and the gun-crew on deck to clear the gun and open fire immediately. It's not popular in the cold waters of unsheltered seas, because it means half a bath for the gun-crews. But the Jap wouldn't play, and with no response from the enemy on the island, *Bluegill* rang up "All engines, ahead standard" and proceeded on her way to the assigned lifeguard station forty miles off Hongkong, filing away for future reference everything that she had learned about Pratas Island.

CONVERSATION at mess turned to Pratas Island, its value to the enemy, why our planes hadn't bombed or strafed it, the strength of its garrison, size of its guns, whether they had radar control and searchlights. Captain Barr knew well enough what was in the thoughts of his commando friends, Anderson and Owens, and he was himself turning over in his mind the same thing: Why not capture the island themselves? The submarines had done about everything else, sunk battleships, carriers, cruisers, destroyers and submarines,

put agents in and taken them out of enemy territory, supplied guerrillas with ammunition, food and medicine, rescued women and children from enemy hands, planted mines, reconnoitered harbors, spent many long days on scouting lines when planes couldn't maintain their searches and even, in one delightful bit of comicality, had bombarded Iwo Jima, one little submarine with its one 4" gun putting in its two cents' worth with toe thundering chorus of the 16's and 14's of the battleship formation. "So," said Eric, "why not? You, Andy, draw up a plan, make an estimate, and we'll think it over."

With supper over, the green baize replaced the white tablecloth and all hands not on watch huddled around the wardroom table-more kibitzers than a family poker party. The ridiculous but clever blah-blah of Tokyo Rose was snapped off and the wardroom radio was, for once, silent. "Darken ship" interrupted the party momentarily while those who had to preserve their night vision donned the red goggles called "Night Adaptation Glasses." These red goggles permit a man to go directly from a lighted room to the bridge without impairment of night adaptation. Otherwise, even momentary exposure to a light would make it impossible to see in the dark for some time, a fatal spot for an officer of the deck to be in.

"Thirty Japs on Pratas," thought Anderson.

"Twenty," said Owens, but he was notoriously optimistic. I guess a commando wouldn't be a commando if he weren't an optimist.

SOMETIMES two weeks is a long time. For a high-point G.I. in Okinawa or Naples, it's a year. For *Bluegill*, it was a long two weeks because it was a dull two weeks. No enemy ships contacted, no calls for help by our airmen. The bombing operations were postponed again and again, and finally canceled, and *Bluegill* was ordered back to the Subic Bay base.

The Jap is, by our way of thinking, a funny bird. His evident eagerness to expend his life and join his honorable ancestors was in evidence throughout the war. The stubbornness and inflexibility of mind which led him to repeat again and again an attack into a strong point rather than admit a tactical error, cost him heavily in Guadalcanal and elsewhere. The evacuation of Kiska was held by the Jap to be a glorious victory for them because they had tricked us. It was their victory but our island, without the loss of a man.

And so, I suppose, they thought *Bluegill's* capture of Pratas was a Jap victory because no Jap was there to oppose it. They had abandoned the island sometime between the *Bluegill's* reconnaissance and her return. The only Japanese witnesses to the display of the colors of the U.S. on the staff of Pratas Island were the rats and lizards,-Pratas rats and lizards,-but symbolic of the former inhabitants.