

MYSTERY OF DORADO'S LAST VOYAGE

WHAT HAPPENED TO THIS NEW SUBMARINE AS IT HEADED FOR THE PANAMA CANAL?

BY RAY BARKER



The launching of the USS Dorado.

On the night of 12 October 1943, L/Commander Earle Caffrey Schneider and his executive officer were going over charts aboard the USS *Dorado* (SS-248) as the new submarine headed for the Panama Canal. *Dorado* and its crew of 77 men had departed New London, Connecticut, on 6 October following successful sea trials and the voyage to the Panama Canal had proven to be trouble-free. The sub was running under a moon-lit but stormy sky and was making regular reports with expected arrival at the Canal on 14 October. However, on that date the *Dorado* did not appear. The sub was never seen again and this triggered a lengthy investigation.

A *Gato*-class submarine, the USS *Dorado* was laid down on 27 August 1942 at the Electric Boat Company in Groton, Connecticut. She was sponsored by Francis Allen, wife of R/Adm. Ezra G. Allen, Budget Officer of the US Department of the Navy, and launched on 23 May 1943. The submarine was commissioned on 28 August 1943 — just one year and one day since the start of construction.

The *Gato*-class was the first mass-production US submarine design of the Second World War. *Gatos* destroyed much of the Japanese merchant marine and a large portion of the Imperial Japanese Navy. *Gato* is a species of small catshark and like most other US submarines of the period, boats of the *Gato*-class were given the names of marine creatures.

The *Gato*-class design, with a maximum range of 11,000 nautical miles, was a near-duplicate of the earlier *Tambor*- and *Gar*-class submarines. The only significant differences were an increase in diving depth from 250 feet to 300 feet and an extra five feet in length to allow the addition of a watertight bulkhead dividing the one large engine room in two, with two diesel generators in each room. The *Gatos*, along with nearly all of the US Navy fleet-type subs of WWII, were of partial double-hull construction. The *Gatos* were slow divers when compared to some German and British designs but that was mostly because the *Gatos* were significantly larger boats. Sufficient fuel bunkering to provide the range necessary for



The keel of the *Dorado* being laid on 27 August 1942.

75-day patrols from Hawaii to Japan and back could be obtained only with a larger boat, which would take longer to submerge than a smaller one. Seventy-seven *Gatos* were commissioned from November 1941 (USS *Drum*) through April 1944 (USS *Croaker*). Twenty were lost during the war and the USS *Halibut* which was damaged but returned to base was considered too badly damaged to be rebuilt and was scrapped.

Lieutenant Commander Schneider had started out his career on board



Patch from the short-lived USS *Dorado*, the USS *Pennsylvania* where he spent a year before going on to the USS *Ranger* for three years. It was then on to submarines and he reported aboard



Dorado during fitting out at the Electric Boat Company in August 1943. Note the women workers and the ship's bell at the left.