

In Last 38 Years

Three Submarines Lost Off N. England Coast

By WILLIAM J. CLEW

The writer covered two submarine disasters for The Courant, the sinking of the S-51 off Block Island in 1925, and its raising the following year, and the sinking of the S-4 off Provincetown in 1926.

There have been three major submarine disasters off the New England coast within the last 38 years.

The submarine S-51 was sunk off Block Island on the night of Sept. 25, 1925, when it was struck by the coastal steamer City of Rome and sank in 120 feet of water. Thirty-four of its crew were lost. Three men who were on deck at the time of the collision were rescued.

Engineering Feat

On June 24, 1926, the submarine was raised to the surface in the first maritime engineering feat of its kind and towed to the New York Naval Shipyard at Brooklyn with its phantom crew. The submarine was placed in drydock, and the bodies of the dead crewmen were removed and buried with Navy honors.

Less than 6 months later, on Dec. 17, 1926, the submarine S-4 was sunk in a collision off Provincetown, Mass. It carried a crew of 40, of whom six got out alive. The S-4 was raised in March, 1928, and taken to Boston.

On May 23, 1939, the submarine Squalus went down off Portsmouth, N.H. Of its 59 crewmen, 33 survived and 25 died in the flooded compartments.

The Navy went to unusual efforts to raise the S-51. Divers working from the minelayer Falcon, which was anchored over the wreck, spent the winter tunneling under the hull. Handicapped by the cold, stormy waters off Cape Judith, R.I., they used high pressure hoses to clear away the mud under the S-51, and passed heavy anchor chains beneath it. To these, they fastened heavy pontoons in the spring of 1926, and pumped them full of air. The first effort to raise the ship failed when a sudden storm came up while the pontoons were being blown of their water ballast and the rusty bow of the submarine shot above the surface. The S-51 had to be lowered to the bottom again. Two weeks later it was raised.

Both Ships Lost

The S-51 operation was directed by Capt. Ernest King, now dead, who was then commander of the New London Submarine Base. His headquarters was the Vestal, repair ship of the Atlantic Fleet. Both the Vestal and the Falcon were lost in the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. By that time King was an admiral and the top man in the Navy, directing all its operations in World War II.

Out of the experience of the S-51 disaster came the Momsen Lung, a breathing apparatus that allowed men to ascend from great depths safely. This was followed by the development of a bell which could be lowered to a sunken submarine, fastened over an escape hatch and bring up survivors. A third development was the practice escape tower at the New London base, where men are trained in slow ascents and other features of rescue operations.

The engineering officer in charge of S-51 operation, who later played a part in the other two disasters, was Commander Edward Ellsberg. He was recalled to duty from retirement in World War II, given the rank of commodore and directed the raising and repair of several ships sunk by the Japanese.