

**A TALE OF SIX VESSELS AND MORE –
AND THE LAST ARMED MUTINY IN THE ROYAL NAVY**

For troops serving in Panama and the Canal Zone during World War 2 it may have been something of a safe backwater. For aircrew there was the weather, and the other usual risks associated with flying in the period, plus the chance of encountering a U-boat in the Caribbean (there would be no similar threat in the Pacific approaches to the Canal). It was those at sea who were most at risk from enemy action – whether on merchant ships being preyed upon by the U-boats, or the ships seeking them. But even in this last category, a proportion of casualties would come from tragic accidents.

The chief direct threat to the Canal and its traffic during the war came from the U-boat campaign in the Caribbean, known to the Allies as the Battle of the Caribbean. In the worst period, between February and August 1942, no fewer than 330 vessels were sunk in the Caribbean, its approaches and the Gulf of Mexico (this includes those lost to Italian submarines operating on the edge of the Caribbean). The very real threat from the U-boats led to increased naval and air patrols from Panama, and the implementing of a convoy system.

Most of the ships lost to the U-boats would not be under the Panamanian flag. However, 82 Panamanian ships are shown as being losses due to U-boats during World War 2 - with 78 sunk (totalling 416,682 tons) and four others damaged (38,456 tons)¹. Even while still a neutral, at least seven Panama-flag vessels had been sunk before the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941, all sinkings taking place in the North or South Atlantic².

An examination of the Battle of the Caribbean from a Panamanian perspective demands an entire essay, or more. It is nevertheless worth noting, I think, that despite the great

¹ <https://uboat.net/allies/merchants/search.php>

² <http://www.usmm.org/casualty.html>

efforts of the airmen, Army and Navy, involved in anti-submarine patrols out of Panama, there are only two successful anti-submarine combat missions recorded by the Panama-based Sixth Air Force in the Panama Sea Frontier that involve the sinking of U-boats. The 45th Bombardment Squadron was credited with sinking the U-654 off Colón on 22 August 1942; and the 59th Bombardment Squadron damaged U-153 on 6 July 1942 (this U-boat being later sunk by the destroyer, USS *Landsdowne*)³.

Here I intend to focus on a handful of unfortunate vessels involved in incidents near Panama, heading to or from the Canal Zone or, in the case of one, being part of the 15th Naval District based in the Canal Zone.

The fortunes of war could be unkind, and sometimes one could be a victim of one's own side, through so-called "friendly fire", mistakes and tragic accidents.

As if mines laid by enemy submarines were not enough of a threat, the defensive mines deployed in the sea approaches to protect the Canal also caused problems during the war, with anchored mines exploding after being apparently struck by large fish, by parts from a sunken vessel offshore or other flotsam. Even heavy seas which could sometimes cause them to explode. They could also come loose, and on 3 August 1943, the *Chagres*, a tugboat belonging to the Panama Canal's Dredging Division became a casualty when it struck a submerged mine off the Pacific entrance to the Canal (in an area that had been declared safe) and sank. The captain and seven crewmen were lost, but the chief engineer and six others were rescued.

In January 1943, the USS *Charles Carroll* (AP 58), a *Crescent City* Class transport serving with the US Navy struck a mine off the Canal Zone and had to put into Balboa for repairs. Only having been launched in 1942, after involvement in Operation *Torch*, the Allied

³ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris, Panama Canal Commission: <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/6j>

invasion of North Africa, she had been heading for the Pacific theatre when she was damaged by the mine. It is not clear if she was damaged by a mine laid by a U-boat (the most likely explanation) or a rogue one from the Canal Zone defences (as was the case with the *Chagres*).

On 19 August 1942, a tragic accident saw a US Navy flying-boat collide with another Panama Canal tug, the *Alhajuela*, which then burst into flames. Six Canal employees were killed, together with eight of the 10-man crew of the flying-boat. However, the tug was towed to a dry dock and rebuilt, returning to service nine months later.

THE LOSS OF THE S-26

A submarine base was located at Coco Solo, near the city of Colón, at the Atlantic end of the Canal. It had been established as such in 1918, also being home to a naval air station (Upham NAS) and, later, patrol airships (or blimps). It saw additional facilities added under the wartime construction programme begun during Autumn 1940 with the developments being confined entirely within the limits of the existing boundaries⁴.

At the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, it was home to three ageing V-Boat submarines which had been launched in 1924-25, and decommissioned in 1937, only to be recommissioned because of the threat of war in September 1940 and assigned to Coco Solo, arriving just before the Pearl Harbor attack. They were used to make (uneventful) war patrols from there, but suffered from poor operational performances and were withdrawn in 1942. Also in 1942, the smaller S-boat submarines also based in Coco Solo were transferred to Australia, and the submarine base would be disestablished in 1944.

⁴ https://www.ibiblio.org/hyperwar/USN/Building_Bases/bases-18.html

However, before they could be redeployed, one of the S-Boats was lost in the Pacific in the Gulf of Panama. On 24 January 1942, S-26 (SS-131) became second US submarine to be lost during the war.

The S Class, also known as “Sugar Boats”, after the then phonetic code for S, had been the first class of submarines built in significant numbers for the US Navy and they made up most of the interwar submarine fleet, being the immediate predecessors of the later V-boats. The first US submarines designed for open sea operation⁵, they were designed during World War 1, but were only completed afterwards, with 51 of the class commissioned 1920-25. The S-26 was built by the Bethlehem Shipbuilding Company of Quincy, Massachusetts and displaced 854 tons surfaced and 1,062 tons submerged, was 220 feet (76 metres) long and had a normal complement of 42 men. It mounted a 4-inch (102 mm) deck gun and 4 21-inch (533 mm) torpedo tubes.

The boat had been sent from the main submarine base at New London in Connecticut on 10 December 1941, arriving at Coco Solo on 19 December. She only completed one, uneventful operational patrol from the base before tragedy struck.

S-26 departed Balboa, at the Pacific end of the Canal, with fellow submarines S-21, S-29 and S-44, on voyage to its patrol station in the Pacific, accompanied by an escort vessel, the USS *Sturdy* (PC-460)⁶. At 2010, the escort vessel sent a visual message to the submarines saying that it was leaving the formation. However, S-26 did not receive the message and shortly afterwards the escort somehow mistook the submarine for a U-boat (a highly unlikely occurrence given the vessels’ location) and proceeded to ram her. The submarine sank within seconds. The next day divers attempted to rescue any crewmen trapped in the sunken boat, but after 25 unsuccessful dives the effort was called

⁵ Earlier ones had been intended for harbour or coastal water defence.

⁶ This was a former yacht, built in 1930, and converted into a submarine chaser patrol vessel. Commissioned in October 1940 as USS *Sturdy*, she operated from Balboa from November 1940. She later transferred to the Atlantic end of the Canal in February 1942 and, after repairs in Mobile, Alabama, she returned to Panama, reclassified as coastal patrol yacht (PYC-50), until disposed of in October 1944.

off. Three crewmen⁷ who had been on the sail (conning tower) at the time of the collision survived^{8,9}

USS DORADO

The S-26 was far from the only US submarine loss during the war, in fact the US Navy lost 52 submarines¹⁰ and some 3,500 crew – with the Submarine Service suffering the highest casualty percentage of any US forces during the war, at around 20%. Another of the many losses was USS *Dorado* (SS-248)¹¹, lost with 77 crewmen, with the loss being reported on 25 October 1943.

USS *Dorado* was one of many submarines built by the Electric Boat Company. She was also one of the first of their boats¹² to be built in part by women¹³, as the wartime workforce expanded and drew in women workers to supplement and replace male ones. A *Gato* Class diesel-electric submarine, she displaced 1,549 tons surfaced and 2,2463 tons submerged, was 311 feet 9 inches (95.02 metres) in length.

Despite having a short service life, it was used to depict life in submarines during wartime in a series of paintings, two artists accompanying her during her shakedown¹⁴.

⁷ The boat's commanding officer, the executive officer and a lookout.

⁸ <http://www.lost52project.org/S-26-Home.html>

⁹ <https://ussnautilus.org/the-loss-of-uss-s-26-ss-131/>

¹⁰ <https://maritime.org/pamphist/subslost.php#:~:text=UNITED%20STATES%20SUBMARINE%20LOSSES&text=Fifty%2Dtwo%20U.S.%20submarines%20were,submarines%20lost%20during%20WW%20II.>

¹¹ Named, like other wartime US submarines, after a type of fish – the dorado fish is better known by its Hawaiian name of mahi. She was the first US Navy submarine so named. A second (SS-526) was cancelled in 1944 and the name has not been used since.

¹² Note: submarines are always “boats”, regardless of their size.

¹³ Life magazine prepared a feature on the women working on the boat but never published it.

¹⁴ Two artists joined it for its shakedown cruise – when the ship and its systems are tested prior to entering service – which involved four short voyages from Groton. The artists completed a set of 25 paintings that include depictions of “sailors on watch peering through binoculars from the conning tower. Below decks, they drink coffee, peel potatoes and play cards next to torpedoes. They clamber through a hatch and man a deck gun”: <https://apnews.com/article/cf2ee913f9314892955f06daca29f89d>

The boat also has the unique and sad distinction of being the only one lost directly after leaving Groton¹⁵, where the Electric Boat Company was based and the submarine was built.

It had been only the second boat built at the company's new Victory Yard, which occupied a former World War 1 shipyard two miles from the company's main yard. Its keel was laid down on 27 August 1942, and she was launched, rather unceremoniously, on 23 May 1943, the seventh such launching in a 13-week period and the ceremonies of previous launchings having been dispensed with. She was commissioned into the Navy, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Earle Caffrey Schneider, on 28 August 1943.

Following a shakedown cruise comprising four short trips out of Groton, when the artists immortalised the boat, she set sail from the submarine base at New London, Connecticut for the Canal Zone on 6 October 1943, but never reached its destination. When she failed to arrive, unsuccessful searches made in the Caribbean, beginning on 14 October.

A subsequent Navy Court of Inquiry decided that she had probably been the victim of "friendly fire". It heard that a Martin PBM Mariner flying-boat of US Navy patrol squadron VP-210, operating out of Guantanamo, Cuba, had encountered an unknown submarine on the night of 12 October. The patrol aircraft had been supplied with incorrect information on the submarine's expected location¹⁶, so assumed that this must be an enemy boat and attacked with depth charges and a 100 lb (45.3 kg) bomb. The crew said that they had, in fact, identified the submarine as a U-boat, and had spent 12 minutes observing it before

¹⁵ The town became known as "The Submarine Capital of the World" and 72 diesel-powered submarines were built there during the war. The shipyard there remains on the company's main facilities, having providing submarines for the US Navy for over 100 years, including today's nuclear-powered giants. Elco (the Electric Launch Company) was a subsidiary that built motor launches and, during World War 2, nearly 400 PT Boats.

¹⁶ Standard operating procedure at the time was to impose restrictions within 50 nautical miles (93 km) ahead, 100 nautical miles (190 km) astern and 15 nautical miles (28 km) to each side of the scheduled position of an unescorted submarine making passage through "friendly" waters.

attacking¹⁷, and that both the bomb and one of the depth charges had not actually been seen to explode - of the three depth charges dropped, one depth charge was confirmed as not exploding, one was dropped from a height too low for it to arm itself, and neither the third depth charge nor the bomb were seen to explode. After making its attack, the PBM had continued to search the area for 20 minutes, but observed no explosions, bubbles or debris.

About two hours after this attack, the same PBM came upon another submarine and attempted to exchange recognition signals with it, but was fired upon. This second submarine was later identified as a U-boat, U-214, which had laid a minefield of 15 mines five miles off Colón.

No trace of the USS *Dorado* was ever found, and debris that was recovered was determined not to be from her.

Postwar, Kriegsmarine records confirmed the second contact, with U-214 reporting that it had fired upon an aircraft. Another U-boat in the area, U-518, had no record of an attack being made on it.

One theory is that USS *Dorado* had been sunk by a mine (as happened to numerous submarines of all sides, many just disappearing without trace), or been damaged by the patrol bomber attack, and had difficulty in submerging - as had happened during her trials¹⁸ - and which she would have attempted if attacked. If she had sunk as a consequence, prevailing currents might have carried the boat towards the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. Indeed, in the 1970s, a pilot in that area used to use a landmark

¹⁷ Quite why a U-boat would continue on the surface, unless damaged, for such a time if aware that an aircraft, presumably hostile, was in the area, is not explained. It may be worth noting that the attack is also said to have taken place at night.

¹⁸ One former crewman, who left the boat just before she left New London, said that "Many, many times we desperately tried to dive and the *Dorado* would just not submerge":

<https://apnews.com/article/cf2ee913f9314892955f06daca29f89d>

It also suffered a fire, and became stuck for hours on a mud bank during one dive.

nicknamed the “Gray Ghost” in the sandy seabed, and this might have been the hull of the boat in the sandy seabed – later lost as the seabed shifted.

USS *ERIE*

USS Erie (PG-50) was one of two vessels built under the following the 1922 Washington and 1930 London Naval Treaties as “slow gunboats”. Under the Treaties, while limits were placed on larger ships, there was no limit how many small patrol-type combatants (such as gunboats, coast guard cutters, sloops, armed yachts, etc) each navy could have so long as the ships were generally built for littoral (i.e., coastal), convoy escort operations etc, and not general fleet use.

Such vessels could not exceed 2,000 tons (2,032 tonnes) standard displacement and could not mount a gun larger than 6.1 inch (155 mm), or have more than four guns above 3-inch (76mm). It could not be able to launch torpedoes or have a speed above 20 knots. However, this modest specification provided the US Navy with a pair of ships that they could use to patrol the Canal Zone, freeing more flexible destroyers and cruisers for other missions. This at a time when most other patrol gunboats of the day were “China” patrol boats, such as could be used on the rivers of China, that were much smaller, and much less heavily armed.

USS Erie, (given flag number PG 50, denoting it being classified as a “patrol gunboat”) was laid down on 17 December 1934 at New York Naval Yard while her sister ship, *USS Charleston (PG 51)*, was laid down about the same time, at the Charleston Navy Yard. They had Parsons geared turbines coupled to a pair of Babcock and Wilcox boilers, and were 327 feet (100 metres) long with a 41 feet (12.5 metres) beam. They had four 6-inch (150 mm) guns in open shield single mountings fore and aft. They also had four quad 1.1-inch (2.8 cm) anti-aircraft guns. The ships could also accommodate 44 US Marines and could carry a Chance Vought OS2U Kingfisher observation seaplane. They had a

complement of 180 officers, men and marines (though normally carried fewer during peacetime operations).

USS *Erie* was commissioned on 1 July 1936 and USS *Charleston* a week later. The ships were not just used for their intended roles protecting the Canal Zone. In 1936, for example, USS *Erie* was an armed observer of US interests during the Spanish Civil War and then served as a midshipman trainer at Annapolis.

USS *Erie* was in the Canal Zone on 7 December 1941. She was used to pick up interned Japanese citizens and direct suspect ships to authorities. Then she was sent through the Canal and into the Caribbean for use against the U-boats. It was employed on the regional convoy routes established at the time between Trinidad and Guantanamo Bay.

On 12 November 1942, she was escorting a convoy when she was torpedoed by U-161 just out of Curacao. Damaged, and with 18 casualties, she was beached. The resulting fire left USS *Erie* at a near-total loss. She was towed to Willemstad in the Dutch West Indies (now Curacao), but she capsized three weeks later and settled in the harbour. Consequently, she was struck from the Naval List on 28 July 1943. She was salvaged in 1952, and her hulk sunk in deeper water.

The Kingfisher floatplane was knocked off the ship by the torpedo strike, and became a popular dive site postwar off Curacao, as was her final resting place for deep water dives.

MUTINY! HMS *LOTHIAN*

There was a mutiny aboard HMS *Lothian* while at Balboa in the Canal Zone on 1 September 1944. It resulted in the court martial of three seamen, these being held on 27 October to 19 December 1944.

Built as the MV *City of Edinburgh* by Cammell Laird, Birkenhead as a cargo ship of 8,036 gross registered tons for the Ellerman City Line and completed August 1938. It was intended for operations on the US – Australia – New Zealand route, on which route it was used until 1939. She was requisitioned by the British Ministry of War Transport in 1939 for use in during World War 2 as a troop transport.

In 1943 she was taken over by the Royal Navy and converted into a Landing Ship Infantry (Headquarters) ship¹⁹ for operations in the Pacific and commissioned as HMS *Lothian* in September 1943.

On 3 August 1944, she sailed from the Clyde to New York, where the crew were refused shore leave due to work that needed to be done aboard, and then she sailed on to Panama to transit the Canal. There had already been some unrest while in New York, with NAAFI stores being pilfered.

The ship was said to be unsuitable for her planned use. Her complement had increased from 450 to 750, including several hundred RAF and Royal Corps of Signals specialists. She had poor ventilation and air conditioning, and there was even a lack of sufficient water. These factors (together with deteriorating food aboard) were factors making her unsuitable for use in tropical regions. These factors were made worse, it was said, by inexperienced officers, with minor infringements going unpunished.

She reached Balboa on 1 September 1944 and the poor conditions aboard triggered an armed mutiny (said to be the first in the Royal Navy since the 19th Century).

When orders were piped on the afternoon of 1 September, confusion broke out, and men refused to fall in. Petty officers and then the first lieutenant tried to quell the unrest. Then one sailor was reported to be in possession of a rifle, and rumours spread of a cache

¹⁹ Aka LSI(H).

of small arms having been raided. An angry crowd of around 30 seamen gathered on deck and pushed back gangway guards onto the jetty.

A detachment of armed Royal Marines was prepared and used to put down the short-lived mutiny.

Although no lives were taken, the short-lived mutiny of the H.M.S. Lothian on September 1, 1944, has received a fair amount of publicity. The conditions precipitating the mutiny were poor living conditions on the mess deck in a sweat-box-like atmosphere and the treatment of the crew "like cattle.

Mutiny in Force X by Bill Glenton (1986)

17 men were court martialled and reduced to the ranks, with six others given extra duties and punishment drill. Sentences were suspended (due to the lack of suitable jails or alternative ships in the Canal Zone) as the ship proceeded to the Pacific.

The ship joined the US 6th Fleet at New Guinea on 29 September, but was not used by the US forces, saw no combat, and eventually returned to Sydney. She was then used as the Fleet Train Headquarters ship for the Rear Admiral Fleet Train (RAFT) until May 1945.²⁰

In February 1945, she served as a flagship for the Admiral controlling the merchant ships arriving to supply the British Pacific Fleet. After the surrender of Japan in August 1945, she was used to evacuate prisoners of war and civilians from Singapore, Hong Kong and Shanghai.

In 1946 she was returned to her civil owners and used until 1961, when she was sold to a Hong Kong owner for scrap.

²⁰ <https://www.worldnavalships.com/forums/thread.php?threadid=5305>

SS AFRICANDER

During the war a large number of merchant ships belonging to the Axis countries were interned in the US and subsequently taken over by the US Government and dozens were re-flagged out to Panama (by my count, 78)²¹. The Axis ships retained by the US were first allocated to the US Maritime Commission, who in turn handed them on to the War Shipping Administration for operation, being assigned to various US steamship companies (under what was called a General Agency Agreement) and registered under the flag of Panama²².

One example of such an interned vessel was the *SS Africander*, a 20-year-old Italian ship of 5,441 tons with a Norwegian master and a crew of 35. It was interned in New York in September 1941 and was allocated by the War Shipping Administration to the Waterman Steamship Company of Mobile, Alabama.

It was attacked by German aircraft while on passage from Scotland to Archangel in the Soviet Union in September 1942, when part of convoy PQ18, carrying machinery, with six tanks and five aircraft as deck cargo. It was torpedoed and sunk, but all the crew and the 11-man contingent of US Navy Armed Guard manning its guns survived²³.

²¹ In March/April 1941, the US also seized some 600,000 tons of Axis- and Danish-owned (Denmark by then occupied by Germany) vessels and turned them over to the British. The US was also successful in persuading other republics in the Americas to do the same: <https://history.army.mil/books/wwii/Framework/ch05.htm>

²² <http://www.armed-guard.com/panama.html>

²³ The US Navy Armed Guard was a service branch responsible for defending US and Allied merchant vessels from enemy air, submarine or surface vessel attack during the war, serving mainly as gunners, signallers and radio operators. The service was disbanded soon after the end of the war: <http://www.armed-guard.com/>

THE *SURCOUF*

The *Surcouf* was the largest submarine in the World before the war²⁴, being laid down in 1927 and launched in 1929 – being 361 feet (110 Meters) long and having a displacement of 3,304 tons (3,357 tonnes). It could travel 10,000 miles (16,093 km) at 10 knots (maximum surface speed was 18 knots, its submerged speed was 8½ knots). It carried two 8-inch (203 mm) guns in a single turret, and had a hangar aft of the conning tower for a small, two-seat monoplane seaplane, as well as a 16-foot (4.9 meters) motor-boat. Its more conventional submarine armament comprised a total of 22 torpedoes.

She had been planned as the first of three such “cruiser-submarines”, intended to not only operate with the fleet and pursue enemy shipping, but also maintain contact with France’s overseas colonies. The Washington Naval Treaty that had limited the number and size of major warships placed no limit on the size of submarines, and the *Surcouf* was intended to combine the roles of both a submarine and a conventional cruiser.

She escaped the German invasion of France in 1940. Fleeing to Britain, it then had to be forcibly taken over by the Royal Navy (two British and a French sailor were killed in a skirmish). After a refit, it was handed over to the Free French and eventually sent to Bermuda.

It took part in the capture of the islands of St Pierre et Miquelon off Newfoundland in December 1940²⁵. Then, in January 1942, she set sail for Tahiti in the Pacific via the Panama Canal, first calling into the US Navy submarine base at New London to refuel and load torpedoes.

²⁴ It would be surpassed by the Japanese I-400 class of later in the war, submarines also designed to carry aircraft and originally planned for an attack on the Panama Canal.

²⁵ The neutral US, which had given undertakings to the Vichy Government of non-interference in its territories, objected and requested that the Free French withdraw, but De Gaulle refused and, in due course, the US backed down.

Having left Bermuda on 12 February 1942, she was lost on the night of 18/19 February, and a US report initially said that the submarine was sunk after a collision with a US freighter²⁶ on the Caribbean side of the Canal, 80 miles (129 km) from the Canal Zone²⁷, this happening because both vessels were operating at night without lights due to the U-Boat threat. 130 men were lost in the sinking, including four Royal Navy officers.

However, a later French commission of inquiry claimed that the submarine had been lost in a “friendly fire” incident, after being attacked by US aircraft. It was claimed that the damage to the freighter was too slight to have been caused by a collision with a vessel the size of the *Surcouf*. It was also said that the description from the freighter was of a submarine smaller than the *Surcouf*. It is also said that the Germans did not record a U-boat loss being in the area concerned.

The wreck has never been found and, if the incident had occurred where the freighter claimed, then the depth there is around 9,800 feet (3,000 metres).

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22 September 2022

²⁶ The SS *Thompson Lykes*, which had reported colliding with a semi-submerged object. It did not stop, fearing that it may have been a U-boat.

²⁷ *The U-Boat War in the Caribbean* by Gaylord TM Kelshall (United States Naval Institute Press, 1994).