

This is the view the Japanese captain of I-176 would have seen of the *Corvina* as his torpedoes tore into the surfaced American submarine. Actually, the sub being blown in two is the USS *Devilfish* (SS-292); struck by USS *Wahoo's* (SS-565) torpedoes in a deliberate practice sinking off San Francisco in August 1968.

CORVINA'S

FATEFUL FIRST AND LAST WAR PATROL

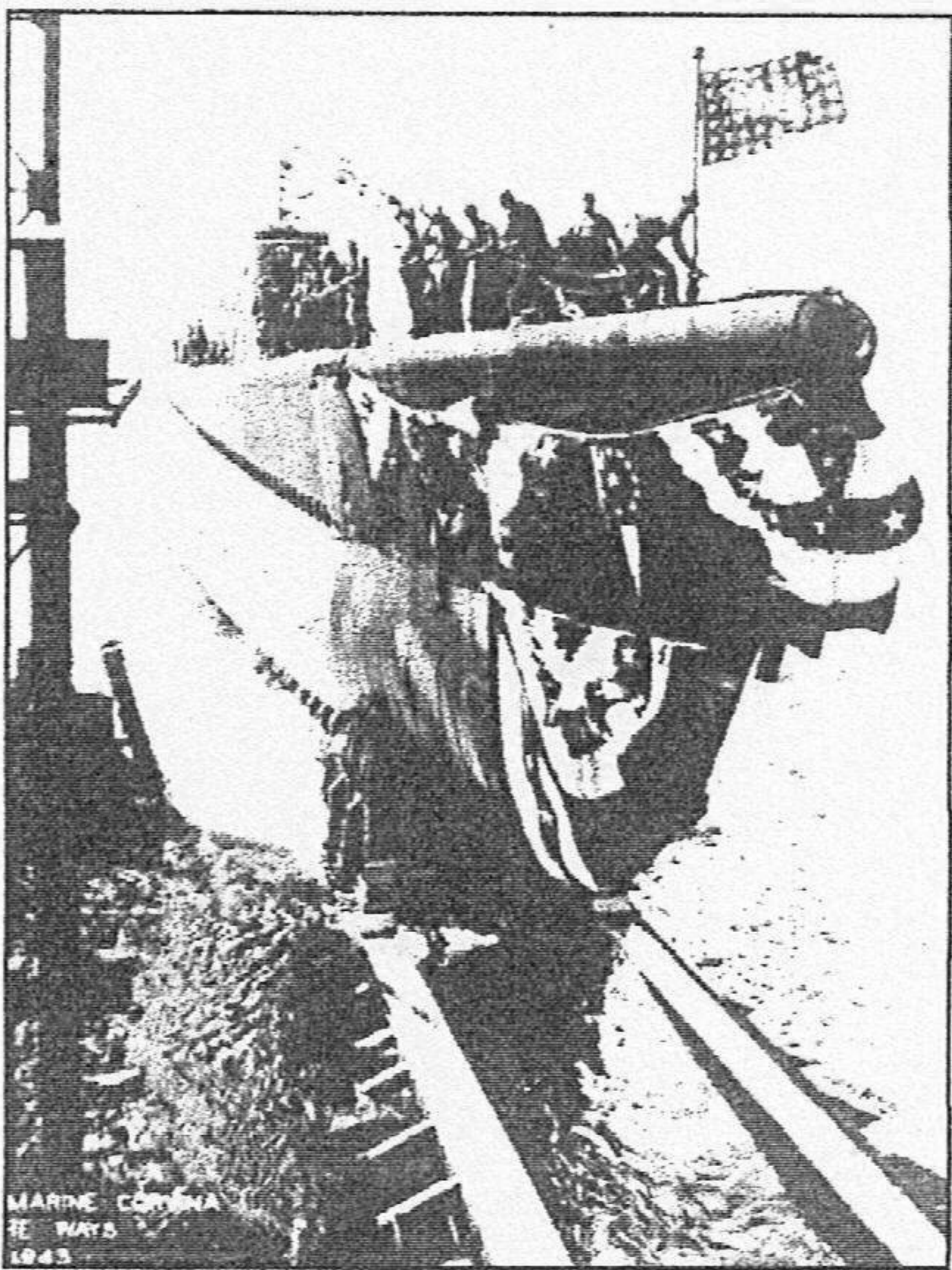
One of the honored 52 submarines of WWII "still on patrol," USS *Corvina* (SS-226) simply vanished without a trace or clue to her fate while on her maiden war patrol. Sixty-two years later, an unsettling air of mystery still surrounds her loss

BY ROBERT SABLES



The widow of a submariner lost in WWII places a rose on the US Submarine Memorial at Seal Beach, California. Of the 52 American submarines lost in WWII, several simply vanished without a trace to no known causes. Their failure to return from patrol was simply noted: "Overdue, Presumed Lost." (PM2 B. Brannon)

During World War Two, the US Navy lost 52 submarines. The majority of these losses were due to enemy action. In some cases, there were survivors who later revealed the details of the sinking but most boats were "lost with all hands." The available books and articles on these submarines deal mainly with those boats that had successful war patrols, e.g. *Clear the Bridge! The War Patrols of the USS Tang* by R/Adm. Richard H. Kane, USN, *Overdue and Presumed Lost: the Story of the USS Bullhead* by Martin Sheridan, *Pigboat 39* by Bobette Gugliotta, etc. The sagas, adventures, and failures of other lost submarines are not so well known. Such is the case of the USS *Corvina* (SS-226).



Corvina (SS-226) being launched 9 May 1943. Less than six months later, she was sunk southwest of Truk by the Japanese submarine I-176. All hands were lost under mysterious circumstances.

Her keel was laid at the Electric Boat Company, Groton, Connecticut, on 21 September 1942. She would be the 29th *Gato*-class submarine to be built at the yard. In 1942, submarine production in Groton was at an all-time high. This was the result of around-the-clock shifts and the introduction of "Rosie the Riveter." The keel for the USS *Dorado* (SS-248) had been laid on 27 August 1942 and the USS *Cero*'s on 24

August 1942. After seven months on the ways, the USS *Corvina* (SS-226) was launched on 9 May 1943. Her sponsor was Mrs. Ralph W. Christie, wife of Adm. Christie, Commander Submarines, Southwest Pacific.

The prospective commanding officer Cmdr. Roderick S. Rooney, USN, was shortly joined by Ens. J.D. Atwood, Lt. William M. Chewning, Ens. Leonard N. Lense, Lt. Edmond Ocumpaugh IV, Lt. James B. Roak, Lt. David K. Sloan, Jr. (XO), and Lt. (jg) John D. Smith.

At pier-side, the boat was "outfitted," taking aboard armament, communication equipment, medical kits, gallery fixtures, life jackets, rope, office supplies, etc. Electrical cables ran throughout the sub and welders made fast any

movable equipment. Young seamen reported aboard from the Submarine School at New London while a few seasoned hands were transferred in from other fleet boats. Finally, on 6 August 1943, Cmdr. Rooney read his orders before the assembled crew placing the USS *Corvina* in commission. It was a proud moment when the first watch was set. There followed the customary ship's commissioning party at a local banquet hall. A photo of this event has been obtained but unfortunately there is no caption.

On that day in the Pacific, a Cmdr. Frederick Moosbrugger led a small Naval force of six destroyers to victory in the battle of Vella Gulf. In that engagement, four Japanese destroyers carrying reinforcements to Kolombangara were intercepted by Moosbrugger. Effective torpedoes and gunfire by our "Cans" put the IJN *Arashi*, IJN *Kawakaze*, and IJN *Hagikaze* under while the IJN *Shigure*, while damaged, escaped to Rabaul. The US forces suffered no losses. At home, survivors of the torpedoed gunboat USS *Plymouth*

were brought ashore at Norfolk, Virginia. On a lighter note, the Cincinnati Reds beat the Chicago Cubs that afternoon at Wrigley Field (9-7). Over in the Mediterranean, the US Army's 1st Division gained control of Troian, Sicily.

The *Gatos* appeared as an advanced type fleet submarine in late 1941. The class leader, USS *Gato* (SS-212), was launched at the Electric Boat Company on 21 August 1941 and commissioned 31 December 1941 (some three weeks after the Pearl Harbor attack). She demonstrated the endurance of this class by remaining in service until March 1960.

As designed, their specifications were:

Displacement:

Surface 1526-tons
Submerged 2424-tons

Length: 311-ft 9-in

Beam: 27-ft 3-in

Draft: 15-ft 3-in

Speed:

Surface 20.25-kts
Submerged 8.75-kts

Complement:

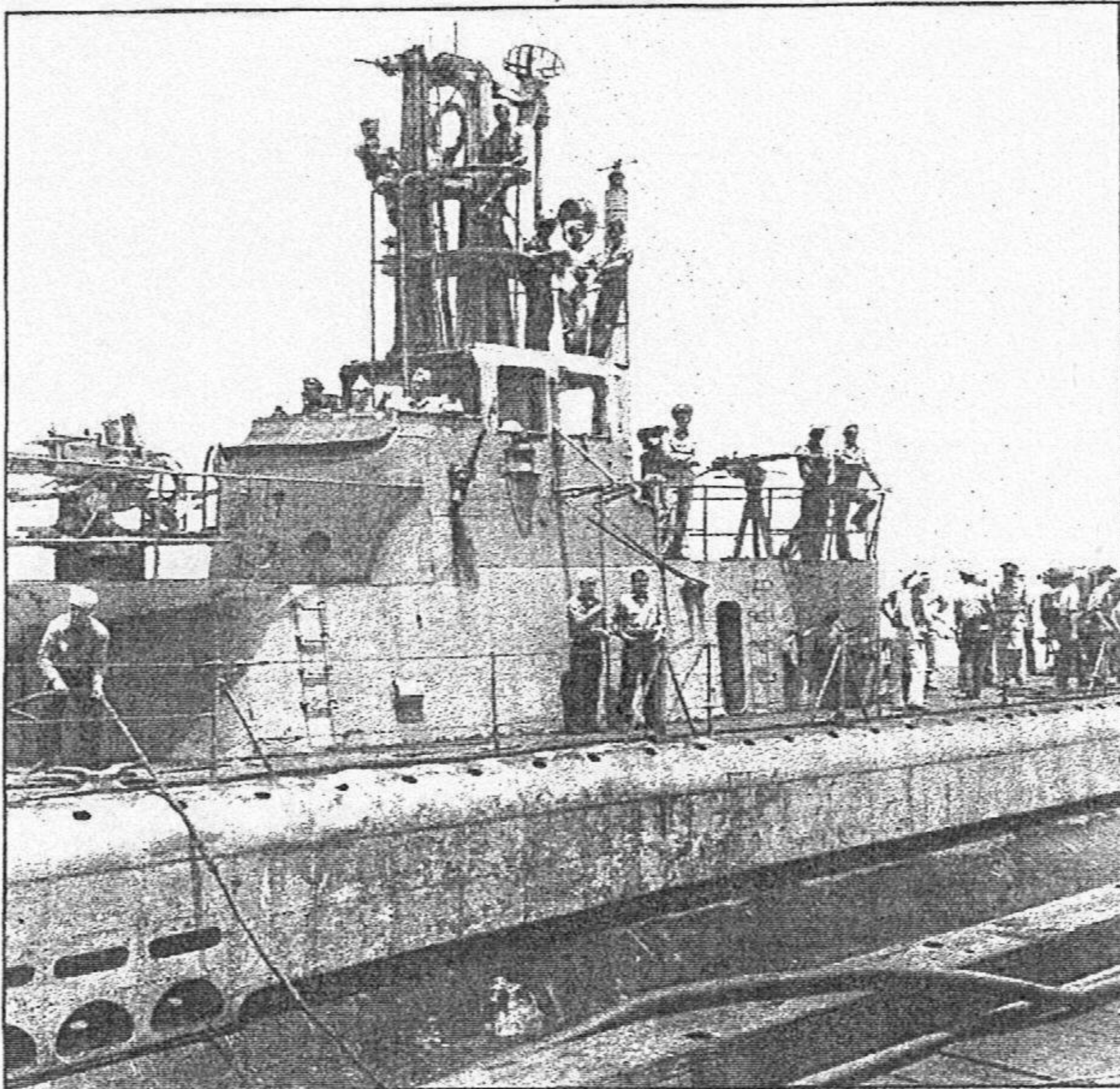
Officers 6
Enlisted 54

Armament: Ten 21-in torpedo tubes (six forward, four aft), 24 torpedos on board, One 3-in/50 deck gun, Two .50 mgs, Two .30 mgs

Deepest depth: 300-ft

Propulsion: Four General Motors model 16-278a diesel engines, each producing 1600-bhp, and each directly coupled to an electrical generator. Two diesel generators were located in the forward engine room, the other two in the after engine room). Four general electric 1375-hp motors/two motors drive each propeller through connected reduction gears. (location motor room — below the maneuvering room). *Gato*-class submarines had two main storage batteries (126 cells each) located in the forward battery space and the aft battery space.

Watertight compartments: 8



Postwar Japanese records disclosed that their submarine I-176 fired a spread of torpedoes at an unidentified submarine near their stronghold at Truk at about the time of *Corvina's* disappearance. Two of the three torpedoes reportedly made contact with deafening explosions. If this target was *Corvina*, she was the only American submarine in the entire war to be sunk by a Japanese submarine.

On the morning of 18 September 1943, lines were drawn aboard the *Corvina* and she slowly glided out into the Thames River. Shortly entering Long Island Sound, she encountered the local fishing fleet heading out to sea. The *Corvina* later changed course to the south — destination the Panama Canal Zone — a stop on the way to Pearl Harbor. Commander Rooney made good use of this time for training with frequent “crash dives,” collision alarms, fire drills, surface actions, etc. A heightened sense of alert overtook the crew on this lap of the trip. German U-boats were still prowling the east coast and our forces were on the search for them. No unforeseen events occurred and, after an eight-day passage, the *Corvina* arrived at the Coco Solo Submarine Base.

A following submarine would not complete the journey. On 6 January 1943, the newly-commissioned USS *Dorado* (SS-248) departed New London, Connecticut, bound for Panama but never arrived. There had been rumors throughout the shipyard about

shabby workmanship, but they were never confirmed. A subsequent Court of Inquiry was unable to determine the cause of the loss. It was known that a patrol plane had attacked a submarine around that time period and that a U-boat was in the area.

After refueling and taking on supplies, the *Corvina* proceeded to Pearl Harbor, arriving on 14 October 1943.

The USS *Corvina* arrived at a critical time in the Pacific Campaign — the pending invasion of the Gilbert Islands. The three islands to be invaded were Tarawa (Operation *Galvanic*), Makin (Operation *Kourbash*), and Apamama (Operation *Boxcloth*). With the Solomon Island campaign under control and large quantities of war materials arriving, it had been decided earlier that year to open up a second front against the Japanese. After a full analysis, the Gilberts were chosen due to the fact they would be in the direct line of communication from the south, offered good sites for fighter airfields, were less strongly

defended than the Marshalls, and could be taken with available resources. Task Force 52, escorting elements of the 27th Infantry Division, was charged with the taking of Makin; Task Force 53, covering the 2nd Marine Division, Tarawa, and the USS *Nautilus* (SS-168) would transport 78 Marines from the 5th Amphibious Reconnaissance Co. to Apamama atoll. The invasion was set for 20 November 1943.

A main concern of the planners was that the Japanese would send reinforcements to the Gilberts from Truk, their main base in the Carolinas. With its deep lagoon, barrier reef, airfields, entrenched defense positions, and high peaks, Truk was known as the “Gibraltar of the Pacific.” It was located some 1300-mi northwest of Tarawa.

To counter such a move, operation plans called for several US submarines to be on patrol off Truk alert for any sorties. A few boats would also be sent to the Marshalls, a fueling stop on the northern route to the Gilberts. Dispatched to the Marshall Islands were the USS *Seal*, USS *Spearfish*, and the USS *Plunger*. To the Carolinas went the USS *Thresher* (SS-200), USS *Apogon* (SS-308), USS *Corvina* (SS-226), USS *Sea Raven* (SS-196), and the USS *Sculpin* (SS-191).

One boat, the USS *Paddle* (SS-263) would take station north of Naruru Island (26-mi south of the equator/300-mi west of Tarawa) to perform weather reporting duties for the invasion forces.

The three weeks spent by the USS *Corvina* at the Pearl Harbor Submarine Base went by very quickly. There were the necessary operational exercises, training sessions, but the crew members managed to get into Honolulu for some down-time. Many relaxing hours were spent on the beach swimming, getting the mandatory photo with a hula-girl, visiting the Royal Hawaiian Hotel, and just enjoying a “few cold ones.” Little did they suspect that this would be their last good time.

On 4 November, the USS *Corvina* departed Pearl Harbor for her assigned area, the waters south of Truk. Her mission “attack all departing shipping!”

Heading southwest, the *Corvina* reached Johnston atoll (717 nautical miles from Pearl Harbor)

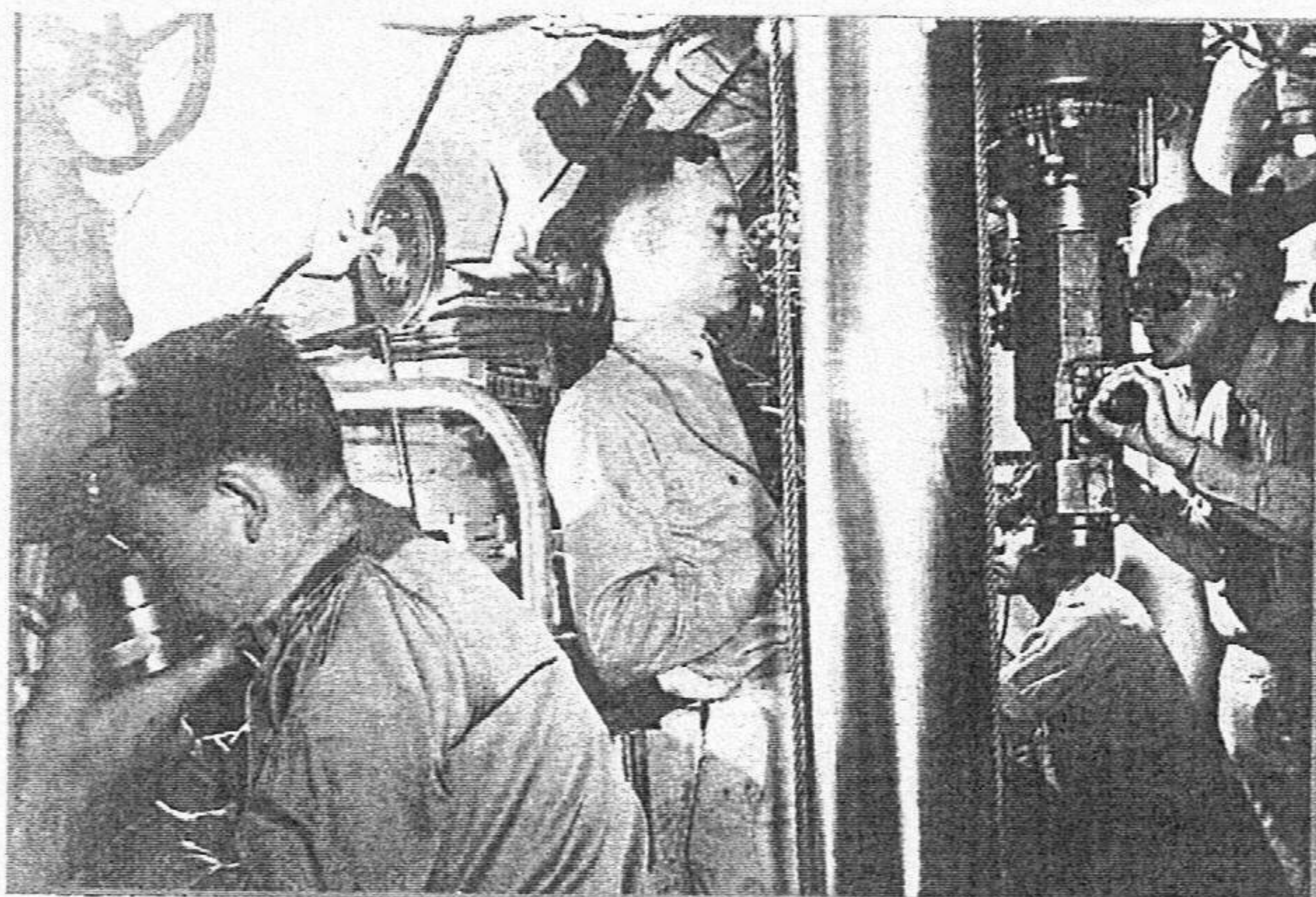
on 6 November and topped off with fuel. She remained at the atoll for several hours and then departed. The workers at the dock were the last men ever to see her. An Ultra message was sent on 15 November advising of an enemy submarine in her area.

In the invasion, the worst fighting took place on Betio, the largest islet in the Tarawa atoll. It took 76-hrs of hard fighting before being secured on 23 November. The cost: 1056 US Marines and sailors.

With the campaign concluded, the patrolling submarines were ordered to new assignments. On 30 November, a dispatch was sent to the *Corvina* advising of a reassignment to Task Force 72 (Brisbane). There was no acknowledgement. She was later radioed to report to Tulagi — again no acknowledgement — and she failed to appear. Further transmissions were to no avail.

Finally, on 23 December 1943, the US Navy Department reported the USS *Corvina* "as presumed lost." Three months later, on 14 March 1944, her loss with a crew of 82 was announced.

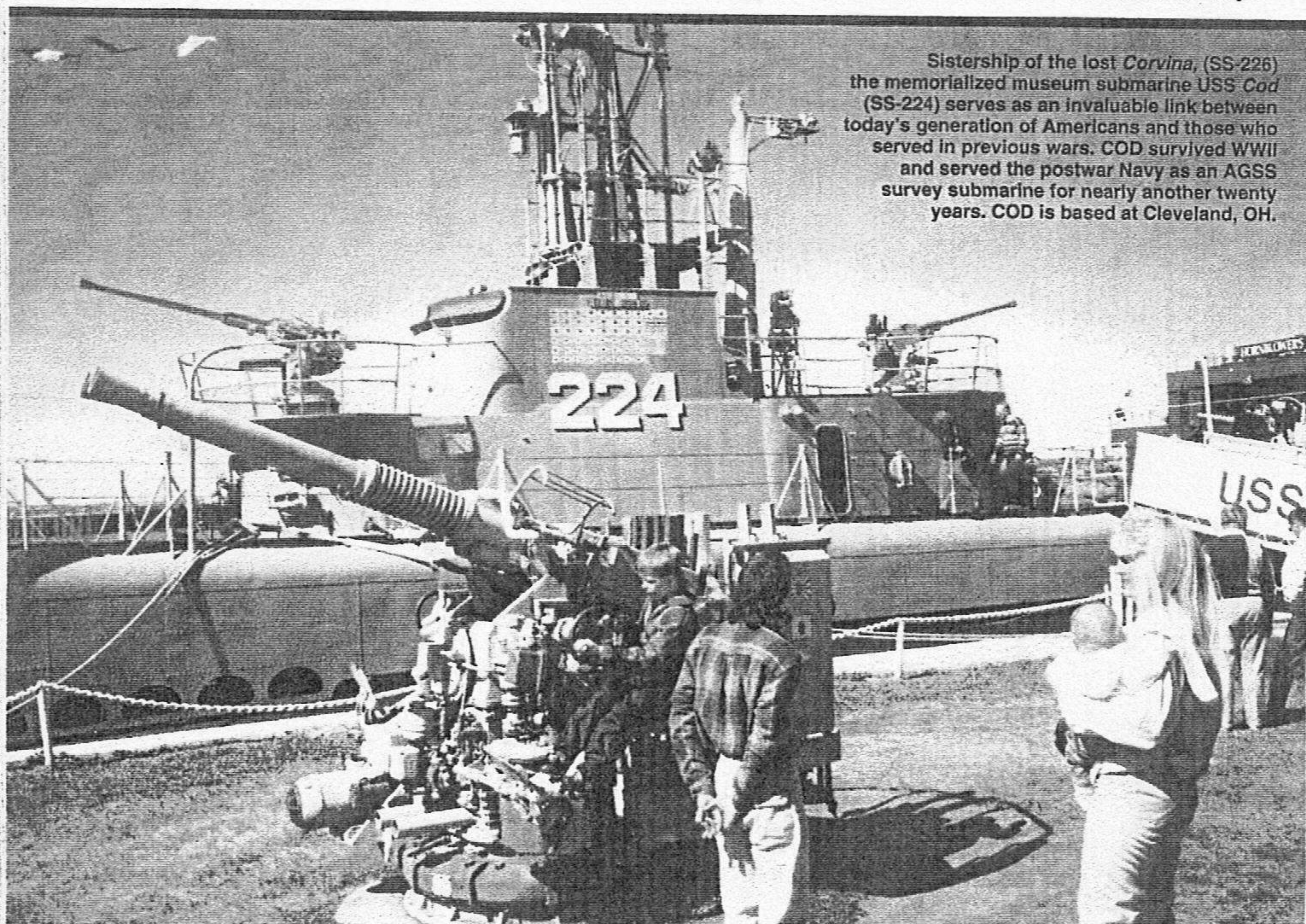
The fate of the USS *Corvina*, along with the majority of other lost submarines, would not be known



Corvina's maiden war patrol was a most dangerous assignment that sent her deep into Japanese waters off Truk, their most-heavily-fortified Naval base in the entire Pacific rim. Questions still remain about her final hours: Why was she surfaced in broad daylight? Why no position reports? Why didn't the Japanese search for survivors?

until the end of the war. In 1946, captured Japanese Naval records revealed that the Japanese submarine *I-176* (L/Cdr. Yamaguchi), operating out of Rabaul, spotted a surfaced American submarine south of Truk on 16 August 1943. At 0220 hrs, the *I-176*, after making a

submerged approach, fired three torpedoes — two of which struck the *Corvina*. The record added there was "a great explosion sound" and the *Corvina* went under in a swirl. There were no survivors. The location — 151° 10E, 5° 50N. The *I-176* proceeded onto Truk later that day.



Sistership of the lost *Corvina*, (SS-226) the memorialized museum submarine USS *Cod* (SS-224) serves as an invaluable link between today's generation of Americans and those who served in previous wars. *COD* survived WWII and served the postwar Navy as an AGSS survey submarine for nearly another twenty years. *COD* is based at Cleveland, OH.

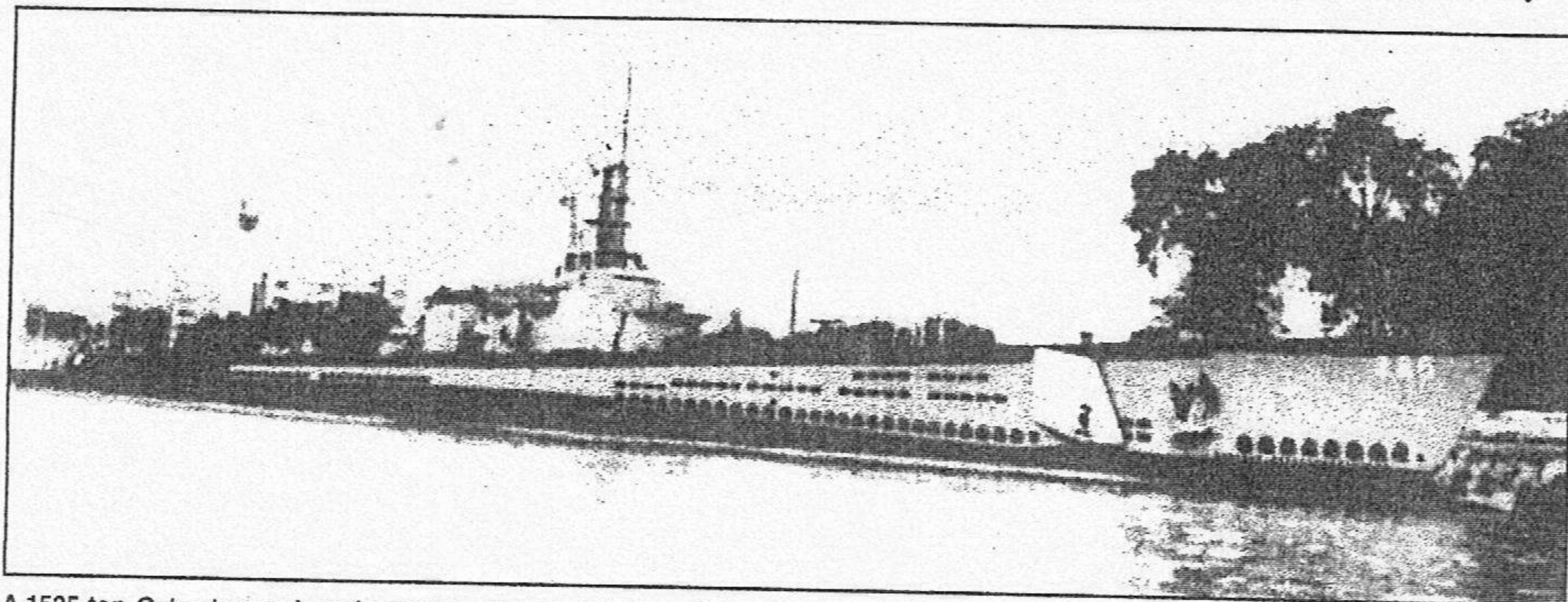
Three days later, on 19 November 1943, the USS *Sculpin* (SS-191) was severely damaged during an underwater/surface engagement in the waters north of Truk. The IJN *Yamagumo* (a destroyer), after forcing the *Sculpin* to the surface, opened fire, hitting the conning tower and killing the commanding officer and executive. The decision was made to scuttle and the IJN *Yamagumo* later picked 42 survivors. The US Navy achieved vengeance at the Battle of Surigao

stated, "On this day 55 years ago, the *Corvina* and her crew were lost. This day, 55 years later, we are here to dedicate this memorial to them, to their families, to this purpose and to prove in our way that their loss will not go unnoticed. We know their loss was not in vain, and it must be remembered and honored. If you will listen, very closely, not with your ears, but with your heart, you will hear a very definite, 'Thank You,' from them — Brave warriors of the *Corvina*."

went under in 23 minutes with a loss of 644 lives. It was one of the greatest Naval disasters in WWII. Like the USS *Corvina*, the USS *Liscome Bay* had been in commission just over three months. Her attacker, the *I-175*, was sunk by the USS *Farr* (DE-35) off Wotje on 4 February 1944.

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A 1525-ton *Gato*-class submarine built by the Electric Boat Co., USS *Corvina* (SS-226) failed to return from her maiden war patrol in mid-November 1943. The Navy did not disclose her loss with her 82-man crew until March 1944.

Strait (24-25 October 1944) when the USS *McDermut* (DD-677) torpedoed and sunk the IJN *Yamagumo* with all hands. Retribution was also obtained for the loss of the USS *Corvina* when the USS *Frank* (DD-554), on 17 May 1944, attacked and sunk the *I-176* near Buka Passage.

Chartered in 1981, the Submarine Veterans of World War Two is dedicated to perpetuate the memory of lost comrades. In line with this, each State is assigned a specific lost boat. The State of Nevada was honored with the USS *Corvina* (SS-226).

In 1996, a Mk.16 torpedo with a bronze plaque listing the names of the crew was placed at the Northern Nevada Memorial Cemetery, Fernley, Nevada. The later-formed United States Submarine Veterans, Inc. (USSVI) contributed a marble plaque with its creed engraved on it.

On 16 November 1998, a marble slab also listing the USS *Corvina* crew members was dedicated at the Southern Nevada Veterans' Cemetery, Boulder City, Nevada. During the dedication, J. Richardson

In 1992, the *Corvina* Base, a chapter of the USSVI, was established in Reno, Nevada. Aside from recruiting area ex-submariners in the bonds of friendship, the Base participates in local community activities.

No other US submarine would bear the name *Corvina*. The *Los Angeles*-class subs were named after US cities — e.g., USS *Scranton* (SSN-756) — the Ohio-class after States — e.g., USS *Alaska* (SSBN-732)

It would be remiss not to mention the tragic loss of the escort carrier USS *Liscome Bay* (CVE-56) during the Gilbert Island campaign. On 24 November 1943, the USS *Liscome Bay*, flagship Carrier Division 24, was cruising with her sisters, the USS *Coral Sea* (CVE-57) and USS *Corregidor* (CVE-58), just south of Makin Island. At 0510, she was hit with a torpedo at the aft starboard quarter. The attacking submarine was the INJ *I-175*, commanded by Cmdr. Sunao Tabaka, a veteran of the Pacific campaigns. The resulting explosion was devastating and the carrier

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