USN Submarines Based in Brisbane during World War II

by Mr. John Perryman

The decision to establish United States Navy (USN) submarine bases and support facilities in Australia during World War II followed a series of victories by the Imperial Japanese forces that resulted in domination of South-East Asia and much of the South-West Pacific. Consequently the American Asiatic Fleet submarines were forced to evacuate their base at Cavite in the Philippines and were successively ordered to withdraw to Bataan, Java, Hawaii and Australia.
The ports of Fremantle, Western Australia, and Brisbane, Queensland, were selected by the USN as suitable ports to support a major submarine offensive and facilities were quickly established at both to provide the necessary infrastructure.

Brisbane proved highly suitable with well established port facilities and a dry dock capable of handling most US submarines then in service. It was also out of range of Japanese aircraft based in New Guinea.

The first of eleven S Class submarines arrived at New Farm, on the Brisbane River, in company with the tender USS *Griffin*, on 15 April 1942 under the command of Captain R.W. Christie, USN. By the end of the month four were on active war patrols.

The S boats were soon involved in the Solomon Islands campaign and one of them, *S44*, Lieutenant Commander J.R. ‘Dinty’ Moore, USN, became the first US submarine to sink a major enemy warship when it torpedoed the Japanese cruiser *Kako* off Kavieng on 10 August 1942. Moore was subsequently awarded the Navy Cross for this action.
S44's ships company assembled on her casing in Brisbane
S44, under the command of Lieutenant Commander J.R. Moore, USN, became the first US submarine to sink an enemy warship during WWII.

In Brisbane a warm rapport was quickly established between its citizens and the visiting US sailors, many of whom were invited into Australian homes. Brisbane was also transformed into a major submarine maintenance facility at which a total of 89 submarines were dry docked for repairs over a three year period.

As the war progressed the ageing S class boats were replaced with the Gato class submarines which were equipped with radar, had a greater radius of action, higher speeds and larger payloads of torpedos. In addition to interrupting Japanese sea lines of communication the US submarines supported Australian coast watchers and Special Forces operating deep behind enemy lines throughout the Pacific. They also rescued numerous Allied airmen who had been shot down, or who had ditched, over the sea.
Lieutenant Commander D.W. Morton, USN and Lieutenant Commander Howard Gilmore, USN both distinguished themselves in submarines based in Brisbane.

Several famous US submarines were based in Brisbane including USS Wahoo, Lieutenant Commander D.W. ‘Mush’ Morton, USN and USS Growler Commander H. W Gilmore, USN. Gilmore was awarded a posthumous Medal of Honour in recognition of his self-sacrifice during Growler’s fourth wartime patrol mounted from Brisbane on 1 January 1943. During that patrol Growler was on the surface in the early hours of 7 February when a ship’s shadow was sighted through the darkness in poor visibility. As Growler was preparing to attack what transpired to be the enemy store ship Hayasaki, the ship altered course with the intent of ramming Growler. Although evasive action was taken Growler struck the Japanese ship head on at 17 knots. Following the impact the enemy opened fire on Growler’s conning tower at point-blank range with heavy machine guns. Two of the
submarine’s crew were killed and three wounded including Lieutenant Commander Gilmore. Two wounded lookouts were helped below but Gilmore remained at his post ordering his executive officer to ‘take her down’. *Growler* was severely damaged and following a brief depth charge attack she surfaced to find the sea empty with no sign of the enemy or Lieutenant Commander Gilmore. Eighteen feet of *Growler’s* bow was bent at right angles to port and her conning tower was full of holes from machine gun fire. In spite of this damage the crew made temporary repairs and after a slow, ten day transit back to Australia she entered Morton Bay to undergo extensive repairs in Brisbane.
By the war’s end patrols under Brisbane’s submarine command resulted in the sinking of 117 enemy ships totalling 515,000 tons. This number included three heavy and two light Japanese cruisers. Seven of the Brisbane based submarines were lost.

Vice Admiral Sir John Collins, KBE, CB, RAN acknowledged the contribution of the US submarine campaign to
overall victory in the Pacific when he wrote ‘[A] big factor, at the time little known, was the U.S. submarine campaign in the Pacific which practically annihilated the once flourishing Japanese merchant marine. Great credit is due to the American submariners for their success in a difficult task’.

A heritage walk has been established in Brisbane commemorating the service of Australian and US submariners and more information concerning this may be found on the following web page.


The research of the authors is both acknowledged and appreciated and their work is highly recommended as further reading.