

HISTORY OF USS SEA POACHER (SS 406)

Although built late in World War II, the submarine USS SEA POACHER completed four war patrols before the cessation of hostilities, operating as a life guard for plane strikes and as an advance picket for fast carrier task forces.

The vessel was named "SEA POACHER" for a fish of the Agonias Family which lives in semi darkness at depths up to fifty fathoms from the Bering Sea southward to Puget Sound. The keel for the SEA POACHER was laid by the Navy Yard at Portsmouth, New Hampshire on 23 February 1944 and was launched on 20 May 1944. Mrs. Hazel J. Spiller, wife of Commander J. H. Spiller, hull superintendent of the Navy Yard, acted as official sponsor. Commander F. M. Gambacorta, USN, took command of the ship when she was placed in commission on 31 July 1944.

The SEA POACHER began her war career on 19 November 1944, when she slipped out of Pearl Harbor with the PERANA and SEA OWL, bound for the East China Sea. After voyage repairs in Saipan, the trio set course for Iwo Jima.

During the afternoon of 3 December as the ship was steaming on the surface a lookout sighted what appeared to be a periscope close aboard. The SEA POACHER turned away at full speed to avoid the contact. Another lookout reported a torpedo wake astern but contact could not be made with the supposed submarine:

On 20 December the SEA POACHER found her first torpedo target, a small patrol cargo but the four torpedoes fired all ran under the target. The submarine came in for another close call three days later on the 23rd when what appeared to be the wakes of four torpedoes appeared on her port hand. She evaded the tracks, but again could not make contact with the enemy.

Christmas dinner was served to the crew as the ship lay submerged 18 miles off Southern Japan.

No more contacts worthy of torpedoes were made, and the sub ended her **first patrol** on 13 January 1945, as she entered port and moored alongside the USS SPERRY in Guam.

The SEA POACHER was assigned to an area northeast of Formosa for her second patrol, which lasted 50 days. The results were disappointing, as only four contacts were made and each of these proved to be ships so small that it was not worth while to sink them. The ship returned to Midway, arriving on 27 March after a fueling stop in Saipan.

Lieutenant Commander C. F. Leigh, USN, was in command of the ship when she left Midway on 26 April 1945 for her **third** patrol, headed for the Kurile Islands.

On 11 May the submarine got her first chance to draw blood when a group of small craft was sighted on the northwest side of Shimushiru To. Although a

sub chaser was patrolling between SEA POACHER and her targets, she worked her way in through the haze and fired six torpedoes at the largest target. At least one of them struck the ship forward of the bridge and sent her down by the bow. The escort dropped a few depth charges in the area, but none were close to the mark. The remaining ships got underway and were lost in the fog before they could be attacked.

Four days later four small fishermen were sighted, and the gun crews manned their stations. The sub was not sighted until she began firing at point blank range.

During the first of the action, six inches of the 20 mm blew off, wounding three members of the 5-inch gun crew. The gun kept up a steady fire, however, stopping the last ship. After raking the other three, the SEA POACHER resumed her fire on the first target, setting it afire.

When this ship was burning furiously, the submarine set out after the others, and soon had a second one burning brightly. The haze lifted just as this ship began to burn, and four other small craft were spotted. After sweeping these new targets with automatic weapons fire, the sub broke off the action because of the nearness of the coast.

That evening she took time to shell radio towers and buildings on Shimushiru before setting course for Midway with the wounded on board, arriving on 19 May. The three gunners, S. E. Horton, Jr., QM1c; R.H. Cooley, SM3c; and C. C. Carter, EM3c, were awarded the Purple Heart.

After a refitting out the submarine left Midway again on 16 June, bound for her fourth war patrol, this time off the eastern coast of Honshu and Hokkaido. She was to be part of a group of submarines making a sweep for any picket boats in the path of the carrier task forces then preparing to hit the Japanese homeland.

After stops at Guam and Saipan, the ship got underway for the "lifeguard League," standing by to rescue any airmen forced down at sea. But no need arose, and on 7 July, she began her sweep for picket boats.

Three days later a small ship came in view, and after tracking her for some time, the SEA POACHER fired three torpedoes from short range. All three ran under the shallow-draft boat, however, and she abandoned the attack. Two wooden sea trucks appeared on the 20th, and again the gun crews went into action. The Japanese did not see their adversary until she opened fire from 300 yards, tearing them apart.

Two days later she opened fire on another wooden vessel, setting it afire. Just before midnight on the next day a steel-hulled vessel was set on fire with a few well placed five inch shells. Her crew tried to man a deck gun, but were cut down by machine gun fire from the SEA POACHER. The shells hit depth charges stowed on the vessel's fantail, and blew her apart.

During the early morning of 26 July another sea truck fell victim to the sub's guns, and on the next afternoon a fishing lugger was attacked. Four

five-inch hits left nothing floating but a few boxes, baskets and debris. One man was taken prisoner. He was one of eight soldiers regularly assigned the job of getting food for their Army unit.

On 1 August the SEA POACHER joined the ANGLER and THRONBACK for a bombardment of Urakawa. The trio formed in column and proceeded to pound the power station, boats, railroad tracks and buildings for ten minutes before their ammunition was expended. Withdrawing, the SEA POACHER set her course for Midway. Two hours later a plane caught her on the surface and dropped two bombs as she dived, but no damage resulted. She arrived in Midway on 6 August and sailed immediately for Pearl Harbor, arriving on 11 August, four days before the end of the war.

The USS SEA POACHER earned three Battle Stars on the Asiatic-Pacific Area Service Medal for participation in the following operations:

- 1 Star/Assault and Occupation of Iwo Jima -- 15 February - 14 March 1945
- 1 Star/THIRD Fleet operations against Japan -- 10 July - 1 August 1945
- 1 Star/Third war patrol -- 26 April - 19 May 1945

With the war's end, the USS SEA POACHER was chosen to remain on active duty and was assigned to the Atlantic Fleet.

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STATISTICS

OVERALL LENGTH	312 feet
BEAM	27 feet
SPEED	20 knots
DISPLACEMENT	1525 tons
COMPLEMENT	8 officers - 72 enlisted

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