
The Round Tablette

Founding Editor: James W. Gerber, MD (1951–2009)

25th Anniversary

September 2011

25:01 Volume 20 Number 1

Published by WW II History Roundtable

Edited by Dr. Connie Harris

www.mn-ww2roundtable.org

Thursday, 8 September 2011

Welcome to the September meeting of the Harold C. Deutsch World War II History Roundtable. Tonight's speaker is Don Keith, author of *War Beneath the Waves* and *Final Patrol*, along with veterans of submarine warfare in the Pacific.

Weapons often take years to develop but one of history's most controversial took over a century. The world's first submarine was the *Turtle*, developed by David Bushnell in during the American Revolution. This one-person craft was to attach a mine to the bottom of a ship's hull. George Washington consented to let Bushnell attempt to sink a British ship with the new invention. Although the effort failed, it did foretell a weapon of the future. The world's first successful submarine was the Confederacy's *Hunley* which destroyed the *Housatonic* off Charleston in February 1864, but the *Hunley* also sank from an explosion. The United States Navy commissioned its first submarine in 1900, but only World War I brought out this weapon's true potential.

The American submarine forces began the Second World War with a myriad of problems. While the US possessed excellent submarines with enough range and load capacity to operate in the Pacific, its forces had no combat experience, limited numbers, and technical problems.

The submarine forces were not commanded by the Navy's finest warriors. Most commanders were over-age and feared losing their crews and boats, and often failed engage with the enemy and sink ships. By the end of the first year of war, one-third had been

replaced. Even with its command personnel problems, the submarine forces had many attractions; they were all volunteers, with casual discipline, and extra pay. However, the volunteers had to pass demanding physical, mental, and psychological tests to qualify for the submarine training because of the added stresses that came naturally with submersible duty.

The limited number of submarines also caused a problem at the beginning of the war. In the Pacific, there were only 50 submarines to cover the entire area of Japanese activity from the Japanese home islands to Pearl Harbor to Australia. There was too much geography for so few boats.

The US Navy's submarine fleet most difficult problems were technical. Submarines were supposed to launch their attacks deep beneath the sea but American subs are the beginning of the war did not have the adequate ranging sonar's and tracking equipment. To solve this problem, the Navy attempted to develop a torpedo that would make a near miss as good as a direct hit. A magnetic device designed to make them explode underneath enemy ships, but these rarely functioned because the Navy inadequately tested these torpedoes before the war. To further add to the problem the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance refused to believe the reports coming from the Pacific and blamed the misses on the submarine commanders.

During 1942-43 the Navy sorted out these problems and built up its strength for a maximum effort in 1944. The force size doubled, new commanders were promoted, and the torpedo problems were solved. In addition, by 1944, the breaking of the Japanese Army Water Transport Code, with ULTRA signal intelligence, Navy planners were able to place their submarines along the

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Japanese merchant marine shipping routes.

As for the Japanese, before the war, they recognized that commercial shipping would play a crucial role in bringing raw materials from the “Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere.” They realized that this was necessary to keep the war economy functioning. There was a massive expansion and modernization of their merchant fleet, but little effort was made in preparation to defend this commercial shipping.

In the fall of 1941 only two junior officers in the Japanese naval high command were responsible for protecting the entire merchant fleet from enemy submarines. Their area of responsibility also included anti-mining, antiaircraft operations, and antisubmarine warfare. The Japanese high command failed to notice the success of German submarines against British shipping in the Atlantic, and did not establish an escort fleet at the island of Formosa until six months after Pearl Harbor, but it consisted of only eight destroyers.

The US Navy’s problems gave the Japanese Navy a false sense of security and they did not establish a second escort fleet until March 1943. The US Navy’s sinking of Japanese merchant fleet increased steadily throughout the war. By the end of 1944, American submarines had sunk half the Japanese merchant fleet and two-thirds of tanker fleet. The movement of oil from the Dutch East Indies and shipments of raw materials to Japan slowed to a trickle. The American submarine offensive against the Japanese commerce brought the empire to the brink of collapse.

Based on postwar Japanese figures, US submarines destroyed sixty percent of its merchant fleet and 30 percent of its warships. This winning effort cost the US Navy fifty-two submarines and 3,500 lives. The submarine forces had the highest casualty rate of any service branch at 22 percent but no other aspect

of the American war effort was the ratio between cost and results so obvious.

Further Reading:

Don Keith, *War Beneath the Waves: A True Story of Courage and Leadership Aboard a World War II Submarine* (New York: NAL Trade, 2011)

Don Keith, *Final Patrol: True Stories of World War II* (New York: NAL Trade, 2006)

James Calvert, *Silent Running: My Years on a World War II Attack Submarine* (New York: Wiley & Sons, 1997)

Richard H O’Kane, *Wahoo: The Patrols of America’s Most Famous World War II Submarine* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1987)

Peter Sasgen, *Hellcats: The Epic Story of World War II’s Most Daring Submarine Raid* (New York: NAL Trade, 2010)

Admiral Eugene B. Flickey, *Thunder Below!: The USS *Barb* Revolutionizes Submarine Warfare in World War II* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997)

Edward L Beach, *Submarine* (New York: Henry Holt, 1952)

Announcements:

Twin Cities Civil War Round Table - Sept. 20, 2011 www.tccwrt.com - 612-724-3849

St Croix Valley Civil War Round Table - No info at press time: Steve Anderson - 715-386-1268

Rochester WWII History Round Table - 507-280-9970; www.wv2roundtable-rochester.org

Minnesota Military Museum, Camp Ripley, 15000 Hwy 115, Little Falls, MN 56345, 320-632-7374

Air Show - Eden Prairie - www.wotn.org - 952-746-6100 July, 2012

Honor Flight - Jerry Kyser - crazyjerry45@hotmail.com - 651-338-2717

CAF - Commemorative Air Force - www.cafmn.org or Bill at 952-201-8400

Minnesota Air Guard Museum - www.mnangmuseum.org 612-713-252

Round Table Schedule 2011-2012

Sep 8 Submarine Warfare

Oct 13 Children Caught in the Brutality of War

Oct 27 The Resistance Against the Nazis

Nov 10 Bitter Appeasement — Munich

Dec 8 *The GI Offensive in Europe*

2012

Jan 12 The Battle of Leningrad

Feb 9 Code breaking and Computers

Mar 8 OPERATION PLUM 27th BG

Mar 22 Japan’s Mistake: Starting the War

Apr 12 Jedburgs-Jumping Behind Enemy Lines

May 10 Battle of Leyte Gulf

If you are a veteran of one of these campaigns – or know a veteran, contact Don Patton

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