

How “Cutie” Saved Christmas

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The night was clear and warm. The moon was high, and we could see the outlines of the islands of Lombok and Bali in the distance. We were heading north to our scheduled operating area off the east coast of what was then called Indo-China. We were the US submarine *Bluegill*. We had just finished a refit in Fremantle, the harbor of Perth, West Australia.

It was late Christmas Eve 1944 and many of us were reminiscing on Christmases past and praying that we could see this one through for we were approaching Lombok Strait.

"They" would be waiting for us on Lombok and in the Strait; shore batteries on Lombok and anti-submarine patrol craft in the Strait. The Japanese knew that Lombok Strait was the gateway through the Dutch East Indies where Allied submarines transited from "down under" to the Japanese-held islands and homelands to the north. Headquarters had not reported any of our submarines lost in Lombok Strait, but we knew that the enemy had given some of them a thorough depth-charging resulting in some physical damage to the subs and a great deal of nerve shattering apprehension for the men. Furthermore, there was a strong current running through the Strait. Tonight it was running from north to south. We knew if we transited it submerged, headway would be very slow making us a sitting duck target for the anti-submarine patrol craft above. None of us cared for depth charges.

Submarines on the surface are difficult to see at night unless they cross the moon's path, but the moon was high overhead this night, so after mulling over the pros and cons, the Captain and the Executive Officer decided to transit Lombok Strait on the surface. Our surface search radar was better than that of the Japanese patrol vessels, and because of the moon's position we figured we could pass the Lombok shore batteries before they spotted us.

"What if the shore batteries have radar?" I asked.

The Executive Officer, Bud Cooper, smiled and replied, "George, we'll make the decision to stay surfaced or dive after they start shooting. I don't think they'll hit us with the first shot." I muttered that maybe the Japanese had a William Tell on the island.

So we started up the west side of the Strait near Bali - as far as possible from Lombok Island. The Exec and I were in the control room plotting our position; the Captain, Eric Barr, was on the "bridge." All four engines were firing full blast; we were transiting at top speed, about 21 knots.

Suddenly there was a loud roar overhead, and I excitedly exclaimed, "Bud, a plane, we've been picked up by an enemy patrol plane; we should dive right now!"

"That's no aircraft; that's a large projectile passing overhead." And indeed it was, for instantly the

Captain yelled, "left-full rudder" to the helmsman. The Captain was salvo-chasing. Salvo-chasing means heading for the projectile's splash, a tactic for confusing the enemy's range and deflection corrections. But the projectiles kept coming.

"Clear the bridge!" the Captain yelled. "Level off at six zero feet." Down came the lookouts, quartermaster and Captain, and we leveled off at that depth.

"Bud, that's a nerve racking experience, those projectiles were landing closer and closer; I thought it best to get out of there," the Captain volunteered.

"Well, I'm sure the shore battery has radioed the patrol craft our position," the Exec replied and then warned Sonar, "Keep a sharp listening watch for enemy propeller (screw) sounds. Enemy patrol craft will be closing our position." We could have gone deeper, but an earlier dive did not show us any thermal layer that we could hide under, so it was better to stay near the surface as long as possible as we could take an occasional periscope look, even though it was night.

But there was no time for a leisurely cup of coffee for sonar reported, "High speed screws bearing 020, the bearing is steady, and they don't sound like any patrol craft; they're destroyer screws!"

"Oh, God, the first team," I whispered. The Captain took a quick periscope observation and said he could barely make out the ship, but that he could see the "bone in his teeth" (bow wave). He then passed the word, "Rig for silent running and depth charges; 360 feet." Kenny Beckman, our diving officer ordered, "six-degree down angle," and the men on the diving planes acted accordingly.

We had just settled out at 360 feet when sonar reported, "Destroyer is 'pinging' and it looks like he has made contact on us." Our number one sonar operator, Ware, kept the bearings coming and reported that the enemy was commencing his first run. It was, and he was a professional. What a way to spend Christmas Eve. He dropped just four depth charges this first run. They were big, and they caused damage. There was an electrical fire in the maneuvering room, and the diving planes were stuck into "hard-dive." Back in the maneuvering room our veteran electrician, "Rabbit" Hare, was fighting the fire while holding in the breakers so that we could "back-emergency;" in the after-engine room our leading machinist, "Silent" Turner, was bouncing among sea valves, closing those "backed-off" by the depth charges, and in the Control Room our two stalwarts on the diving planes, Basil and Cerreto, were struggling violently to get control of the planes. We finally stopped the dive at 525 feet, 200 feet below our test depth. Several more depth-charging runs caused other damage, but we were able to hold our depth.

It was then that LT Bucko Stockton suggested that we use our Mk.27 torpedoes. This was the first patrol on which we carried Mk.27s. They were brand-new. These were the first acoustic torpedoes that the US Navy had introduced to the submarine forces, and Bluegill was one of the few submarines to carry them. We had never fired one in anger, but had made some practice runs off Fremantle. The explosive charge was about 90 pounds, and the torpedo was designed to hit the enemy ship near the propellers. It was fired when the sound (noise) of the enemy ship reached a certain decibel level. Of course it had to be fired during the destroyer's approach, and before his depth charges exploded.

Many of us were skeptical of this "Cutie," as it was called, for it might give away our position if it failed to explode. But Bucko was persuasive, and the Captain was in a dilemma. "Go ahead, Bucko, but make it good," the Captain said.

"Captain, we've been checking his noise level, and the setup looks good, but we can't fire it from this depth, we've got to come up to at least 200 feet."

There was a brief moment of silence, and then the Captain said, "Do you know what that means? If you miss we'll be blown out of the water, and I doubt if the diving officer can get us up there, anyhow."

Then Kenny Beckman spoke up, "Captain, the water salinity has been changing; it must be because we are nearer the beach. There is an indication of a layer forming at about 200 feet. Give me ten more turns, and I'll scoot up there just for an instant, and then go deep again as soon as Bucko fires the Cutie." We all knew that Kenny could do it, if anyone could.

"What do you think, Bud?" the Captain asked, knowing that Bud would have judiciously weighed all the factors.

"We are experiencing considerable internal damage, but first we must get the gun crews ready for a 'battle surface;' then, after the next depth charging, let's go to 200 feet while the water is still churned up and fire the Cutie on the following 'run' of the destroyer. I suggest we try to go deep again rather than fight it out on the surface."

On that we all agreed, but concurred that it would be good to have the gun crews ready. On the next destroyer run only one depth charge was dropped, but it was so close that we knew we had to take the chance. Kenny speeded up, called for a slight up angle and even blew a little water out of the "Safety" Tank. We arrived at 200 feet just as Ware, on the sonar gear, reported that the destroyer was turning for the next run.

Bucko and his torpedo crew were tensed up and ready, and when the noise level of the destroyer's propellers reached the required level, he fired. Kenny immediately flooded "safety" and called for a ten-degree down angle. There was a long wait. We had missed. The destroyer was passing overhead and the first depth charge of this run exploded close aboard. Our hopes and spirits were shattered.

"Bud, are the gun crews ready; We may have to 'Battle Surface?' " the Captain asked. But just then Ware reported that the destroyer's screws had stopped. Was he listening for us? Did he have us "cold" and was just waiting for our next move? Or had "Cutie" performed as designed? Slowly our spirits started to rise and guarded smiles appeared, for we just kept creeping ahead on our northerly course and never heard from that destroyer again. We guessed that "Cutie" had hit the destroyer just after it had dropped the depth charge and before it exploded.

Bucko and his crew had performed magnificently; they were heroes. We "broke out" the medicinal brandy for we had been undergoing this ordeal for three hours, and it was time to relax, and it was then that

I asked quietly, "Kenny, how could you tell there was a possible layer at 200 feet when we were down over 500 feet?" A sly smile appeared, but he never answered for just then Strain, the ship's cook, started singing softly over the loudspeaker system "Silent night, Holy night." He couldn't sing worth a damn, but we all hummed along with him.

Author's Note: This story has a little bit of "poetic license" to it. The 1st part to Lombok Strait - with the shore battery firing at us - happened at the beginning of the 3rd Patrol. The firing of the "Cutie" did not occur until the 4th patrol. I just combined parts of two patrols."