

HISTORY OF USS PORPOISE (SS 172)

The first diesel-electric submarine built by the United States Navy was USS PORPOISE. Construction was begun on the sub on 1 Novomb 1933, at the U.S. Navy Yard, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. The SS-172 slid down the ways at Portsmouth on 20 June 1935, sponsored by Miss Eva Croft of Somersworth, New Hampshire. About two months later (15 August 1935) the sub was commissioned with Lieutenant Commander S.S. Murray, USN, as her first commanding officer.

After trials were completed off Portsmouth, PORPOISE departed for her shakedown cruise on 3 January 1936. Ports she visited were: Newport, Rhode Island; New London, Connecticut; Washington, D.C.; Miami, Florida; Curacao; Dutch West Indies; Canal Zone; Port Antonio, Jamaica; Guantanamo Bay, Cuba; New Orleans, Louisiana, and Savannah, Georgia, returning to Portsmouth in June 1936.

PORPOISE transitted the Panama Canal, and on 1 September 1936, she joined the Pacific Fleet at San Diego. For five months the sub underwent extensive training in gunnery and torpedo exercises and in March 1937, she participated in a fleet problem in the Hawaiian area, returning to San Diego in May 1937.

The submarine entered the Mare Island Navy Yard in November 1937 for an extensive overhaul and, overhaul completed, she proceeded to Pearl Harbor for fleet exercises in January 1938. Twenty-two months later (19 November 1939) PORPOISE got underway for Manila where she became part of the Asiatic Fleet upon her arrival (1 December 1939). From December 1939 to December 1941, she was engaged in various exercises with Submarines, Asiatic Fleet.

At the outbreak of the war (7 December 1941) PORPOISE was at Olongapo, Philippine Islands, undergoing a refit. She was a portrait in miniature of the United States' unpreparedness at the start of the war. With all four main engines being overhauled and her entire after battery out, PORPOISE was in no condition to meet the enemy. As the required work was accomplished in record time, she became one of the few U.S. Vessels operating in the Pacific. The sub moved to Manila on 20 December 1941, and was enroute to her First War Patrol only 15 days after the Nips struck Pearl Harbor.

The sub steamed out of Manila Bay on 22 December enroute to her First Patrol with Lieutenant Commander J.A. Callaghan, USN, as commanding officer. After picking her way through the mine fields off Corregidor, PORPOISE set course for the Lingayen Gulf. The following day at 1433, while off the gulf, she made her first contact with the enemy, a Japanese destroyer -- 4,000 yards range. The Jap quickly picked up the scent and came charging toward the sub, which immediately dove, rigged for depth charge attack and commenced silent running.

Deep in the murk PORPOISE picked up still more screw noises on her sound gear, indicating that the enemy had been joined by another ship. Five charges were felt at a distance, then the DD stopped, and three more charges were felt much closer. Sixteen more charges were dropped at a distance, before PORPOISE was able to clear the area, having incurred very slight damage.

On Christmas Day PORPOISE again made contact with two enemy destroyers. This time she was subjected to eighteen accurately placed charges, which were so close they seemed to explode over her and actually blistered the paint in her conning tower. This attack resulted in a great deal of minor damage, none of which was serious enough to force her to return to her base, thanks to the hard work of her crew in repairing the sub.

PORPOISE proceeded to the China Sea area on 28 December and on 11 January 1942, while patrolling off Cape Paderan, French Indo-China, she made one contact, but was unable to make any attack. She proceeded on her patrol, passing through the Balabac Strait, Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and into the Makassar Strait, arriving off Balikpapan on 23 January. Here, PORPOISE observed the blastin of oil wells by the Dutch, who were following the now well-known scorched earth policy, as the Japanese had invaded Borneo. While patrolling off Balikpapan at 0205 on 27 January an unidentified ship was sighted, tracked and attacked, but due to unknown circumstances the torpedoes either missed or failed to explode. At 0900 the same day, another enemy ship was attacked, but again the results were negative. That night PORPOISE left the area enroute to Surabaya, via Cape Mandar and Madura Straits, mooring at the Naval Base, Surabaya, Java, on 31 January.

Her refit completed, PORPOISE stood out of Surabaya on 9 February enroute to the Netherland East Indies area for her Second War Patrol. Clearing the mine fields off Madura Strait, she proceeded through the Makassar Strait, and it wasn't until the 26th day (6 March 1942) of the Patrol that she sighted the first enemy vessel, a light cruiser of the NATORI class. However, the enemy ship was at too great a distance and PORPOISE could not close the range for attack.

It wasn't until 13 March that PORPOISE made the only attack of this patrol. At 1535 smoke was sighted on the horizon. This contact developed into a convoy composed of three cargo ships in column with one ASAHIO Class destroyer as escort. Commencing her approach at 1600 PORPOISE hove into position and fired a spread of four torpedoes at the leading AK at 1643. One hit was heard before the enemy escort came charging in the direction of PORPOISE, causing her to seek the depths. Far below the surface the sub rigged for depth charge attack and at 1655 the first of twelve extremely close charges was felt. The enemy DD kept circling and searching until 1843, at which time the sub came to Periscope depth and sighted one AK and two ships of unknown type, silhouetted against the western sky.

Leaving this area, PORPOISE took up the assigned patrol and transitted the Malay Barrier. On 23 March the sub was caught in a terrific cyclone, which lasted until the 25th. The storm reached such severe proportions that, while it was believed that PORPOISE could be successfully submerged, the Commanding Officer could not see how she could be resurfaced without foundering. Therefore the sub rode out the storm on mountainous seas, until it finally subsided.

On 30 March PORPOISE made rendezvous with USS ISABEL and anchored at Fremantle, Australia, having completed her 50-day war patrol.

The submarine moved from Fremantle to Albany, Australia (3-5 April) for her refit and she returned to Fremantle (24-26 April). Here, the sub topped-off fuel, water, and provisions and the same afternoon (26 April) set course for Pearl Harbor, via the Netherlands East Indies for her Third War Patrol.

Proceeding up the west coast of Australia, passing Timor, and through the Banda Sea, PORPOISE took up patrol off the western approach to Amboin on 8 May. That day she sighted a 5,000-ton cargo ship with a single gunboat as escort, close inshore. The sub made her approach and then closed to attack, firing a spread of four torpedoes at the AM. However, as the target changed course to head up Amboin Bay at the last minute, all the torpedoes missed. PORPOISE then sought the safety of the deep and rigged for depth charge attack.

Fifteen minutes after the torpedoes were launched, the enemy escaped. Dropped four very close charges, which caused extensive minor damage to the sub. PORPOISE lay in hiding until 1835, when upon surfacing, she found the enemy ship sitting a mere 5,000 yards away. However, the gunboat did not see the sub and she silently and quickly cleared the area.

That night PORPOISE received orders to proceed to the enemy held island of Ju (also spelt Joe and M), and rescue the crew of an Army plane, which had made a crash landing there. Arriving off Ju on the 10th, the sub lay, submerged, 1,000 yards off the beach until sunset. At this time a large bonfire was sighted on the beach, and considered this to be a signal beacon, the sub surfaced and moved in as close to the beach as possible. The friendly natives on this island brought five survivors out to the sub on their bancas.

With the Army airmen safely aboard, PORPOISE set course for Darwin, Australia, mooring there on 16 May. At Darwin the sub took on fuel, provisions and fresh water, and debarked the rescued airmen. She got underway to continue her patrol the next day.

After a month of unproductive patrolling, she moored at Pearl Harbor on 17 June, thus ending her Third War Patrol for which she was awarded the Submarine Combat Insignia.

On 20 June, PORPOISE set sail from Pearl Harbor enroute to Mare Island, California, arriving there on the 28th. The submarine underwent a major overhaul at Mare Island, having new main engines and radar installed. After a series of post-overhaul tests, PORPOISE got underway for Pearl Harbor on 22 October, and upon arrival there, the Submarine Base made repairs on deficiencies developed in passage. Repairs completed, PORPOISE underwent an eight-day training period and on 29 November she was ready for sea.

PORPOISE departed Pearl Harbor on the 30th, enroute to Midway and her Fourth War Patrol. The sub arrived at Midway on 4 December, topped-off fuel and stores, and got underway the following morning.

Steaming steadily, the sub made two unfruitful contacts before arriving off the coast of Honshu on 18 December. While patrolling off Honshu, PORPOISE made numerous contacts, but all were sampans, too small to bother with. However, on 31 December an eight ship convoy with one escort was sighted and PORPOISE commenced tracking them. After tracking the convoy all night, the sub closed to attack the following morning, firing four torpedoes at two overlapping freighters. Three hits were scored and upon observation the main target (5,000-ton) was seen to break in two and the secondary target almost immediately took a heavy list to port and headed for the beach.

While observing the results of the attack and looking for the escort, the first depth charge went off. Immediately PORPOISE went deep and seven more charges were felt, before the enemy vessel was no longer heard, the sub went to periscope depth and, after determining that the remnants of the convoy had long since departed, she cleared the area.

On 3 January 1943, PORPOISE, while patrolling off Kinkasan, sighted a convoy which first looked like a long approach, but that was a mirage, as suddenly the ships seemed to jump over the horizon and the sub found herself about 3,000 yards from the escort, a CHIDORA Class torpedo boat. PORPOISE turned and fired a stern shot at the escort, but no hit resulted, as the torpedo appeared to pass directly beneath it. The submarine immediately dove, and was promptly set upon by the escort, which dropped nine extremely close depth charges with no serious damage resulting. Laying quiet in the murk for an hour after the escort was last heard, the sub surfaced and started in pursuit of the convoy. However, after over three hours pursuit, it was apparent that PORPOISE could not catch the enemy vessels.

Leaving her patrol area on 7 January, PORPOISE headed for Midway, mooring there on 15 January, thus completing her Fourth War Patrol for which she was awarded the Submarine Combat Insignia.

Refit completed, PORPOISE departed on her Fifth War Patrol on 6 February, but due to leaky oil tanks the patrol was delayed and the sub proceeded to Pearl Harbor for dry-docking and repair, arriving there on the 15th. Eleven days later (26 February) with all repairs completed, PORPOISE stood out of Pearl Harbor and headed for Johnston Island. After an uneventful passage, the sub arrived off Johnston Island on 1 March 1943, and proceeded onward to her patrol area.

On 9 March PORPOISE sighted a convoy off Kwajalein, but after a night of tracking she was unable to get close enough to attack. The sub then continued on to her patrol grounds off Jaluit Atoll where she made contact with a seaplane tender and its escort, but as her radar went out of commission for a time during the night, SS-172 lost contact with the enemy.

The submarine made many contacts with enemy vessels too small to bother with, before sighting a 3,000-ton cargo ship on 4 April. PORPOISE submerged, made her approach, and, -- in position -- she fired a spread of three torpedoes at the AK. The last missile hit the enemy vessel, which immediately burst into flames and started settling by the stern, sinking in four minutes.

After patrolling her area for a while longer, PORPOISE headed for Johnston Island with her fuel running dangerously low, due to constant running against heavy seas. Safely reaching Johnston Island, she refueled, and then proceeded to Pearl Harbor, arriving there on 15 April 1943, thus completing her Fifth War Patrol for which she was awarded the Submarine Combat Insignia.

After undergoing her normal refit at Pearl Harbor, PORPOISE got underway for her Sixth War Patrol on 20 June 1943. The Sub proceeded to Johnston Island where she topped-off fuel and provisions, departing there the same day (22 June).

Five days after leaving Johnston Island, she was depth-bombed by an enemy plane, but no damage resulted. The following day (28 June) PORPOISE performed reconnaissance work on Tarca Island, and on the 30th while patrolling off Enijun Channel, she made contact with a medium freighter with two escorts and screened overhead by two enemy planes. Making her approach, PORPOISE fired a brace of torpedoes from her stern tubes at the freighter and one hit was heard.

PORPOISE dove to 225 feet and rigged for depth charge attack, and shortly thereafter two heavy aerial bombs landed close to the sub. The "undersea" raider was then subjected to a very accurate depth charge attack, and a total of thirteen charges were dropped in singles or pairs, the first few driving SS-172 down to 275 feet.

Again PORPOISE incurred much minor damage, but 18 minutes after the first bombs were dropped, the last depth charge was heard, and the sub cleared the immediate area.

At 0020 on 3 July contact was made with an enemy freighter with one escort and PORPOISE commenced tracking. Having made her approach and gained position, the sub fired a spread of three torpedoes at 0213. Two hits were scored, which sank the target, and the sub went to deep submergence to prepare for depth charge attack, which for some unknown reason, was not forthcoming.

PORPOISE continued patrolling in her assigned area and on 6 and 7 July she underwent aerial bombings and a depth charge attack. Two night gun attacks were conducted, one against an auxiliary schooner on 15 July, and one against an enemy radio station on 17 July. While on this patrol PORPOISE made excellent reconnaissance on many enemy-held islands in the Marshall Islands group.

At 1012 on 18 July, contact was made with an enemy passenger freighter with two escorts, and after tracking the Jap vessels for 14 hours, PORPOISE closed the freighter, and fired a brace of torpedoes. Both of the missiles ran true and hit, leaving the target dead in the water. The sub dove and rigged for depth charge attack, which amounted to three very heavy (but not very close) depth charges.

Shortly after the depth charging, PORPOISE went to periscope depth, reapproached the target and fired two torpedoes, one of which hit, and the passenger-freighter started to settle by the bow. The sub again dove for the briney deep and rigged for depth charge attack, with the escorts steaming directly for her. Eleven heavy charges were dropped by the escorts, but, fortunately, none were very close and PORPOISE cleared the area.

The morning of 21 July PORPOISE departed her assigned area and headed for Pearl Harbor, arriving there on 28 July 1943, thus ending her Sixth (and last) war Patrol, for which she was awarded the Submarine Combat Insignia.

Due to leaky fuel oil tanks PORPOISE departed Pearl Harbor for New London, Connecticut, where she was to be used as a training sub. The submarine arrived at New London in September 1943, and, except for the period between May and July 1944, when she underwent an overhaul at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she served on this duty in the New London area.

PORPOISE was decommissioned on 15 November 1945 at Boston, Massachusetts, and remained in that status until 8 May 1947, when she was assigned to the EIGHTH Naval District, Houston, Texas, for Naval Reserve Training.

During her six war patrols (from 22 December 1941 to 28 July 1943) PORPOISE sent four enemy vessels, totaling 25,600 tons to the bottom and damaged four more, totaling 13,000 tons. She also rescued five Army airmen from the enemy-held island of Ju. SS-172 was awarded four Submarine Combat Insignias for her successful patrols against the enemy.

SUCCESSIVE LIST OF COMMANDING OFFICERS

Lieut. Comdr. S.S. Murray, USN - 15 August 1935 to June 1937
 Lieut. Comdr. J.M. Will, USN - June 1937 to July 1939
 Lieut. Comdr. J.A. Callaghan, USN - July 1939 to February 1942
 Lieut. Comdr. J.R. McKnight, USN - February 1942 to May 1943
 Lieut. Comdr. C.L. Pennett, USN - May 1943 to August 1943
 Lieut. Comdr. L.E. Strickler, USN - August 1943 to September 1944
 Lieut. Comdr. J.J. Madison, USN - September 1944 to 15 Nov., 1945

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The PORPOISE (SS 172) earned five (5) battle stars on the Asiatic Pacific Area Service Ribbon, for participating in the following operations:

- 1 Star/Submarine War Patrol Pacific -- 30 November 1942 to 15 January 1943
- 1 Star/Submarine War Patrol Pacific -- 26 February to 15 May 1943
- 1 Star/Submarine War Patrol Pacific -- 20 June to 28 July 1943
- 1 Star/Philippine Island Operation (including Guam and other concurrent Asiatic Fleet operations) 8 December 1941 to 6 May 1942
- 1 Star/Midway 3-6 June 1942

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STATISTICS

SURFACE DISPLACEMENT	1,310 tons		
OVERALL LENGTH	- 301 feet		
BEAM	- 25 feet	COMPLEMENT	- 57
SURFACE SPEED	- 20 knots		

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Stencilled 25 June 1948
 Restencilled 3 April 1951

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