

# OCCASIONAL PAPER 13

August 2017

The Naval Historical Society of Australia

## LOCAL AUSTRALIAN/USA SUBMARINE INITIATIVE HELPS TURN THE TIDE OF WAR AGAINST JAPAN IN 1942

*The following story provided by Commodore Bob Trotter OAM RAN (Ret'd), National President of the Submarine Association is about a little-known part of the shared Australia/USA submarine history which helped turn the tide of war in the Pacific.*

Tuesday 20th June 2017 was the 75th Anniversary of events in Albany that turned the tide of the Pacific War.

History records that from March 1942 Allied Submarines had retreated to Fremantle and Albany via Surabaya & Tjilatjap in Java, Darwin and Exmouth, and, from bases there conducted some 170 submarine operations with a profound effect on the outcome of the war. Not well known is that from the start of the Pacific War, US submarines had very few successes against enemy shipping despite aggressive patrolling of enemy invasion and re-supply routes in the Philippines and Dutch East Indies theatres. The main reason appeared to be the submarine's main offensive weapon, the Mk 14 torpedo.

By May of 1942, Commander Submarines Southwest Pacific, Captain Charles Lockwood USN then Headquartered in the long since demolished CML Building in Perth, had received report after report of perfectly aimed torpedoes passing harmlessly beneath target ships. These complaints had barely disturbed the calm of the Bureau of Ordnance which had countered by asserting that claims of problem torpedoes were inventions to disguise the performance shortcomings of submarine skippers. Incensed by this and impressed by the detailed reports and analyses by the submarine skippers, the experienced Lockwood was spurred into action and, like in many wartime cases, the initiative of the 'men at the front' came to the fore by ignoring red tape, rolling up their sleeves and forcing a solution.



Fremantle Submarine Repair Base 1942

Supervised by Lockwood's Chief of Staff, Captain James Fife USN, on 20th and 21st June 1942 Lieutenant Commander James 'Red' Coe in USS *Skipjack* fired three test torpedoes through a fishing net strung across Frenchman's Bay at Albany. The tests concluded that the torpedoes were running on average 11 feet deeper than that set. In combat this would mean that the torpedoes were too far beneath the target's hull for the fuse to operate correctly, resulting in them passing under without exploding. Maintaining its scepticism, the Bureau of Ordnance discredited the tests and suggested that Lockwood should conserve his scarce supply of torpedoes.

Undaunted, Lockwood organised another test and on 18th July USS *Saury* fired five torpedoes at the net, all of which ran deep. The Bureau of Ordnance was finally driven to conducting its own tests on 1st August 1942 which, unsurprisingly to the skippers, concluded that the Mk 14 Torpedo ran 10 feet deeper than set. After a thorough investigation, the Bureau uncovered a series of design defects and testing deficiencies that caused the deep running.

The depth setting mechanism was completely re-designed and following extensive testing the submarines operations were conducted with increased confidence.

From a start point of very limited success in 1942, by mid-1945 virtually all the Japanese merchant fleet and most of its Navy had been sunk, starving the Japanese of the resources it needed to continue the war and to feed its people.

'Red' Coe's April/May 1942 Report of his patrol off Indo China included the statement:

"To make a round trip of 8,500 miles into enemy waters, to gain an attack position undetected within 800 yards enemy ships only to find that the torpedoes run deep and over half the time will fail to explode, seems to me to be an undesirable manner of gaining information which might be determined any morning within a few miles of a torpedo station in the presence of comparatively few hazards."

A few hours, a single submarine, a fishing net, and a few torpedoes at Frenchman's Bay Albany had proved Coe and the other skippers right and changed the course of the war in the Pacific.



AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

USS *Pelias* at Albany Long Jetty 1942

302645