

NAVY DEPARTMENT
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF OF NAVAL OPERATIONS
DIVISION OF NAVAL HISTORY (OP-29)
SHIP'S HISTORIES SECTION

HISTORY OF USS TRITON (SS 201)

USS TRITON (SS 201) is named for a large genus of univalve marine snails which derived their name from a sea demigod in Greek mythology, son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, represented as having the lower part of his body fishlike. His special attribute is a trumpet made of a conch shell, which he blows to raise or calm the waves. Later mythology imagined a multiplicity of Tritons, attendants on the sea gods. TRITON is the first submarine and second ship of the Fleet to bear the name.

The first TRITON was a tug, originally named DOUGLAS H. THOMAS when acquired by purchase in 1889 from her builders, J. H. Dialogue and Sons of Camden, New Jersey. She was assigned to duty at the Navy Yard, Washington, D. C. where she served until 1925, then being transferred to duty under the First Naval District at the Boston Navy Yard. She was first commissioned, 22 March 1917, and on 1 July 1920, she was designated YT-10. On 19 May 1930, she was stricken from the Navy Register. She was disposed of by sale, 15 September 1930. Her over-all length was 96 feet 9 inches; beam, 20 feet 9 inches; displacement, 212 tons; mean draft, 9 feet; speed, 13 knots. Another tug named TRITON (S. P. 3312) had brief service during World War I. She was chartered by the Navy on 17 October 1918 and served as a tug in the FOURTH Naval District until returned to her owners, 8 March 1919.

USS TRITON (SS 201) was built by the Navy Yard, Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Her keel was laid 5 July 1939 and she was launched 25 March 1940 under the sponsorship of Mrs. Ernest J. King, wife of Rear Admiral King who became Fleet Admiral during World War II. TRITON was placed in commission, 15 August 1940, when Lieutenant Commander W. A. Lent, USN, assumed command.

On 8 January 1941, TRITON arrived at the Submarine Base, New London, Connecticut. On 14 January she sailed to conduct shakedown cruise which included visits to Puerto Rico; the Virgin Islands; Trinidad; and Barranquilla, Colombia. She returned via Key West, Norfolk and New York, arriving at New London, 16 March 1941. She returned to the Portsmouth Navy Yard for overhaul, 28 March 1941.

During May and June 1941, TRITON was engaged in local training operations at Portsmouth and New London. On 1 July 1941, she sailed from Portsmouth, enroute to the west coast. She passed through the Panama Canal, 12 July, and arrived at San Diego, 20 July 1941.

TRITON was assigned to Submarine Division 62, Squadron 6, U. S. Pacific Fleet. On 29 July 1941 she departed in company with submarine TROUT for the Submarine Base, Pearl Harbor, arriving 4 August 1941. She made a training cruise to Midway Island (30 August - 15 September), then engaged in Fleet tactics and training in local operating areas of the Hawaiian Islands until November 1941.

On 19 November 1941, TRITON departed Pearl Harbor to conduct practice war patrol off Wake Island. She was in that vicinity, 7 December 1941, when both Pearl Harbor and Wake came under attack by the Japanese. She received news of the attack upon surfacing that evening and was warned to stay outside the range of the coast defense guns. She continued patrol south of Wake Island and on 10 December 1941, found herself in position to intercept the Japanese naval force as it approached Wake. That midnight as she finished a battery charge on the surface, two bright flashes silhouetted a Japanese man-of-war heading toward her. TRITON went deep for evasive tactics as her soundman reported a rush of high-speed screws of the enemy on the hunt. After more than three hours of lethal hide-and-seek, Lieutenant Commander Lent maneuvered TRITON into a position to attack the hunter, and fired four after-tubes on sound bearing of the enemy. A blunt explosion was heard and the blast vibrated through TRITON. She was credited with damage to one Japanese warship. This was the first torpedo attack made by a Pacific Fleet submarine in World War II. TRITON returned to Pearl Harbor, 31 December 1941.

On 25 January 1942, TRITON sailed from Pearl Harbor on her second war patrol which was conducted in the East China Sea. While off Kyushu, Japan, 17 February 1942, she obtained a hit to damage a sizable cargo vessel and later that day, made hits which sank cargo SHINYO MARU NO. 5, of 1,498 tons (32°-14'N; 127°-14'E). On 21 February she intercepted two freighters in the northern area of the East China Sea and closed in from starboard in an attempt to get both ships. Upon close of the approach, the second ship was too near TRITON's track for a bow shot. She fired two torpedoes for two hits which sank cargo SHOKYU MARU of 4,484 tons (32°-10'N; 126°-28'E). She then swung to fire at the second ship but the enemy put his stern to TRITON and evaded at high speed. In the vicinity of Nagasaki Ko,

27 February 1942, she made hits on a passenger-cargo vessel, but the extent of damage was unknown. TRITON returned to Pearl Harbor, 17 March 1942. Lieutenant Commander C. C. Kirkpatrick assumed command, 18 March 1942, relieving Lieutenant Commander W. A. Lent who was awarded the Navy Cross for distinguished service in TRITON.

TRITON departed Pearl Harbor, 13 April 1942, to conduct her third war patrol. Within the 300-mile circle of Marcus Island on the night of 23 April, she made a surface attack on a trawler of estimated 1,000 tons. When two torpedoes were fired for no hits, she opened with her deck gun and left the enemy a mass of splinters and driftwood (28°-22'N; 123°-50'E). She patrolled through the Nansei Shoto pass on 29 April and on 1 May intercepted a convoy of six freighters with two escorts. After making two hits on the leading vessel, she was forced down. Eight depth charges exploded astern for no damage to TRITON and she lay silent as the escorts searched back and forth overhead. About an hour and a half later, she came to periscope depth to fire one torpedo at the crippled target without success. Another torpedo from her stern tube broke the back of passenger-cargo CALCUTTA MARU of 5,339 tons and she sank (28°-07'N; 123°-45'E).

On 6 May 1942, as TRITON patrolled off the China coast near Hang-Chou, she intercepted a convoy of six ships under escort of several destroyers. She let the convoy pass and fired two torpedoes at a trailing merchantman for two misses, then fired two more as a destroyer closed in. Two hits were scored to sink TAIEI MARU of 2,209 tons (28°-42'N; 123°-50'E). She evaded the destroyer without difficulty. After clearing the area, she moved rapidly on the surface to gain ahead and as the convoy approached, two torpedoes were fired which sank passenger-cargo TAIGEN MARU of 5,660 tons (28°-19'N; 123°-38'E). Two more torpedoes were fired at a fourth cargo vessel but nothing was heard to indicate that these found their intended target. Again forced down, TRITON was shaken but unharmed by exploding depth charges. On 17 May she battle surfaced for a gun attack during which she sank two deep-sea sampans of 100 tons each.

Shortly after dusk on 17 May 1942, TRITON was cruising at periscope depth in the general area of Nansei Shoto, when Japanese submarine I-164 of 1,635 tons, broke the surface to expose the rising sun flag painted on her conning tower. TRITON immediately manned battle stations and fired one torpedo which hit the enemy near the stern. Fragments of the I-164 were observed to be blown about 100 feet in the air as she sank (29°-25'N; 134°-09'E). TRITON returned to Pearl Harbor, 4 June 1942.

On 25 June 1942, TRITON sailed from Pearl Harbor for her fourth war patrol, and set course for Dutch Harbor, Alaska. Ordered to patrol off the south coast of Agattu, she arrived on station 3 July 1942, hampered by a blinding fog. The next morning she was in the vicinity of Cape Sabak when the fog lifted enough to reveal sight of a Japanese destroyer. The enemy faded into the mist and after tracking for over ten hours, TRITON overtook the enemy and fired two torpedoes. Japanese destroyer NENOHI of 1,600 tons was hit amidships, and gradually capsized (52°-15'N; 173°-51'E). In the vicinity of Buldir Island, 15 August 1942, TRITON sighted a darkened vessel and fired four torpedoes. One hit and an explosion followed. A second explosion was seen and heard as flames rose about 300 feet and debris was seen flying in the air. The enemy disappeared in a fog bank and further attack was not possible.

Returning to Dutch Harbor, 24 August 1942, TRITON departed two days later with 24 enlisted Army men and their equipment. They were landed in Kuluk Bay, Adak Island, during the night of 27 August 1942. TRITON departed Dutch Harbor 31 August for Pearl Harbor, arriving 7 September 1942. She remained for overhaul which was completed 6 December 1942.

On 16 December 1942, TRITON departed Pearl Harbor on her fifth war patrol. She was one of three submarines stationed between Midway and Wake to mark the way for Army Liberator bombers in strikes on Wake Island and to rescue crews of any planes forced down at sea. No rescue missions were required but on the night of 23 December, she assisted in guiding the Liberator bombers in a night bombing attack on Wake Island. The following day she sighted an enemy vessel headed for the anchorage at Wake and closed to shut off all motors as the enemy passed close aboard to continue seaward. She fired two torpedoes to sink water carrier AMAKASU MARU NO. 1 of 1,913 tons (19°-16'N; 166°-37'E). On 28 December 1942, she set on a collision course some six miles distant from her target. When the range closed, she fired three torpedoes at passenger-cargo OMI MARU of 3,393 tons (6°-23'N; 160°-17'E). Three hits broke the enemy into several pieces and she sank in less than three minutes. On 13 January 1943, she scored one hit on an enemy tanker who broke off the attack by firing on TRITON's periscope. TRITON cleared the area to surface at a safe distance and after gaining ahead, submerged at periscope depth for a second try. Some twenty minutes later the enemy hove into sight and four torpedoes were fired. Two geysers of water were seen amidships of the tanker but no explosions were heard. With torpedo tubes empty, TRITON was not able to make further attack and the enemy escaped. The following night, she sighted a freighter under

escort. As she made surface approach light blinkers flashed from the escort and TRITON was illuminated by searchlights. She dived and rigged for silent running as the escort commenced depth charge attack. After four unsuccessful runs on TRITON, the enemy withdrew. On 16 January 1943, she made two hits on a freighter and a third hit on another. Forced down by escorts, she was unable to determine the extent of damage. That afternoon, the last of her torpedoes were expended in an unsuccessful attack on a passenger-cargo vessel and TRITON steamed for Brisbane, Australia, arriving 26 January 1943. For heroic service in TRITON, Lieutenant Commander Kirkpatrick was awarded the Navy Cross and two gold stars in lieu of a second and third Navy Cross. He was also awarded the Army Distinguished Service Cross. He was relieved, 14 February 1943, by Lieutenant Commander George K. Mackenzie, USN.

On 16 February 1943, TRITON departed Brisbane for her sixth war patrol. She was directed to hunt for traffic between Rabaul and Shortland Basin on her way north. She reported on 26 February of having sighted smoke on 22 February and that she had obtained evidence of enemy radar on Buka. On 1 March 1943, she was directed to patrol in the Tingwon Island area and on 6 March, attacked a convoy of five ships under destroyer escort. In this action she sank cargo KIRIHA MARU of 3,057 tons (00-00'N; 145°-00'E), and scored hits on another vessel. One of her own torpedoes circled for return to TRITON and she was forced down in a crash dive. Meanwhile, the destroyer had moved in for depth charge runs which caused her to remain deep while the remaining vessels of the convoy escaped. On 8 March, she made a night attack on another convoy, claiming five hits of eight torpedoes fired. She was unable to observe results or follow up the attack, being forced down by gunfire and depth charge attacks of escorts.

The last word from TRITON was received 11 March 1943 when she reported "Two groups of smokes, five or more ships each, plus escorts . . . Am chasing." She was ordered to stay south of the equator and informed that submarine TRIGGER was operating in an adjacent area. On 13 March a message was sent informing TRITON that three enemy destroyers were in her area on a submarine hunt or had missed contact with a convoy which they may have been assigned as cover. She failed to acknowledge this message as well as subsequent radio dispatches. She was ordered to clear her area and return to Brisbane, 25 March 1943. TRITON made no reply to this order and when she did not reach Australia on the expected date, was presumed lost. Information obtained from Japanese records after the close of war revealed that TRITON was lost on 15 March 1943, the victim of attacks by three Japanese destroyers in waters just north of the Admiralty Islands

The action reports of the destroyers show that a great quantity of oil, pieces of wood, corks and manufactured goods bearing the mark "Made in U. S. A." floated to the surface after a prolonged depth charge attack. At the time of this attack, submarine TRIGGER some ten miles distant had made two attacks on a convoy of five ships and was forced down by depth charges of enemy escorts. She heard distant explosions for about an hour which indicated a submarine under depth charge attack. It is presumed she heard the attack which sank TRITON. Lieutenant Commander George Kenneth MacKenzie, Jr., USN, was posthumously awarded the Navy Cross for extraordinary heroism and courage AS Commanding Officer of TRITON. A destroyer, USS GEORGE K. MACKENZIE (DD 836), commissioned on 13 July 1945, is named in his honor.

TRITON earned five battle stars for operations listed below:

- 1 Star/WAKE ISLAND (INCLUDING JOHNSTON ISLAND): 8-23 December 1941
- 1 Star/SUBMARINE WAR PATROL-PACIFIC: 25 Jan - 18 Mar 1942
- 1 Star/SUBMARINE ASSESSMENT-PACIFIC: 17 May 1942
- 1 Star/SUBMARINE WAR PATROL-PACIFIC: 25 Jun - 7 Sep 1942
- 1 Star/CAPTURE AND DEFENSE OF GUADALCANAL: 16 Dec 1942 -
26 Jan 1943

ORIGINAL STATISTICS

LENGTH OVER-ALL:	307'2"
EXTREME BEAM:	27'3"
STANDARD DISPLACEMENT:	
Tons:	1475
Mean Draft:	13'3"
SUBMERGED DISPLACEMENT:	
Tons:	2370
DESIGN SPEED:	
Surface:	20 Knots
Submerged:	8.75 Knots
DESIGN DEPTH:	250'
DESIGN COMPLEMENT	
Officer:	5
Enlisted:	54
ARMAMENT:	
Torpedo Tubes:	(10) 21-inch
Secondary:	{1} 3"/50
	{2} .50 caliber
	{2} .30 caliber
TORPEDOES:	24

The fourth of our submarines lost in the Solomons-Bismarck area in the early part of 1943, TRITON, commanded by Lcdr G. K. MacKenzie, Jr., left Brisbane on 16 February 1943 to begin her sixth war patrol in that area. She hunted for traffic between Rabaul and Shortland Basin on her way north, and began to patrol the equator between 154 degrees, and 156 degrees E, on 23 February.

She reported on 26 February having seen smoke on 22 February and that she had obtained evidence of enemy radar on Buka. Moving westward, she patrolled areas northwest of SNAPPER and southeast of TRIGGER from 26 February to 6 March, when she left her area to attack a convoy in TRIGGER's area. Her report on 7 March, amended by another on 8 March, stated that the convoy had been composed of 5 ships and 1 DD escort. She reported their speed and course and the fact that she had sunk two AK's of the convoy and damaged another, claiming 3 hits out of 6 torpedoes fired at noon 6 March. A circular torpedo run forced her deep, where she was depth-charged by the destroyer. She had later tried two night attacks, one dawn attack, and one afternoon attack, all without success, and was returning to her area at the time she sent the message. About eight hours after the third message, TRITON transmitted again telling of another night attack on the convoy. She claimed 5 hits of 8 torpedoes fired, and, although she could not observe results due to gunfire and attack by the escorting destroyer, she believed two more freighters to be sunk.

The last word received from TRITON came on 11 March 1943 when she reported, "Two groups of smokes, 5 or more ships each, plus escorts...Am chasing". She was ordered to stay south of the equator, and was informed of the area (an adjacent one) assigned TRIGGER.

On the morning of 13 March TRITON was told that three enemy destroyers had been sighted at 2 degrees - 00'South, 145 degrees - 44'East on a northerly course. She was informed that they were probably on a submarine hunt or were a convoy cover and had missed contact.

TRITON, on 16 March, was ordered to change her area slightly to the east. TUNA and GREENLING were placed in adjacent areas (to the south and west, respectively) on 22 March, and all were to disregard areas when on the chase, and to avoid when encountering a submarine. TRITON was told to clear her area on 25 March 1943, and return to Brisbane. When she failed to make her report of position, new results and estimated time of arrival when it was expected, she was ordered to do so. No report was received and she was reported as lost on 10 April 1943.

Information now available that the war is over shows that TRITON was, without a doubt, sunk by the enemy destroyers of which she was given information on 13 March. Enemy reports show that these ships made an attack on 15 March at 0 degrees - 09' North, 144 degrees - 55' East. This position was slightly north and west of TRITON's area, but she undoubtedly left her area to attack the destroyers or the convoy they were escorting. The report of the attack by the destroyers leaves little doubt as to whether a kill was made. Three against one, they unloosed upon TRITON an avalanche of depth charges. Their battle reports described the barrage as strewing the ocean's surface with "a great quantity of oil, pieces of wood, cork and manufactured goods bearing the legend,

"Made in U.S.A." "Made in U.S.A." - fitting epitaph for a valiant submarine. In addition, TRIGGER, in whose area this attack occurred, reported that on 15 March she made two attacks on a convoy of five freighters with two escorts at 0 degrees North, 145 degrees East. At this time she was depth charged, but not seriously, and she heard distant depth charging for an hour after the escorts had stopped attacking her. Since she was only about ten miles from the reported Japanese attack cited above, it is presumed that she heard the attack which sank TRITON. Apparently by this time the destroyers had joined their convoy.

TRITON was a most active and valuable member of the Submarine Force prior to her loss. In total, she is credited with sinking 16 ships, totalling 64,600 tons and damaging 4 ships, of 29,200 tons. Her first patrol, conducted around Wake Island, resulted in no damage to the enemy, but her second, in the northern part of the East China Sea, was very productive. In ten days she sank two freighters and damaged a freighter-transport and another freighter. She went back to the East China Sea for her third patrol, and again was most successful. She sank a trawler, two freighters, a freighter-transport, two sampans, and a submarine. The latter was I-64, torpedoed south of Kyushu on 17 May 1942. TRITON's fourth patrol was made in the Aleutians. During it, she is credited with sinking two escort type vessels.

On her fifth patrol, TRITON went into the Solomons area. She sank a tanker and two freighters, in addition, damaging a tanker of 10,200 tons and a freighter. She was credited with having sunk two medium freighters on her last patrol.

USS TRITON (SSN586) was named in honor of USS TRITON (SS201) lost in action.