

Stories from the Crew

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From Larry Bodiford, LT 65-67 (with comments / corrections by others):

The other day I recalled the time when Sirago went aground (bumped the bottom) during a "Springboard" ASW exercise. I believe we were operating in the Atlantic, just Northwest of St. Thomas is one of the ASW periods of the "Springboard" operation. The water in our assigned area ranged from 100 to up to several hundred feet. George Long was the Navigator and had advised us to stay above 100 feet in most of the area. Howard Eldridge had the Conn. I don't recall just who was the diving officer. It must have been the mid watch, because most of us were in the rack. I believe there were several surface ships in the distance. Howard was up for a "lookaround" when he saw a SONAR Dipping Helo moving in our direction. He ordered the diving officer to proceed to 85 feet. I don't remember if he added speed or not. The chart we were using had indicated that the depth at our position was about 110 feet. We later verified our position with visual fixes. As Sirago was proceeding to ordered depth we could hear the SONAR pinging. When the angle was back to about "1 degree down" The boat shuddered and the bow started to come up. Howard knew we had hit something, probably the bottom, and sounded the Collision Alarm. I can't recall if we stayed at periscope for long, but we ended up breaking off from the exercise. We confirmed our position at the point of contact and that the water there (on the chart) should have been in excess of 110 feet. Sirago then proceeded in the Charlotte Amalie and tied up in the vicinity of Pier two, which was the UDT/SEAL piers at the time. All of the appropriate reports were filed and we went about trying to determine the extent of damage we had received. Using our "Jack Brown" rig, I went down and inspected the hull. The only damage I could find was good scraping of the paint on the bottom side of the starboard bow-plane and an oval shaped dent in the front edge, and slightly to starboard of the Chinmount SONAR dome. The dent was 12" x 18" and about 4 to 6 inches deep. We checked out all of the systems that could have been effected and everything seemed to be OK. This was all included in the follow-on reporting.

At some time after we were back in Norfolk, word trickled down from COMSUBLANT that "they" believed we were not in the reported position or were not at the reported depth, because the chart indicated water in excess of 110 feet. In other words, they thought we were being untruthful. Some how Don Lawrence, Sea Lion skipper, heard about the situation. He probably heard it from Stan Hecker, my first CO on Sea Lion. The next time Sea Lion went to St. Thomas for SEAL training, he took the exact coordinates we had for the event. While operating around St. Thomas Sea Lion located the position and went through the area taking soundings. They found a knoll that was not on the chart. The knoll came up to about 80 or 85 feet. A couple of swimmers actually went down and looked around the bottom to see what we might have hit and to confirm the depth. They brought up a cup-full of sand and pebble from the Knoll. It was just a sandy Knoll shaped similar to a breast of a woman lying on her back. Sea Lion gave the bottom sample to Frank Talbot and reported what they had found to COMSUBLANT. We started calling the place where we "Found the Bottom", "Talbot's Tit"

That's as good as I remember. However, in one of our visits to St. Thomas during that period we had a problem with a submerged pier piling and had to have the port screw replaced. I was the Officer of the Deck coming in to Charlotte Amalie, Pier Two area. During the Landing process the Port Quarter got a little close to the pier. I had left the starboard backing bell on just a little too long. There was no contact with the stern planes and the ship had not closed the pier enough to have contact with the propeller. It was reported that the port screw had hit something, but we didn't know what it was. After we were tied up, we went back to try to determine what we had hit, and discovered that several of the pier support pilings had rotted apart just at the water line. The visible part looked OK, but the part below the water and not visible from the ship, was actually falling away from the pier at about a 45 degree angle and could have been in the path of the propeller blades. We knew the prop had hit one of these pilings. Using the "Jack Brown" rig I went down to examine the propeller blades. At least two of the blades had hit the piling and the blade had been curled back from true in a couple of spots. We believed the problem with the blades would cause severe premature cavitation. I tried to un-curl some of the spots with a Crescent Hammer adjusted to the width of the blade tip. It worked a little, but, in some spots the bronze was too brittle and broke apart. We later confirmed the excessive cavitation of the Port Screw. We went through a Waterborne Propeller replacement back in Norfolk. The fact that we had the Prairie System did not help things. We were back to normal in time for our North Atlantic trip.

You may recall that the "Jack Brown" rig is basically a large face mask with a supply of air from a hose between the mask and ship's LP air.

Chuck Veir Comments on above, QMC 66-69:

Here's what I remember...I was in the control room when the SQDN Commander (who was riding us at the time) recommended to CDR Talbot to take the boat to 100 ft. Shortly there after we struck bottom...the collision alarm was sounded. Before the lower conning tower hatch was shut I climbed up into the conning tower and relieved Earl Meyers (the QMOW) . The QM log was 5-10 minutes behind events and the DR plot the same. To make a long story shortupon arrival Norfolk I went on 2 weeks leave. At the time I was told that I wouldn't be needed for the investigation....Ha ! when I returned to the boat I was chewed out royally by LCDR Long. I'm almost certain he was OPS/NAV at the time. Anyway, I wasn't where I said I'd be while on leave....and the investigation was held up for 2 weeks until I returned. Apparently I, my charts, QM log and my departmental regs were desired at the long green table on the tender. This whole event took place 40 years ago....and I just can't recall who the Diving Officer, Chief of the watch or OOD was...However,I do remember feeling relieved when we were finally vindicatedwe were where we were supposed to be and my charts were correct !!!!!

Joe Palermo Comments on above, LT 67-68 (but barely LTJG at the time):

I reported on board Sirago January 1967, fresh out of sub school. Our first deployment was to Springboard '67 off of St. Thomas and San Juan that spring. At that time both the "grounding" and the screw ding incident were part of Sirago's legend - colorfully and frequently told by Lt Sea Daddy Larry Joe Bodiford . I do remember the "sea mount" being now identified on the chart but not by its proper name in honor of the late Captain Talbot. If memory serves, this feature was just west of St. Thomas in the Straits of (or Sound of) Vieques. If memory serves, the incident had occurred the prior spring. At the time of my reporting, Loveable George Long was Nav/Ops. Jim Slave Driver Degroff was XO, Larry Joe was engineer and Ray Nice Guy Anderson was Comm and I was there to replace Quick Hand Tomashek as Supply / Weapons. The fact that we could not locate several cases of beef steaks, account for about 100 dozen Crispy Creams and a few torpedoes did not delay Tomasheks departure.

Shortly after arriving on board I do recall the news that Captain Talbot had just received official notification that he and Sirago were not at fault.

As for the screw ding incident, I will never forget the tenderness that spring with which we tied up to the decaying pier at the old Navy - Seal / Submarine base in front of the "Carribe" Hotel. (I think that was its name.) The hotel was formerly a Government Issue two story wooden / grey barracks. It was like a scene out of McHale's Navy. I do recall Larry going over the side shortly after we tied up to check the conditions around the screw. The only excitement from that dive was that he had come face to face with a toothy barracuda.

At lunch time one day shortly after we left that old pier, I also remembered the lady who owned that hotel??? Coming out to sea in her 42 foot cabin cruiser to pick up Captain Talbot and the Captain of the other boat we were operating with at the time. Both captains jumped overboard in swimsuits and swam to the stern of the cruiser where the transom door was opened for their ease of entry. There they enjoyed a relaxing lunch while the rest of us enjoyed a couple of hours sunning on deck. Both XO's now had sea commands.

Boy, that was the real Navy... ARGHH!! Never had anything like that happen on board my next boat -a boomer.

Charles Tomashek Comments on above, LTJG – 66-67 On the Dive:

At 98 feet approaching 100 feet, there was a solid bump. I thought, "Who fired a water slug?" I looked at the chief of the watch and he said, "Condition Baker set below." I ordered periscope depth, and a large up bubble, told the Conn Condition Baker was set, figuring that if we hit at 98 feet, staying at 100 was a bad idea, and that the captain would rather see with the periscope than have me ease up into the bottom of one of the destroyers. At 80 feet the XO said, "From the Captain, make your depth 80 feet." I'm already ordering 1 down bubble and 63 feet. I ordered full dive on both planes and 80 feet. The boat topped out at 63 feet and took a large down bubble. "From the captain, make your depth 63 feet." We're at 63 feet, but were rapidly pointing toward the bottom. I ordered bow buoyancy blown. Nothing happened. I turned around and repeated the order. The air manifold operator was standing there with his mouth open. Harry Yockey came through the forward hatch, reached up and blew bow buoyancy and continued to the Conn. The operator stopped the blow when ordered, and we remained at 63 feet. We got our exact position and couldn't decide how we hit the bottom at 98 feet. We went to St. Thomas and inspected the bottom of the boat and found no damage. The next day when I came to take the watch the Chief of the Watch said, "Howdy, Mr. Ricochet". The name only stuck for a while. Upon return to Norfolk we found that we had hit something with one of the diving planes. Later a submerged wreck was found at the location. (I know the names of most of the players. Larry Bodiford was the battle stations diving officer. He also did the inspection of the bottom of Sirago at St. Thomas. George Long was Ops Officer and had the conn until relieved by the Captain. Frank Talbot was Captain and Jim DeGroff the XO. Pappy Goff had the air manifold. Although I can clearly see the face of the Chief of the Watch, his name escapes me.)