

# HOW THE JAPANESE ATTACKED EMIDIO

JUST DAYS AFTER PEARL HARBOR, AN ENEMY SUBMARINE ATTACKED A TANKER OFF THE CALIFORNIA COAST  
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Just days after the Japanese attack on the US Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor on the morning of 7 December 1941, marauding enemy submarines were searching for targets off the West Coast. Eight American ships were attacked and three were sent to the bottom, two close-in to the California coast, in less than three weeks. America was at war.

The Imperial Japanese Navy's First Submarine Group, under the command of R/Adm. Tsutomu Sato, was stationed

northeast of Pearl Harbor during the attack. Once the surprise assault on the Hawaiian naval base had concluded, the First Submarine Group formed a barrier to prevent any US Navy ships from pursuing the retiring Japanese attack fleet. After the threat had subsided, the group's nine submarines turned east and sailed toward the West Coast of the

United States. Initially they were in pursuit

of an American carrier with subsequent orders to take up station at various points along the coast to interdict shipping, both commercial and military.

Four subs were

stationed at strategic West Coast ports with *I-15* in the waters outside of San Francisco Bay, *I-19* off Los Angeles/Long Beach Harbor, *I-25* patrolling the mouth of the Columbia River, and *I-26* guarding the entry to the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Five other boats patrolled the shipping lanes with *I-9* at Cape Blanco, Oregon, *I-10* off the coast of San Diego, *I-17* near Cape Mendocino, *I-21* patrolling near Estero Bay, and *I-23* in the waters of Monterey Bay, all of which are in California.

On the afternoon of 20 December 1941, SS *Emidio* was steaming in ballast

approximately 200 miles north of San Francisco, having delivered a load of petroleum products to the port of Seattle, Washington. At 1:10 pm, a submarine was sighted. *Emidio's* captain, Clarke A. Farrow, attempted to outrun the submarine. *I-17*, with Captain Kozo Nishino in command, was able to quickly close the distance to the tanker using the submarine's maximum surface speed of 23.5-knots to his advantage. Capable of only 11-knots maximum speed, *Emidio* did not stand a chance.

## ATTACK AND RESCUE

At 1:45 pm, Capt. Nishino ordered *I-17's* 14cm/40 deck gun (5.5-inch diameter with a barrel length of 220 inches) to begin shelling the tanker from less than one-half a mile away. An initial "SOS" radio call was sent from the tanker as the report from the submarine's cannon reached the men on deck. The first of six shells struck the aft davit of the No. 2 lifeboat and the second took off the radio antenna. At that point, Captain Farrow ordered the helmsman to zig-zag as he tried in vain to save his ship.

While under fire from the submarine, Chief Mate Joseph C. Chambers and Able Seaman Louis G. Finch climbed above the wheelhouse to rig a new antenna. After the second SOS signal was sent, Finch helped a couple of injured seamen into a small work boat. Once in the water, the swells were threatening to swamp the boat and Finch chose to lighten the craft by getting into the water and holding onto the gunwale. He did so for an hour and a half until he was transferred to another life boat. (For his actions, Finch was awarded the Merchant Marine Distinguished Service Medal.)

The No. 3 life boat was being lowered with Ordinary Seaman Fred Potts with messmen R.W. Pennington and Stuart McGillivray on board. Before the boat could touch the water, a Japanese shell



Grounded on Steamboat Rock, *Emidio* is down by the stern from a torpedo hit in the engine room. The wrecked tanker was quite a sight and this view was extensively photographed. (Nautical Archive Images)