

VOYAGES OF THE LETHAL LADY

THE USS WAHOO QUICKLY COMPILED A RECORD AS ONE OF THE MOST FEARED GATO-CLASS SUBMARINES. ITS DISAPPEARANCE WAS SHROUDED IN MYSTERY FOR SIX DECADES

BY TIM HUTCHINSON



Wahoo readied for launch on 13 February 1942 at Mare Island. The Whale (SS-239) is on the building ways on the left and a hull section for Tinosa (SS-283) is just visible on the lower left corner of the photo.



On the night of 14 September 1942, the men aboard US Navy attack submarine *Wahoo* spotted smoke rising from the funnel of a vessel emerging from Truk's North Pass. Lieutenant Commander Marvin Kennedy uncorked four torpedoes at the 6438-ton Japanese freighter *Kamogawa Maru*. The first three missed, but the panicked Japanese helmsman swerved directly into the path of number four. The missile hit squarely amidships on the port side and set off a hold full of ammunition. As the doomed ship went up like a volcano, an escorting destroyer commenced dropping depth charges. Kennedy dove to 230 feet, below a temperature gradient that reflected sonar waves and hid the hunters from the enraged escorts.

The United States Navy had launched *Wahoo* from its Mare Island construction site off San Francisco on St. Valentine's Day 1942. Precisely 13 years earlier, mobster Al Capone had had his rival Bugs Moran's gang machine-gunned to death in a Chicago garage. This slender new martial maiden would prove infinitely deadlier than those ruthless Prohibition gunsels.

Wahoo had already been under construction when Imperial Japanese forces assaulted Pearl Harbor. The unfinished machine's mission-to-be was handed down from Navy high command even before her launching: "Conduct unrestricted submarine warfare." Her crew could hardly wait to lash out at the faraway island nation that had ruthlessly wounded their country. They had no way of knowing

how much blood they would drink.

By summer, *Wahoo* was completed, her men trained on how to use her in battle, and her stores full. She churned eagerly into the Pacific Basin at 10:00 on the morning of 23 August 1942. Her targets-to-be were mercifully ignorant of the sleek young tigress bearing down on them.

For American forces bent on regaining their usurped Philippine possessions, the first step was the bristling Japanese bastion on Truk atoll. In the midst of the Caroline Islands chain, Truk is encircled by coral reefs that made it impossible for heavy warships to get within shelling range of shore targets. With Imperial air and sea forces menacing any task force that might try to bypass the facility, the installation was a hornets' nest. With

no bomber bases in range of Truk at this time, submarines were the only weapons the Allies had to wield against this hot spot. *Wahoo* arrived in the area on the morning of 4 September.

Shortly after dawn on the 6th, Kennedy's lookouts summoned him to the attack periscope. He fired six torpedoes at six-second intervals, but all missed the freighter steaming southeast across his bow.

For over a week the ocean was barren of targets as the impatient Americans searched for prey. On the evening of 14 September, a torpedo in number one forward bow tube spontaneously activated itself and crashed through the chamber's outer door. Although the warhead did not explode, the missile remained protruding halfway out of the silo. This made the boat seriously susceptible to depth charges, but the crew had

no thoughts of aborting their cruise. Instead they ignored the faulty torpedo jutting from their bow and sank the *Kamogawa Maru*.

Following this inaugural kill, the seas again became sterile, and after a full month of fruitless hunting a disillusioned Kennedy returned to Pearl with the defective missile still poking from its tube. For three weeks, *Wahoo* was worked on and restocked while her men chafed to return to predatory pursuits.

On 8 November, a grim Kennedy again headed west with a rested crew equally anxious to prove themselves. Their assigned patrol area was north of enemy-held Bougainville Island. Guadalcanal-bound supply and troop convoys traversed this sector regularly, and with the Imperial Navy having won control of the seas surrounding the Solomon Islands it was critical

to block the Axis shipping lanes if American Gen. Archer Vandergriff and his Marines were to have any hope of survival on Guadalcanal.

Hunting was poor until 10 December. That evening *Wahoo* attacked a convoy between Buka Island and the Kilinailau Islands. The resolute Americans closed to just 700 yards from 8748-ton *Soyei Maru* before blowing her into a towering bonfire. Diving away from depth-charging escorts the huntress and her sailors were shaken by the blasts, but managed to escape.

The Japanese apparently realized an especially dangerous raider was on the prowl, and decided to fight her with her own kind. On the morning of 14 December, one of Japan's huge I-class submarines churned blithely across *Wahoo's* bow. Responding to his men's shouts, Kennedy stumbled from the

USS *Wahoo* (SS-238) off Mare Island Navy Yard on 14 July 1943.