

Fateful Encounter Off Sonsorol
by George Folta

Prelude: Rushing toward the submarine USS BLUEGILL with a 'bone in her teeth' the Japanese light cruiser YUBARI met an unexpected rendezvous with eternity. As USS BLUEGILL cut loose a spread of torpedoes, the U.S. Marines who perished defending Wake Island could at last take solace that their deaths had been avenged.

“General Quarters, General Quarters, man your battle stations. Enemy aircraft approaching from starboard. Make all preparations for getting underway,” shouted the Officer-of-the-Deck on the Japanese light cruiser YUBARI. The cruiser was anchored at Rabaul, New Britain, one of the Solomon Islands in the South Pacific. It was 0654 on the morning of 11 November 1943. He had just sighted a large formation of 80 to 100 US Navy attack aircraft. These were from the US aircraft carriers SARATOGA and PRINCETON. Subsequently the YUBARI took evasive action under cloud cover but even so was attacked by torpedo bombers (TBFs). She evaded three torpedoes and shot down two TBFs. Three men on the YUBARI were wounded. After the American planes departed the crew of the cruiser were treated to one of their favorite desserts in recognition of their fine performance: riceballs.

They didn't know, nor would they have cared if they did, that half way around the world on this same date in the northern hemisphere an American submarine was being commissioned at the Submarine Base in New London, Connecticut. A submarine that YUBARI was destined to meet. She was named USS BLUEGILL (SS-242), Lt. Cmdr. Eric L. Barr commanding.

Eric had assembled an outstanding crew on BLUEGILL. He had already made three war patrols as executive officer on the submarine KINGFISH. A graduate of the US Naval Academy, class of 1934, he was “all Navy.” His father had command of a submarine in World War I. His grandfather had sailed before the mast. Even though he looked ten years younger than his actual age - too young to command a submarine - he was all business: very thorough, very demanding. He knew what he wanted.

Number two aboard was the executive officer, Bud Cooper. He, too, was a graduate of the US Naval Academy, class of 1939. He possessed a strong character based on a deep religious faith and a love of family. He had a profound understanding of people and exhibited unusual compassion in his handling of the crew's problems. As Hugh Story, one of the BLUEGILL officers, once observed, “Bud is the complement to Eric; he's the link between the captain and the crew.” Bud had already made six war patrols on the submarine POLLOCK.

Number three aboard was the engineer officer, Kenny Beckman, a graduate mechanical engineer from the University of California. Kenny was an outstanding “diving officer.” In fact, in all respects he was an outstanding officer and great fun to be with. One side of him loved music and poetry; the other side loved girls and the “grapes.” His self confidence was infectious. He had previously made seven war patrols on the submarine PLUNGER.

During the “fitting out” of the BLUEGILL these three chose members of the precommissioning crew

they figured would be dependable shipmates in the severest of conditions. They chose well.

BLUEGILL was almost 312 feet in length, displaced 1526 tons, and had a test depth of approximately 300 feet. She carried 24 torpedoes and had ten torpedo tubes; six forward and four aft. BLUEGILL had been constructed by the Electric Boat Company in Groton, Connecticut.

The YUBARI was designed by Doctor Hiraga to conform with the rules of the Washington Disarmament Conference. She was the model for the heavy cruisers MOGAMI and MIKUMA. She was 435 feet in length and displaced 2890 tons. Her main battery consisted of six 5.5/50 guns. She was completed in July 1923.

After commissioning, the BLUEGILL conducted training exercises in the New England area and while en route to Milne Bay, New Guinea, where she arrived on 22 March 1944.

On that same day the YUBARI departed Kisarazu, on the east shore of Tokyo Bay, for Saipan. She had just completed a repair period at Yokosuka during which she had received upgraded sonar gear. Subsequently, while patrolling in the Saipan Island area she was given the task, along with the destroyer YUZUKI, of transporting 580 officers and men of the 192 Infantry Regiment to Sonsorol Island, south west of Palau, to resist any landing by the Allied Forces. The transfer was completed on 26 April 1944.

On that same day BLUEGILL, while on its first war patrol, approached Sonsorol to take an assigned station for covering the Allied landing at Hollandia on the north west coast of New Guinea.

BLUEGILL and YUBARI were about to encounter each other off this small island. Neither knew the other was in the vicinity. Both were manned by men with unswerving devotion to their country.

"Permission to come to the bridge?" requested Bud Cooper waiting at the hatch between the conning tower and the bridge.

"Permission granted, but you won't get any star sights. It's misty and overcast," said the officer-of-the-deck, Bob Vollenweider. It was the morning of 27 April 1944.

Built by Sasebo DY in 1923, the 4200-ton IJN YUBARI is seen in 1936 after a refit that saw her modernized with increased armament, a raised funnel and armored shield added to her four 24-inch torpedo tubes. Mortally damaged by the BLUEGILL off Palau late in April 1944, YUBARI would capsize while under tow by escort destroyers. Early in the war YUBARI had led the naval assault force that struck American-owned Wake Island.

"Well, I want to come topside for a breath of fresh air and see if I can see Sonsorol Island; it barely shows up on the radar scope, probably because it's so low ." So saying, Bud concentrated his gaze to the northwest. Minutes later he reported, " A ship is coming out of that rain squall to the northwest. Bob, you had better dive. I'll notify the captain," and he disappeared down the hatch.

"Dive, dive, dive, clear the bridge," Bob shouted, and down came the bridge personnel through the conning tower to the control room. "Six zero feet, seven degrees down angle," Bob ordered the bow and stern planesmen as he "took over" the dive.

By this time the captain was in the control room. "Could you tell what kind of ship?" he asked Bud.

"No, Captain, but I've got a feeling it was a destroyer ."

"Did any of you lookouts see it?"

"Yes, sir, and it looked like a destroyer to me," answered Doug Smith, the quartermaster with the long-range eyes. We all swore that Doug could see over the horizon.

"I had better take a look. Bob, bring her up to five five feet." With that the captain scrambled up the ladder to the conning tower. "Up scope," and the quartermaster pressed the up button. A quick search around revealed nothing and then he concentrated on the northwest and there at 328 degrees true was indeed the "tops" of a destroyer. "Man battle stations submerged," ordered the captain, and the quartermaster passed the word over the announcing system.

Men scrambled every which direction, and within seconds battle stations were manned. In the conning tower Bud was activating the torpedo data computer (TDC), Folta had taken station as assistant TDC operator, Ploetz stood ready as the assistant approach officer, Duncan in the forward torpedo room was making sure that all was ready for firing torpedoes, Story had started the plot in the control room, Beckman had taken over the dive, and Vollenweider had gone back to the maneuvering room.

The time was 0712. "Kenny, take her down to eight zero feet; quartermaster, ring up full speed; Bud, my intentions are to run at this speed for about fifteen minutes and then come up for a periscope observation. Kenny, did we get in a full battery charge last night?"

"Not quite, Captain, but we'll keep a close check on the gravity."

"Captain, what initial range shall I use for plot?" asked Story , looking up the hatch to the conning tower where the captain stood by the periscope.

"Well, use 20,000 yards; that's a rough guess," the captain said as he peered down the hatch.

And so the BLUEGILL proceeded for 45 minutes at 80 feet except for two observations. Finally at 0800 it slowed to three knots, came to periscope depth and continued steering for the southern tip of Sonsorol. At 0830 the visibility improved and the captain identified the target as a Mutsuki-class destroyer, but her movements were mystifying; she was steaming in wide circles with an occasional disappearance behind the southern tip of the island. "What do you make of this, Bud?" the captain asked, beckoning Bud to the periscope.

"Captain, I think she's making wide sweeps searching for submarines before a larger ship comes out," offered Bud as he surveyed the scene.

"I like your optimism, and that's a good assumption. Down scope." At the 0940 observation the captain exclaimed, "Oh-oh, down scope, Kenny take her down to one zero zero feet, there's an aircraft about a thousand yards distant heading our way." But nothing came of the aircraft's approach, for no depth charges were dropped. Back at periscope depth, the captain could not see any aircraft.

At 0945 Lt. Takehiko Tsuda took over the "conn" on the YUBARI bridge. Lt. Tsuda was proud of his ship. He had been aboard since October 1942 as the navigator and was also discharging the duties of an executive officer. Considering the sweeps of the YUZUKI and the aircraft's searches, Tsuda figured it would be safe to sortee and set course for Saipan, but like the YUZUKI he would use radical maneuvers at first. "All lookouts keep a sharp lookout for submarine periscopes," forewarned Tsuda. The starboard and port lookouts put their binoculars to their eyes and scanned the sea surface of their respective areas.

At 1010 with the scope up, the captain announced, "The destroyer is signaling. Let's hope it's an 'all clear' to something bigger," And then it happened! The captain exclaimed excitedly, "Oh my God, a cruiser of the Mogami-type just came out from behind the island. Mark bearing, angle on the bow 20 port. Estimate range 11,000 yards. Change set-up for the cruiser. Ploetz, give me the normal approach course. Oh-oh, the target has started radical course changes and now he's slowing down. Helmsman, continue steering your present course. Down scope."

WHAM!

"What was that?" Folta whispered to Bud standing beside him.

"Nothing but a depth charge, probably dropped from an airplane. Not very close, I think the pilot just wants to scare any submarines that might be in the area."

"Or perhaps he sighted our periscope." Folta ventured.

"No, George, the charge would have been dropped much closer ."

"Well, do they get much louder than that?"

"George, that was nothing," replied Bud with an amused smile.

At the 1037 observation the cruiser was seen to go back behind the island. Had they detected us? Was that the reason for the aerial depth charge? Were they luring us into a trap? But on the next observation at 1054 the cruiser came from behind the island and headed in an easterly direction. She was moving fast for she had a frothing stern wake and a "bone in her teeth." "Right full rudder, an ahead full. Quick set-up on the cruiser. Make ready all tubes, depth setting ten feet. Angle on the bow 85 starboard,

range 2.600 yards. Estimate speed 25 knots. Use divergent torpedo spread for 1000 feet," the captain sang out. He made two more quick periscope observations which Bud cranked into the TDC.

"Solution looks good, Captain," announced Bud.

"All tubes ready ," reported Nick Ferro manning the firing panel.

At 1059 the captain ordered, "Fire torpedoes." So Nick pushed in the firing button followed by five more at eight-second intervals. Of course Nick knew that only the bow tubes were being fired at that time.

"Torpedoes!" yelled the starboard bridge lookout on the YUBARI.

"Left full rudder ," Lt. Tsuda instantly ordered, and though he avoided several torpedoes one hit near the center of the ship just forward of #1 boiler room. The cruiser immediately listed to starboard and black smoke poured out.

But there was no time to savor YUBARI's demise because there was a destroyer closing in on us from astern. Our four torpedoes aft were ready, so the captain got a quick setup and fired torpedoes, but the destroyer maneuvered radically and avoided all torpedoes. "Kenny, take her down to three zero zero feet. Rig I for silent running and depth charge I attack. Left full rudder, all ahead standard," he ordered in one breath. And then dropping down to the control room he announced to all, "Well, we've paid for the construction of the BLUEGILL, and all you first timers are qualified to wear the submarine combat pin." (A coveted badge only received after participating in a "successful" war patrol).

There followed 20 depth charges, some distant and some close. Now we first timers knew what Bud meant because the close ones shook all of us. There is nothing like being depth charged in a submarine, and the submariner who does not fear the depth charge does not exist. For one thing, he is in surroundings from which there is no escape. There he waits motionless, in a state of suspense for the next explosion. Too much time to think. Too much time to imagine consequences. But, luckily, this destroyer was not certain of our location because his depth charging was erratic. Our depth versus temperature graph indicated a layer at 130 feet, so we remained deeper while clearing the area at three knots.

Several hours later after we all had munched on sandwiches prepared by Strain, the cook, and "sonar" reported all clear on the sound gear, the captain, back in the conning tower, ordered, "Kenny, bring her up to six zero feet. Up scope." The time was 1359. The captain searched the horizon but could not see the cruiser, the destroyers or aircraft so he figured it was time to relax. "Secure from silent running and depth charge attack. Stand by to surface." The quartermaster sounded the surface alarm and the BLUEGILL broke the surface. The captain rushed up the ladder to the bridge, looked all around and ordered, "Lookouts to the bridge." We headed back to where Story , hovering over the control room plot, estimated the YUBARI should be, but no cruiser was in sight. She must have sunk we all gleefully surmised. We did see four destroyers, however, milling around obviously looking for us. The captain wondered aloud - to attack or not to attack?

Kenny solved that question by reporting, "Captain, the battery gravity is at 1180." This was too low to conduct another submerged attack and escape, so we cleared the area by heading to the south. Many of us breathed a sigh of relief for I many of us had experienced enough depth charges for our baptism. But the YUBARI had not sunk, even though she was listing more to starboard and slowly going down by the bow. The cruiser's captain, Takao Nara, made every effort to save his ship. His damage control parties shored up weakened bulkheads, pumped out flooding water, and fought raging fires, and being hopeful and not giving up the captain had a detachment of men preparing YUBARI for towing. At 1552 the seriously wounded were transferred to the destroyer SAMIDARE, and at 1650 the SAMIDARE and YUZUKI began towing the YUBARI to Palau.

But it was a losing cause. By 0615 the next morning all hands had been transferred from YUBARI to the SAMIDARE and YUZUKI and YUBARrs battle colors had been lowered, and the Emperor's picture transferred. The two destroyers continued to tow, but at 1015 on 28 April 1944, the two destroyer captains, Matsumoto and Ikeda, cut their tow lines. The cruiser's survivors, with tears in their eyes, watched the YUBARI sink bow first at latitude 05-38N, longitude 131-47E.

At last those Americans on Wake Island, who had died defending it against overwhelming odds, could rest in peace, for it was YUBARI that had led the Japanese task force which captured Wake early in the war.

SOURCES

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