

BATFISH Beats the Boneyard

by Bruce Brotherton

On September 2, 1945, Tokyo Bay was filled with the proud warships of the Allied nations. There, overshadowed by the great ships, the submarine tender PROTEUS (AS-19) and twelve of her charges represented the U. S. submarine force. A photograph of Admiral Nimitz signing the surrender document aboard USS MISSOURI was presented to Vice-Admiral Lockwood, then COMSUBPAC, with the following inscription from Adm. Nimitz: To Vice-Admiral Lockwood--your submarines made heavy contributions toward the victory shown here. C. W. Nimitz'. And heavy contributions they were indeed. Although 52 U. S. submarines were lost in the war, along with 3,505 officers and men, these losses were comparatively slight against those inflicted on Japanese shipping by these boats. The Japanese entered the war with roughly six million tons of shipping, and at its end had less than one million tons. Of the ships lost, two thirds were attributed to the US Navy's submarines. Adm. Nimitz, commenting further, wrote: "We, who survived World War II and were privileged to rejoin our loved ones at home, salute those gallant officers and men of submarines who lost their lives in that long struggle. We shall never forget that it was our submarines that held the line against the enemy while our fleets replaced losses and repaired wounds."

The keel of USS BATFISH was laid December 31, 1942, at the US Navy Yard, Portsmouth, N. H. BATFISH was launched on May 7, 1943 and commissioned August 21--dates which serve to illustrate the short time needed even at that busy stage of the war. Her first commanding officer was Lt. Cdr. Wayne R. Merrill, USN.

After her commissioning, BATFISH went through a routine shakedown period of about a month, during which she remained at Portsmouth. Two-thirds of her crew were not qualified in submarines and much of the time was spent in training them in operational procedures. Drills were conducted in diving, emergency situations and approach problems. BATFISH left Portsmouth in the middle of September, 1943 and headed for Newport, R. I. There she engaged in several days of torpedo practice, and on Sept. 26 left for New London, Ct., for minor repairs and maintenance. Still more intensive training was conducted in attack procedures, especially surface gunnery.

In mid-October, BATFISH departed Newport for Pearl Harbor by way of the Panama Canal, arriving at Pearl on Nov. 19. For the next five days she resupplied alongside USS GRIFFIN (AS-13), then from Nov. 25 to Dec. 11 participated in routine and vigorous training exercises in which boat and crew were 'polished up' for wartime operations. All boats arriving at Pearl Harbor



BATFISH in 1943.

for the first time underwent this training in order to give them the latest tips and tricks learned the hard way by submariners who had already been in action with enemy forces. After completion of final training, BATFISH left Pearl for Midway, whence she stood out early on Dec. 11 for her first war patrol.

The area assigned her was just south of Honshu, Japan, and after pounding through high seas and typhoon weather, she arrived in the area on Dec. 29. During the entire patrol, the weather remained extremely rough and prevented BATFISH from closing any of the several convoys sighted, with one exception. On the night of Jan. 19, 1944, the weather moderated somewhat. While sea and wind still made operations difficult, a convoy of four ships was sighted and BATFISH made a surface torpedo attack. The following sinkings were credited to her by the Force Commander:

- 1 AP (Ginyo Maru class)..... 8,615 tons
- 1 AP (Tatugami Maru cl.)... 7,065 tons

No further contacts were made during this patrol, and BATFISH left the area and headed for Midway on Jan. 24, arriving Jan. 30, fifty-one days after departing Pearl. A Battle Star was awarded the boat for the first patrol. After a two-week period of refit, transfer of a relief crew, and six days' training, she left Midway for her second patrol in the same area. The first patrol seemed pleasant by comparison with the second, which BATFISH spent fighting for her life in seas that stagger the imagination. No contacts were made with the enemy, and on April 15 the tired boat and crew gratefully left the area for Pearl Harbor.

Eighteen days were required to refit the boat after her violent 54-day patrol in a typhoon. The

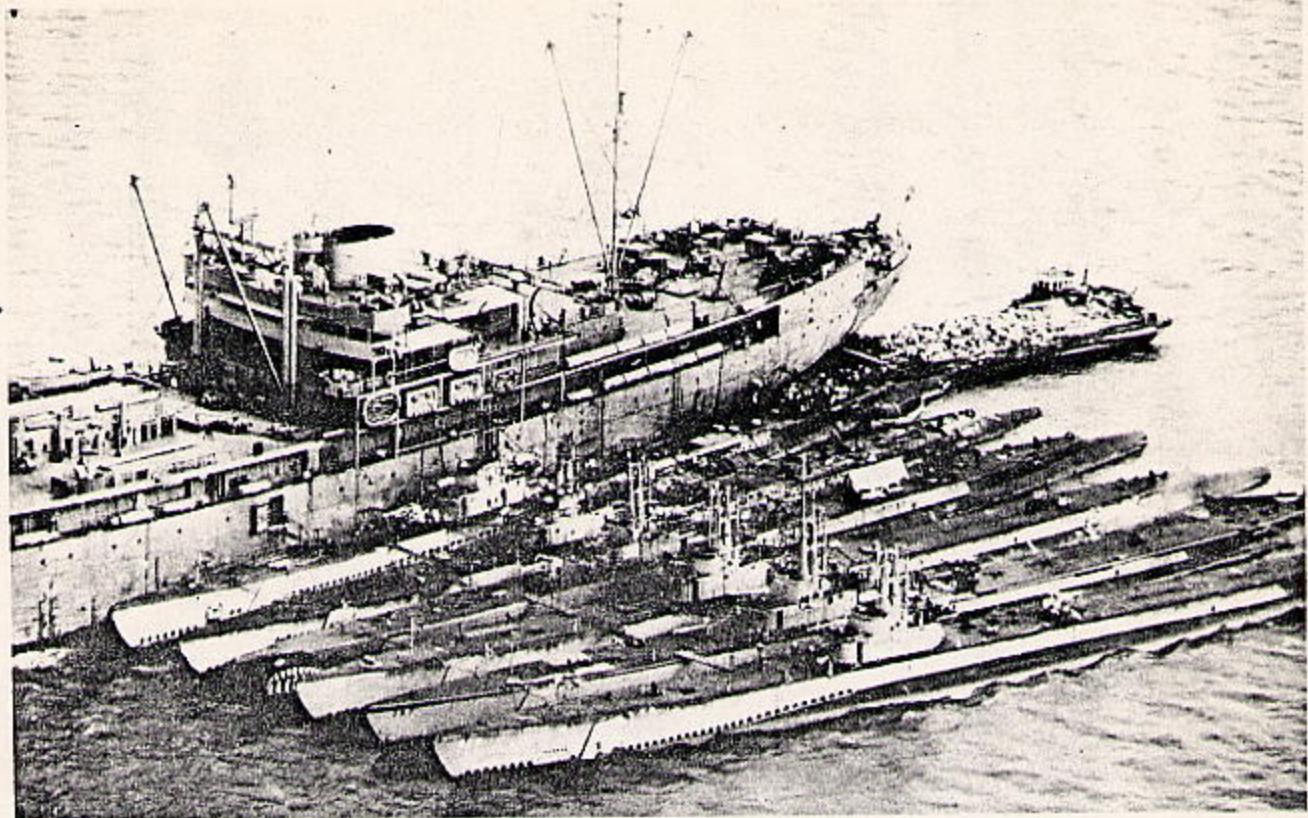
work parties of PROTEUS did a splendid job, and on May 10, 1944, BATFISH departed for additional training at Midway. There Lt. Cdr. J. K. Fyfe relieved Merrill in command on May 16, and soon afterward BATFISH left on her third patrol. Her assigned area this time covered the southern area of the Japanese home islands of Kyushu, Shikoku and Honshu. The sub made six attacks during this patrol and sank three merchant ships, a trawler and a small escort vessel. The three larger ships were sunk with torpedoes and the others by gunfire. The following sinkings were credited to her:

- 1 Freighter..... 3,500 tons
- 1 Freighter (Mayati Maru cl.) 2,200 tons
- 1 Freighter (Anastasia Maru cl.) 3,000 tons
- 1 trawler..... 500 tons
- 1 escort vessel..... 300 tons

In the gun action against the small escort EM2c Thomas F. Allen, USNR, a loader in the four-inch gun crew, was severely wounded in the knee by .25 cal. machine gun fire. A Combat Star was awarded the boat after completion of the patrol on July 7.

The boat received sixteen days' overhaul and refit at Midway from PROTEUS, during which time she received her first load of the new Mark 18 torpedoes. Three days' training were devoted to learning how to use these long-awaited electric fish.

On August 1, BATFISH left Midway for her fourth patrol, off the Palau Islands. She arrived there with Palau in sight of the high periscope on the 13th. After five days in the area, a report was received from HARDHEAD (SS-365), concerning a battleship she had damaged 100 miles to the west of BATFISH's position. The latter raced to the spot reported, but found no sign of the victim or



Home from the wars, six of BATFISH's sisters crowd alongside AS PELIAS or GRIFFIN at San Francisco, December 13, 1945. Identifiable are (bottom to top): LIZARD, ICEFISH, LOGGERSHEAD, BAYA and MORAY.

of debris and so returned to her station. There she found intense air activity, and spent most of the daylight hours submerged off the entrance to the main harbor. Allied planes were conducting raids day and night. BATFISH received a report that planes had sighted a grounded destroyer on a reef north of Palau, and the same day--Aug. 23--approached Velasco Reef to investigate. She sighted an AK well-aground on a sandbar surrounded by an exposed reef. A minelayer was riding at anchor nearby and a small boat was making repeated trips between the two ships. Proceeding to the other side of the reef, BATFISH found the DD reported earlier, either aground or anchored. It had been extensively damaged by air attack, and five small vessels including two tugs were busy nearby. Two Japanese aircraft were also seen circling overhead. It was decided that the AK was out of reach by torpedo, so the destroyer (later identified as the SAMIDARE) was selected as the target and an approach begun. Three torpedo-hits were obtained and the target disappeared. A mine layer was seen getting up steam and air cover increased rapidly.

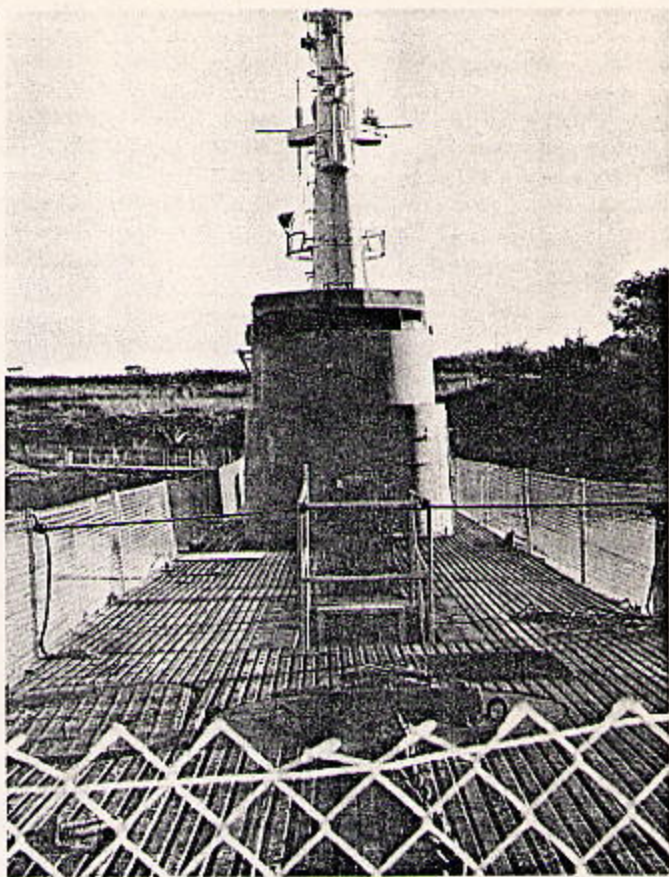
Two days later BATFISH was surprised by a Japanese PC boat while running submerged. A

quick set up shot was lined up by the sub and three torpedoes were fired; all of them missed. The PC stopped to avoid the torpedoes and another was fired, which also missed as the target had speeded up again. BATFISH went deep and was lightly depth-charged. On Aug. 26 she returned to the reef to find the AK still aground and unreachable, more small-boat activity, and the minelayer still anchored nearby. An approach was made on it and one torpedo fired, which hit it amidships. Three minutes later another torpedo hit the target in the same spot, and the minelayer apparently broke in half, the stern portion sinking while the bows remained afloat. On orders from COMSUBPAC, BATFISH shifted to the operational control of COM-TASKFOR 71 and departed station on Sept. 3 for refit by the Submarine Repair Unit. Twenty-one days had been spent in the assigned area and twenty days in transit. One destroyer and one mine-layer were credited to her on this patrol, and yet another Combat Star awarded.

On October 8, BATFISH got underway on her fifth patrol, this time in the vicinity of the Philippines. Three days later she arrived in Exmouth Gulf, West Australia, to fuel ship. It was not long after leaving the Gulf that the forward periscope

jammed in the raised position and the boat was forced to make for Port Darwin for emergency repairs. She once again headed for her patrol area on Oct. 17. A few days after arriving there, she picked up a radar contact at night in the Flores Sea. There appeared to be one large ship with two escorts, one to either side and forward of the larger ship. A spread of six torpedoes was fired, which ran under the big ship without exploding. The ships were on a steady course, moving slowly, and took no evasive action. On the second approach BATFISH fired one torpedo which also ran under the large vessel, but apparently hit the escort on the other side; the radar pip for this escort disappeared abruptly from the screen and its sonar pinging stopped. Both the main target and the remaining escort then suddenly turned toward BATFISH and began firing. It was a "Q" ship! It was seen to be a medium-sized AK, very high in the water, very well-gunned, and capable of at least twenty knots. The escort was a fast, new PC. They fired fifteen salvos at BATFISH, which had attacked on the surface, before she discovered she could not outrun them and dived deep. She received one of the most violent depth-charge attacks of her career, over fifty being counted.

After passing through the Sibutu Passage, the boat began patrolling the area between Mindanao and the Negros Islands. On Nov. 1 she received orders to leave that area and proceed to one west of Luzon. She arrived there on the 4th to begin lifeguard duties for Allied aircraft. Two days later, however, the air strikes were cancelled. While in the same area BATFISH sighted ships headed north from Manila. The group consisted of seven escorts (including two DDs) in a double screen, one AOB-class CA, four AKs and an AP. As BATFISH made her approach a DD ran over her, spoiling her shot. Immediately she came back to periscope depth and fired six torpedoes at the trailing ship; all missed, and the escorts began depth-charge attacks which kept her down. This state of affairs continued through the next day till the convoy arrived in San Fernando harbor. On Nov. 8 smoke from a large convoy was sighted, headed south toward Manila. BATFISH tried to make an end run around the 14-ship convoy, but was attacked from the air before she could do so. Apparently the aircraft continued shadowing her, for when she surfaced three hours later she found two escorts waiting, and underwent a severe depth-charging. After eluding her attackers, BATFISH decided to take another look at San Fernando harbor. Entering submerged, she found one AK anchored in the stream and two more tied up at a dock. As the harbor was shallow and small, manoeuvring was difficult and the only approach available a poor one. Cdr. Fyfe decided to try an attack anyway; two torpedoes were fired at the anchored ves-



View looking aft, showing the unfortunately necessary chain-link safety fence.

sel and two more at the ships at the dock. The first two torpedoes passed under the target and exploded on the beach near airplane hangars. The results of the other two fish went unobserved since BATFISH was spotted by aircraft and depth-charged, barely getting out of the harbor without being sunk.

On the following day BATFISH returned to the harbor for another try. The largest target thus far discovered was sighted just inside the harbor, but proved to be a properly-lighted hospital ship, and the attack was cancelled.

In the course of a co-ordinated search in company with RAY (SS-271) and RATON (SS-270), an enemy convoy was sighted just after sunset on Nov. 14. The convoy was made up of four ships and as many escorts. RATON made the first attack and sank one ship, and other explosions followed which could have been either depth-charges or torpedoes. After receiving word that RAY was beginning her attack, BATFISH started in from a position ahead of the convoy. At close range she sighted two medium-sized ships escorted by a single DD or DE.

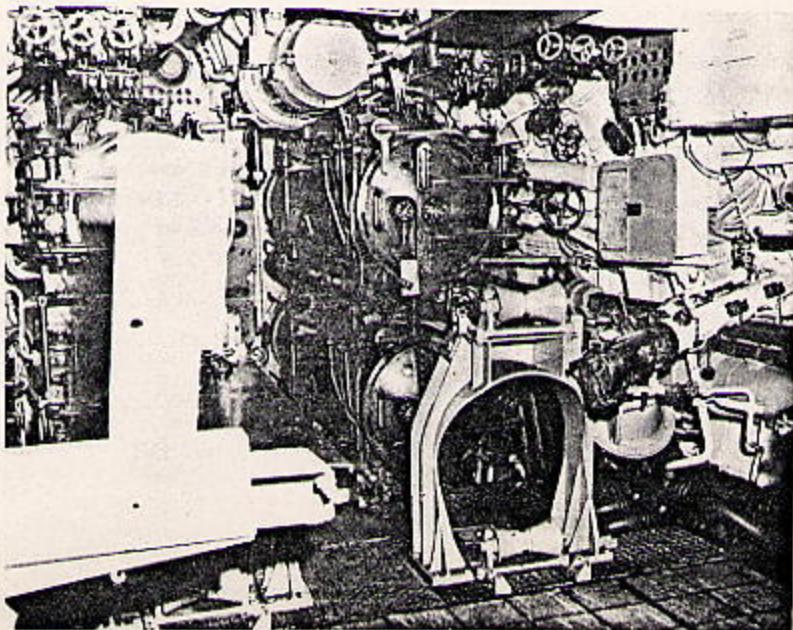
Four torpedoes were fired and two hits observed on an AK and, a moment later, a hit on the escort. Both sank rapidly and the remaining ships began zig-zagging wildly. BATFISH then retired from the action, as the other two subs were in a better position to attack. A few days later, BATFISH departed the area for Pearl Harbor, arriving there on Dec. 1. She was credited with sinking an AK and a DE for a total of some 5,000 tons, and damaging an AK and a PC totalling about 4,300 tons. A Combat Star was awarded for the patrol.

After a 17-day refit by Submarine Division 282, during which some long-needed alterations were completed, BATFISH left Pearl en route for Guam. She arrived at Apra Harbor on Jan. 9 and left the next day on her sixth patrol, this time in the South China Sea. After passing through Balintang Channel, she headed for Formosa, then toward Hong Kong and down the coast of China to her area off the coast of Hainan. Early one morning a group of pips were sighted on radar. Owing to their slow speed BATFISH waited until daylight to surface and inspect them. They turned out to be a group of 28 junks, and were found to be carrying no contraband. The ship's pharmacist's mate tended two injured men from the junks. For the next eight days the sub found nothing but similar craft and finally went farther down the coast to investigate an aircraft report of ships in Yulin Bay. One small AK came out and offered a perfect target, but three torpedoes passed under it without exploding and there was no further opportunity to shoot.

On February 2 the boat received orders to change her area to the Babuyan and Calayan Is. north of Luzon. Arriving there, she found very rough weather and little else. A day or so later a small landing craft was sighted heading toward Formosa. An attack was made on the surface, but the weather was too bad for the five-inch gun to be used. The landing craft was raked with 40-mm, 20-mm and small arms fire. While this was not enough to sink the craft, fires were seen aboard it until rain and darkness finally brought the action to an end.

On the night of Feb. 10, BATFISH picked up enemy radar impulses on her APR detector and obtained a bearing. Soon a contact was made on the SJ radar, and she began a radar approach on the target. Four torpedoes were fired without any hits; the target seemed to take no notice and the sub began an end-around run in order to make a second approach. This time the target was sighted and positively identified as a Japanese submarine (Ro-55). Three more torpedoes were fired, the second of which sank the enemy sub. The searchlight was hastily rigged but no survivors were found. The next day a torpedo was fired at BATFISH, believed to have come from a 'friendly' plane seen circling overhead. The boat went deep and the torpedo passed astern. The next night the boat again picked up enemy radar impulses, and again the source proved to be a Japanese submarine. Just as BATFISH was preparing to fire, the enemy sub was heard to blow his tanks. Remain-

The after torpedo room. Two of the torpedo tubes can be seen, as well as a smaller one (at right) for launching flares and sonar-confusing devices.





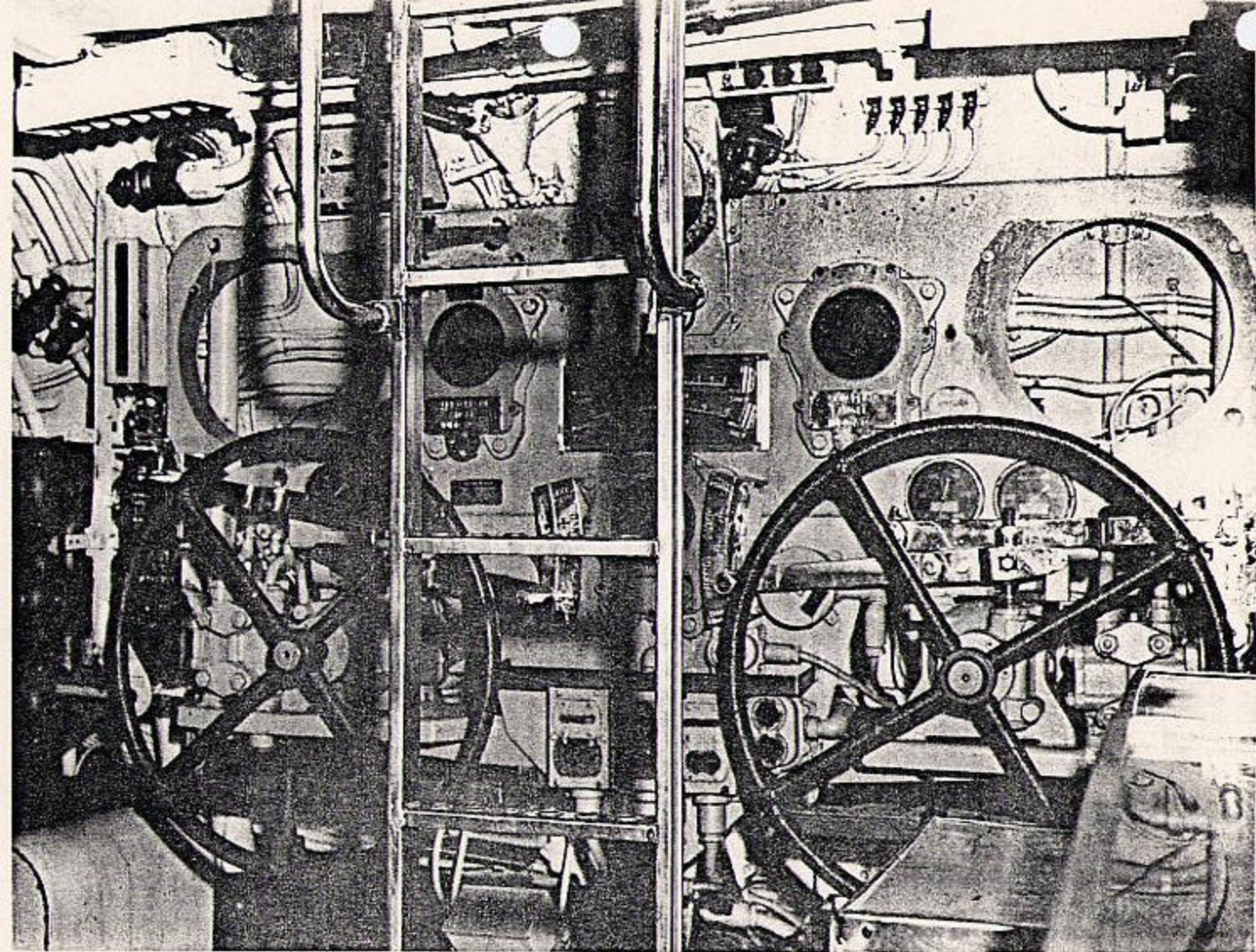
BATFISH at her 'retirement home'

ing submerged, BATFISH ran ahead to a shooting position. Four torpedoes were fired, and the first three hit, blowing up the target in what Cdr. Fyfe describes as the greatest explosion he ever witnessed. Explosions continued for fifteen minutes, leading to the impression that the sub had been acting as an ammunition ferry. It was later identified as Ro-112.

On the following night BATFISH made contact with a third Japanese submarine while both were running surfaced. As the enemy sub was approached it dived, and BATFISH repeated her tactics of the preceding night. Before long the target surfaced and BATFISH moved into position for a submerged attack. Three torpedoes were fired, and the first one hit and destroyed the target. Again, no survivors were found, but a box of navigating equipment was recovered, from which the sub was identified as Ro-113. On Feb. 16 BATFISH departed her area for Guam, arriving there on the 21st. The following day she proceeded to Pearl Harbor, arriving at the Submarine Base on March 3. She was credited with sinking three enemy submarines and damaging a landing craft of 200 tons. Combat insignia was again awarded her and, after the war, a Presidential Unit Citation for the three sub kills.

BATFISH left Pearl Harbor on March 6 and arrived at San Francisco on the 13th for overhaul at the Bethlehem Steel Shipbuilding Co. On the 18th, Lt. Cdr. W. L. Small relieved Cdr. Fyfe as commanding officer. San Francisco was left behind as BATFISH sailed for Pearl Harbor and a training period. During this, a large part of her crew was transferred to other assignments and new men came aboard. She left Pearl for a Life Guard League patrol, arriving on station July 14. No sooner had she arrived when she received orders to

change her area from Southeast of the Empire to the East China Sea. She arrived on the new station three days later, to find Allied air activity very heavy in the area. In the process of life-guarding and avoiding friendly submarines, the lookouts sighted two torpedo wakes crossing just ahead of the boat. Who fired them has never been determined. On the 24th, as part of a diversion plan for other submarines entering the Sea of Japan, BATFISH surfaced off the north coast of Yaku Shima and commenced shelling beach installations. The shelling was continued until sunset and at least one building was destroyed. At dawn the following day a Japanese submarine was sighted hugging the coast. Unfortunately it was following a course which did not allow BATFISH to get within torpedo range. Later the same day, a report was received concerning a ditched B-25 and a search begun with the aid of a 'Dumbo' (PBY), which proved fruitless. The next day a life raft was spotted by air search and the sub was directed to the location, where she picked up three B-25 survivors. She received small thanks for her efforts, however: On Aug. 1 an Okinawa-based B-25 dropped four bombs on her, fortunately badly-aimed. That night BATFISH departed station and delivered the badly injured B-25 crewmen to Iwo Jima. From there she took up a new lifeguard station on Aug. 5 off Honshu. Almost continuous contacts were made with Allied aircraft while travelling to the new station. One day, after arriving on station, two torpedo wakes were sighted, much as before, crossing BATFISH's bow. A few hours after this incident, word was received officially to cease all hostilities. A rendezvous was made with TIGRONE (SS-419) and an aviator was taken off the other sub for passage to Midway. After a brief stop there, BATFISH left for Pearl Harbor, arriving on August 26. On Sept. 9, 1945, she arrived at



Control room, with conning tower ladder at center. The wheels controlled bow and steerplanes. Depth gauges are missing.

San Francisco and proceeded to Mare Island Navy Yard to preserve ship and await decommissioning.

According to the Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships, BATFISH was recommissioned on March 7, 1952, and on April 21 assigned to Submarine Division 122 at Key West for training duty. Though still listed in Fahey's 1965 edition, she was apparently a 'dockside hulk' and in the normal run of events would soon have been scrapped.

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Following ten years of hoping, planning and - determination, what was once considered an impossible scheme became reality in 1972, when BATFISH arrived at the Port of Muskogee, Oklahoma. She looked tired and worn when I first saw her that rainy day in May, but behind the shabby paint and rust of her exterior I saw a proud and lucky ship that would be a shining example of America's submarine force of World War II.

BATFISH was brought to Muskogee largely through the efforts of the U. S. Submarine Veterans of W. W. II of Oklahoma. In 1970 the State joined with the Vets and organized the Oklahoma Maritime Advisory Board, to obtain from the Navy a W. W. II submarine, renovate her, plan and build a large center for the study and display of U. S. naval history, and manage the operation of both. The task has been accomplished on a volunteer basis by many of the Sub Vets, as well as other interested persons.

BATFISH was first sand-blasted, then primed and painted. The propeller guards, which were bent or broken, were repaired. The wooden plank-

ing was repaired or replaced with new decking. Guard rails for public safety were constructed of chain-link fencing. The torpedo-loading hatches were cut out of the deck and replaced with steel stairways and railings to afford visitors safe, easy entrance and exit without marring the boat's appearance. Her own lighting system has been recircuited for outside power to light the interior as it was originally.

At present, the sub sits on the bottom of the Arkansas River at a ninety-degree angle to the bank, in eight feet of water. She was towed up the river through the newly-built Arkansas River Navigation System on barges which lifted her enough to permit passage to Muskogee. A twenty-foot steel gangway extends from the bank to her stern. The future of BATFISH is bright indeed; she has already attracted great interest in a multi-state area. As funds become available, renovation will continue. The guns and many other fittings such as bunks, torpedoes, etc., have long since been removed, but it is planned to bring her back as nearly as possible to her wartime condition.

A War Memorial Park will be established around the sub, which will be permanently moored in an artificial lagoon 400 feet from the river. A large naval arts center with more than 30,000 square feet of floor space will be built. The museum is being developed with a view to obtaining a national reputation for excellence. In addition to all this, smaller exhibits will be placed about the grounds, possibly including a W. W. II PT-Boat. At time of writing, submarine-veteran guides had conducted more than 15,000 visitors through the boat.