

USS Wahoo's Final Patrol



(Far left top) Lt. Richard O'Kane, USS Wahoo (SS 238) executive officer talks with Cmdr. Dudley "Mush" Morton, Wahoo commanding officer on the ship's conning tower, March 1943.



(Far left bottom) Cmdr. Dudley "Mush" Morton and Lt. Roger Paine work on a firing solution during patrol in 1943.

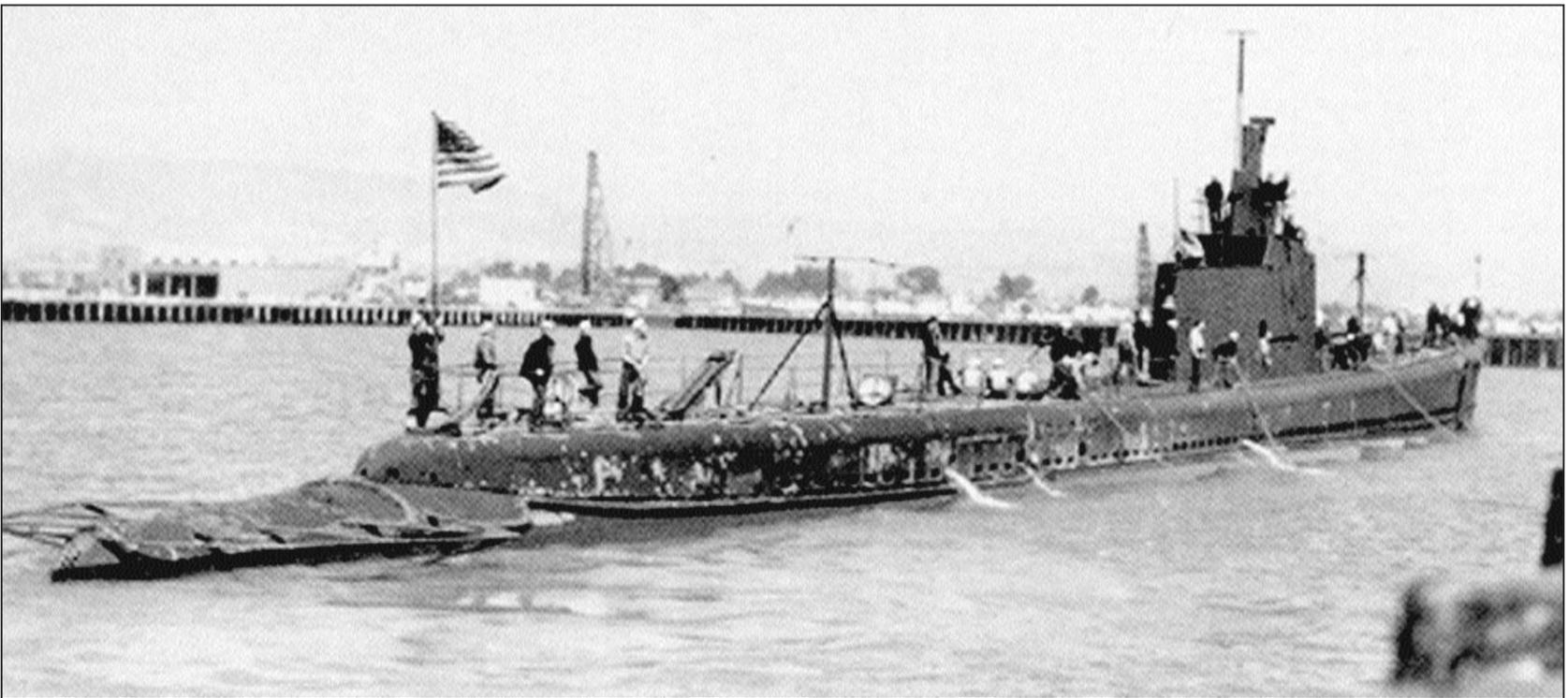


(Left) Wahoo sinks Japanese submarine Nittsu Maru, as seen through Wahoo's periscope, in the Yellow Sea on March 21, 1943.

(Below) Wahoo Sailors receive mail on pier S-1, Submarine Base Pearl Harbor in 1943 following their third war patrol.

(Far below) USS Wahoo enters Pearl Harbor early in 1943.

All pictures are official U.S. Navy photos



Aggressive WWII submarine skipper 'Mush Morton' always took the fight to the enemy

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At the outset of World War II, Rear Adm. Charles Lockwood, newly appointed commander of the Pacific Fleet Submarine Force, was seeking daring and courageous men to lead his submarines into battle. Frustrated by the lack of enemy sightings or engagements when his subs returned from patrol, he began replacing the existing commanding officers with a younger, bolder breed of skipper who would aggressively seek out and engage the enemy. Cmdr. Dudley "Mush" Morton was just this type of leader.

Born in Virginia and raised in Kentucky, Cmdr. Morton had a feisty and daring nature about him. A life-long yearning for greatness and his desire to always "give that extra effort" led to his success at U.S. Naval Academy (Class of 1930) and eventually to command of one of the U.S. Navy's most fierce warships of all time, USS Wahoo (SS 238).

"When I first met Cmdr. Morton it only took me one minute to realize that I would follow that man to the bottom of the ocean if necessary," said former Wahoo Sailor, retired Chief Yeoman Forrest Sterling. "Mush Morton was a true leader of men and knew his business inside and out," he added.

Cmdr. Morton commanded his first submarine, USS R-5, in the Atlantic, and was transferred to the Pacific after two successful patrols. He served as Wahoo executive officer under Lt. Cmdr. M. G. Kennedy and returned to assume command of the ship in January, 1943. Nicknamed "Mush Mouth" and later shortened to "Mush" because of his story-telling ability, Morton was an uncommonly

talented submarine commander. Extremely capable and aggressive, he feared nothing on or below the sea. Every time Wahoo departed on patrol Lockwood was confident there would be engagement with the enemy and reports of enemy ship sinkings to follow.

Fresh off a west-coast overhaul, Wahoo headed westward from Pearl Harbor on Aug. 8, 1943 to begin her sixth war patrol. Targets were plenty, but faulty torpedoes had Morton in a fit of rage. He was risking his crew and his ship in one of the most hazardous areas of the world. "Damn the torpedoes," wrote Morton in his messages back to COMSUBPAC. Lockwood ordered the Wahoo to return to Pearl.

Upon arrival in Hawaii, Mush Morton paid a visit to Lockwood's office. He described in detail how frustrating his patrol had been, a patrol that saw Wahoo fire ten "duds" in a row. After several heated discussions, Cmdr. Morton convinced Lockwood to let him go back to the Sea of Japan with a load of new Mark 18 electric torpedoes. Lockwood gave his permission, assigning USS Sawfish to go with Wahoo. Although the Mark 18's had not yet been debugged, Cmdr. Morton and Lt. Cmdr. Sands (Sawfish) felt they were better than taking out a load of Mark 14's. Both ships departed Pearl Harbor on Sept. 9, 1943 with a mixture of each.

Wahoo topped off her tanks with fuel at Midway Island and proceeded west with order to enter the Sea of Japan via La Perouse Strait around September 20th and patrol below the 43rd parallel for about four weeks. Sawfish was to enter the Sea of Japan three days later and patrol that area above the parallel. If all went well Wahoo would depart the



Cmdr. Dudley "Mush" Morton

area on Oct. 21st. Mush Morton and his 79 crewmembers were never heard from again.

A study of Japanese records after the war revealed the submarine's fate. Between September 29th and Oct. 9th Morton was taking the fight to the enemy. Wahoo was able to sink four ships in the area. On Oct. 5th, the Japanese news agency Domei announced to the world that a "steamer" was sunk by an American submarine off the west coast of Honshu near Tsushima Strait, with the loss of 544 lives. This was the 8,000-ton Konron Maru. The other three ships that Morton sank totaled 5,300 tons.

TIME Magazine reported this broadcast in their Oct. 18, 1943 edition under the headline, "KNOCK AT THE DOOR." The magazine's readers were reminded that the torpedoing occurred in waters, which were "Japan's historic door" to Asia's mainland.

Morton's ship sustained some damage from unknown causes during this period because it was leaking oil as it transited the La Perouse Strait on the surface on the morning of Oct. 11, 1943. This explains why Cmdr. Morton chose to make the passage in broad daylight. A large-caliber coast artillery gun on Soya Misaki promontory sighted Wahoo around 8:30 a.m. and opened fire. Morton submerged his damaged submarine and continued on course. Sawfish had been depth-charged by patrol boats while transiting the strait two days prior. There was little doubt that the target on the 11th was Wahoo.

Meanwhile, the Japanese battery commander alerted patrol aircraft and ships to the intruder's presence. An hour later, a patrol seaplane arrived and spotted small oil slick on the water. Closer inspection revealed a submerged black hull and conning tower. The seaplane and another dropped several bombs on the target and brought up bubbles and oil.

At noon a submarine chaser arrived and dropped 16 depth charges, bringing up one of Wahoo's propeller blades. Following this barrage the Japanese could not find the submarine. Only an expanding oil slick of diesel fuel 200 feet wide and three miles long marked Wahoo's watery grave. A teary-eyed Lockwood examined the Japanese records with much sadness as it described the loss of one of his favorite sons - "Mush the Magnificent."

The loss of Cmdr. Dudley "Mush" Morton and Wahoo sent shock waves throughout the entire submarine force. When Wahoo was officially reported missing on Nov. 9th, Lockwood ceased all further trips into the Sea of Japan. The area was

abandoned as a patrol route and was not invaded again until June 1945.

Morton was posthumously awarded a fourth Navy Cross, and when he died, was responsible for sinking 19 ships totaling 55,000 tons. These figures, in terms of individual ships sunk, placed him as one of the three most successful submarine skippers of the war. Incidentally, the only man who surpassed Morton in the entire submarine force was Morton's former executive officer, Captain Dick O'Kane, who totaled 24 kills in the USS Tang before she was sunk by the last of her own torpedoes with the loss of all but nine of her crew in 1944.

In 1960 Lockwood was asked to write the forward for former Wahoo crewmember Forest Sterling's book, "Wake of the Wahoo." He wrote about Morton. "When a natural leader and born daredevil such as Mush Morton is given command of a submarine, the result can only be a fighting ship of the highest order, with officers and men who would follow their skipper to the Gates of Hell...And they did," wrote Lockwood.

"Morton lined up an impressive number of 'firsts' during the short 10 months that he commanded Wahoo: first to penetrate an enemy harbor and sink a ship therein; first to use successfully a down-the-throat shot; and first to wipe out an entire convoy single-handed," added Lockwood.

Several former Wahoo crewmembers were discussing their beloved commanding officer years later and were able to sum up "Mush Morton's" attitude in one word - "Attack!" Thus marked the end of another in a long line of WWII U.S. Navy submarine heroes, Cmdr. Dudley "Mush" Morton, a man who always took the fight to the enemy.