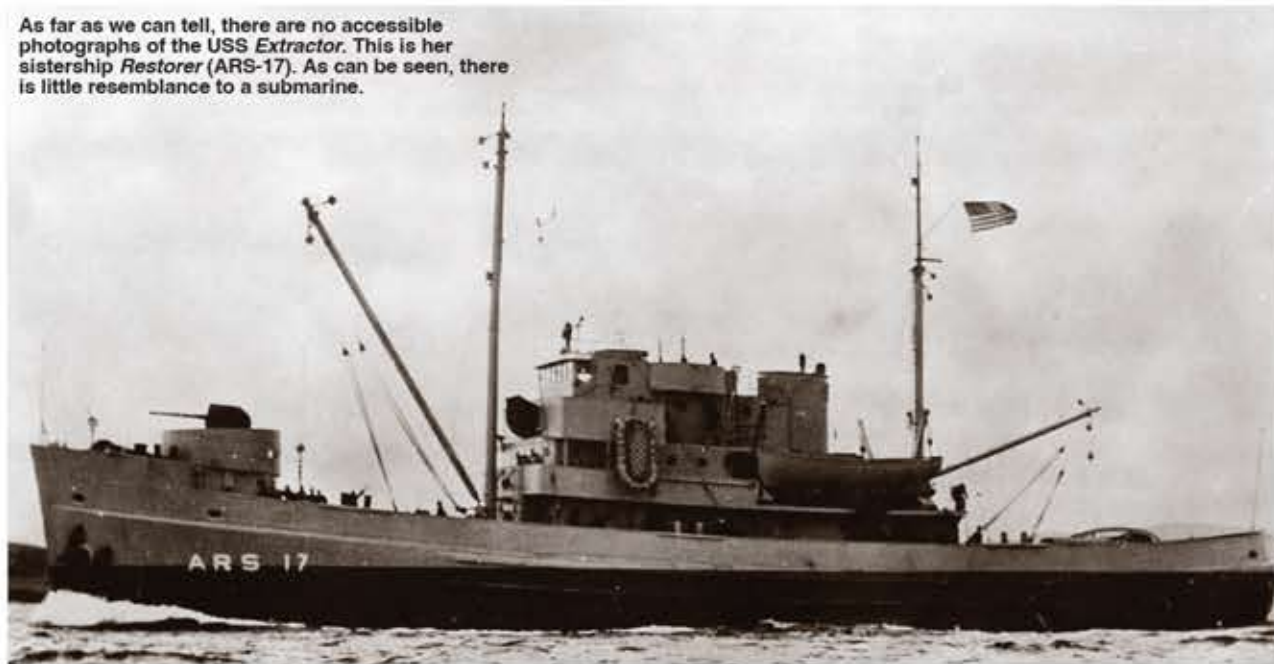


As far as we can tell, there are no accessible photographs of the USS *Extractor*. This is her sistership *Restorer* (ARS-17). As can be seen, there is little resemblance to a submarine.



LAST LOSS TO FRIENDLY FIRE

THIS TRAGIC SINKING WOULD BE THE LAST WWII LOSS OF A US NAVY SHIP
SUNK BY ANOTHER US NAVY SHIP - BY JAMES THOMPSON

She was just about as unglamorous as a ship could be. Yet, she was hard-working, faithful, and ready to perform any assigned task. She was USS *Extractor* (ARS-15), an *Anchor*-class rescue and salvage ship. There were only four other ships in her class and they were *Anchor* (ARS-13), *Protector* (ARS-14), *Extricate* (ARS-16), and *Restorer* (ARS-17). Powered by four Hoover, Owens, Rentschler Co. 685A diesel-electric engines and three diesel-drive 40Kw 240F DC ship's service generators, the *Anchors* had a single propeller that could transfer up to 1200-shp giving an absolute maximum top speed of 15 knots.

Displacing 1615 tons, the *Anchors* were 183-ft 3-in long with a beam of 37-ft and a draft of 14-ft 8-in. They carried six officers and 59 enlisted men, many of whom had highly specialized training. Since there was a war going on, the *Anchors* were armed with a single 3-inch/50-caliber gun and four single 20mm anti-aircraft mounts. The lead ship of the class, USS *Anchor* was

commissioned on 23 October 1943 and like her following sisters, immediately went into service to provide the Fleet with a variety of services.

These ships received little in the way of recognition and when USS *Extractor* was built at Colberg Boat Works in Stockton, California, no one recorded when she was laid down. However, ARS-15 was launched with minimal ceremony on 15 June 1943 but not commissioned until 3 March 1944 with Lt. (jg) Leslie C. Oaks in command.

She immediately headed out into the Pacific for a variety of locations — being called in where combat ships needed help. On 1 December 1944, she departed Ulithi and headed to Guam, arriving on 3 December. From that base, she made voyages to Tinian and Saipan and continued to assist ships at sea. By 21 January 1945, Lt. (jg) Horace M. Babcock had assumed command and *Extractor* was ordered to leave Guam and head to Leyte in the Philippines. No escort would be provided. There were 80

officers and men aboard the stout vessel as it slowly steamed toward its new assignment.

On the 23rd, the ship's radio picked up an operational priority message that came through quite garbled and could not be decoded. *Extractor* was operating under radio silence and Babcock did not request a retransmission of the message because of this restriction. The message that had been sent requested that Babcock reverse course with *Extractor* and return to Guam. Unknown to routing control, the message could not be understood and *Extractor* was continuing on to the Philippines per her original orders.

The weather was clear and the sea was smooth as the *Extractor* slowly ate up the miles. Also on the 23rd and unknown to Babcock, the *Extractor* was being regularly "painted" by radar and the ship closely watching ASR-15 was USS *Guardfish* (SS-217) under the command of Cmdr. Douglas T. Hammond. The ship was underway to

its new patrol area in the Luzon Strait.

Guardfish was a *Gato*-class submarine and a veteran warrior out on its tenth combat patrol. *Guardfish* had won a Presidential Unit Citation for its first and second war patrols and a second for its eighth war patrol. By her tenth war patrol, she had sunk 18 enemy ships, tying it in eighth place for number of ships sunk.

The SD radar on *Guardfish* had picked up a target at 2030 at 11,000 yards. Completely oblivious of the fact that his orders had been changed and that he was being stalked by one of the deadliest ships in the inventory of the US Navy, Babcock proceeded on course to the Philippines. Aboard the *Guardfish*, Hammond could not make visual contact but kept the target on radar.

At 2310, a signal was sent to ComSubPac and ComTaskGroup 17.7 asking for information on friendly forces in the area. A watch was then set up to listen for signals from the target. Nothing was heard and it took until 0113 on 24 January for the message from ComSubPac to be answered.

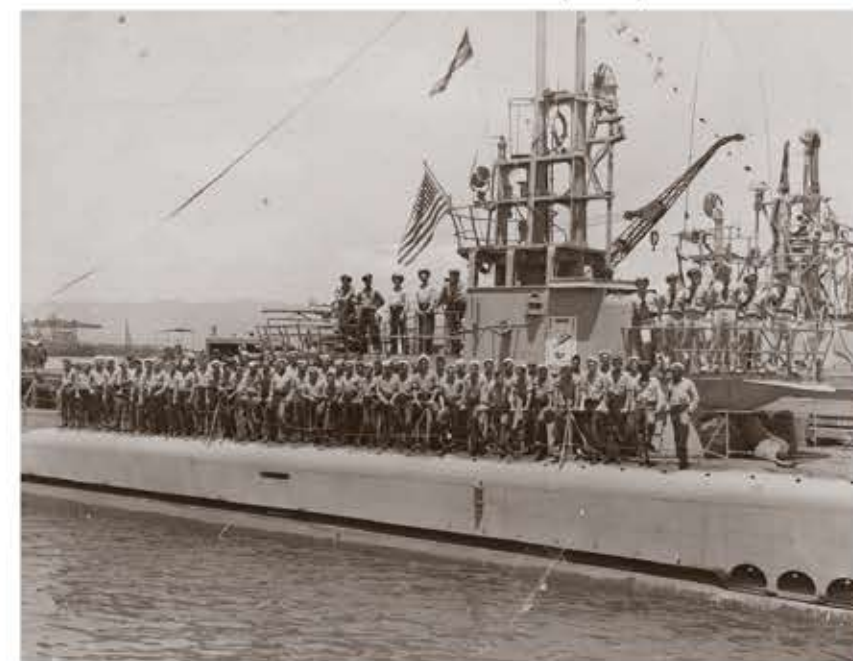
Hammond was told there were no friendly submarines in the area but if the target was a surface ship, then it was probably friendly since *Guardfish* was in a joint operation zone. Hammond kept maneuvering the sub until he got in front of the target at 0600. Cautiously raising the periscope, Hammond made four observations of the target and then his executive office made a further two for positive identification. Midway between Guam and Luzon, Hammond fired four Mk. 18 torpedoes at 0620:20 at the target, which the men had identified as a Japanese *I*-class submarine.

It was just 1 minute 18 seconds after leaving the tube that the first torpedo exploded. A second explosion took place eight seconds later. There were no further explosions so the last two either missed or were duds. Raising the periscope, they saw they had made a terrible mistake. The bow of a ship was raising into the air and it was definitely not a sub. Hammond stated that he "realized with great concern that we had not hit a submarine."

The two torpedoes tore the little *Extractor* apart. Her back was



USS *Protector* (ARS-14) on 22 December 1943.



Guardfish and crew toward the end of WWII.

broken and she immediately began to sink. *Guardfish* surfaced at 0630 and proceeded to an area of floating wreckage. Rescue of survivors began and by 0815 some 73 men, including Babcock, had been pulled from the water. They continued to search the area until 0909 when Hammond determined the men had gone down with the *Extractor*.

A signal was sent at 1156 to ComSubPac and ComTaskGroup 17.7, telling them of the terrible mistake. The *Guardfish's* 10th war patrol ended on 26 January at Guam and the only ship sunk was *Extractor*. A Court of Inquiry determined that the sinking had been an unfortunate accident,

absolving ComSubPac, but criticizing Lt. Babcock for not breaking radio silence to request retransmission of an operational priority message. The Court also criticized Hammond for not using the underwater telephone. He received a formal letter of reprimand but remained commander of *Guardfish* for two more war patrols. There was no court martial of Hammond. He was not relieved of duty until 29 July 1945, after the ship's twelfth war patrol.

This was the last "friendly fire" sinking of a US warship during WWII. At war's end, *Guardfish* was the only US submarine to sink another US Navy ship. **SC**