

Sub Killer

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The submarine, still firing, made a hard turn and headed east. It didn't submerge.

The blimp's big rubber bag, torn with bullet and cannon holes, was partially deflated when the airship hit the water. Radioman John Rice, noting the time of 23:53, completed his last mayday call. Water covered the floor of the gondola.

"Abandon ship!" Grills ordered. Crew members quickly pulled the plugs to inflate their yellow life preservers and then made their way out via window escapes on both sides of the partially submerged gondola.

"Everyone's out all right and clear of the ship," Grills called to Eversley. "The life raft went down with the stern. Better get out of here because that sub may be looking for us. I'm going back to the ship to make sure the radar is destroyed and the flight-code book sunk."

Ensign Eversley called the men around him after Grills swam away. "We can do two things," he said, "either go back to the ship, which can be seen better by searchers—and also that submarine—or swim away from here. Each man decide for himself."

Four men—Rice, Schmidt, Radioman 3rd Class Robert Bourne, and the assistant gunner, John Kowalski—chose the former and followed Grills to the wreckage. Eversley, Jandrowitz, Gidding, Eckert, and Stessel swam out to sea.

WHEN DAWN CAME, the wreckage was still in sight, and new hope came over the Eversley group. "Look! Look!" Eckert pointed. A blimp appeared on the horizon. It was just a speck miles away. But it didn't come nearer and finally disappeared.

About two hours later a pair of blimps appeared and flew almost directly overhead but gave no indication of having seen the survivors. A few more minutes and a twin-engine seaplane came over the wreckage and dropped a parachute. The chute contained a package of supplies, but it landed out of sight and out of reach.

The men knew now that they had been seen. Rescue must be imminent. "It won't be long now," Eversley shouted to Stessel, and started swimming toward him. The bombardier, trying to keep himself above water, was about 30 yards away. The copilot planned to pull him closer to the other men. Eversley heard Stessel yell and stopped for a moment.

"There's a shark! There's a shark!" Stessel screamed, pointing to a black fin that was circling him. Eversley, barely 15 yards away, froze.

The shark circled Stessel two or three more times, then suddenly struck

at him like a trout hits a fly.

"Oh my God! Help me!" Stessel cried as he splashed wildly with both arms. His face was covered with blood. The long, black monster had locked onto Stessel's waist and was tugging

like a dog trying to pull away a bone. Its fin was slapping the water.

Eversley turned in horror. He couldn't watch any more, and he started swimming back to the other three men. They also had witnessed

the savage assault and saw Stessel disappear with the fin.

"Let's pray," Eversley said, still shivering from fright. The four formed a square in the ocean and began in unison, "The Lord is my shep-

herd; I shall not want..."

Fifteen minutes later they saw the last of the K-74 as the sea slowly swallowed its remains. There were two violent explosions—apparently from depth charges which were still

armed and probably torn from their racks when the gondola hit the water. "Let's hope the others were clear of her," Gidding said.

There were two more hours of the blazing tropical sun and the incessant

electric shocklike stings of Portuguese jellyfish. At 10:15 a.m., the destroyer U.S.S. Dahlgren came into view and soon hauled the men aboard.

A half-dozen shots rang out as the Dahlgren crew lifted Eversley, the

last man. "There were two shark fins right behind you," a sailor with a rifle informed Eversley.

Another great sigh of relief came over the four when they learned Rice, Schmidt, Kowalski, and Bourne were also aboard, having been picked up about three miles away. It wasn't until eight hours later that Lt. Grills, suffering from severe sunburn and submersion, was rescued by a seaplane. He had become separated from the others during the night and was trying to swim to shore—a good 25 miles away.

The Navy, not very proud of its highly touted submarine killer's first performance against a surfaced enemy sub, waited 11 days before issuing a communiqué on the unprecedented engagement. The communiqué only gave the barest details: "A nonrigid airship, U. S. K-74, was lost at sea recently as the result of a gunfire attack by a surfaced enemy submarine... One member of the crew was lost."

The 75-word statement went almost unnoticed in the nation's press. Then, nearly two decades later, retired Vice Adm. Charles E. Rosendahl, doing research for a history of the Navy's nonrigid airship program, uncovered this bizarre war adventure. Investigating further, he learned through West German sources that on July 19, 1943, German Naval Headquarters received a radio message from U-boat 134 that it had been attacked and damaged by an American airship off the Florida coast.

THE SUBMARINE dispatch indicated that the blimp's gunfire had caused some damage to the boat's main ballast tank.

The U-134's message also showed that bombs were dropped from the airship, contrary to the belief of Lieutenant Grills.

Admiral Rosendahl learned that the destruction of the K-74 was avenged on Aug. 24, 1943, when a British bomber caught up with the U-134 in the Bay of Biscay off France. The bomber crew reported that the submarine was surfaced, apparently damaged, and limping back to port when its bombs found their mark. The German Admiralty confirmed this two months later when it disclosed that U-134, last heard from on Aug. 24, was presumed lost along with its crew of 28 officers and men.

Details of this unparalleled blimp-sub engagement were not declassified until 1961, when the Secretary of the Navy awarded special letters of commendation to every member of the K-74 crew except Lieutenant Grills. The lieutenant, now a lawyer in Indianapolis, was presented the Navy's Distinguished Flying Cross "for courage, skill, and devotion to duty in the face of hostile gunfire... in keeping with highest traditions of the United States Navy."



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