

Navy Department
Office of the Chief of Naval Operations
Division of Naval History (Op-29)
Ship's Histories Section

HISTORY OF USS GROWLER (SS-215)

USS GROWLER (SS-215) is named for a species of black bass. She is the first submarine of the Fleet to bear the name and the third ship of the Fleet to be named GROWLER.

United States Sloop GROWLER, first ship of the Fleet to bear the name, was purchased on Lake Ontario, during October 1812, and was first commanded by Sailing Master M. P. Mix. She was actively employed in Chauncey's squadron on Lake Ontario from 1812 to 1814. She took part in attacks on Kingston, York, and Fort George and the engagement with the British squadron, 7-11 August 1813. She was captured by the British 10 August 1813 but was recaptured by the Americans on 5 October 1813, libelled and purchased by the United States Navy, she was again taken by the British on 5 May 1814. A Schooner of two guns, later seven, originally merchant ship EXPERIMENT, GROWLER had a complement of forty officers and men. She had a displacement of 53 tons.

United States Sloop GROWLER, second ship of the Fleet to bear the name, carried 11 guns and had a displacement of 112 tons. She was purchased on Lake Champlain in 1812 and cruised on Lake Champlain as one of Macdonough's squadron under the command of Lieutenant Sidney Smith until 3 June 1813, when she was captured by the British near Isle Aux Noix in Canada and taken into the Royal Navy as the SHANNON. This name was changed to CHUB which was her name when she was recaptured by the Americans during the battle of Lake Champlain on 11 September 1814. She was taken into the United States Navy but performed no further service.

USS GROWLER (SS-215) was built by the Electric Boat Company of Groton, Connecticut. Her keel was laid, 10 February 1941, and she was launched on 22 November 1941, under the sponsorship of Mrs. Robert L. Ghormley, wife of Rear Admiral Ghormley, who at that time was special naval observer at London. The submarine was placed in commission on 20 March 1942, when Commander Howard W. Gilmore, USN, assumed command. After brief shakedown training she steamed to Pearl Harbor to take her place with other submarines already carrying the war to the enemy.

On 20 June 1942, GROWLER departed Pearl Harbor on her first war patrol and after fueling at Midway on 24 June, steamed to patrol the waters off Kiska, a Japanese-held island in the Aleutians Islands Chain. While on station off Kiska Harbor in the early morning of 5 July 1942, three Japanese destroyers were detected outside the harbor and GROWLER began a direct but cautious approach, firing one torpedo at each of the first two destroyers to score solid hits amidships. Two more torpedoes fired at the third destroyer ARARE, 1,850 tons, scored a hit and she spouted flames in a bright explosion, as she launched two torpedoes at GROWLER who dived to 100 feet as the enemy torpedoes shot by on either side of her and close enough to be heard without the aid of sound gear. A moment later

later depth charges were coming down and a Japanese seaplane joined the enemy hunter-killer group determined to blow GROWLER to the bottom. Commander Gilmore maneuvered GROWLER through skillful evasion tactics and surfaced when the storm was over to observe a great funnel of smoke billowing up from the destroyer anchorage, the funeral shroud for Japanese destroyer ARARE (52°-00'N; 177°-40'E). Her companion destroyers were towed back to Japan. GROWLER returned to Pearl Harbor on 17 July 1942.

GROWLER was again ready for sea and her second war patrol on 6 August 1942 and, after refueling at Midway, entered her patrol area around Formosa on 21 August. She fired two torpedoes at a freighter on 23 August which ran under the enemy without exploding and the freighter made a run for shallow water where she was covered by shore batteries. Two days later, GROWLER sank the powerful ex-gunboat SENYO MARU, 2,904 tons (22°-23'N; 120°-10'E) and on 31 August, sank cargo EIPUKU MARU, 5,866 tons (25°-43'N; 122°-38'E). A darkened sampan began trailing GROWLER on 4 September, but was soon sunk by six rounds of 3-inch gunfire. Three hours later GROWLER spotted the masts of a large ship some twelve miles distant and ran ahead of the enemy's probable course where she dived and lay in wait until the enemy came within 1,000 yards. She fired two torpedoes to score two hits and supply ship KASHINO, 4,000 estimated tons, went down by the bow, her screws spinning in the air. Commander Gilmore swung his ship for a bow shot and fired one torpedo which missed. Two minutes later he added another from 700 yards to sink KASHINO (25°-43'N; 122°-38'E). After two days of inactivity due to rain and rough seas, GROWLER was again in the fight on the afternoon of 7 September when she sank cargo TAIKA MARU, 2,204 tons, who was hit under the bridge and broke in two to sink in two minutes (25°-31'N; 121°-33'E). Numerous patrol planes and enemy picket boats prompted GROWLER to move back to Takao where she sighted a large freighter on 11 September 1942 but the enemy could not be closed for an attack. Two days later she launched an attack on a scattered convoy of seven ships, making an approach on the largest to fire four torpedoes for as many misses. As the patrol boats closed in on her, GROWLER ran through the convoy at periscope depth to lose them completely. She departed the area on 15 September and concluded her patrol at Midway on 23 September 1942.

Following refit, GROWLER departed Pearl Harbor 22 October 1942, bound for the sealanes from Truk to the south on her third war patrol. Several contacts were made in the area but none could be attacked. On 10 December 1942, she arrived at Brisbane, Australia for refit by USS FULTON.

GROWLER's fourth war patrol commenced 1 January 1943 when she steamed from Brisbane for Lae, New Guinea. After several ship sightings which could not be developed into attack, she fell in with an eight ship enemy convoy on 16 January 1943 and proceeded to attack. Working her way inside the patrol boats, she set up an attack on one of the columns. Just as GROWLER was ready to fire, the whole column zigged directly at her, leaving no alternative but to fire her stern tubes at the other column. Although an escorting destroyer was only 400 yards away, she fired two shots which hit the leading ship, passenger-cargo CHIFUKU MARU, 5,857 tons, and sent

her down by the stern (4°-00'S; 151°-55'E). The ensuing depth charges were not too close but kept GROWLER down until the convoy had scattered and escaped.

After steaming to the area off Emirau Island, GROWLER's lookouts sighted a medium freighter on 26 January but as GROWLER completed a run-around to submerge and await on the enemy's approach track, the target changed course and sped away. On 30 January 1943, a cargo steamer crossed GROWLER's path, and after an hour's tracking, GROWLER fired three torpedoes without obtaining a hit, as the enemy opened fire and turned toward GROWLER who dived. Before GROWLER was able to surface again, the enemy had cleared the area. After a fruitless attack on a converted patrol boat, 31 January, and another on 4 February, GROWLER sighted a 2,500 ton gunboat on 7 February 1943. However, during GROWLER's approach the enemy changed course toward GROWLER, who swung her rudder full left and sounded collision alarm as the enemy struck GROWLER head on at about 17 knots. The terrific impact heeled GROWLER over 50 degrees, as the enemy opened fire at point blank range with .50 caliber machine guns. The men on GROWLER's bridge were caught by the withering fire, and before they could get below, five were wounded. As GROWLER commenced to dive, those still alive scrambled through her hatch, but Commander Gilmore, the assistant officer of the deck and one lookout, Ensign W. W. Williams and Fireman Third Class W. F. Kelley, respectively, were killed by the hail of machine gun bullets. Command passed to the executive officer, Lieutenant Commander A. F. Schade, who brought the badly damaged GROWLER to safety.

Endorsing GROWLER's fourth patrol report, Commodore Fife commended: "The performance of the officers and crew in effecting repairs and bringing the ship safely back to base is one of the outstanding submarine feats of the war to date..." Admiral Halsey wrote: "The force commander is proud to extend his congratulations and commendations to this valiant ship and her courageous crew. Commander Howard W. Gilmore was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for distinguished gallantry and valor, above and beyond the call of duty. In the terrific fire of the gunboat's machine guns, Commander Gilmore, refusing safety for himself, remained on deck while his men preceded him below."

It was not until 13 May 1943 that GROWLER was again ready to set out on patrol, her fifth of the war. With Lieutenant Commander Schade in command, she cruised until 19 June before being able to make a torpedo attack, coordinated with USS GREENLING, and fired four deadly "fish" leaping toward the largest ship of the enemy convoy, following up with two fired at the second ship in column, obtaining two explosions which sank passenger-cargo MIYADONO MARU, 5,196 tons (1°-38'N; 148°-14'E) with damage to the other. GROWLER returned to Brisbane, Australia on 30 June 1943.

GROWLER's sixth war patrol was generally unproductive. She departed Brisbane on 21 July 1943 for the New Ireland area where she made several contacts but was unable to press an attack. She returned to Brisbane on 12 September 1943. Mechanical difficulty cut her seventh patrol short and after three weeks in the area north of Tulagi, Solomons Islands she returned to Pearl Harbor on 7 November 1943, then steamed to Hunter's Point, California, for a yard overhaul.

After overhaul, GROWLER returned to Pearl Harbor, departing 21 February 1944 on her eighth war patrol, to be conducted in the East China Sea. Effective anti-submarine activity hampered her; of fourteen ship contacts made during this patrol, ten were anti-submarine patrol vessels. She commenced her first attack on the night of 14 March 1944, when she spotted a ship on the horizon and began an end run to get in position for attack. GROWLER was sighted by the enemy while still at extreme range, and the enemy began pursuit. GROWLER dived for a down-the-throat shot straight into the bow of the oncoming destroyer but failed to get it off when depth control was lost. On 22 March, she fired four torpedoes at a small cargo ship for possible damage as she was forced down by patrol boats, being shadowed by a patrol plane or enemy patrol craft throughout the 23rd. A small naval auxiliary blundered into the patrol area on 10 April and GROWLER sank her with gunfire. She returned to Majuro Atoll on 16 April 1944.

Lieutenant Commander Thomas B. Oakley, Jr., assumed command of GROWLER on 23 April 1944, and on 14 May, GROWLER departed on her ninth war patrol, most of which was spent on lifeguard duty during the air strikes on the Marianas Islands. She also guarded the entrance to Surigao Strait in hopes of catching part of the Japanese Mobile Fleet, returning from the Battle of the Philippine Sea. From 22 May until 4 June 1944, GROWLER remained off Saipan, Marianas Island, with only a few contacts which could not be developed because of the proximity of land and air cover. By 10 June 1944, she was off Surigao, spending 11 days there with only one ship contact. On 28 June she set course for Midway, having only enough fuel to reach port by using one engine, plus a ten per cent reserve. This same day she encountered a large cargo ship with four escorts and after tracking five hours was in position for attack in the early morning of 29 June 1944, firing six bow tubes and swinging hard to bring her stern tubes to bear as three solid hits registered. There was a pause and then an awesome explosion of cargo KATORI MARU, 1,920 tons, who was evidently carrying gasoline. Streamers of fire shot out in every direction, "resembling a Fourth of July flowerpot." Smoke and flame shot up to 700 feet, and when the smoke lifted there was only a clear horizon where the target had been (19°-09'N; 120°-27'E). Continuing toward port, GROWLER came across a raft with five Japanese seamen on the morning of 6 July 1944, and attempted to rescue them. At first they played possum, and then threw off heaving lines from the submarine. Since they were drifting toward land, and were well in an air search sector, GROWLER left them and steamed to Midway where she fueled before departing for Pearl Harbor, arriving 17 July 1944.

GROWLER departed 11 August 1944 on her tenth war patrol, rendezvousing with PAMPANITO and SEALION at Midway to form "Ben's Busters", a coordinated search and attack group commanded by Lieutenant Commander Ben Oakley in GROWLER. The three set out for the sea lanes between Luzon and Formosa on 17 August with GROWLER in the center, flanked by SEALION on the starboard and PAMPANITO to port.

GROWLER's first opportunity to attack was on the morning of 31 August, following an attack by SEALION on a large convoy, who sank an enemy destroyer and a large transport to scatter the convoy. GROWLER fired her stern tubes to obtain a hit on a destroyer as two more explosions followed in rapid succession for unconfirmed results. The panicky ships of the convoy

were firing on one another by now and GROWLER retired, diving at dawn to lose the persistent enemy patrol craft.

GROWLER's next good contact came on 12 September 1944, about one hour after midnight when she intercepted a convoy of seven or eight ships, and after sending out a contact report, she eagerly closed in to fire at a ship in the center column as a destroyer sighted her on the surface and came bearing down on GROWLER. She swung ten degrees, firing three bow tubes before the range got so close that no others could be fired. Destroyer SHIKINAMI, 1,950 tons exploded, taking a 50 degree list to port as her momentum carried her on toward GROWLER.

Four of GROWLER's stern tubes smashed into two large cargo ships as she steamed ahead at flank speed and swung hard left to avoid the destroyer, still coasting toward her. After eluding a patrol craft and observing SHIKINAMI to sink (18°-16'N; 114°-40'E), GROWLER began an end around to attack the convoy again. She worked her way into 1650 yards and fired six torpedoes at frigate HIRADO, 860 tons, diving to surface two hours later when the frigate had sunk (17°-54'N; 114°-49'E).

During this night attack, SEALION sank two ships. Three days later, as she was on surface patrol in the area, PAMPANITO found 73 Allied prisoners of war who had been aboard one of the ships which both GROWLER and SEALION had torpedoed. GROWLER was well out of the area by then, headed for Fremantle, but an emergency call for help brought SEALION, BARB and QUEENFISH to pick up the rest of the survivors. These submarines managed to pick up 159 of the men before a typhoon ended the operation.

Late in October 1944, GROWLER, HAKE and HARDHEAD set out together intending to operate west of the Philippines. The war patrol, GROWLER's eleventh, proved to be her last.

GROWLER spotted an enemy convoy during the early morning of 8 November, and the three submarines moved in for an attack. HARDHEAD sank a tanker in the melee, but neither she nor HAKE could make contact with GROWLER when the battle was over.

Japanese records examined after the war threw little light upon the submarine's loss and, although it is certain that she sank with all hands during this engagement, it is not known just how she was sunk.

USS GROWLER was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation with the text reading as follows:

"For outstanding heroism in action against enemy Japanese shipping and combatant units during her First War Patrol from June 20 to July 17, 1942; her Second War Patrol from August 5 to September 23, 1942; her Fourth War Patrol from January 1 to February 7, 1943; and her Tenth War Patrol from August 11 to September 26, 1944."

USS GROWLER (SS-215)

USS GROWLER earned eight battle stars on the Asiatic-Pacific Area Service Medal while participating in the following operations:

1 Star/MIDWAY: 3-6 June 1942

1 Star/MARIANAS OPERATION:

Battle of the Philippine Sea: 19-20 June 1944

1 Star/CAPTURE AND DEFENSE OF GUADALCANAL: 1 Jan-8 Feb 1943

1 Star/CONSOLIDATION OF SOLOMON ISLANDS:

Consolidation of southern Solomons: 13 May-20 June 1943

1 Star/FIRST SUBMARINE WAR PATROL: 20 June-17 July 1942

1 Star/SECOND SUBMARINE WAR PATROL: 5 Aug-23 Sept 1942

1 Star/EIGHTH WAR PATROL: 21 Feb-17 Apr 1944

1 Star/TENTH WAR PATROL: 11 Aug-26 Sept 1944

NAVY UNIT COMMENDATION:

20 June-17 Jul 1942 - First War Patrol, Pacific

5 Aug-23 Sep 1942 - Second War Patrol, Pacific

1 Jan- 7 Feb 1943 - Fourth War Patrol, Pacific

11 Aug-24 Sep 1944 - Tenth War Patrol, Pacific

ORIGINAL STATISTICS

LENGTH-OVERALL	311'9"
EXTREME BEAM:	27'3"
STANDARD DISPLACEMENT:	
Tons:	1526
Mean Draft:	15'3"
SUBMERGED DISPLACEMENT:	2424 tons
DESIGN SPEED:	
Surface:	20.25 knots
Submerged:	8.75 knots
DESIGN COMPLEMENT:	
Officer:	6
Enlisted:	54
ARMAMENT:	
Main:	10 Torpedo Tubes (24) 21" torpedoes
Secondary:	(1) 3"/50 (2) .50 caliber (2) .30 caliber

RECOMPILED AND STENCILED: 4-2-58 (Wn)