Virginians at War
WWII: Submarines
Transcript

NARRATOR: Virginians have always stood at the crossroads of the fight for freedom. It is a battle in which we all reap the benefits.

WORLD WAR II 1939-1945

NARRATOR: World War II was the defining event of the 20th Century. It involved 60 countries. Over 57 million people were killed. The nuclear age was launched, and the United States emerged as the world's most powerful nation.

World War II was fought in two major theaters of operation: the North African, Mid-Eastern, and European Theater, and to the Far East, the Asiatic-Pacific theater.

World War II Submarines – The Pacific Theater

PEARL HARBOR

SHOWERS: On December 7th, when the attack occurred, I was on duty with the district intelligence office. Well, it was almost unbelievable to me. Certainly a surprise. We knew we had lost our battleships, which was the core of the Navy at that point, and it was pretty grim.

UTKE-RAMSING: At Pearl Harbor, they destroyed our fleet, essentially. We were powerless. The only things they didn't destroy was the submarines. They didn't attack the submarine base, and they didn't attack the fuel depots. But we were the ones left to fight the war for maybe two years while they rebuilt the ships and built new ones. So, we operated to destroy the Japanese shipping, both military and commercial.

PADGETT: The new job was 311 feet, nine and a half inches. I never will forget that. And it was 32 feet abeam. But we had a crew of 79, and each boat had a little bit different crew, but our crew was 79, and we carried 24 torpedoes. You had six

torpedo tubes forward, and four astern. It was a crew of 79, I think it was nine officers and the rest of them was enlisted men.

SMITH: You had a little bunk, and they were on chains that hung on the sides of the walls and over the torpedoes. Torpedo tubes, torpedoes were all stacked in-between them. Had a row of torpedoes, then the bunk. And you eat in shifts – the whole crew couldn't eat at one time. Oh, food was good. We ate pretty good.

MAHLER: Everybody smoked cigarettes on the submarine. You could buy a carton of cigarettes for 45 cents for a carton, 10 packs. That was four and a half cents a pack. So you just take one puff off the thing and threw it away, then light another one. At the end of about a 14 or 16 hour dive, the air was so bad in the submarine you could cut it with a knife. You take a little match and try to strike it, it would sputter. It wouldn't even burn. It was terrible.

THE FIRST YEAR

SHOWERS: While our submarines deployed, we in the intelligence business became very intimately involved with it. The results they were achieving was very disappointing. The torpedoes were not working, they were not exploding. We would intercept messages from Japanese ships saying that they had undergone a torpedo attack, but the torpedo passed under their ship, or even in some cases hit their ship and did not explode. But it was a disappointing thing, and it was something we couldn't talk about because our intelligence based on intercepted Japanese communications and breaking of their code was regarded in those days, those early war days, as very, very sensitive information on which we didn't take action because we didn't wanna run the risk of revealing our codebreaking success.

UTKE-RAMSING: Torpedoes were a terrible problem. You just had to adjust and aim your torpedoes more shallow, and they were just a disaster.

RINDSKOPF: On my very first patrol, the very first night, we were off Japan. I was on watch, saw this big blob out there, on the surface, of course. Moonlight, saw this big blob, and in about seven minutes we fired two torpedoes at him and we sank him. Immediately afterwards, a small escort came out around the corner, headed at us. We dove, and in a little bit came up, and here was this escort lying broadside to us, at perhaps a thousand yards. Perfect shot. We fired three torpedoes at him and nothing happened. We reported this when we came in, and the wise guys on the staff said, "Oh you made a mistake with your calculations, and that's why you miss."

Well it took 18 months, and a lot of hard work and a lot of missed targets. It was a miserable, miserable situation.

MYERS: When the war started, skippers go out and fire 25 torpedoes and never get a hit. But one day, a skipper out in Honolulu took a warhead and dropped it from that diving tower I was telling you about, and he found out that the firing pin, which goes in to fire it, didn't have a bracket and it would go like that. Well they fixed that, and then two captains out in Australia decided they'd check depth. So, they'd set it at seven feet, fire it, and it would go down 27 feet. What happened was, the torpedo manufacturer was testing the depth with no warhead. Well, you stick a 650 pound warhead on there, yeah! Well after they fixed that up, we sunk everything in the ocean. But God knows, you'd be surprised. I think that war would have ended a lot earlier if we'd had the good torpedoes.

SHOWERS: We lost effectiveness in submarine force probably for, certainly the first year of the war or maybe a little longer before we were really able to straighten that problem out.

WAR PATROLS

SHOWERS: The Pacific Ocean is a tremendously large body of water. It's one third of the Earth's surface. When you're in a submarine, even if you have your periscope up in a clear day, your distance of observation is not more than 20 miles, and that's not very far to see on the surface of the ocean. The Japanese were very good navigators, and their merchant ships and their convoys were required to lay out a course and establish a noon position for each day, and that information was contained in a message which was sent out to the destination of the convoy. And we would intercept that message and, rather than searching these vast, broad ocean areas, it would enable him to go to a location or go to a position and almost await the arrival of the convoy.

SMITH: Our boat was tested for 400, operating at 400 foot, and 600 foot was our crush depth. And we got knocked down to 517 foot one time by them heavy, they call them "heavies." And man, they were loud. We took 280 plus depth charges in six war patrols. They were well-built.

PATRICK: We sunk our first ship, which was a Japanese light cruiser. We sunk that. The captain fired a spread of six torpedoes, and we had a direct hit. We swung around and you could turn tail on it and fire at four at the destroyer that was

coming down on us. Our captain, I tell you, had nerves of steel. How we avoided that destroyer, and dropping those depth charges… captain told us the next morning that he went underneath the sinking ship.

DREWRY: When they drop a depth charges, you can actually hear it hit the water. You can hear the click, which is the detonator going off. You hear the explosion, and then you hear the water swirling around you. And the closer you hear those noises, the closer that depth charge is, you know.

UTKE-RAMSING: We could all hear the explosion. We went deep and rigged around silently. That means you turn off all fans, you turn off all air conditioning, you turn off all pumps as far as you can. I mean, you have to have some to keep from going down. You talk in whispers, and you, if it got too bad, later on, you'd take off your shoes and walk. If you made a noise, everyone would… *cringe*. The depth charge is right on your deck, just like being pounded. And of course the lights go off and everything. Cork comes flying all over the place. And by this time, you're silent running and everything is wet and slippery, you're slipping all around and hanging on for dear life. We stayed down from about noon 'til midnight. We had to come up. We had to come up because our battery was dead, the air was all gone and we were gasping, and things were pretty bad. So, we came up and fortunately there was a cloud covering the moon and we put our engines on even before we hit the surface they turned on the engines and we jumped out of the water and ran as fast as we could. And we got away that time.

SWANBECK: The escorts picked us up right away and started the depth charges. And when we finally got out from under them, we'd had quite a bit of damage topside done, the lifelines were rattling and things like that. And it was dark, it was midnight and when we surfaced, I went down on deck to see how much damage had been done. And the first thing I did when I came after the conning tower, I stumbled over this thing and I felt it, and I knew right away it was a depth charge. And I went back up to the bridge and I told the skipper. I said, "Uh, Captain, we've got a depth charge down on deck." He said, "What are you talking about?" I said, "I'm not kidding! There's a depth charge down there!" And what we did, we got a rubber life raft, had 'em send it up and we laid it out right next to it, and [it] took three of us to lift it into the life raft. Then we inflated it, and then the skipper trimmed down – what we called it – sink the submarine down enough to float this thing off. But in the meantime, the escorts had picked us up again and were shooting at us, and so as we were putting it overboard we slashed it, hoping it would sink and go off near them. Then we got the hell out of there. When we got

into Brisbane, somebody had the nerve to ask us why we hadn't brought it back for them to examine.

WOLFE: A bomber caught us on the surface and dropped two bombs on us, and of course everything, all the lights went out. Broke every lightbulb on the ship and smashed the periscope lens, knocked our antennas down. Everything went out of order. We had no power. We started down at about a 60 degree angle, which is pretty far down, and anyway, the old man – we had no power – so the old man ordered everyone to go aft to pull the stern down, to straighten it out a little bit. So, we all run back as far, as fast as we could. One guy was complaining about someone stepped on his toe. I said, "My God, man! Here we are about to die and you're talking about someone stepping on your feet!"

DREWRY: That's the ideal thing for a night attack. When the moon sets, you go in, you fire, you back off, hit 'em again. Move up, and you get to where you can really see the guy, and then you cut loose on him. Maybe you spread two, three torpedoes. There you go. I remember one time, we fired on this one Tiger. Hit him, and he lit the sky up like it was daylight. And we looked right down, right on the port side where I was a lookout. There was a Japanese escort sitting right alongside of us. They scared the hell out of us and we scared the hell out of them. They ran one way, we ran the other.

PADGETT: Now a Japanese submarine also, one time, fired two torpedoes at us. Luckily they missed. You could hear 'em coming. Of course, we did a maneuver to... when we got a bearing, or what angle it was coming to you, we went a little deeper and made a hard flank turn and so forth and so on. But you could hear 'em go by. Two of 'em. That was more scarier than the depth charges are.

WERTHMULLER: About an hour later, another frigate came out. By golly, that thing was heading right for us. We had an acoustic torpedo lift, but we were told, "You shouldn't fire these torpedoes unless you get aft the beam of the target." Well, the target was coming right down toward us, and so he fired a torpedo at it. It was coming right for us. And by the time the torpedo apparently turned around, it hit him! They were almost on top of us by the time the explosion went off, and you could hear all this noise and stuff coming down on us. We went deep, and by the time we came up, we got a message saying the war was over! Isn't that amazing?

DREWRY: If that don't scare you, you're a fool! But you have to control that, you know, you can't let it take away from your job or what you're doing. You have to do what you have to do.

UTKE-RAMSING: You have no choice. You have no choice. You just had to go on, and go on and try to do everything you can to save the ship, save your life.

ISLAND PATROLS

ANCERAVAGE: We were a guerrilla boat. We were responsible, we were assigned to duties of delivering supplies and ammunition and establishing the guerrilla warfare in the Philippine Islands. I think the average crew was about 100, and at times we carried some guerrillas to put up in the Philippine Islands. We carried a lot of supplies, sometimes maybe up to 100 tons of supplies, so we had supplies, people running all over the place. You know, what they used to call "hut bunking" – one in and one out. And at times, there's times I remember we brought back 84 refugees from the Philippine Islands. We only rescued around 84 of them, stretcher cases. And some of them were POW, some of them were civilians, well, some of them came off the islands, were civilians. We came into the island, up as close as we could get to the island, and they were transported out by whatever means they could get them from the ground to the ship. And then we carried them aboard ship in the best way we possibly could. We had to get them off the stretchers, we didn't take none of the stretchers. And I don't recall too much, but I know they were brought aboard on litters, they couldn't walk, they had a hard time walking, everything else. It was pretty bad. There was women there, I mean, some children on board with that group, and then we had POW that were prisoners of war. We saw some good days, we brought some soldiers back, Marines back, and we were glad to get off the boat.

MYERS: We picked up 52 pilots that were down. One of them, they went to pick him up but they couldn't surface because they were so close to the shore. And he took hold of the periscope and pulled him out at sea so they could surface and take him aboard.

SMITH: We located this pilot and he looked like he was getting wash in to shore, and they were firing at us from the beach. And he looked like he was exhausted and wasn't gonna make it and everything. So, I grab the life ring and swam out and got him and pulled him back in, under fire. And I rescued him, got on board. The guys

on the deck helped get him up. And… I received a Silver Star for it. All in a day's work.

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

SHOWERS: I have heard it said, and I believe it's true, that by the end of the war, our submarines had destroyed over 90% of the Japanese merchant fleet through submarine sinkings.

UTKE-RAMSING: I had an article by a Japanese admiral saying, "We had no fuel for our cars. We had no fuel for our ships. Our people were starving." And the submarines won the war. And we subscribe to that.

SPENCER: I'm mighty proud of the fact that less than 2% of the Navy personnel sank, 40% of the Japanese warships and 60% of their merchant shipping.

MYERS: We lost more people in submarines, percentage wise, than any other unit in the military, because we lost 52 submarines. And out of 52, I think there was only five or six, there was anybody able to get off of them before they were sunk.

DREWRY: I always refer to it as "my boat." And when I say "my boat," I didn't mean the captain's boat or the Navy's boat, it was *my* boat. Nothing was gonna happen to *my* boat while *I* was on it.

Dedicated to the crews of the fifty two World War II Submarines "still on war patrol."

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