

Death of a Sub Killer

Off our Florida shore, a U. S. blimp sights a German U-boat and attacks; here—on the 20th anniversary of the encounter—is a thrilling, little-known chapter from World War II

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Editors' Note: A Naval era has ended: the last two of the Navy's lighter-than-air vessels—those familiar sausage-shaped blimps—were decommissioned in 1962 at Lakehurst, N.J. During the war these vessels protected our shores against marauding submarines, sometimes at great risk, as the following story of the K-74 testifies.

IT WAS A BEAUTIFUL summer evening—hardly a cloud in the sky or a whisper of a breeze. Visibility seemed unlimited as the K-74, a 250-foot-long blimp, slowly pushed skyward from its mooring at Richmond Naval Air Station in southern Florida.

The 10-member crew had never flown together as a unit on submarine patrol before, but each man either had experience with other crews or months of intensive flight training. None dreamed that this routine mission almost within sight of the coast would soon explode into a battle unparalleled in United States Naval history.

The date was July 18, 1943. Germany's U-boats—reportedly 500 to 700 strong—were still prowling the sea lanes in wolf packs, riddling convoys with torpedoes in a last-ditch effort to master the seas. Nearly 600 merchant ships had fallen victim, and the Allies were feverishly striving to develop an ironclad defense against them.

The airship, armed with newly perfected radar and depth bombs, was earning a reputation as an effective sub killer; the K-74, now lazily heading out over the Florida Straits, was part of an Atlantic fleet of 200 airships in the Navy's Anti-submarine Defense Program. It carried four depth bombs and a 50-caliber machine gun.

The moon was almost full, and the ocean was calm with only a slight swell. Midnight was an hour away, and navigator John Jandrowitz had just clocked the wind at 10 knots an hour. Then suddenly the idyllic peace was shattered by the shrill ring of the general-quarters alarm.

"We've got a blip on radar off starboard," Lt. Nelson E. Grills, the 28-year-old sandy-haired commander, announced over the intercom.

"I see a sub!" shouted Machinist's Mate 1st Class Isadore Stessel, the bombardier from Brooklyn. "To the left. It's surfaced."

The moonlight had created a perfect silhouette. It was a submarine, all right, sleek and streamlined. Its hull looked like a fast-swimming fish, and it was leaving a trail of foamy white wash.

"We can't be more than 30 or 35 miles east of Key West," a crewman said. "Must be ours."

"I doubt it," the commander declared, "but let's go back so we can get a good look at her."

Ensign Darnley Eversley, the copilot, turned the cigar-shaped airship right and made two circles from a distance of two miles, enabling

the crew members to assess the submarine.

All agreed it had a rear deck gun, long and low, separated from the conning tower. There also appeared to be a forward gun and a twin-mount in the conning tower. But the aft gun was the clue, for only the German 750-ton U-boat was known to have one separate from the conning tower. It was characteristic of the German 750, and so was the low railing.

Grills checked his flight folder again. His charts showed that a convoy of nearly a dozen ships was to be in these waters in the morning.

"I guess we ought to get her," Grills concluded without emotion.

Slowly and methodically, Eversley started the blimp on its third circle, swinging into a southerly direction to come in behind the sub for the bomb run. He increased his speed to 1,700 RPMs, dropped down to 250 feet above the water, and headed straight for the U-boat's starboard side. A burst of gunfire came at the blimp as she drew within 200 yards of her target.

"Starboard engine's afire," shouted Jerrold Gidding, on aft lookout.

Machinist's Mate 3rd Class John L. Schmidt aimed an extinguisher through the right window at the engine, while the gunner, Garnet Eckert, Jr., fired two short bursts—then a long one.

The sub halted its fire, apparently stunned by the blimp's firepower and Eckert's accuracy.

When the airship pulled to the right side of the sub, Grills leaned back and tapped Stessel: "Drop one . . . drop two."

Stessel pressed down on the bomb releases. "What's the matter?" Grills called as the blimp started over the sub. The airship had not bobbed up from the loss of weight as it always does when depth bombs or heavy gear are dropped.

"Releases are stuck," Stessel answered.

"And we were right on her!" Grills groaned. "We couldn't have missed."

ECKERT HAD FIRED his first belt of 60 shells and was completing his second when he was suddenly tossed off target! The blimp was on a steep, uncontrolled climb.

Ensign Eversley snapped back the throttles to break the climb but seemed powerless. The airship, still over the submarine, was standing on its tail and still climbing.

His only thought was to get away from the sub—as far away as possible. He continued pulling the throttles, trying desperately to level off.

The submarine's gunfire resumed, and some shells ripped through the plastic front windows of the gondola. Schmidt reported that the fire in the right engine was out, but now the left one had been hit.

"We're going to ditch," Grills warned, pressing the crash button. Fuel tanks were dropped to lessen the danger of an explosion.

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