

Ships Data Section
Public Information Division
Office of Public Relations
Navy Department

HISTORY OF USS STEELHEAD (SS 280)

On the prow in enemy-controlled waters, USS STEELHEAD left a trail of destruction in her wake. During seven war patrols in World War II, the underseas marauder sent seven enemy ships to the bottom and severely damaged four others.

Sliding down the ways at the U.S. Navy Yard, Portsmouth, New Hampshire on 11 September 1942, just three months after her keel was laid (1 June 1942), STEELHEAD was sponsored by Mrs. Marguerite Brown, of New London, Connecticut, widow of Captain A.W. Brown, USN. One year to the day after the fanatical attack on Pearl Harbor, the submarine was commissioned with Lieutenant Commander David L. Wheelchel, USN, as first commanding officer.

With her vengeful future in mind, the submarine conducted a shortened period of trials and training runs in the vicinity of the Isle of Shoals off the coast of New England and in Long Island Sound off New London, during December 1942 and January 1943. Upon completion of this preliminary training, STEELHEAD departed New London for Pearl Harbor via the Panama Canal, arriving at Pearl Harbor on 8 April 1943.

After an extensive training period, the sub stood out of Pearl Harbor for her First War Patrol. Enroute, a short stop was made at Midway on 25 April to top-off fuel, take aboard stores and fresh water, and to ascertain that all equipment was in first class shape. STEELHEAD departed the same day.

The submarine proceeded to her assigned area carrying twelve mines and nineteen torpedoes. Eight of the mines were successfully laid with the submarine on the surface on the tenth night in the area and the remaining four mines were laid with the submarine submerged on the twenty-ninth night. The first eight mines were planted only six to eight hundred yards off shore in forty-two feet of water; a difficult and bold feat. After the eight mines had been planted Japanese patrol vessels appeared and the sub was forced to clear the area.

STEELHEAD carried out a night bombardment from two miles off shore of a steel works, an iron works, and a railroad, all in the vicinity of Muroan, Hokkaido. The results of this shelling were undetermined, and it is believed that this was the first bombardment of the Japanese homeland by any unit of the U.S. Navy. No torpedo attacks could be made, due to the scarcity of suitable targets and in addition the whole crew was affected with an acute stomach disorder, which made the patrol extremely arduous. Considerable anti-submarine activity was experienced, particularly from enemy aircraft, which was more of a nuisance than a hazard to the sub.

Completing her patrol on 9 June, STEELHEAD moored at Midway.

On 30 June the submarine churned from Midway enroute to her Second War Patrol.

After reaching her area, at 2016 on 10 July contact was made with a Jap convoy, consisting of an auxiliary aircraft carrier with three escorts. While closing, an orange flash was sighted, and a number of explosions were heard from the direction of the convoy, leaving the impression that it was already under attack. In position at 2348, a spread of five torpedoes was fired at the large enemy ship, scoring at least three hits. The target turned away emitting clouds of black smoke and apparently went dead in the water.

One of the escorts was directly astern of the sub and dropped two depth charges. However, the sub-killer apparently never sighted STEELHEAD, as he returned to the vicinity of the damaged auxiliary carrier. She then cleared the area of attack with intentions of getting ahead of the targets to intercept them at dawn. However, radar contact was lost due to stormy weather and the convoy could not be recontacted.

Continuing on patrol, contact was established on 20 July at 1946 with a four-ship enemy convoy, consisting of a large freighter, two small freighters, and one destroyer escorting. Heavy clouds obscured visibility and while closing, a rain squall overtook the sub, making conditions still worse.

While getting ready to fire on the large freighter, STEELHEAD was forced down by the escort, which was heading directly for her. While being held down by the escort, the rest of the convoy dispersed, and when the sub came to periscope depth none of the targets could be sighted. After an unsuccessful search in hopes of recontacting a member of the convoy, the sub cleared the area.

On 22 July, fire broke out in her maneuvering room, but due to the excellent work of all hands, it was quickly extinguished and disaster averted. On the 31st STEELHEAD recieved a contact report from the submarine USS POGY and proceeded at high speed to the area of the reported contact.

The underseas raider sighted the reported contact -- a freighter with one escort, at 0500 on 1 August, and commenced tracking. While closing, it was evident that the freighter had already been attacked as she was dead in the water with her escort circling. However, while closing, the target got underway, and at 0707 STEELHEAD launched a spread of four torpedoes at the freighter. While diving into the murk, the sub heard two hits on the target which left the ship dead in the water.

Running silent, STEELHEAD was subjected to an extremely close depth charge attack, during which the sub incurred much minor damage. The attacking escort was able to keep close contact with the sub, and while she was being assailed she heard many breaking-up noises from the freighter, indicating that she was sinking.

After a prolonged depth charge attack, a mechanical failure left the submarine with a 15° up angle. This was temporarily repaired, and the sub then eluded the escort.

Radar contact was made with an enemy task force, consisting of three capital ships, an auxiliary aircraft carrier and five destroyers, at 0132 on 5 August, and STEELHEAD commenced her approach. While at a great range and with the chance that the valuable targets might escape before she could close them, the submarine fired a spread of six torpedoes at the carrier, swung right, and then fired a four torpedo spread at a battleship. Two hits were heard on the carrier, followed by three extremely loud explosions which were thought to be very heavy depth charges.

While clearing the area, smoke was sighted from the direction of the convoy, indicating that one of the ships fired upon had fires blazing. The following day STEELHEAD departed her area and on 16 August she arrived at Pearl Harbor, thus completing her Second War Patrol.

Refit completed, STEELHEAD stood out of Pearl Harbor on 12 September, enroute to her Third War Patrol. The first part of the patrol was spent in rescue duties in the Gilberts during an Army bombing of Tarawa. The second part of the patrol was conducted in the Palau area.

The submarine arrived in the Tarawa area on 19 September, and mission completed, she departed the area on the 21st, enroute to Johnston Island, arriving there on the 24th. At Johnston Island the sub topped-off fuel and took aboard provisions before getting underway from there the following day.

On patrol, at 0033 on 6 October, contact was made with a large Japanese tanker, and the surfaced sub commenced tracking. At 0236 -- in position -- a spread of four torpedoes was fired at the tanker, scoring three hits, one of which was a dud. The target then opened fire with her deck guns, and as her missiles were coming uncomfortably close, the sub dove, with intentions of making a periscope approach. However, while leveling off at 80 feet, fast screws were heard, coming from astern. One depth charge was felt close aboard, from a previously unsighted escort, and the sub went deep and commenced silent running. Upon coming to periscope depth an hour later, nothing could be sighted, except a heavy oil slick where the tanker had been (The tanker was severely damaged and later was sunk by the submarine USS TINOAS).

Clearing the area, she made contact with two enemy ships on 20 October at 2220, and commenced tracking. After a three-hour approach, STEELHEAD fired a spread of three torpdoes from her stern tubes at one of the targets, a freighter, scoring two hits. The submarine then went deep to avoid being rammed by the second ship. She was then subjected to a severe 22 missile depth charge attack. Coming to periscope depth at 0400, STEELHEAD started trailing the damaged ship and at 0800 the target with her escort was recontacted. Five minutes later, a cloud break directly behind the sub left her silhouetted against the horizon and the two enemy vessels opened fire.

Going deep the sub heard the distant depth charges and upon coming to radar depth shortly thereafter, she was unable to re-establish contact with the severely damaged target.

While off Palau, STEELHEAD's sound gear made contact with a Jap convoy standing out of a harbor at 1611 on 2 November. The convoy was later found to consist of a medium tanker and a large freighter in the right hand column; two smaller freighters in the left hand column; and three escorts. Commencing her approach on the surface the sub swung into firing position at 0247 on 3 November and fired a six-torpedo spread from her stern tubes at the overlapping targets. For unknown reasons, no hits were seen or heard on the targets, even though the torpedoes were seen exactly on course. STEELHEAD sought the dark depths, rigging for depth charge attack on the way down. While running silently, three depth charges were heard at a distance, and shortly thereafter a mechanical failure, which admitted a great deal of water to sub, forced her to surface to effect repairs. Luck was with STEELHEAD as no ships were in sight, and, repairs completed, the sub set out to recontact the convoy.

Sighting smoke from the convoy at 0549, STEELHEAD started her approach with intentions of making her attack at dusk. In position at 1602, she fired a spread of six torpedoes from her bow tubes at two overlapping freighters, but again there were no hits for the same unknown reasons. While going deep, the sub was subjected to a depth charging by one of the escorts, and upon coming to the surface at 1954 STEELHEAD started searching for the convoy.

SS-280 re-established contact with the enemy vessels at 2318 and commenced closing it. Finally, after failing to reach a satisfactory firing position for 17 hours, the sub swung into position and fired the four tropedoes remaining in her bow tubes at 1636 on 4 November. As two freighters and one escort were close aboard and heading directly for her, the sub went deep, and again due to poor torpedo function, no hits were scored on the targets.

Deep and running silent, STEELHEAD was subjected to a severe depth charge attack, during which two enemy escorts had the sub well spotted. However, due to brilliant maneuvering, the sub was able to put the enemy astern, and clear the area with all her torpedoes expended.

After deciding to trail the convoy in order to send contact reports to other subs, STEELHEAD recontacted the convoy at 0018 on 5 November and trailed it for three days, thus giving valuable information to other U.S. forces in that area and enabling other submarines to attack.

After clearing her patrol area, STEELHEAD docked at Johnston Island to replenish her depleted fuel supply on 22 November and on the 25th she moored at Pearl Harbor, ending her patrol.

With her refit completed, on 25 December 1943, STEELHEAD departed Pearl Harbor enroute to the Bungo Suido area via Midway for her Fourth War Patrol.

After taking on fuel at Midway on 29 December, the sub proceeded through heavy seas and while enroute to her area made contact with a five-ship enemy convoy, consisting of three freighters with two escorts at 0110 on 10 January 1944. This contact was made with bad weather prevailing, and as the sub commenced approaching the convoy it got steadily worse, developing into a full fledged typhoon when the sub reached a firing position.

With the whole convoy hidden by the driving rain, the surfaced sub hove into position and at 0528 she fired a spread of four torpedoes by radar at the leading ship in the column. In spite of the mountainous seas and other unsatisfactory conditions, one hit was scored on the target, and shortly thereafter the enemy vessel plunged to the bottom.

The enemy escorts began a frenzied hunt for the underseas raider, which at this time was clearing the area at high speed on the surface. As the submarine now was only 100 miles off Honshu, it was decided that it would be suicidal to attempt to close the convoy again.

Arriving in her assigned area on 14 January, STEELHEAD contacted an enemy hospitalship, which she left go by unmolested, on the 26th.

STEELHEAD patrolled her assigned area, but extremely bad weather, which sometimes reached typhoon proportions, was encountered, and this restricted the sub's activity very much. However, a Japanese "Q" ship was contacted on 14 February and attacked the night of 14-15 February. The enemy vessel was closed and fired upon twice, but escaped untouched, due to the shallow draft of the vessel and the mountainous seas.

Clearing the area, STEELHEAD continued on patrol until the following day when she headed for Pearl Harbor via Midway. The submarine moored at Pearl Harbor, completing her Fourth War Patrol on 24 February.

Following her refit, STEELHEAD departed Pearl Harbor for her Fifth War Patrol which took place west of the Marianas Islands and east of the island of Formosa. Despite extensive area coverage, no contacts worthy of torpedo fire were encountered. However, on the night of 17-18 April she bombarded the island of Rasa in company with the submarine BARB, and on the 30th a 500-ton enemy trawler was engaged and sunk by gun fire. STEELHEAD departed her assigned patrol area on 16 May, arriving at Midway on the 23rd, thus completing her fifth patrol.

On 17 June, her refit completed, STEELHEAD stood out of Midway in company with the submarines PARCHE and HAMMERHEAD (the three-sub "wolf pack" was known as Park's Pirates), enroute to her Sixth War Patrol north of the Philippines and south of Formosa.

Entering her patrol area on 30 June, it was not until 30 July that she contacted a suitable target. At 0130 on the 30th, STEELHEAD sighted smoke on the horizon at twenty miles distance, and she commenced closing the aircraft escorted contact, after sending hourly contact reports to PARCHE. When she finally sighted the convoy, the submarine found that it was composed of four lines of vessels, with three or four ships to each line and with many escorts placed at strategic points around the convoy. Finally, after 26 hours of tracking, STEELHEAD attained position at 0332 on 31 July, and fired a spread of six torpedoes at a tanker and a large freighter in the first line. One hit was observed on the freighter, followed by many explosions, the first three of which sounded like torpedoes. No hits were seen on the tanker but black smoke was observed coming from her water line amidships.

Quickly swinging right, STEELHEAD fired a spread of four torpedoes from her stern tubes at another large freighter, but due to the enemy's radical maneuvering the torpedoes missed ahead. Many explosions and much confusion reigned among the Jap ships, indicating that PARCHE was attacking. At 0449 STEELHEAD chose another target, a large two-stack transport, and launched a spread of four missiles from her stern tubes. Two hits were seen on the transport, which was slowed, and shortly thereafter the sub received a report from PARCHE indicating that she had sunk four ships.

STEELHEAD started closing still another enemy ship, a medium sized freighter, and at 0516 she fired a four-torpedo spread at this target, scoring two hits on the enemy vessel, which sank in almost record time, amid loud explosions and great flashes of flames. Returning to the previously attacked transport, the sub saw a large hole in her side and the vessel was emitting breaking-up noises, indicating that she would never make port.

At 0651 fast screws were heard passing directly over her conning tower. It was not known whether it was PARCHE firing, or an enemy escort above STEELHEAD. As it was a precarious position to be in, the sub dove into the murk. A half hour later the sub again came to periscope depth and sighted the attacked convoy to the south and another convoy headed north. However, STEELHEAD stayed submerged as land was in sight with many enemy air escorts in evidence.

STEELHEAD received orders to clear the area, and headed towards Balintang Channel. After transitting the channel astern of PARCHE, the sub headed for Pearl Harbor via Midway. She completed her patrol when she moored at the Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor, on 16 August.

Shortly thereafter STEELHEAD proceeded to the U.S. Naval Drydocks, Hunter's Point, San Francisco, California, for a major overhaul, arriving there on 24 August. During the overhaul period, on 1 October, while in drydock, STEELHEAD suffered a serious fire. As a result of the fire, a new conning tower was added, new hull plating installed in the control room, and new equipment installed in the pump room, control room, and conning tower.

On 23 October 1944, Lieutenant Commander Byrnes, USN, relieved Commander D.L. Whelchel, USN, as commanding officer. After a long period of time while repairs were being effected, STEELHEAD stood out of San Francisco on 16 April 1945, bound for Pearl Harbor.

During the training period at Pearl Harbor, while operating off Barbers Point, the sub got completely out of control, while engaged in a routine dive, due to simultaneous material casualties, and experienced a 53° down angle. Emergency measures were carried out and disaster avoided. However, the affects of this experience were long felt by all hands.

On 13 May 1945, STEELHEAD departed Pearl Harbor for Guam and her patrol area. This patrol was divided into two phases, the first being a lifeguard mission off Truk, which lasted ten days, and the second being conducted in the Tokyo Bay and Kii Suido area as a lifeguard submarine. No torpedo attacks were made, but two trawlers were sunk by gun fire and an Army aviator was rescued from the ocean. The sub returned to Saipan for voyage repairs and then on to Midway for refit, arriving at the atoll on 5 August 1945. On 25 August, STEELHEAD departed Midway for San Diego in company with USS BUSHNELL, USS TINOSA, and USS SEAHORSE, arriving in the United States on 5 September.

During the period 5 September 1945 to 2 January 1946, the submarine furnished services to the West Coast Sound School, and Fleet Air, West Coast. In addition, on her visit to Long Beach, California, over Navy Day, she was host to approximately 15,000 visitors over a three-day period.

On 2 January, STEELHEAD departed San Diego for Pearl Harbor in company with USS BUSHNELL, Submarine Squadron ONE, plus other submarines of Interim Squadron TWENTY-ONE, arriving on 9 January.

At Pearl Harbor, SS-280 conducted training exercises for the new members of the crew until 5 February, when she commenced her preliminary pre-inactivation overhaul. On 5 March, the sub departed Pearl Harbor for San Francisco, mooring alongside USS AEGIR at Tiburon Bay on 12 March. Here she continued her pre-inactivation overhaul. STEELHEAD moved to U.S. Naval Shipyard, Mare Island, California, on 26 March where the decommissioning process was completed.

USS STEELHEAD (SS-280) was decommissioned and transferred to the Pacific Reserve Fleet on 29 June 1946. The submarine is presently engaged in the Naval Reserve Training Program at San Diego, California.

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STATISTICS

SURFACE DISPLACEMENT - 1,525 tons	ARMAMENT - One 4"/50 calibre battery plus ten 21" torpedo tubes.
LENGTH OVERALL - 311 feet	
SURFACE SPEED - 20 knots	COMPLEMENT - 85 officers and men

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LIST OF SUCCESSIVE COMMENDING OFFICERS

Lieut. Comdr. D.L. Whelchel, USN	- 7 December 1942 to 23 Oct. 1944
Lieut. Comdr. R.B. Byrnes, USN	- 23 October 1944 to 29 June 1946

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(Stencilled 2 August 1948)