

USS PARCHE *remembered*

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Capt. Robert Brandhuber
Chief of Staff, COMSUBPAC

WWII survivors from historic battle reunite, remember at USS Bowfin Submarine Museum and Park

EIGHT members of the elite society of surviving World War II submariners were reunited recently at the USS Bowfin Submarine Museum and Park. What made this gathering so special? These eight former shipmates were on hand to pay tribute with a plaque dedication to their captain, their submarine and the historic battle they took part in on a hot summer evening in July 1944.

The submarine being honored was the USS Parche (SS 384) and the man in charge was Cmdr. Lawson P. (Red) Ramage, a man whose fierce courage and deadly warrior-like ferocity belied his carrot-topped, baby-faced looks.

In 46 minutes on July 31, 1943, the USS Parche shot 19 torpedoes, achieving 15 or 16 hits, sinking five enemy ships. For this action, Cmdr. “Red” Ramage received the Medal of Honor. Lt. Churchill J. Campbell was on the bridge with Ramage during the historic battle and was one of the eight survivors in attendance at the dedication ceremony.

“Plain and simple, the skipper just got angry,” said Campbell, describing Ramage’s mood during the confrontation. Campbell was the Officer of the Deck and remained on the bridge while Ramage darted below, checking the RADAR from time to time in the middle of the fight.

Other Parche survivors on hand for the dedication were Robert E. Dillon, Robert Erwin, Robert A. Hall, A. L. “Gus” Kulick, David J. Manns, Robert T. Silvis, and Carl Vozniak. Also in attendance were Joan R. Mitchell, Vice Adm. Ramage’s daughter, and Mary Campbell, Churchill Campbell’s wife. It was Mrs. Campbell who spent the past year and a half organizing the dedication for her husband and his shipmates.

“I felt it really needed to happen and their story needed to be told,” said Mrs. Campbell. “Our husbands and friends were among the lucky ones that came home, but there were over 3,000 of their submarine

shipmates who didn’t make it back. We need to remember them as well,” she added.

“The men who served in these arenas are true American heroes,” said guest speaker Capt. Robert Brandhuber, Chief of Staff for Commander Submarine Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet (COMSUBPAC). “In my opinion they should serve as an example to those that would enjoy peace today,” he added.

Brandhuber talked about the impact of the engagement. “In less than one hour, the lives of every crewmember on Parche – as well as those on the enemy ships – would forever change. It was the one crystallizing moment that forever forged the lives of you and your families.”

Brandhuber, a former submarine skipper himself, went so far as to suggest Parche’s story might even look good on the silver screen. “The rugged individualism remained the sparkplug of the American submarine effort,” reflected Brandhuber.

“How do you weigh the courageous actions of the Parche crew that early morning in late July 1944 in terms that today’s leaders can genuinely appreciate – the vast majority of whom have not served in uniform? I am quite sure that the Parche story would make a great movie. I’d be curious to see who might get to play Churchill Campbell’s part!”

“This is my premise. It wouldn’t break my heart if in my lifetime, or my children’s lifetime, that we never had another battle Hollywood could make a movie about. A robust, credible and always ready force is the best safeguard against those who would do us harm. The goal isn’t to win a war. The goal is to be so overwhelmingly capable that you don’t have to fight it,” Brandhuber added.

After a refit, Parche went to sea on June 17, 1944 for her second war patrol and was operating with the Parks’ Pirates wolf pack (Cmdr. L. S. Parks) off Formosa in company with USS Hammerhead (SS 364) and USS Steelhead (SS 280). At 10:30, on

the morning of the 30th, Steelhead (Cmdr. D. L. Wheelchel) sighted a convoy’s smoke. Steelhead trailed.

The convoy was under an umbrella of air protection, and Wheelchel’s submarine was unable to attack during the day. But at 8:15 p.m. Steelhead got off a message to pack-mate Parche, giving the course and speed of the Japanese ships. Ramage put Parche on the estimated track and set her plunging along on the surface, top speed.

By midnight the two submarines were overhauling the quarry. At 3 a.m., morning of the 31st, Steelhead was boring in on the attack. Thirty minutes later, Wheelchel opened fire. Two Japanese rockets soared in the night, signaling the convoy’s alarm and were seen by Parche.

Ramage’s submarine had made contact with one of the convoy’s escorts about 30 minutes earlier and was driving forward with crew at battle stations to strike the convoy’s flank. The glare of the rockets now revealed several large ships in silhouette and three escorts rushing about. In just a few minutes Parche was soon between the escorts and their convoy, but while this maneuver was going on, the entire enemy convoy had reversed its field and was now headed directly for Parche.

Ramage picked out the closest target for the first shot - a medium-sized freighter. He swung his submarine and opened fire with two bow shots. The alerted freighter managed a lucky zig, and the torpedoes missed, but moments later, Parche’s lookouts spotted two tankers off to starboard.

Starting a run for these targets, Ramage got in a stern shot at the freighter, and a thumping explosion registered a hit. A five-minute dash brought Parche within torpedo shot of the tankers. Ramage fired four torpedoes at the leading tanker, then swung Parche hard right to fire three at the second tanker. The leading tanker collected the first salvo from cutwater to wake. The first torpedo blew the ship’s bow to pieces.

The next three ploughed into the tanker’s mid-section, quarter and stern.

The ship went under immediately, leaving only a small patch of burning oil to mark the spot. The second tanker, struck near the bow by two torpedoes, staggered and slowed down, but kept on going. So did Parche, and she didn’t slow down.

The USS Parche (SS 384) was built by the Portsmouth, New Hampshire Navy

Yard. Her keel was laid on April 9, 1943 and three months later, on July 24, Miss Betty Russell, daughter of the U.S. District Judge Robert Lee Russell, formerly Judge Advocate General of the Navy, smashed the traditional bottle of champagne across the bow as she slid into the water for the first time. Rear Adm. Thomas Withers, Commandant of the Portsmouth Navy Yard, and former COMSUBPAC, commissioned Parche as a vessel of the United States Navy on Nov. 20 1943.

The submarine took its name from a small, gorgeously colored, four-eyed butterfly fish, the chaetodon capistratus. When escape is not possible, the four-eye will sometimes turn to face its aggressor, head lowered and spines fully erect, like a bull about to charge. This may serve to intimidate the other animal. Such was the case with its namesake during World War II. The Parche faced her aggressors head on, torpedoes ready, like a bull about to charge.

Following the war Parche was assigned to “OPERATION CROSSROADS” as a target ship for the atomic bomb tests at Bikini Atoll. She arrived in Bikini lagoon on June 1, 1946 and spent the whole month preparing for history’s fourth atomic explosion that occurred on July 1. Parche was anchored 2,000 yards off the aft starboard quarter of the battleship USS Nevada.

Following the initial drop, the crew returned to realize Parche had suffered only very minor damage - mostly some optical equipment that had been placed topside and gotten blown away.

However, the entire port side was completely blackened as if someone had gone over it with a blowtorch. The next day most of the crew was back aboard and it was business as usual.

She proceeded to Mare Island Naval Shipyard at Vallejo, Cal., was assigned to Naval Reserve training duty in Oakland, Cal., and finally was decommissioned on Dec. 10, 1946. On Dec. 1, 1962 her classification was changed to Auxiliary Submarine, AGSS-384 and on November 8, 1969 she was struck from the Navy list and sold on June 18, 1970.

All that remains is her original conning tower barrel, located at the USS Bowfin Submarine Museum in Pearl Harbor, and the bridge structure, shears, and upper gun on display at the Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.



Surviving USS Parche (SS 384) crewmembers gather with Capt. Robert Brandhuber at plaque.



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Above: Bob Erwin speaks at the plaque dedication recently at the USS Bowfin Submarine Museum and Park.



Above: The machinists aboard USS Parche (SS 384) pose for a photo in 1944.



Above: Sailor aboard USS Parche (SS 384) pose with a life ring from one of the Japanese ships they sank during a skirmish July 31, 1943.