



**Date of event:** 13 July, 1942  
**Date written:** Jan.-Feb., 1992  
**Written by:** James Giannatti

### A Near Miss--In A Vertical Sense!

Shortly after the war began and having survived the "Battle of Borinquen," I received orders to take my squadron (the 45th) to Aruba and set up operations to protect our oil tankers steaming toward the Panama Canal. Our B-18s were armed with .30 cal. machine guns and four depth charges that were fused to explode at a depth of 50 feet.

The mission proved to be quite frustrating. We knew that there were German submarines stalking the tankers because it was an all too familiar sight to see a column of black smoke on the horizon and find that another oil tanker had fallen victim to the accursed Germans. It was not a pretty sight to see the flaming tankers wallowing in the water with many crewmen swimming for their lives in the flaming oil on the water's surface or to see a lone lifeboat with only one man aboard who did not lift his face or wave when we flew 50 feet to one side. I wanted to fight in the worst way! But where was the enemy? He was safely hidden beneath the water licking his chops. I have never seen a more dedicated group of men than those of the 45th. They were determined to avenge this carnage. Many of the bombers returned to base with fuel tanks registering close to empty. My anger reached a high point when an enemy sub sank a tanker almost beneath us on one of our patrols. This time we thought that at last we were able to fight back. We dropped our depth charges on a large cigar-shaped image (indistinct) just below the surface of the water. The roiled waters coughed up some debris and oil, but this was another ruse that the Germans employed.

Shortly after this event, the 45th was moved to France Field in Panama from which we continued our patrol efforts.

On a rainy morning in 1942 my crew and I departed in the trusty B-18 on another patrol. The only crewman I can remember was the Bombardier, Marshall "Shorty" Norton. Before departing, a senior officer briefed me as follows: "In order to press a successful attack on an enemy sub, it was vital to do so without hesitation. The enemy sub could submerge in less than a minute. The best target would be on the surface or just beneath. Furthermore, a system of sanctuaries had been devised for friendly subs. Friendlies would be in these sanctuaries so it would be wise to stay away from those areas. Also, friendly subs would be identified by specific color markings on their decks, the American flag would be flying at the stern. Identifying signal flares would be fired by friendly subs in recognition. Further, friendly subs will be submerged. If, for some reason that is not possible, you will be advised by radio."

We departed and started our search, flying at about 500 feet and weaving in and out between local rain squalls. As we circled a squall, lo and behold, just ahead of us, less than a half mile away, on the surface, was a long, cigar-shaped, black sub.

In less than a wink, as we overtook the sub, it was evident that this sub was not friendly because it lacked color markings, there was no American flag, there were no flares, it wasn't in a sanctuary, and I had received no message that an American sub was in the area. I immediately passed a command to open the bomb bay and to take battle positions for an attack. We dived to about 200 feet above the water. Our bomb run was at a 45-degree angle to the sub. Shorty Norton dropped his depth charges in a perfect strike. I wasn't able to see the bombs explode because I pulled up into a steep chandelle, looking back at the sub over my shoulder. As we came around 180 degrees, I saw the sub rocking at a 45-degree angle in the midst of what appeared to be an inferno of boiling water. The nose gunner was training his .30 cal. machine gun eager to strafe the deck. I was elated! Now it was our turn to dump the Germans in the water.

My elation was quickly turned to chagrin when I saw an American flag suddenly pop out at the stern! I immediately turned my radio to the Navy frequency, and I heard a torrent of expletives that made me fully understand what the phrase, "Cuss like a sailor" really means.

I was thoroughly disgusted with myself; I can't recall the exact sequence of events after that. I apologized. I asked about casualties and damage. I advised the individual on the other end that I would report the incident and request an emergency destroyer come to the rescue immediately. Also I advised that I would remain overhead as long as fuel would permit.

As I circled I had worrisome thoughts. What would be my fate? Could I be court martialed for aiding the enemy? How could I face my peers if Hitler wrote me a letter of commendation? I dreaded the thought that I may have hurt or even killed my fellow Americans. It was obvious that the sub was badly damaged, it just seemed to be dead in the water.

I circled the sub as long as possible and then returned to France Field. The base commander, having been erroneously informed that I had sunk a German sub, had quickly assembled an honor guard to greet me. I walked up to the commander who was beaming, and I told him, "Sir, it was an American sub!" I have never seen a countenance change so fast in my life, nor have I ever seen an honor guard evaporate into thin air!

I learned the next day that the American sub that I had so flagrantly violated was en route to its home base after a hairy patrol in enemy water near Japan. They thought they were in friendly waters and were home free. They were anticipating shore leave when they got into port at Norfolk, Virginia, and this was to be nixed by some fly boy.

I received word that a crewman on board the sub observed our menacing approach and rushed to shoot the necessary identifying flares, but that the pin stuck, and he used his teeth to pull it out. He lost several teeth in the process.

I didn't sleep well that night, and I worried that I was destined to be hanged from the yardarm of some Navy ship.

My commander talked to me shortly after the mishap. He informed me that I should have no trepidations. I had followed orders and deserved a letter of commendation. Furthermore, he said, the sub skipper should receive a letter of reprimand for not following orders. I felt somewhat relieved, but couldn't help feeling that I certainly wasn't helping our effort to win the war.

Here I must explain why I picked this title for my story. I was informed by the experts in ordnance that the reason the sub was not sunk even though the bombs were placed perfectly was because of the fusing. Fifty feet was beyond the lethal radius. If the fuses were set at 25 feet, it would have been curtains for the sub. Therefore, the near miss was in a vertical direction instead of horizontal. Shorty Norton was too good a bombardier to miss a shot like that.

It was comforting to learn later that there were no serious injuries suffered aboard the sub. For the sailor who pulled out those signal flare pins with his teeth, I can see in my mind's eye the look of disbelief on the face of some Navy dentist when he asked, "How did you get those teeth knocked out?"

Editor's Postscript: Floyd Park, who was with the 40th at Colon, Panama, at the time of this mission, adds this item to the story: "The day after the bombing of the sub, we who went off base and to town found out that we had to either fight the sailors in town or head for the base. I chose to quickly return."

While the Navy took the hit on one of its submarines, it (the Navy) was reluctant to admit that anything had gone too badly wrong. A copy of the sub's log (Submarine *S-16*) tells about the event in handwritten entries in the ship's log as follows:

"Underway as before. 1210 Made identification signals to Army planes. 1223 Made identification signals to U.S. Army planes. 1226 Submerged on course 190 T&pge. 1227 Bomb exploded, surfaced 1228. Made identification signals, displayed colors. 1231 Submerged. Bomb exploded close aboard. 1232 Surfaced. 1239 When [sic] ahead 2/3 speed on both engines course 160 T&pge. 1255 Continued steering various courses at various speeds, conform to channel. Captain and Navigator on bridge. (Signed) R. Buthrong." [Buthrong was the sub navigator.]

On Wednesday, 15 July, 1942, the log shows that the sub had returned to Panama. The sub "Moved to starboard side to Berth 'A' on the north side of Pier '3' U.S. Submarine Base, Coco Solo Panama."

A copy of the War Diary of the Commandant Fifteenth Naval District, Balboa, CZ for July, 1942 reports "Submarine *S-16* returning to Cristobal from mission...reporting its position at noon as attacked by Army planes. No damage inflicted. Submarine returning to Cristobal with surface escort."

From Submarine Division Thirty-Two, New York, NY, on 15 July, 1942, comes a paper: "Subject; USS *S-16* -- Report of Sixth War Patrol." In paragraph two of the cover pages, it is reported: "A detailed report of all circumstances connected with the bombing of *S-16* by Army planes from the submarine's point of view is being submitted to the Commander Submarine Squadron Three by Commanding Officer, *S-16*. At the present writing damage from the bombing appears to be slight. There were no casualties."

Subsequent pages of this report give this account: "At 1000, 13 July, received message from ComPanSeaFron which required report from this ship. At 1140, 13 July, surfaced to make required report. While on surface, sighted and exchanged recognition signals with several planes. After sending required report by radio, attempted to dive twice, but planes dropped two bombs, one of which damaged underwater body. Decided to proceed to port on surface and reported intention to ComPanSeaFron and ComSubRonTHREE. At 1355 Passed the eight and one-half mile sea buoy and proceeded through swept channel to harbor."

From Submarine Squadron Three in Coco Solo, a report was filed which said, "An investigation is being made by Commander Panama Sea Frontier of the bombing of *S-16* by friendly planes. From reports received to date, the bombing appears to be the result of a series of mistakes, none of which were made by the *S-16*. Commander Submarine Squadron Three has made certain recommendations to Commander Panama Sea Frontier which should prevent future occurrences. A report of this incident is being forwarded to Commander Submarines, Atlantic Fleet. The damage appears to be minor and does not warrant docking the vessel prior to her scheduled overhaul period."

**Date of event:** 13 July, 1942  
**Date written:** April, 1992  
**Written by:** James I. Cornett

### A-17s Versus Submarines

After the 40th Group had arrived in the Canal Zone, the 29th Bomb Squadron with me as squadron commander was stationed at Aquadulce Field, Panama. (The 29th Squadron was assigned to the 40th Group from April, 1941 to May, 1943. Ed.) The base had limited basic facilities with a dirt airstrip. This was termite country with huge termite mounds scattered around the area. In fact, it was necessary to daily level embryonic termite mounds from the airstrip to prevent tire damage. This chore was accomplished by Panamanian civilians each morning.

We were provided Northrop A-17 fixed gear attack aircraft which none of us had previously flown. The pilot's cockpit was in the front, and a gunner position was in the rear. In addition to under-wing bomb racks, an internal fuselage bomb rack compartment was incorporated for carrying small fragmentation bombs or similar types of ordnance. With crew and munitions aboard we could stay airborne some seven hours. Even though these aircraft had seen a lot of use prior to their assignment to us, our maintenance personnel, with a great deal of ingenuity, kept them flying. If they had radios, they never worked.

In the wee hours of the morning of 13 July, 1942, the Squadron received a mission directive from 40th Headquarters. An enemy submarine had been reported in the Caribbean near the Canal entrance. I was well aware of the super sensitivity of any threat to the Canal and shipping convoys transiting the Caribbean. The mission directive ordered us to search for the submarine in a 40-square-mile area around the center of its reported sighting. All available aircraft were to be utilized, each one to carry two 300-pound bombs. We were to stagger refueling at France Field so as to have only one aircraft out of the search area at a time. In addition, we elected to carry a gunner with 1,500 rounds of armor-piercing ammunition for his guns.

We had less than four hours before our directed takeoff time. In the interim, the aircraft were readied and loaded with bombs and ammunition. Pilots and gunners were selected and briefed on the mission. As there would be no radio communication, all phases of the search mission were provided each pilot. These consisted of search area location, search pattern, altitudes to be flown, individual fueling times established, etc. I elected to be last for refueling. The pilots were 1st Lieutenants Robert W. Rosebush, Herbert S. Meisel, John W. Dickinson, Jr., and me.

As we approached the search area, we spread out in the search pattern at the appropriate altitude. After several hours, Lt. Dickinson had refueled. Lt. Rosebush was on his way back. I noted Lt. Meisel on my left and observed that his departure for refueling was near. Then things got sticky. Suddenly there was a column of black smoke under Lt. Meisel's aircraft coming from the surface of the water. From that I assumed he had located the submarine and had bombed it. I immediately headed towards him and saw a surfaced submarine. I'd previously briefly seen a German U-Boat. This one appeared smaller, and I wondered what it was doing in the Caribbean. There was a crew member sending light-signal code letters and burning colored flares. These made no sense as we had not been provided with code-of-the-day information. Besides, it was supposed to be an enemy submarine.

Then the crew member disappeared, and the submarine started to submerge. Mistake! I dropped one bomb inboard and port side of the submarine, but it was 100 feet short. As I circled to make another bomb run, the submarine surfaced. The crewman reappeared in the conning tower and waved an American flag. That didn't mean anything to me either. I flew by the conning tower and hand signaled the crewman to stay on the surface. Bad communication. The crewman disappeared, and the submarine started to submerge again. I lined up on its prow and dropped my last bomb. On pulling out, I was skimming the water past the conning tower which my gunner proceeded to shoot up. Looking back, I saw that the submarine was well into the bomb slick and surfacing. Lt. Dickinson got on my wing, and I hand signaled him to bomb it if it started to submerge. Then I picked up Lt. Rosebush and gave him the same instructions.

By this time, I was low on fuel. The submarine was still on the surface, and Lt. Meisel would have reported it when the landed at France Field to refuel so I departed for the base.

I'd had a bladder relief urge twenty minutes after takeoff over six hours before. I'd tried the relief tube, but it was stuck under the seat. Finally I pulled it loose, but it was plugged up. I couldn't find any containers in the cockpit, and I didn't want to shower the gunner so I stayed in misery until the submarine episode.

On parking the aircraft after six and three-quarter hours in the air, the parking corporal jumped on the wing to obtain service information. I bolted out, pushed him aside and took care of the bladder problem. While I was giving the lineman service information, the Officer of the Day arrived in his Jeep. He told me the Navy and the Air Force people wanted to talk to me. I told him I would call the AAF people first. Lt. Meisel had reported the submarine, but was not aware of my activities. By this time he was back in the search area.

I called the AAF folks, probably the VI Bomber Command. They were extremely upset that I had missed the submarine. My discussion of events didn't seem to impress them. I was told I'd be receiving a message to file a mission report, directed to return to my base, and they would take care of my aircraft in the search area.

Then I called the Navy folks. I thought the AAF people had been upset until the Navy people got on my case. Conversation ensued, not verbatim, but generally as follows:

Navy: "Tell your people to leave that submarine alone."

Me: "Can't. We have no radio communication."

Navy: "Will they bomb it?"

Me: "Don't think so unless it starts to submerge. I suggest you tell it to stay on the surface if you're in contact with it."

Navy: "You already knocked lights out, and we don't know what else. Didn't you see the signals they sent?"

Me: "Yes, but they meant nothing to me. It was reported to be an enemy submarine."

Navy: "It's a U.S. Navy training submarine, etc., etc."

I gave the O.D. some money and told him to send some beer over to the submarine crew if it got in. (I never got a "thank-you" note.) I then departed for Aquadulce.

About a month later, we participated in a joint training exercise at Rio Hato airfield with live parachute fragmentation bombs dropped from the fuselage racks. One of our aircraft had some hung bombs which later fell out armed as we pulled out of the lines to the Zone. Trouble again. On landing at Rio Hato, I was told to stand by; the general wanted to talk to me. An AAF Brigadier General came up to me, and I appropriately reported. I explained what had happened. He stated something to the effect that if we are going to play war, someone will get hurt. In this case, you've only knocked out our communications with the Zone. Then my name registered, and he became quite emotional because of my missing the submarine and why hadn't I hit it. My lame response was that I had tried. He then stated that the sub was 800 miles from its supposed position and, in effect, was an enemy submarine in area where we had found it.

**Date of event:** 22 August, 1942

**Date written:** 30 November, 1982

**Written by:** P.A. "Chick" Koenig

#### Sinking of German Sub U-654

We took off from France Field on the afternoon patrol #2. This patrol ran north from France. Anti-sub patrol was not the most exciting way to digest lunch. Along with lack of sleep, it was no surprise that about an hour after takeoff, the crew was almost 100% asleep. I sighted what at first appeared to be one of those long rolling waves that we all had chased before, except that this one continued too long and then developed into a hull. In about three minutes it turned into a fully surfaced sub. The crew awoke real fast on hearing this development. We all remembered the incident of a few days before when the CO had depth-charged one of our subs.

I elected to dry run directly over the sub in order to attempt an exchange of recognition. On the pass, no personnel were seen on deck and as we chandelled 180 degrees, the sub started diving. We dropped down to 200 feet at 150 mph and made our bomb run. We crossed him at about a 45-degree angle and dropped our four depth charges. The first one was about 50 feet short, the second one was right alongside his hull (short), the third was just over and alongside, and the fourth was about 50 feet over. His conning tower was still above the surface as the first charge exploded. We had been carrying 325-pound charges until we banged up one of our own subs. Then we started carrying 600-pound charges.

The Navy, for a change, answered our radio report real fast and sent out help from the Squadron. In the meantime, an oil slick appeared and continued to enlarge. Some small bits of debris appeared on the surface.

We were flying a B-18; the crew of seven is listed below. The sinking took place at 12 degrees N, 56 minutes W on 22 August, 1942 at 1900 GCT.

P -- P.A. "Chick" Koenig  
CP -- Murr Skousen (Deceased)  
B -- William Lessin (Deceased)  
FE -- Harry Crawford (Deceased)  
R -- Pascal Shepard  
G -- W.E. Appleby, T.R. Smith

Editors Note: When digging out this story, P.D. Shepard responded by telephone. He says "When we sank the sub I sent out a message something like 'Sighted enemy sub, sank same.'" When asked if this was sent in code, he replied, "Heck, no. It went out in the clear. In those days, it was so early in the war, we didn't have codes."

Epilogue: Throughout its existence, the 40th Group had an affinity for submarines. Previous issues of MEMORIES have told stories that affirm this affinity. In issue #15, we told the story of Major Roberts and his crew of "Last Resort" who were returning from the 21 November, 1944 mission to the aircraft factory at Omura. They sustained damage from fighters and headed out over the Yellow Sea to try to get the damaged plane into shape for the flight back to base and to shed the fighters. They made contact with the submarine *Spadefish* whose radio call signal was "Funny People." The *Spadefish*, without regard for its own safety, actually broadcast its coordinates and invited "Last Resort" to "Come on down; we'll pick you up." The sub gave the plane the distance and bearing to its position. Howard T. Anderson, who gave this account of the exchange between plane and sub, said, "At least we knew we weren't alone out there." "Last Resort" made it to an emergency base at Laohokow and thence to Hsinching, so the assistance of the submarine was not needed this time.

On another occasion, as told in Issue #21, Jim Lyon's crew was forced to bail out over the Bay of Bengal. The British submarine *Seadog* on patrol near where the crew landed, diverted to the plane's bail-out side and, at great risk, surfaced and picked up crew members, Teplick, Lester and Dimock, from a life raft. The sub was persuaded to search further and later John Topolski was pulled in to the sub after floating in the water for something like 38 hours with only his Mae West for support.



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