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about 1000 words

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Down the Throat

By John Kilgallon

It was a perfect spring morning with flat seas and clear blue skies when Captain Eli P. Cooke made a terrible mistake.

"Down scope! Crash dive!" he called out.

"Christ, Jim I left the scope up too long now that Jap destroyer is headed our way with a bone in his teeth!"

The crew of the USS Hammerhead responded swiftly to the commands echoed throughout the boat. Vents were spun open to allow water into the ballast tanks. The diving planes were at full down position both fore and aft. The electric motors kicked into a higher whine as they spun the shafts faster to get

the Hammerhead below periscope depth and into the safety of the deep.

Jim Kelly, the Hammerhead's executive officer, whispered, "My fault sir, took my eyes off the stopwatch to check our trim..."

The submarine is deathly quiet as the crew realizes their lives are now on Davey Jones' bargaining table.

"Depth now 200 feet." said Ensign Culpepper. As diving officer, "Pepper" had responsibility for the boat's performance underwater.

"Diving officer, level off at 350 feet," said Captain Cooke.

"Aye, 350 feet level sir." Came the reply.

"Destroyer screws bearing 200 degrees, speed 15 and increasing. Range 3,000 yards, closing. Not pinging, sir." Sonar had the target turned hunter.

"Decrease speed to two knots."

"Aye, speed two knots."

"Rig for silent running."

"Aye, silent running."

Word was whispered throughout the boat. Silent running meant no unnecessary movement, conversation or anything that would make the tiniest bit of noise.

"Helm, come left and steady on 090, let's see if we can quietly cut under him."

"Left, zero-niner-zero, aye."

Hammerhead slowly turned portside on to the destroyer as it continued to thunder through the ocean overhead.

"Why isn't he pinging?"

"Destroyer, range 1,000 yards, closing, speed 17, bearing now 270 on portside."

"Not slowing? Maybe he isn't sure where we are?"

"Destroyer crossing astern, maintaining 17 knots sir. No active sonar and he's too fast for passive listening..."

"Very well, Phones. Jim, let's turn the tables on this bastard, come right to course 190 and start the plot. Battle stations torpedo."

"Aye sir, course one-niner-zero. Starting target plot. Battle stations torpedo, pass word of mouth."

"Pepper, bring her up to periscope depth, watch her bubble. I don't want to broach and show our nose to him..."

"Aye, periscope depth, gentle rise on the planes, let's get her up to 65 feet quietly."

"Increase speed to six knots."

"Six knots, aye"

"Forward torpedo room; prepare tubes one and two for quick shots. Open outer doors."

"Aye aye, quick shots on tubes one and two, outer doors open."

"Control, destroyer slowing and turning to port, bearing 075 starboard, speed 13 knots."

"Aye, Sonar, bearing 075, Starboard."

"Periscope depth, Captain."

"Reduce speed to two knots, standby periscope," said Captain Cooke as he squatted to snap down the handles on the periscope as soon as it cleared the well. Jim Kelly was right there opposite ready to call out bearing and range for the target plot to be entered in the torpedo data computer or TDC.

"Two knots, Captain."

Deftly cranking the periscope handles to change magnification, Cooke immediately crab walked through 360 degrees to clear the horizon. He quickly returned to the Japanese destroyer, after verifying no other ships or aircraft were about.

"There he is Jim, looks like an Ukuru class escort vessel, about 1000 tons. Mark!"

"Aye, target bearing 047, range 2200 yards." Jim called out to the plot.

"Speed is down to ten knots on the target," said Phones.

"Perfect. Down scope."

PING! PING! PING!

"Captain, the Jap has his sonar..."

"I heard Phones. Torpedoes! Fire one... "

"Aye, Fire One... Number one fired electrically."

"Fire Two..."

"Fire Two! Number two fired electrically."

"Full dive! Right full rudder! Maintain speed."

"Aye, Full dive on the planes, right full rudder."

The pinging in the background could be heard by everyone in the Hammerhead. As Hammerhead dove and turned right, the crew understood the boat needed to get out of the tin can's way. If the Jap survived the two bows on war shots there would be the devil to pay. She quietly dropped through the fathoms and circled to get out of the enemy's way.

Krump! Wham!

"Time, XO?"

Krump! Wham!

"Both torpedoes hit! Ninety-two seconds for number one, 108 seconds for number two," said Jim.

"Okay, let's take a look. Periscope depth, make our speed eight knots."

"Aye aye, periscope depth, eight knots." Jim repeated the command to the diving officer, but Pepper had already made the changes as the Hammerhead's deck began to incline.

"Periscope depth, sir," said Pepper.

Crouched by the periscope, Cooke ordered, "Reduce speed to two knots."

"Aye, reduce speed two knots." Hammerhead slowed to a crawl again.

"Up scope!"

"Aye, up scope." Jim hit the control raising the periscope.

With a practiced fluidity, Cooke snapped down the handles and began a slow once around to clear the horizon, then focused on the Japanese destroyer.

"Looks like we took his bow off, he's way down by the bows and his stern is out of the water, screws churning nothing but air. Some survivors in the water."

Another once around with the periscope and Cooke said, "All clear on the horizon. Stand by to surface!"

"Stand by to surface!"

"Surface! Let's air the boat out and get a charge on the batteries, Jim."

"Surface! Surface! Lookouts to the bridge!"

"Engine room, open the main induction valve and charge batteries on two engines!"

"Aye aye, charge on two engines."

"Helm, come to course zero-one-zero."

"Aye aye, course zero-one-zero."

The Hammerhead angled up and swiftly broke the surface as life aboard the submarine revived with hatches open and fresh sea air replacing the stale smell of sweat and diesel. Heading nearly due North, Captain Cooke put the sinking destroyer and its sailors off his stern. He glanced up to make sure the periscope shears were manned and the radar was performing its monotonous whirl. The search for another target begins.

Bio:

Part time freelance and ghostwriter. Fifty-five year old father of three living in Millstadt IL. Sixteen year Air Force veteran and currently project manager for an IT company.