THE I124: A JAPANESE SUBMARINE WRECK IN CLARENCE STRAIT

by

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State Library of the Northern Territory
Darwin 1992
Cataloguing-in-publication data supplied by the State Library of the Northern Territory

Dermoudy, Peter.


Occasional papers; no. 34

ISBN 0 7245 0717 5
ISSN 0817–2927

1. Submarine boats
3. Shipwrecks – Northern Territory – Clarence Strait.

i. Title
ii. Series (Occasional papers (State Library of the Northern Territory); no. 34)
iii. State Library of the Northern Territory.

940.5451

(The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily represent those of the publisher.)
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INTRODUCTION

This talk was given by Peter Dermoudy on 8 May 1991 at the State Library in Darwin as one of the Library's series of 'Under the Banyan Tree' lunchtime entertainments.

Peter is an architect and historian who has specialised on the period of World War II in the Northern Territory. He is the author of a large number of reports on the conservation and preservation of military sites throughout the Territory, particularly the Top End. However, nautical subjects appear to have held a particular fascination for him. He has recently been involved in efforts to raise the anchor of HMS Beagle from its resting place in the Victoria River and, of course, in proposals to raise the H124.

Peter has made a special study of this vessel, a wreck which has given rise to several persistent rumours about having a partner close by. It is perhaps not far from the truth to say that the wreck of the H124 has caused more problems for Australia than the fully-commissioned and antagonistic submarine did. Here is the complete story.
I will be speaking today mainly about the Japanese submarine I124 which was sunk off Bathurst Island in January 1942. I will tell you some of its history, and explain to you what the submarine looks like, and what some of the aspirations and possibilities are for future action on it.

The submarine in itself has a number of firsts; probably most importantly for us, it was the first Japanese ship to be sunk by Australians in the Second World War. This submarine also has the distinction of being the first submarine to sink an American ship during the Second World War, so he finally got his just deserts from the Australians.

I would like to tell you a bit about the actual submarine. It is basically a German design which came out towards the end of the First World War, and it is this, I believe, that makes this submarine so very important. There are no First World War submarines still in existence today. They were all scrapped or given away to other countries, including one to Japan. They all eventually disappeared. Except this one which is the only remaining example and is just out there and intact.

This submarine is not exactly World War I, but it has all the features the Germans had learned, all the good and bad things, I suppose, that had come out of the First World War. From that point of view it is full of the interesting technology of that particular time. The keel for this submarine was laid in 1924, and it was finally completed in various yards in Kobe and other places by about 1928, so it is a very old submarine. These particular submarines were not highly regarded by the Japanese. They were originally mine-laying subs, and in order to do this they had vertical tubes in the aft sections. The mines were stacked one above the other in these vertical tubes and were laid through the bottom of the boat. Because of this, every time mines were laid, the boats had to be retrimmed. They had other problems, as well. They were fairly slow, and hard to manoeuvre but had a good range, which was quite important for a mine-layer in that they were expected to travel a fair distance. This one had a 10 000 mile range at 14 knots, which was not too bad, but once submerged, it only had a 40 mile range with a speed of 4.5 knots. It carried only one 5.5 bore gun and varying numbers of torpedoes – from about 22 up to about 28 – these were fired through four forward tubes.

One of my most prized possessions is a Japanese drawing of the submarine, which shows the various compartments. One can see where the diesel engines were, the electric motors, all the batteries, the conning tower, a crane down aft for lifting their small craft on and off, lifting mines and torpedoes and such things. She was a reasonably large ship, not large by American submarine standards, but fairly large for a Japanese submarine. It was 85.2 metres long, 7.5 metres beam and drew 4.39 metres.

In the 1940s some of these particular submarines were fitted with saddle tanks for aviation fuel, and were used as fuelling tenders for the purpose of refuelling Japanese float planes. It is believed that some of the float planes that were seen over Darwin before the first raid may have been refuelled from these I class submarines (four of them were built).

Crew numbers varied. The Germans carried forty crew on their version, but it is believed the Japanese had somewhere between fifty and seventy. One of the stories circulating about this particular one is that it had a crew of eighty on board when she went down. This seems to be rather high. I would tend to go for the more conservative figures of somewhere between fifty and seventy.
I will now just recount a little of her early history in the Philippines. Some of this is conjectural, German submarines retained their identification numbers, whereas the Japanese tended to change their numbers around. This particular submarine was one of four submarines in the 6th Submarine Squadron of the Ninth Submarine Division. They were assigned to the Philippines as the Philippine Submarine Group. On 1 December 1941 the group left Samah on Hainan Island, came down through the Balabac Strait and were based in the Davao Gulf, their main area of operation. They layed mines in this particular area to control the shipping and on 10 December our submarine, the 1124, torpedoed the British ship, Hareldawins, which was only a 1 500 tonner but this event was significant in that it was the first vessel to be sunk by Japanese submarines in World War Two.

The submarine then returned to Camranh Bay on 14 December where the four mine-layers, the 1121, 1122, 1123 and 1124, were reunited. They patrolled Manila Bay and on 11 December, whilst on patrol, one of the 1124's mines sunk the 1 800 ton American SS Corregidor. The 1124 also rescued aircraft crews that had ditched during an air attack on Manila. On 18 December the squadron began a patrol of the South China Sea and then returned to Davao at the end of the month, to join their flagship, the light cruiser, Chogei.

The group was redeployed with the six vessels of the Fifth Squadron to the area then known as the Dutch East Indies, to the north west of Australia. From their base at Davao they were to assist invasions, disrupt enemy lines of communication, patrol, observe and intercept the allied fleet, and lay mines in these regions. They were told to mine up through the western end of the Torres Strait up to the western end of the Clarence Strait. These were the chief mine laying areas.

On their way down through the Banda Sea, sometime between 14 and 16 January the 1122 and 1124 spotted the cruiser, the USS Houston, and we all remember the Houston was in Darwin on the day of the bombing on 19 February. The submarines were detailed to follow the ship and its two destroyers, one of which was probably the Peary. They shadowed these ships down in a broad sweep. The other two submarines that had been laying mines were also told to join in the general hunt. By the night of 20 January the hunt had switched to an American convoy which was being escorted by two American ships, the Edsall and the Alden. In the convoy was an oil tanker called the Trinity, and the 1124, which was alone by then, fired a torpedo at the Trinity. I will just read from the Skipper's log of the USS Edsall. He is talking about the other ship, the Alden, and this is about five o'clock on the morning of 20 January:

"He was patrolling just to the south of the Trinity, when the Trinity shot one white flare. The Alden slowed down and the Trinity then reported that he had seen torpedo wakes coming from the astern and across over to the port side of the boat. They sounded the alarm and they put on full left rudder and sped up to 15 knots. They then started picking up echo bearings at 2500 yards and they asked the Alden if she wanted help. The Alden reckoned that she was OK and replied in the negative."

The Edsall went back to join the Trinity to give it submarine protection, but then in answer to further signals, he changed course and moved away from the Trinity and sped up to 20 knots and actually got in front of the Trinity so that he was leading the way at a good speed which was making him a difficult target for a submarine. The Trinity kept going and the Edsall kept up a circling motion all the way around and they actually arrived in port by ten o'clock, so that this had gone on for about five hours.

In the meantime, the Alden had a crack at the submarine. He picked it up on his asdic and his sound listening gear and they could hear propellers. The Alden dropped charges and they thought that they got air and oil bubbles, but because it was night and because of the need to look after the fleet, they did not really press home the attack.
The next morning three Australian corvettes were called out. The Alden had remained almost on station and was still moving around the submarine. The Australian ships went out and there was also, by this stage, a Dutch Dornier flying boat circling over the area. The Alden dropped a buoy where they thought the submarine was located, and an incredible number of depth charges were dropped. Some of them were set so shallow that one of the Australian ships, the Lithgow, blew some of the wiring out of its anti-submarine equipment. For a long time they were unable to use their asdic. They had almost ruined their radios as well, and they had also blown their gyro compass from its mountings. The Deloraine was suffering much the same damage. It was so badly knocked up that on the day of the Japanese raid she was in the drydock being repaired from her own depth charges which had resulted in buckled plates and the like.

There were large quantities of oil and bubbles rising. The Deloraine was closing in, and they saw an approaching torpedo track. They managed to manoeuvre very sharply and the torpedo missed the stern by about ten feet; it was a close shave. This provided confirmation that the submarine was present, and it surfaced shortly after, only the bow and conning tower appearing. It is thought that one of the ships was so close to it, that one of its depth charges actually landed on the submarine's deck whilst it was still on the surface. The submarine went down. There were masses of oil.

They then started to pick up what seemed like the echoes from two submarines. This is where the event became confusing and caused considerable speculation which still continues. The official analysis would have it that the submarine was critically damaged, but was still just capable of movement and was trying to escape very slowly. When depth charges are dropped, the water is disturbed and the asdic becomes virtually useless, as it does when a vessel crosses her own wake. Circling ships may have picked up one another's propeller disturbances and depth charge patterns. Also, dropping depth charges always results in an oil slick. Inexperience on many of the ships participating could have meant that they identified depth charge debris as oil slicks from submarines.

At this stage the battle was about 19 miles south of Cape Fourcroy. There was no ships were whirling around attempting to take sights. It was also the Wet Season, so there were storms coming in reducing visibility. The only landmark that could be used with any accuracy was one of the hills on Cape Fourcroy, Bathurst Island, a hill very close to Radar Hill – in those days they called it Penguin Hill. They were 19 miles out at sea and I think that they were starting to go a bit cross-eyed. All mariners know that it is extremely difficult to exactly establish your location from any distance out from Bathurst Island. With the submarine possibly moving and mistaking one hill for another, the ships thought there were two submarines out there, and then this turned into three submarines.

All the ships ran out of depth charges on the 20th, the first day. They returned to port and reloaded and went out for a second day and had another crack at the submarine. They tried to send divers down. At that stage of the war, it was important that they attempt to retrieve the code books etc, which would have been of immense value. But, as you all know, there are massive tides in this area. They were also frightened that there were other submarines about, and any major ship out there sending down divers would have been a sitting target.

There were Americans on board one of the small Australian boom ships who attempted diving. Initially they could not find the submarine, and it was only after another four days, on the 24th, that they finally got on board. They reported that the submarine had a gun, and that there was a hatch blown open just aft of the conning tower. The divers were of the opinion that the depth charges had opened the seals to the mine tubes. They were ordered to enter the submarine via the mine laying tubes at the stern. However, they could not get aboard, and could only stay down for about 16 minutes, because of the depth and because of the type of gear they had.
There was a very strong move to bring a ship from the Philippines, called the Penguin. She was a submarine rescue vessel, and had all the gear to blow the submarine's tanks full of air and raise her. The intention was to lift the submarine, bring it into shallow water and search it. However, the Japanese overran the Philippines, the Penguin was sunk, and nothing came of this.

It was also rumoured that the diver heard rapping on the hull of the sunken submarine, which was taken to indicate that the submarine was not completely full of water, that there were some airtight compartments left, and that some of the crew were still alive. However, neither the Americans nor the Australians then had the facilities to do anything to save the crew, so the divers were forced to abandoned the submarine.

It is a little strange that almost two years later, at this same spot, a small Australian corvette, coming through the Straits from the west at night, reported two torpedoes passed underneath. They quickly turned around and started dropping depth charges. Oil and bubbles came to the surface, and it turned out that they had had another go at the I124. They picked it up on their asdic. It is thought that the torpedoes could have been porpoises. It was a strange quirk of fate that they should pick up this submarine again. One of the crewmen on board the corvette had been on board the Deloraine on that earlier occasion.

The submarine when it went down had the Commander of the Japanese submarine fleet on board. His daughter asked the Australian Government if they would retrieve her father's bones or at least his ceremonial sword from the submarine. However, the Government made no attempts to either board the submarine or raise it. A couple of local salvage operators had heard about the submarine, and also picked up a rumour that it had a lot of mercury in it (mercury was used in these primitive submarines as a form of ballast - it was very heavy and could be pumped quickly to compensate for the dropping of the mines). They formed themselves into a partnership and won the rights to the submarine, which was outside territorial waters in those days, and they tried to sell it for 1.5M pounds, with another 1M pounds on top of that if the sub proved to contain mercury.

However, greed caused the consortium to fall apart. Each one made claims that he had found it or had the rights to it or was supplying more gear than the others. One of the parties called on the Australian Government to grant him the salvage rights, and another chose to ask the Japanese to give them to him. The two Governments finally got together and decided to declare the submarine a war grave. On hearing this, one of the partners threatened to blow up the submarine. He actually did put a charge on the conning tower and blew up a large section of it, and probably blew another hole in the ship as well.

The Australian Navy has been down since then and they confirm the submarine is in good condition, that there is very little growth on it, and that it is upright, facing almost north-south. They confirm that it appears the gaskets have all been blown on the rear mine tubes, and that there is also a hatch open, which was reported from the previous dive. Baxter, one of the salvage operators, reckoned he saw oxygen bottles and human remains at the bottom of the companionway. He thought the crew may have been trying to get out.

In recent times there has been another salvage attempt. I asked the Territory Government whether they would consider raising the submarine because of its immense technological value. It is unique, and the only chance that anyone in the world will ever have of obtaining a World War I submarine. It is in one piece, which makes it relatively easy to get up, particularly in these days of air-bag technology. Negotiations were commenced with the Japanese Government.

However, another salvage operator tried to muscle in. He claimed that mercury was leaking from the submarine and was polluting the marine life throughout Clarence Strait. He said that, if nothing else, the mercury should be pumped out and he would happily do it.
At this point the second submarine theory surfaced again. With modern satellite navigation, it was found that the I124 was not where the Navy claimed it to be – it was outside the declared zone. The second submarine story persisted, with fishermen claiming to have caught objects in their nets, and other divers saying they had seen a submarine down there with no gun, but with a hangar on the deck, and that this second submarine must have been carrying seaplanes. The salvage operators were able to say that this was the second submarine and, as it was outside the declared zone, they were able to dive on it. However, it definitely was the I124. They eventually did the right thing and reported its exact position. The declared war grave has now been moved to the correct place, and this is virtually how the matter remains at present.

The Americans have a submarine in Chicago which was captured from the Germans by an enterprising Admiral aboard an aircraft carrier. The Germans attempted to scuttle the submarine, but an American boarding party was sent on board when the submarine just had its bow and the top of the conning tower out of the water in very rough seas. It was wallowing and sinking. The intrepid party went below and found where the Germans had unbolted a plate from the water strainer. Water was coming in through a 270mm tube. The boarding party plugged it, got a rope on board from the American aircraft carrier, and started towing the submarine with all the hydroplanes down, so that they made it plane on the water. They got the propellers going fast enough to generate power through the electric motors to start the bilge pumps and eventually saved the submarine.

This submarine is a little larger than the I124, and it is now located outside the Chicago Museum. A hole has been cut through the wall of the museum and visitors walk in through the side of the submarine, through the ballast tanks and the main pressure hull. Museum visitors can step straight into the submarine and see the size of the ballast tanks. It is a wonderful exhibit, and it is something that I would very much like to have in Darwin.

There is the problem of the bodies still being on board. I would counter this by saying that the Japanese are still working in Corregidor digging up bodies from that incredible battle. They are cleaning the bones and cremating them. This is part of the Japanese religion of releasing the soul from the body. I cannot see why the same conditions could not be applied to any remains on this submarine, that the Japanese treat them in any way in which they would like to, or they could simply be taken from the submarine and placed on the sea-bed where they died in the submarine. I really do not see that they have to stay in the submarine.

That is the story of the I124. With respect to the other three submarines in the group, two were sunk about a year later, and the fourth was finally taken out of commission and broken up. This was discovered after the war when Australia was able to go through Japanese records. There is no possibility of there being a second submarine in Clarence Strait, and particularly not a Japanese one. The Germans did not lose a single submarine in Australian waters. There were no American submarines there at the time. The Dutch certainly had submarines around, but they were not there at the time either. A recent expedition found a rock formation sticking up out of the sea bed some distance away from I124 and it is almost certain that this is what caused the two submarine controversy.