

New Bedford Courier June 1951 The Story Behind the Story Of Submarine Trigger II

By COMDR. E. L. BEACH, JR.

Sometimes a lot of sentiment can be wrapped up in the launching of a new ship. It is something like the birth of a new life, but it can go deep into the hinterland of memory. Frequently there is an underlying tale—a deep-seated thread winding backward through the years to voices long gone, faces imperfectly remembered except by a few to whom they meant a lot.

The very custom of calling a ship "she" is indicative of the personality attached to what might ordinarily be considered merely a complicated mass of steel and machinery. It is symbolic that every ship has a soul, or spirit, the composite spirit of all the men, officers and enlisted alike, who have served in her. We have all heard of the lucky ships, and we have also heard of some unlucky ones. We have heard of the fighting ships, and we have heard of those who somehow never seem to find their way into combat. We have heard of the brilliant ships, the flashy ships, and there are also the unknown drudges of the sea. But, whatever the personality, it is something that is built up through years of service—which cannot be changed overnight—and which can be passed on, reborn to live anew, for the good of the navy and the greater glory of our country. Just so have we had more than one Enterprise in our navy, more than one Randolph, more than one Wasp.

Gave Her All

And so, tomorrow, when Vida Connole Benson smashes a bottle of foaming champagne on the prow of Trigger II (SS564) she by that action gives rebirth to the soul of a ship which served our country well. For the ship after which Trigger was named carried our flag across the far flung Pacific in the days when we had very few left capable of doing so. She was one of the solitary grey units which went forth at the start of the war with determination to wreak vengeance upon the enemy which had struck our great Pacific fleet below the belt. She was a vessel which ranked among the foremost in doing damage to the foe—and she gave her all for the cause of freedom among men.

For in March, 1945, U.S.S. Trigger sailed from Guam on what was to be her 12th war patrol. She sank

move into the mined area and blow themselves into scrap iron. Lay in Wait

She is remembered as the submarine which supposedly lay on the bottom in Tokyo bay for a month, waiting for a new Japanese carrier to be launched—and then, as the huge vessel slid down the ways into the launching basin, torpedoed her and sent her the rest of the way down to the bottom. The truth of that yarn is dramatic enough. Trigger torpedoed the carrier as it left port on an engineering trial run, and the Japanese managed to tow it back into the bay just before it sank. The commanding officer upon this occasion, as well as the mine plant, was Comdr. Roy S. Benson, USN.

Trigger's fame, which had been building up steadily, burst with stunning force on her next patrol when a convoy of three tankers and three freighters were sighted. She had just arrived in the area—north of Formosa—and in that one night Trigger fired all of her torpedoes. When she departed the scene she left behind her two gigantic fires billowing huge clouds of black oil smoke into the dark skies, as two of the three tankers were gutted by their incandescent cargo. A third tanker and one of the freighters was sunk and an additional ship damaged before Trigger ran out of torpedoes.

Short but Costly

When Trigger arrived at Midway she had completed one of the shortest war patrols on record—as well as one of the most costly to the enemy.

It was for this action, and those during the months immediately following, that Trigger became known as the convoy killer. Under Lieut. Comdr. Robert E. Dornin she shattered in quick succession five Japanese convoys bound with war materials for the home ports of Japan.

But her toughest ordeal was reserved for her ninth war patrol, under the command of Lieut. Comdr. F. J. Harlfinger. Unaided, she attacked a convoy composed of some 45 vessels, estimated at 20 merchant vessels of various types and 20 to 25 escorts. Unfortunately she had no time to observe results of her attack but was immediately subjected to a vicious and unrelenting depth-bombing during which, at times,

confined solely to those who are able to be present. Throughout the United States, wherever some surviving member of the crew of Trigger I may be, his thoughts will be attuned to Groton, when the namesake of his old ship takes the water, wishing her, as we all do, good luck, God speed, and a long and illustrious career.

dered to shift her operating area closer to the coast of Japan. There on that dark March night, another submarine was ordered to make rendezvous with Trigger. All night long her radio sent out the call, and all night long the only answer was silence. Gradually fear for the safety of their friends commenced to grow among the crew of that other submarine.

Headless of Danger

For three nights in succession she lay on the surface south of Kyushu and, heedless of danger to herself, unceasingly sent out the unrequited call. There was always the chance that some easily explained circumstance had prevented Trigger from answering. But after the third night a message was sent to Pearl Harbor stating that Trigger had not answered. They could not bring themselves to say that she might be gone.

But gone she was, the victim of a combined aircraft and destroyer attack several days before. Now she lies off the coast of the southernmost island of Japan—one of the 42 submarines we lost to enemy action during the war—along with the hulks of some 2,000 Japanese vessels which she and her sisters took with them.

And entombed in her silent rusting hull, deep in the ooze of the ocean floor where the sun will never find its way, where the only life that moves is in the dim amorphous stealth of the pressure depths, lie the bodies of 91 American sailors. Among them, still in command, his brilliant blonde hair marking him from the rest, is Comdr. David R. Connole, USN.

Led Submarine Force

But those who remember Trigger best remember her in happier days when she was a cocky, rollicking, brawling ship—when, for a time, she led the submarine force in damage inflicted upon the enemy, and kept a carefully laid out "Triggernometer", cataloging beneath a tiny silhouette of each sunken or damaged ship the number of torpedoes used and the number of depth charges received in return.

Trigger the first, (SS237) was built in Mare Island, Calif. and commissioned in January, 1942. Her sponsor when she was launched was Mrs. Sally Vernon, wife of Vice Adm. Walter N. Vernon, USN. She had five commanding officers: Jack H. Lewis, Roy S. Benson, Robert E. Dornin, Frederick J. Harfinger and David R. Connole—and she made a record to be remembered in the submarine force.

She is remembered, for instance, as the vessel which laid a mine field just north of Tokyo Bay and less than 45 minutes later watched an enemy freighter and escort

hours must have come. Trigger received a terrific battering—and a less sturdily constructed ship, or one manned by a less expert or determined crew, might have been lost. As it was, she finally managed to shake herself clear—and a few days later, damages temporarily repaired, she met a target more her size. Once more, and for the last time, as it turned out, Trigger felt the destroying fury swell within her, her seventh convoy within her grasp. Five ships she sank that night—though Jap records later could verify only two—and two of the remainder, in confused flight, ran aground.

Back to Firing Line

Some months later, completely repaired and overhauled, she announced her return on the firing line by sinking two ships and damaging a third in two separate attacks. Then the silence of the deep sea claimed her, and she passed from the ken of men.

And so as the new Trigger slides down the ways at the Electric Boat Co. at 4:45 p. m. tomorrow, there will be both gladness and tears. Gladness because a warrior is returning to our navy to take up the sword and shield

of her namesake, to take the place which was left vacant when the first Trigger died, to carry on the traditions of service so well begun by the old one. Tears there will be, too, for those who went down to the sea in the old Trigger, and who lie with her yet, in a never-to-be-forgotten corner of the ocean which will always be America.

Will Salute Vessel

In addition to Mrs. Roy S. Benson, who was Mrs. David R. Connole, and who will christen the new Trigger, on hand to salute the new vessel will be Mrs. Henry Connole, mother of Commander Connole, who will be matron of honor, and Richard Alan Connole, his son. Also present will be three of her four surviving skippers, and several of her old crew.

Keeping the old traditions alive is important to the navy, and understandably so. It is for this reason, perhaps as much as any other, that the two men who served longest in the old Trigger, who participated in almost all of her distinguished career, have been ordered as part of the commissioning crew of the new submarine.

Also on hand will be Walter Pye Wilson, chief steward, USN, a veteran of 11 war patrols in Trigger I; and watching proudly from the crowd on shore will be H. R. Brown, five patrols, D. T. McLeod, seven war patrols, and Howard Spence of Manchester, eight war patrols.

But the audience will not be