

The Flag

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If I should die, think only this of me:
That there's some corner of a foreign field
That is forever England. There shall be
In that rich earth a richer dust concealed;
A dust whom England bore, shaped, made aware,
Gave, once, her flowers to love, her ways to roam,
A body of England's, breathing English air,
Washed by the rivers, blest by suns of home.

The Soldier

Rubert Brooke 1914

The dark shadow slipped silently through the black water. The night was hazy with a visibility of 3 miles. Winds from the northwest at 4-5 knots with light chop. The indigo silhouette on the horizon was no longer hull down. It had taken almost 7 hours to get into this position.

“Target speed nine knots”.

“Yes, that's the problem, come to three, zero, zero”.

“Range, fifteen hundred meters. Depth three point five meters”.

“Launch.”

The boat seemed to shoot forward and up in reaction to both the hissing discharge of the eel and the loss of thirty-five hundred pounds of onrushing death. The diving officer activated the pumps to take on water and correct the trim, and the count began. At ninety-seven seconds a loud “CRACK” reached the boat and a black and white explosive cloud with a yellow central streak of fire shot upward aft of the smoke stack on the now clearly visible ship.

The first officer slapped Kapitanleutnant Reinhard Hardegan on the back in congratulations. It was 19:49 hours Eastern War Time (EWT), 11 January 1942. U-Boat Eins, Zwei, Drei (123) had just sunk the British freighter SS Cyclops, 9,070 Gross Registered Tons (GRT) approximately 300 nautical miles east of Cape Cod.

OPERATION PAUKENSCHLAG had begun, albeit two days ahead of schedule. On the surface, U-123 turned slowly southward, heading for the busy shipping lanes of New York and New Jersey.

It was night on 7 December 1941 when a surprising and shocking message clicked out of the Siemens teleprinter at Unterseeboote Headquarters at the mouth of the inner harbor of Lorient in German occupied France. Simultaneously, it arrived at the Wolf's Lair, Field Headquarters, near Rastenburg deep in the forests of East Prussia. A stunned Admiral Karl Donitz, Commander in Chief, U-Boats, and Adolph Hitler the Fuhrer of Germany quite possibly read the message at the same time: **“Japan began hostilities against the United States on 7 December. At 19:30 hours Central European Time (CET) strong air formations attacked Pearl Harbor (Honolulu).”**

Donitz immediately moved to his situation room and rapidly began calculating the sailing distances from France to the Eastern United States on the three-foot globe that he kept for that purpose. The distance to New York City on the great circle route was 3000 nautical miles. Only his largest U-Boats the IXB and IXC could make that distance, patrol, and return. It was approximately twenty-two days over and then again back, leaving between seven and fifteen days of operational time, with the larger 1,120 ton IXC's having the bigger fuel bunkers.

For the previous six months, Admiral Donitz had been trying to convince Hitler and his General Staff to pre-position U-Boats off the Eastern Seaboard of the United States in anticipation of an “Act of War”. Donitz was fed up with the gossamer neutrality of the United States with her Lend Lease Program and active participation in protecting British convoys leaving the east coast. He was convinced that it was only a matter of time before Germany declared war on the US, and he wanted to be in position to throttle the chicken's neck immediately. Hitler refused. He firmly believed that the British were planning an invasion of Norway and kept the U-Boats in the North Atlantic, the North Sea, and the Gibraltar approaches. Japan's surprise attack on the American Navy at Pearl Harbor was also a stunning surprise to Donitz.

In 1941, New York harbor had 50 sea departures and arrivals each day. Vast shipping lanes threaded their way from South America and the Caribbean close in on the coasts of Florida, the Carolinas, and north to Chesapeake Bay, Delaware Bay, and Long Island

Sound. It was one of the most congested sea lanes in the world and was one enormous shooting gallery with tankers and freighters carrying the muscle and bones of war materiel: oil, iron, steel, cotton, bauxite, coal, lumber, coffee, and sugar.

Now, Donitz wanted to stage his own surprise attack. As he said, “as sudden and as jarring as the beat on a kettledrum --- PAUKENSCHLAG”. And so he would call it **OPERATION PAUKENSCHLAG (OPERATION DRUMBEAT)**. The Japanese attack, while sudden, demoralizing, and a public relations nightmare for the American public, was, in hindsight, a serious strategic error. Of the Navy ships sunk, most were obsolete in 1941, and amazingly almost sixty percent were able to be refloated and repaired, returning to duty by late 1942. The true heart of the new Navy, the aircraft carriers, were away at sea and would shortly demonstrate their monstrous power at Midway and The Coral Sea.

In dark contrast to Pearl Harbor, a successful concentrated and controlling U-Boat attack on the shipping lanes of the east coast could have conceivably changed the entire course of World War II. The immense loss of strategically important cargoes of oil, steel, food stuffs, and bauxite for making aluminum would have meant that resupply of British forces in North Africa and Britain herself would have been almost impossible. In 1941, the United States was not capable of launching land or sea attacks that would have protected the British Isles.

Donitz had to convince the Naval High Command in Berlin that a large U-Boat flotilla operating in American waters could turn the tide when Germany declared war as she must. He envisioned a fleet of 300 U-Boats: 100 in transit, 100 operating on the coast, and 100 in repair and resupply. In the end, the Fuhrer and the High Command only allowed him 6 operational U-Boats for PAUKENSCHLAG. On 9 December 1941, Hitler released Donitz from his restrictions against naval warfare with the United States and on 11 December von Ribbentrop called in the American Charge d'affaires (the American Ambassador having been called home in 1938 in protest to a Jewish Pogrom carried out that year), and told him at 2:18 in the afternoon that Germany regarded herself “as being at war with the United States of America as of today.”

What Donitz and Hitler did not know was that in the small Buckinghamshire town of Bletchley there existed a large red-brick mansion and estate called Bletchley Park. It was

the home of the Government Code and Cipher School or Station X. The stories of “Ultra,” “Hydra” and “Enigma” are well known, and those accomplishments literally helped save England. Despite the fact that the Kriegsmarine had the tightest code discipline of any of the German armed forces, with the UBootwaffe being particularly sensitive, British code breakers through captured machines, code books, absolutely driven work hours, and sheer luck had managed to break a large portion of German Naval communication traffic. They knew the U-Boats were coming and were able to track them on their way to America.

That information was shared with United States Naval Intelligence and the White House. Sadly, nothing was done about it or possibly could have been done. Admiral Ernest J. King, Commander in Chief Atlantic (CINCLANT), did not like “limeys” and tended to discount their advice and successes. He was considered by many a “contentious son of a bitch”. On 12 March 1942 a bright brigadier general in charge of War Plans confided his opinion to his personal diary: “One thing that might help win this war is to get someone to shoot King”. Thus did Dwight D. Eisenhower declare the frustration that many had with this crusty old sea dog.

From January to July 1942, it was open shooting season on the American Coast due to frank incompetence, lack of suitable naval antisubmarine vessels and aircraft, lack of civilian black-out control, and lack of merchant captain discipline with regard to light control, radio traffic, and sailing patterns. German Naval archives are filled with after action U-Boat reports describing tankers and freighters sailing right at them with lights blazing, no zigzagging, and broadcasting on clear channels their locations and routing instructions. Black-out control along the eastern seaboard was essentially non-existent during that time due to many officials not wanting to frighten the populace about the dangers of war, and frank disobedience on the part of individuals and coastal towns.

U-Boat commanders marveled at their ability to locate new victims silhouetted against the yellow glow of towns and cities. They were often so close in shore they could see headlights on the coastal roads and people on the beach. Incredibly, lighthouses and lighted navigational buoys were left bright, acting as clear beacons for all ship traffic including the U-Boats. If the populace would be frightened by the blackout what must they have thought when they saw explosions and flaming wreckage sometimes only a

mile or two off shore. Certainly the debris and bodies on the beaches must have made some impression.

The carnage began. From January to July 1942 almost 60 ships a month were sunk between Maine and the Caribbean fouling the beautiful sandy beaches of Long Island, the Carolinas and Florida with black oil, thick bunker fuel, and bodies. But slowly and resolutely, the Navy and the Army began to recover, and they received timely help from their old ally England. In January, the United States recognized that it lacked the ships and trained crews to perform antisubmarine warfare. The British, however, had been refining this branch since 1939. England agreed to loan 24 antisubmarine trawlers for use along the mid-Atlantic coast where the shipping lanes were the narrowest due to the protruding Outer Banks of North Carolina and its treacherous shoals Wimble, Lookout, Frying Pan, and the dreaded Diamond.

While the beleaguered Americans were no doubt thrilled with the offer, what they got was exactly what the British promised --- former fishing trawlers commandeered by the Royal Navy in 1939 and staffed with members of the Royal Navy Patrol Services, in essence former deep sea fishermen. The officers were generally naval reserve, but they were well trained and certainly experienced on the high seas. Almost all the ships were in the 400 to 500 gross registered ton range, one hundred seventy feet long, and armed with a World War I deck gun, two 50 caliber machine guns, one Lewis machine gun, and depth charges capable of being fired in a pattern of 10. Their most serious flaw was a lack of speed – 12 knots or less. A surfaced U-Boat could make eighteen and a quarter knots with her twin diesel engines, but only seven and a half knots submerged. The battle was only even if they could get the U-Boat to dive.

In late March 1942, the trawlers began to arrive, with names like HMS Rosemary, HMS Bedfordshire, and HMS Northern Duke. They were spread down the mid-Atlantic Coast home porting in such places as Norfolk, Virginia and Morehead City, North Carolina. In concert with the smaller patrol vessels already on station and a few old Navy destroyers, they patrolled the Virginia and Carolina coast, frequently escorting small day convoys from one safe nighttime anchorage to another.

The first war casualty on the Outer Banks occurred when U-66 sank the tanker SS Allan Jackson sixty miles off Cape Hatteras on 18 January 1942. Twenty-two of the

thirty-five crew members perished in the burning gasoline before the destroyer USS Roe arrived the following day to rescue the survivors. By the end of January twelve ships had gone down off the Banks. Rumors flew in the tight-knit communities along the coast as injured and burned survivors were off loaded in Morehead City, Elizabeth City, and Ocracoke.

The first confirmed sinking of a U-Boat by the US Navy off the East Coast occurred on 13 April 1942. The destroyer USS Roper, an aging World War I four stacker, caught U-85 on the surface off Nags Head, North Carolina and scored a direct hit with her three-inch forward deck gun then finished her off with depth charges. At day break, the resulting large oil slick and floating German bodies confirmed the sinking and the Roper retrieved twenty-nine of them. In preparation for searching the sunken sub for code books and other valuable information, the HMS Bedfordshire, out of Morehead City, relieved the Roper on station with a detachment of Naval divers. In 100 feet of water they finally found the wreckage, but bad weather set in and the search was temporarily abandoned.

Ordinary Americans were very grateful for the help from the British sailors. In late April, Wahab Howard of Ocracoke, manager of the Ocracoke Power & Light Company and a friend Shanklyn Austin of nearby Hatteras, North Carolina were in Norfolk on business. They were having dinner in a crowded restaurant in downtown when two officers from HMS Bedfordshire came in and asked if they could share the table for four. During the convivial conversation that followed, one of the officers, Sub-Lieutenant Thomas Cunningham, asked Howard if he was from Norfolk.

“No Ocracoke.”

“Where was that?”

“About twelve miles south of Hatteras.”

Hatteras was a known reference point for the British because of her famous candy striped lighthouse. Cunningham mentioned that they were stationed out of Morehead City. They shared experiences and no doubt discussed the recent sinking of the U-85. Cunningham was a slightly built, good-looking, fully bearded man of twenty-eight, and Howard noticed his unusual gold watch and gold ring set with black onyx.

On 9 April 1942, the British tanker San Delfino was torpedoed off Cape Hatteras. The northerly directed currents carried four bodies to the surf above Nags Head. Whenever

bodies were recovered at sea or on the beach, the Office of Naval Intelligence was notified since there was a chance of valuable intelligence being learned from papers or diaries taken from the body if it were German. Many of the investigators were civilians, frequently law enforcement officers, since regular naval officers were in short supply. One of these investigators was Aycock Brown, a civilian. He was tasked with identifying the four bodies and determining their nationality. After filing his report, his superior suggested that it would be more proper if British flags could be obtained for the burial rites as well as pallbearers or a firing squad from a British man-of-war. HMS Bedfordshire was known to be in port at Morehead City, so Brown made the trip to the naval pier. Flashing his naval credentials he walked down the pier to the ship, and asked for the officer of the deck. The British sailor, manning the brow, pointed to a young bearded gentleman forward and identified him as Lieutenant Cunningham. Brown boarded, introduced himself to the officer, and explained his mission of obtaining four flags and a burial party.

Cunningham agreed to the flag request and escorted Brown to the ward room, where he waited while the Lieutenant went below. On his return, he asked Brown if he would like to participate in the ancient British Navy tradition of partaking of a tot of rum. Brown readily accepted and Cunningham poured two drinks from a large wicker-wrapped demijohn. The two men obviously enjoyed each other's company and talked freely about their educations and families. Cunningham proudly announced that his wife Barbara was expecting their baby in October and the captain, Lieutenant Davis, had received similar news on the same day. The respite from the stress of war was more than welcome, and soon Brown noticed that the demijohn was empty. He asked for it as a souvenir, and Cunningham laughingly agreed.

As Brown rose to leave, he asked again if a detail of the crew could serve at the funeral. Cunningham replied that unfortunately they could not since they were resuming their off-shore patrol that evening. However, he did hand Brown a bundle of six Union Jacks, two more than Brown needed. They shook hands and Brown toddled off the gangway with the flags under his arm and an empty rum jug in his hand.

Starting out their beach patrol at 06:00 EWT 14 May 1942, two young Coast Guardsmen, Arnold Tolson and Okie Oakland, were driving their truck along the hard

sand at waters edge. Their patrol route was from the Ocracoke Station to the Hatteras Inlet Station and back. As the early morning sun bounced brightly off the water, Tolson suddenly caught sight of what appeared to be a swimmer waving or flailing his arms in the breaking waves. That would have been highly unusual since there was no habitation within miles. Stopping the truck they realized it was a body rolling in the heavy surf. Tolson waded in and dragged the body to the sand where Okie helped him place it in back of the truck and cover it with a canvas tarp. It was fully clad.

As they headed back towards the Ocracoke Coast Guard Station and neared the tiny village of Ocracoke, a man frantically waved them to a stop. He had been fishing with his wife on the point and told Tolson there was a body in the surf near the inlet between the village and Portsmouth Island. Tolson gunned the engine and quickly drove past the Coast Guard Station to the point at the inlet, carefully watching the water. Within minutes they found the second body and put in with the other. Back at the Station, the bodies were placed on a table in a small out building at the rear. The station chief Homer Gray telephoned naval headquarters in Morehead City to notify it of the retrieval.

Within the hour Aycock Brown received orders to have a Marine amphibian aircraft from Cherry Point, North Carolina fly him immediately to Ocracoke. On arrival, Gray escorted him to their makeshift morgue and Gray and Tolson pulled back the tarpaulin exposing the fully clad bodies.

“My God, I know that man from Morehead City. He’s off the Bedfordshire!” exclaimed Brown. Although the identity tags were missing, papers on the body confirmed Brown’s reaction. The dead man was Sub-Lieutenant Thomas Cunningham, Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve. In the left sleeve of his Royal Navy sweater, the officer had stuffed sunglasses and a bankbook on a Morehead City bank. There was no visible cause of death. The other body was identified as Ordinary Telegraphist Stanley Craig, Royal Navy, also of the Bedfordshire. The bodies were stripped and the clothing and personal effects, including the gold watch and black onyx ring, labeled and put aside. Brown took fingerprints that later officially confirmed both identities. Formal autopsies were rarely performed in these circumstances, but a local physician was asked to view the bodies and he surmised that they had been killed either by concussion or drowning or both, both pretty safe guesses.

That same evening the bodies were wrapped in clean sheets and Navy blankets and placed in makeshift caskets. The two remaining Union Jacks given to Brown by Cunningham only a few weeks before now draped the wooden boxes they rested in, as he and Craig were lowered into their sandy graves.

Brown telephoned Naval Headquarters to report the loss. The man on the other end questioned his report since the Navy had had no distress call or report of an attack on the Bedfordshire. Brown was adamant that he knew the man and he was off that ship. "Wait, I'll check again." The man returned to quietly say that the last contact with the Bedfordshire was on 11 May, three days earlier. Despite Brown's information, she was officially shown as "On Station" until 16 May 1942.

Seven days later, Arnold Tolson was on patrol five miles northeast of Ocracoke inlet on the Station's sixty-three foot patrol boat. He spotted two blackened and bloated bodies floating in the water. They had been in the sea almost ten days and were in an advanced state of decomposition and clad only in blue Royal Navy sweaters. Brown was unable to identify them, but concluded they were British seaman, most likely part of the Bedfordshire's crew. They were officially recorded as unknowns, and buried with their two shipmates in the makeshift cemetery on Ocracoke.

When Mrs. Cunningham learned of her husband's death and subsequent burial, she wrote British Naval authorities in the United States and asked if he had received the Roman Catholic rites of burial. Through a long tortuous process the letter finally reached Aycock Brown. Brown visited the site and found that it had deteriorated in only six months time, so he pleaded with the commanding officer of the new US Navy Section Base on Ocracoke for help. On 27 December 1942, a Roman Catholic Navy Chaplain and a local Methodist minister presided over grave side services which included a full dress military funeral, twenty-one gun salute, and placement of four wooden white crosses.

For years thereafter the citizens of Ocracoke meticulously cared for the little cemetery since many of them had sons, brothers, or husbands in military service, but there was no official agency in charge of the four graves. In July of 1969, a surprise party of petty officers from the HMS Eagle, an aircraft carrier visiting Norfolk, suddenly arrived with a station wagon loaded with "English timber" and completely refurbished the picket fence surrounding the graves and erected white concrete crosses with small bronze plaques

identifying Cunningham and Craig and the two unknowns. The Eagle's commander had learned of the site and asked for volunteers to "tidy up" the area.

The bicentennial year, 1976, brought renewed patriotic fervor to the country and the Outer Banks. A local committee suggested that the small grave site be deeded back to the British government in a gesture of friendship. Instantly, complications arose. First it was private land belonging to the Williams family of Ocracoke and not state or federal territory. Second, by Federal statute, United States territory cannot be passed by second parties to a foreign power. However, an ingenious and somewhat devious solution was found by working with the State, the Bicentennial commission, the Williams family, and the British government. The Williams sold the land to the State for \$1050.00 dollars, and the State then leased the land in perpetuity to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission. On 20 August 1976, at a grave site ceremony, the lease for the 2,290 square foot plot was presented to the representative of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission who, to make it binding, paid for the lease with a framed bicentennial silver dollar given her by American friends. A firing party presented arms, the United States flag was lowered, and the Union Jack of Great Britain was raised, symbolizing the transfer.

Walking along the narrow broken-shell paved lane that borders the quiet tree-shaded graves, as I have done, one cannot help but be deeply moved by the sacrifice and gallantry of the men who lie there.

But what of the Bedfordshire? It was only after the war upon inspection of captured German Naval documents that the fate of the Bedfordshire was learned. At 23:40 hours EWT 11 May 1942, during a surface attack by U-558 commanded by KapitanLeutnant Gunther Krech, HMS Bedfordshire was sunk with a single torpedo. The irony is that fourteen minutes earlier Krech had fired two torpedoes that missed but were not seen by the lookouts, thus allowing a second and fatal approach. The remains of the Bedfordshire lie in 105 feet of water twenty-five miles East of Beaufort Inlet off Cape Lookout, North Carolina. The remains were accidentally discovered by a recreational diver in the late 1970's. The ship was identified from a serial number and the manufacture's plate on the vessel's steering post, but the widely scattered debris field attests to its violent end. There

is no memorial there, but a bronze plaque, left by HMS Eagle, at the quiet, peaceful, shaded cemetery in Ocrakoke, North Carolina reads:

**If I should die think only this of me
That there's some corner of a foreign
Field that is forever England**

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