



# The Sinking of Japanese Submarine I-17

*Personal Account Written by Jess W. Carr, USN (Ret.)*

The prepping and conquest of the Pacific had begun on Nov. 19, 1943. The Americans began to transfer their material and their stocks of weapons and munitions towards the American bases farther to the North.

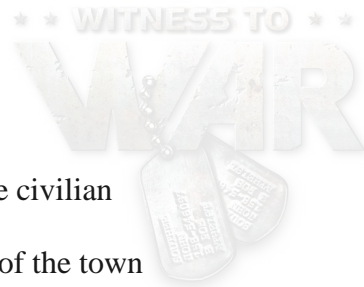
At Noumea that day, three cargo ships and several teams of military longshoremen were taking care of munitions and stowing in the holds cases of all kinds of high powered bombs and small munitions.

It was probably around 14:30 hours when suddenly a terrific explosion shook the town of Noumea. The faithful who were attending vespers in the cathedral hurried outside, terror stricken. From the church square they could see a giant mushroom spreading slowly in the sky of Noumea and explosions, some sharp and some muted, followed one upon another, creating great glowing red clouds.

The American munitions at Doniabo were the victim of the flames. General alert was instantly issued. All military security services and all the U.S. units were mobilized and coordinated their efforts with that of the French police, as well as the city ambulance drivers and firefighters.

The big bombs had not yet exploded. Most of them were already loaded on board the ships. If the fire managed to spread as far as the town, Noumea would risk being partially wiped out.

To avoid the worst, it was necessary that they approach the blazing fire and bring the centers of the blaze under control, while also making sure to get the ships away from the docks.



Faced with the imminence of danger, the authorities took the first step to protect the civilian population. They decided to proceed with the evacuation of the Tir Valley section of the town that was directly threatened. Immediately, there was indescribable panic. Women and children filled the streets outside the houses and fled in the direction of downtown.

Meanwhile, across the bay from Noumea was a small island named Ile Neu. Located on the island, a leper colony, a U.S. Navy PBY Catalina Squadron (Black Cats) and an Antisubmarine Reconnaissance Squadron VS-57.

Living conditions at the Ile Nue were good for the officers and poor for the enlisted men. Officers were assigned to Dallas huts partitioned into rooms with running water and hot showers. The cots had mattresses, and sufficient furniture was around to make the quarters comfortable.

The food was procured from the Army and seemed to consist primarily of air tights, powdered eggs and Spam. Fresh food was scarce, and butter – except for the non-melting, paraffin-based type – was nonexistent. The French farmers would not sell their cattle, but would sell their horses to the Army and the Navy for fresh meat. It was food, but everyone knew for certain there was a war going on. They were glad they had joined the Navy, but were wishing they could get to a ship or Navy base where the food was better.

The enlisted men were quartered in tents (some were not waterproof), and all were without floors. Showers and washing were definitely limited. There were Quonset huts around, but the Pat Wing personnel had taken them. Chow for the enlisted men was same as for the officers.

The versatility of this squadron flying OS2N-1 “Kingfisher” aircraft fit nicely into the island-hopping tactics of the Pacific campaign. Scouting Squadron 57 had received reports from Commander – South Pacific (COMSOPAC) that a Japanese submarine had been operating near



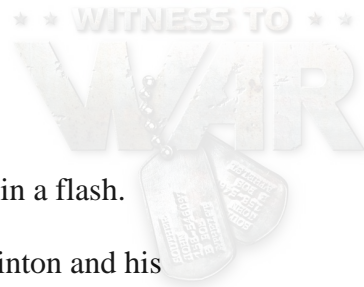
the island of New Caledonia taking on fresh water, fruit and vegetables bought from the natives late at night.

Nevertheless, several suspicious sightings made during the time of the nickel-ore dock explosion were deemed to be the enemy. Could this be the Japanese submarine commander's desperate impetuous move to unload his last torpedo into the nickel-ore dock at Noumea?

First call to action came from an alert Australian gunboat escorting a large troop transport convoy outward bound in the Pacific. In swift response to an electrifying flash "submarine contact" a Navy Kingfisher slid alongside the gunboat for detailed verification. Ocean landings and takeoffs were but part of the days work of Kingfisher's Observations Scout Seaplanes of the U.S. fleet.

Information double-checked, Kingfisher pilot Lt. (jg) Robert J. Clinton guns his ship and takes off for the unseen objective. Seconds grown into minutes, minutes to five...to 10... while the safety of precious lives, ships and urgently needed cargo hangs in the balance. In a scant fifteen minutes after his takeoff, Lt. (jg) Clinton sights a tell-tale submarine periscope cutting the waves. The Kingfisher dives to attack.

Depth charges one and two explode dead ahead of the periscope. Marksmanship is excellent. Down goes the Japanese submarine. A trail of bubbles and oil mark its path. But submarines die hard. This one bobs up five minutes later, bow first, at a steep angle. The only Jap that isn't treacherous or dangerous is a dead Jap. And that goes for submarines, too. Pilot Clinton dives in to strafe. His machine gun sprays the deck of the large submarine. His only hope is to keep the crew from manning the heavy deck gun, a Kingfisher being the smallest Navy plane for combat duty.



Success seems almost at hand, but Clinton's machine gun jams! He zooms in a flash.

The Japanese reach their gun stations. A fire breaks loose in a hell of death, but Clinton and his Kingfisher hover high above. Keeping an eye on his wounded prey, Clinton calls for assistance.

Four more seaplanes come in for the kill. The surfaced submarine, circling wildly, is out of control, but her large forward gun and anti-aircraft guns still blazing deadly fire. Not a breeze stirs.

The undersea radar lies shrouded in her own smoke. Behind this cover, pilot Lt. Robert L. Gittings maneuvers unseen into position astern to launch the second attack. Two depth charges drop swiftly to their mark. Neither explodes. Their fuses had failed.

But there is no reprieve for a Jap sub with Navy Kingfishers overhead. Lt. (jg) Knut W.D. Lee dives his plane. His first charge explodes thirty feet aft of the conning tower. Jap gunfire increases in intensity. Lee turns and dives again. His second charge hit home, within 10 feet of the starboard beam. The blast sends a spurt of water geysering 50 feet upward. And in less than 60 seconds, the giant sub disappears for good.

Landing handily on the ocean, the Kingfishers start circling the area of the sunken sub. There was an oil slick for some time after the sinking, but the most interesting part of the "capture" of the four survivors was that during lengthy interrogations they finally revealed to the intelligence people the whole history of their submarine, which incidentally carried a seaplane with collapsible wings in a shell on the forward deck. The Sub I-17's entire war history was revealed – where it had been, what it had done and where its home base was located in the Truck Islands. Part of the interrogation revealed that it was the I-17 that made the notorious shelling of the Santa Barbara Coast that had shocked Americans so much.



This was the Japanese submarine whose scouting seaplane that is carried had annoyed Americans at sea and ashore for many weeks with its nightmare missions in and around New Caledonia.

The Scouting Squadron never actually encountered another submarine during its period of operations around New Caledonia; conversely, not a single ship covered by VS-57 planes was ever attacked by a submarine. It was later discovered that the mishandling of ammunitions at the dock caused the explosions oat the nickel-ore dock at Doniabo.