Hunters of the Deep: A Brief Synopsis of the Contribution of the Silent Service of the Pacific

by Bryan T. Hayes

The English dictionary refers to “Pacific” as an unaggressive or peaceful nature. The Pacific theater in WWII was a direct antonym as American and Japanese forces exercised immense human destruction across the islands and atolls in the central and Southern theaters. American memories of the WWII Asian battles usually dwell at Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal, Iwo Jima and Hiroshima. As such, the majority of Naval dramatic action captured on film and in books occurred on the surface, on the beaches, or in the air, as the era witnessed an incredible shift from the battleship force to the aircraft carrier, its support units and amphibious operations of the Marines and sustaining naval units. Deserved and warranted is the appreciation of Americans to the carrier and amphibious arm of the U.S. maritime service for their courage and invincible spirit. But in the Pacific, brave American warriors waged another kind of war in the deep that led to a valiant American victory against Japanese transports, oil tankers, and the combat fleet. Submarine warfare was not only an important factor in the defeat of the Japanese, but crucial to the American cause. Often under acknowledged is the impact the U.S. Navy's submarine forces contributed to the outcome of the war in the Pacific. To analyze the Pacific theater without looking closely at the battle figures compiled by the Silent Service is a grave injustice to any student of the war and to the heroic men who unselfishly sacrificed for the greater good of all mankind. Comprising less than 1.6% of personnel assigned to the Pacific fleet, American submarines were credited with 54% of the total number of Japanese vessels sent to the ocean floor.[1] This is a brief glimpse of the gallantry and sacrifice made by the “silent” men of that generation.

Most responsible and the first of the American naval assets to make offensive maneuvers towards the destruction of the Japanese merchant fleet and economy was the Silent Service. Every generation is characterized by noble individuals who, through personal sacrifice and courage, have kept America safe since our humble beginnings. Through initiative, teamwork, leadership and ingenuity, the submariners of the Pacific Theater built the foundations for future special warfare roles and established many of the traditions of our modern submarine force.

Distress Calls

Elite crews of highly intelligent and intensely dedicated officers and men were a major asset of the submarine fleet at the genesis of the war. Equalizing this strength were burdens that included a lack of strategic doctrine, conservative tactics, and inadequate torpedoes. Despite these limitations, the U.S. submariners had not altogether abandoned the Mahanian belief that their primary targets should be Japan’s capital ships. They were in agreement that Japan’s merchant shipping should be targeted, but they had not reached agreement on how to best effectively accomplish that mission. Cautious tactics inhibited the submarine campaign in two other ways during the early stages of the war. First, submarine commanders were cautious of periscope depth attacks because of the ease of being spotted by aircraft in favor of the less effective deeper sonar guided attacks. Furthermore, commanders were wary of the surface night time hazards of raiding until the Germans proved it was an effective mode of attack against merchant shipping.
Despite all this, the most critical flaw was the offensive futility of the torpedo. The Mark-14 torpedo traveled at depths far below the bottom of the steel hull of the enemy, neglecting to activate the explosive warhead. In addition, the detonator jammed when the contact was too direct and severe. Many of Japan’s ships escaped destruction because of these ineffective weapons. Historians are left with the fascinating question as to how much earlier could the war have been brought to a close had the U.S. submarine fleet been initially equipped with reliable torpedoes.

By the end of 1943, remedies were in place and the Pacific submarine fleet began to bring destruction to the resourceful and industrial Japanese empire. American commanders now understood that submarines operate best as independent deplovers in an asymmetric manner, preying on Japan’s merchant and capital ships. Having had to re-write wartime tactical doctrine on the fly, these men were undeniably modern military pioneers. History has placed these valiant sailors and the incredible deeds they performed in their rightful place by securing a prominent position as a powerful submarine force in the expansion of any nation’s naval fleet.

Submariners were carrying out damaging attacks on Japanese naval units as they eliminated the Japanese merchant fleet. During the course of the war, 189 Japanese naval combatants were destroyed by submarines, including 4 Carriers, 43 Destroyers, and 23 Submarines.[2] The loss of the heavier naval units was critical to the Japanese, especially as the strength of the U.S. surface fleet increased. Especially noteworthy are the surprisingly high losses of Japanese destroyers and escort vessels to submarine attacks, which became a vital asset at Leyte Gulf. American submariners frequently attacked the Japanese under conditions of such risk that failure of the attack on the enemy antisubmarine vessel placed the crew in extreme danger. However, these attacks were so successful the Japanese were forced into a shortage of destroyer screening units, allowing their merchant shipping to be inadequately escorted.

Merchant Shipping Assaults

Operating thousands of miles from their bases and deep within enemy-controlled waters, submariners initiated their fight on Japanese shipping immediately following the attack on Pearl Harbor, and continued to fight with telling effectiveness until the Japanese relented. During the early part of 1942, while our surface forces were still weakened by Pearl Harbor, submarines were virtually the only U.S. naval forces that could be exposed in offensive operations. Only 51 submarines were available in the Pacific theater, and barely capable, their attacks produced immediate and damaging results that were greatly needed at the time. They made it more difficult for the enemy to strengthen his forward positions, fortify his defensive areas, and acquire in Japan an adequate reserve of fuel oil and rubber from their recently conquered territory.

Ironically, Japan ultimately went to war when the imports of essential resources were threatened. Their goal was to assure this supply of goods and raw materials would continue undisturbed. Pearl Harbor was a bold, calculated attempt to gain the military advantage against a nation that was at the root of their economic and industrial interests. Japan unleashed its military to secure the dominating control over the pacific, well aware that the U.S. was rich in resources. Trusting that Americans’ were committed to
isolationism, Japan would soon discover their initial assault was an exceedingly grave miscalculation of the American fighting spirit. Once approved by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, the U. S. Navy implemented unrestricted submarine warfare. Strategists and planners that for so long deplored German practice of attacking merchant shipping were now in agreement that all Japanese shipping was defined as existing as part of the military, and thus need not be considered as merchant vessels.

Sinking of enemy merchant ships rose from 134 ships in 1942 to 284 ships in 1943. The submarine coordinated attack groups reached the peak of their effectiveness in 1944, as the merchant fleet of Japan suffered its worst and most crippling blow; 492 ships were sunk or destroyed in submarine torpedo and gun attacks.[3] Additionally, submarine operations were vital to the political and military strategy of McArthur’s return to the Philippines in the Southwest Pacific Theater. The thousand mile advance, aided by the submarines infliction of enormous losses to the Japanese merchant fleet, placed MacArthur’s forces at New Guinea’s westernmost point by mid-1944, ready to invade the Philippines.

Japanese shipping continued to work in the East China and Yellow Seas, but the invasion of Okinawa in April, 1945 soon made the East China Sea worthless to Japan. Causing heavy damage, submersiners were very active during April and May in the Yellow Sea and along the east and south coasts of the main Japanese islands. In June, the landlocked Sea of Japan was penetrated in force. The submersiners were excellent hunters, and in a series of coordinated attacks did tremendous damage to the remnants of the Japanese merchant fleet. In 1944, 600 Japanese ships were sunk, more than the combined totals for 1941 to 1943. These operations drastically reduced the flow of oil from the East Indies, preventing Japan the ability to refuel what was left of its merchant and fighting fleet.

Missions of Confidence and Hope

Among the special missions performed were reconnaissance, rescue, supply, and lifeguard duties. An excellent result of submarine reconnaissance was the intelligence furnished to our surface and air forces prior to the Battle for Leyte Gulf; information which contributed considerably to that victory. Submersiners in a number of instances rescued stranded personnel and performed personnel evacuation duties. The supplies and equipment delivered by submarines to friendly guerrilla forces in the Philippines did much to keep alive the spirit of resistance in those islands.

As air forces came into positions from which they could intensify their attacks on Japanese-held territory, U.S. submersiners were called upon to carry out lifeguard operations to rescue aviators forced down at sea in enemy waters. Occasionally assisted by friendly aircraft, which provided fighter cover and assisted in locating survivors, submersiners rescued more than 500 aviators during the course of the war, often under heavy enemy fire. Former U.S. President George Bush was rescued by the USS Finback after being shot down while he was on an air strike mission over the Bonin Islands. Pilots and airmen performed their missions with sound confidence in the odds of their survival because the submarine fleet was available for these search and rescue missions.
Strategic Significance for Future Warfare

American submarine losses resulted from continued penetration, far from American bases, deep within the enemy zone of defense until the last phase of the war; penetration that was far beyond the areas where the surface and aircraft fleets could reach. The nature of submarine operations and the general necessity of submarines deploying independently severely influenced the numbers of American dead as the personnel loss in most instances was the entire ship's company; 1 in 5 American submariners gave the ultimate sacrifice. As heavy as were the losses in submarine personnel and equipment, submarine training and American's on the home front supplied replacements so effectively that the submarine force at the end of the war far exceeded its pre-Pearl Harbor strength.

American submarine warfare in the Pacific was primarily a war against commerce, not a Mahanian search for command or control of the seas. However, its impact on the war machine of Japan and on their sea control was overwhelming. The strategic impact of the war against any logistic support of Japanese military and naval power was certainly decisive. A major factor contributing to Japan's surrender was the nation's recognition of the fact that it was unable to sustain the war effort due to the severe shortages of raw materials and basic essentials. Most historians speak of the Battle of Midway as the turning point of the war as the decisive closing stages of Japanese air power, and that fight certainly deserves its rightful place in military history. Warfare was revolutionized as the impact delivered from the surface, air, and amphibious forces in the Pacific certainly changed warfare for the future. Likewise and often forgotten, the submarine fleet was well represented in the Allied effort for achieving victory. The overall efficiency of the submarine campaign and the tremendous contribution of the silent service towards its final outcome are truly historic. Strategically, the actions of the pacific submarine fleet were a key defining moment in American and world history at large as submarines performed defining roles of nuclear deterrence, special warfare, lifeguard, and intelligence missions in the decades long Cold War. Today, they continue to be vital to political and military strategy. Generally, the American educational system does not inform students of the submarine role in the world’s Greatest War and consequently, the foundation submariners built for the security and stability of the democratic world for decades to come. The battles of these silent warriors assisted in defining naval warfare nearly 70 years ago and remain so today as their impact on political and military strategy will be felt for generations more.

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