

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
DIVISION OF NAVAL HISTORY (OP 09B9)
SHIPS' HISTORIES SECTION

HISTORY OF USS DARTER (SS 227)

Drawing a strangulating ring of ships and steel closer around Japan, the Allies made their final encircling movement against Leyte in the Philippines, storming ashore on the morning of 20 October. The landings were the climax of the island-campaign, for if they succeeded, Japan would be cut off from her oil supplies and defeat would be inevitable.

The Japanese fully realized this, and decided on a desperate gamble, throwing in their entire fleet, hoping to wipe out their enemies with one blow. To guard this, American submarines lay across the paths that they would have to take, waiting to warn the invasion fleet and to do as much damage as they could personally.

DACE and DARTER were assigned the area off Palawan known as the Dangerous Ground, from its many uncharted shoals. They were looking for an attack from Singapore, and in the early morning blackness of 23 October they found it — a force composed of five battleships, ten heavy cruisers, one or two light cruisers and about fifteen destroyers. After warning the Leyte force, they moved in to attack.

The attack cost DARTER her life, but it cost the Japanese two cruisers sunk and one heavily damaged. More than that, it cost them the element of surprise which had been their only hope, and eventually cost them their fleet.

USS DARTER's story began in the Electric Boat Company's yards at Groton, Connecticut, where her keel was laid on 20 October 1942. She was launched on 6 June 1943 when Mrs. Edwin B. Wheeler, wife of the Shipbuilding manager of the Electric Boat Company, christened the vessel. DARTER was placed in commission on 7 September 1943 under the command of Commander W. S. Stovall, Jr., USN.

The new submarine then ran through tests, exercises and trials until 31 October, and then departed for the Pacific via the Panama Canal. She arrived in Pearl Harbor on 26 November and on 21 December 1943 put to sea on her first war patrol.

A leak in her after trim tank forced her to return for repairs, but on 3 January 1944 she was again underway, setting course for Johnston Island where she topped off her fuel bunkers. The sea lanes off Eniwetok were her first objective. Later she took up a patrol between Ponape and Truk before shifting south of Satawan Island.

The first ship contact came on 26 January, when two small ships with two escorts came into view. Before the sub could get into position, the Japanese detected her, and she was forced to break off the attack. But on the same afternoon the masts of a tanker and two destroyer escorts were sighted over the horizon, and DARTER immediately surfaced to begin an end-around run, staying over the horizon where her low silhouette could not be detected, until she could get ahead to lie in wait for her prey.

But before she completed the maneuver, low fuel tanks warned her skipper that he must refuel, and so the chase was broken off to continue to Tulagi. The sub arrived on 30 January and ten days later left to resume her patrol.

After three days at sea, a 7500-ton vessel with four small escorts appeared, and DARTER began running ahead of him, doubling back to make a periscope approach. Slipping between the two leading escorts, DARTER let fly all six bow tubes, and then swung for a stern shot as the bow tubes all missed. Twenty-five seconds after firing her first stern tubes an explosion ripped through the target, sending spray and smoke flying from amidships. The outraged escorts immediately began a series of depth charge attack, each "growing better with practice." Breaking-up noises entertained the crew, as they listened to their target go down. Two hours later DARTER was able to sweep her periscope over an empty sea.

On 17 February, a carrier strike was in progress on the enemy-held island of Truk, and all through the day bombs could be heard dropping on the Japanese. On the 21st DARTER intercepted a message telling her of a likely target. She soon intercepted a large vessel towing a smaller one with two escorts, but was unable to get off a shot. She then retired reaching Milne Bay on the 25th.

The submarine, now considered a veteran, began her second patrol on 25 March 1944, and after five days out contacted her first target, a large cargo ship with a small patrol craft escorting her. Under cover of darkness and a rain squall, she slipped in on the beam, and fired six torpedo tubes for four hits. The luckless freighter lost her stern in the first blast which was followed by hits spaced from the stern to the bridge. Four minutes later the ship went down and her escort began vigorously attacking a figment of his imagination 5,720 yards away, evoking the comment from DARTER's sound operator: "Just a third class trying to make second."

Shifting to the south of Davao, the sub spotted a task group of three cruisers and four destroyers on 6 April, but could not catch them as they made an unexpected course change and increased speed to 22 knots. Going back to her old area east of Halmahera, the sub patrolled until 29 April when she put in at Darwin for refueling.

Two tankers with two destroyers crossed her path on 6 May, but dawn spoiled her chance for a surface attack, and the targets escaped while she tried to come in at periscope depth. She returned to Manus on 23 May 1944.

Commander Stovall was relieved on 15 June by Lieutenant Commander D. H. McClintock, USN, as commanding officer. A week later DARTER was underway for Halmahera on her third war patrol.

Her first target appeared on the 26th, but a seaplane screening the convoy of two freighters and three escorts kept her down so that she could not attack. Three days later a mine layer with two escorts and a scout plane searching ahead came into view, and the submarine sent six torpedoes after her, scoring two hits. Loud breaking-up noises continued for 24 minutes, as the hunter lay deep, evading heavy depth charge attacks.

Numerous planes throughout the patrol kept DARTER running submerged most of the time, ruining her chances for sighting more ships. Only one more was spotted, on 21 July, but it should not be closed for attack. The sub tied up at Manus on 1 August, and then proceeded to Brisbane, Australia, where she arrived on the 8th.

Commander McClintock took his sleek command out of Brisbane on her fourth and final patrol on 1 September 1944, pausing at Darwin on the 10th. Operating with USS DACE (SS 247), DARTER set up a reconnaissance line to intercept any enemy forces which might interfere with the Morotai landings. On the 24th she left for Biak for replenishment and, after four days in port, headed back to her patrol area of Palawan Passage and Balabac Strait.

The two "D's" fell in with a rich convoy of seven enemy ships with only three escorts on 12 October in the center of Palawan Passage. Waiting three hours for the ships to get into position, DARTER fired four torpedoes at two overlapping tankers from 6000 yards, and then dived to escape the air cover. Three hits were heard, as planes dropped seven bombs close by without damage.

The convoy scurried into the safety of Balabac Strait, where the submarine could not follow. Sending a contact report to DACE, DARTER took up her position to await their sortie. Finally, near midnight on the morning of the 14th the ships ventured out, being spotted first by DACE. Since DACE had made the first contact, DARTER stood aside to let her make the first attack, seeing her make four hits. By this time, the convoy made it into Kimanis Bay with the destroyers effectively blocking any chance for further attacks.

The two subs then took up a patrol in Palawan passage, and on the 18th switched to the west approaches to Balabac Strait. Their vigilance was rewarded on the morning of the 19th when two destroyers approached, and DARTER found her self between the two. She fired four stern tubes at one, but missed her entirely when a turn threw the torpedo track off. The ensuing depth charges did no damage.

As the 21st opened, the radio brought news of the invasion of the Philippines, and immediately the two submarines headed for Balabac Strait, hoping to catch Japanese heavy units from Singapore since the shortest route to the landing beaches lay through the Strait and the Mindanao Sea.

Just before midnight the first enemy warship came into view, three heavy cruisers headed through the Dangerous Ground making 23 knots. After six hours the pursuers were 19 miles behind, and so they broke off, heading south to intercept any other units.

The two subs were cruising along close together on the surface, recharging their batteries, when DARTER made radar contact on a group of fast surface ships at 16 minutes past midnight. Grabbing a megaphone, the captain of DARTER shouted to DACE, "We have a radar contact. Let's go!"

Calling for full power, both ships were soon making 19 knots in hot pursuit of the enemy force of eleven heavy ships, headed up Palawan Passage. The enemy warships were making 22 knots, but soon slowed to 15, and soon an attack was worked out. DARTER was to have first choice, hitting the left flank column at dawn. USS DACE took up a position five miles ahead to attack the starboard column. Since the channel was narrow, the submarine skippers were reasonably sure that there would not be a large course change during the night.

DARTER ran ahead for 20,000 yards, and picked out the leading enemy cruiser as her target. Although neither submarine knew it, the force they had contacted included the two largest warships in the world, the secret Japanese super-battleships YAMATO and MUSASHI, both of whom boasted 18.1-inch guns in their main batteries.

The attack was ridiculously easy. Diving to periscope level, DARTER worked her way in for a clear shot at the leading cruiser in the port column, and at 0532 began firing. The first three torpedo tracks were spread in order to take care of any unexpected maneuvers of the big ship, the heavy cruiser ATAGO. By the time that the next three were ready to fire, ATAGO was roaring by so close that the deadly missiles couldn't miss, and so they were fired straight into his length.

Wasting no time, DARTER swung hard to bring her stern tubes to bear on the second cruiser, and as she did so heard the satisfying roar of five explosions. Firing her stern tubes, Commander McClintock swung his periscope back on the "sight of a lifetime," ATAGO lying dead, a mass of billowing black smoke from her #1 turret to the stern. Bright orange flames licked out along the water's edge as the bow began to go under. To add to the crew's joy, four more hits sounded through the submarine as four of the torpedoes struck the second heavy cruiser, TAKAO. Retaliation began within five minutes, but none of the depth charges came close, although the breaking-up noises from the cruisers were so loud that it seemed that they must be sinking directly overhead.

DACE got off her first attack, and at 0557 the submarines in DARTER could hear four more hits. DACE had eliminated the heavy cruiser MAYA from the Japanese register.

When the depth charging slacked off, DARTER tried to get in to finish off TAKAO, but was unable to get in past the destroyers. Since the Japanese were so close, the submarine could not surface to get an accurate navigational position, and was forced to cruise submerged until nightfall.

TAKAO managed to get underway erratically by 2200, and DARTER started in on the surface to finish her off, but intercepted radar signals caused her to delay, and she went under, running at full speed to get into position.

Suddenly the radio operator on board DACE was electrified by a radio message from DARTER in plain English, "Hard aground." DARTER, running submerged at 17 knots, had hit Bombay Shoal. It had been 30 hours since she had been able to get a good position, having been running on a dead reckoning chart during the whole attack.

The submarine shoaled at 0005, and between then and high tide at 0146 the crew worked feverishly, destroying all confidential matter and dumping everything moveable overboard in an effort to lighten the ship. For an hour after the full tide, they worked to get free, but nothing helped. With sunrise expected momentarily, it was decided to abandon the ship, sending the crew aboard DACE, who was standing by.

Demolition charges were planted, and as soon as the last man was safely on board DACE, they were set off. For some reason, however, they failed to explode properly, leaving the submarine in good condition for any Japanese studies. DACE then tried to blow her up with four torpedoes, but the tide had exposed so much of the reef that each of them exploded before hitting the submarine. With dawn making her position more and more vulnerable, DACE then opened fire with her deck gun, putting 21 hits into DARTER along the waterline before a plane forced her to dive.

A Japanese destroyer then appeared, and may have boarded the sub. The submarine ROCK tried to complete the job of firing ten more torpedoes later, but again the torpedoes went off before hitting the target. NAUTILUS finished the job of destruction on the 31st with 55 six-inch hits.

DARTER's loss was a result of a calculated risk, one of the tactical losses which must be expected in wartime. Her loss was well balanced, however, by the discovery of the Japanese task force and loss of two cruisers sunk and one badly damaged. In order to keep the entire crew together, all of the men on board DARTER were ordered to take over the new submarine MENHADEN, then building at Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

USS DARTER earned four Battle Stars on the Asiatic-Pacific Area Service Medal for participating in the following operations:

1 Star/TRUK ATTACK: 17 Feb 1944

1 Star/BATTLE OF SURIGAO STRAIT: 24 Oct 1944

1 Star/SUBMARINE WAR PATROL: 22 Mar-23 May 1944

1 Star/SUBMARINE WAR PATROL: 21 Jun- 8 Aug 1944

The ship also received the following Navy Unit Commendation, Pacific, for her Fourth War Patrol:

"For outstanding heroism in action during a War Patrol against enemy Japanese Fleet units. Aggressive and relentless in tracking her targets, USS DARTER daringly penetrated hostile waters and succeeded in contacting a Japanese task force. In an excellently planned and brilliantly coordinated attack, she opened fire. As a result of these salvos, launched boldly by the DARTER despite the superior fire power of the hostile concentration, the enemy was forced to retire, thus reducing appreciably the enemy's naval strength subsequently brought to bear against our forces. The splendid combat readiness of DARTER and the gallant fighting spirit of her officers and men throughout this hazardous action reflect the highest credit upon the United States Naval Service."

STATISTICS

LENGTH OVERALL:	311 feet 9 inches
EXTREME BEAM:	27 feet 3 inches
STANDARD DISPLACEMENT:	
Tons:	1,526
Mean Draft:	15 feet 3 inches
SUBMERGED DISPLACEMENT:	
Tons:	2424
DESIGNED SPEED:	
Surfaced:	20.25 knots
Submerged:	8.75 knots
DESIGNED COMPLEMENT:	
Officers:	6
Enlisted:	54
DESIGNED DEPTH:	300 feet
ARMAMENT:	
Torpedo Tubes:	(10)
Secondary:	(1) 3"/50
	(2) .50 caliber
	(2) .30 caliber