

WHAT BEGAN AS A ROUTINE SALVAGE MISSION TO SAVE A BEACHED SUBMARINE QUICKLY RESULTED IN THE DESTRUCTION OF THE USS MILWAUKEE IN ONE OF

GROUNDED AT SAMOA BEACH

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THE US NAVY'S
GREATEST PEACETIME
FIASCOS

Dawn came sluggishly as the surfaced United States Navy submarine *H-3* groped southward through long gray Pacific ground swells off the northern California coast on the early morning of 15 December 1916.

On the bridge, Lt. (jg) Harry Bogusch, commanding officer, with his officer of the watch, a quartermaster petty officer, and a seaman lookout, stood braced against the bridge coaming, staring ahead and inshore for a glimpse of buoys and beacons marking the approach channel leading into Humboldt Bay, where the sub was scheduled to dock at the city of Eureka.

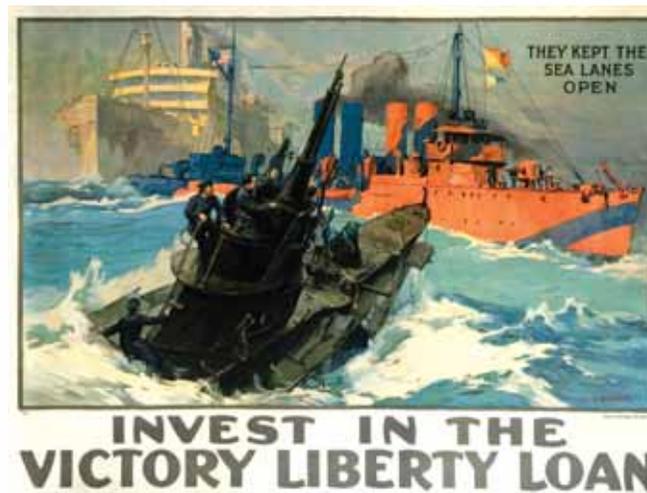
A mixture of mist and smoke from coastal lumber mills squeezed visibility down to a few hundred yards. Time and again, binoculars were raised in an effort to penetrate the murky atmosphere.

Earlier, while bucking to sea across a turbulent Columbia River bar 400-miles to the north, the *H-3* had developed battery trouble and, later, while she was slugging southward through rough seas, one engine had become disabled forcing her to labor on one diesel.

Abruptly, the lookout reported an object on the port beam. All four stared through their glasses and discerned a narrow, dark object protruding from the murk. Assuming it to be a Humboldt entrance marker, Lt. Bogusch ordered the helm to put to port for an easterly heading through the channel — or so he thought.

His order was the first in a series of events that was to end in one of the Navy's most disastrous fiascos.

The sub, which had been rolling gently while cruising beam-on to the swells, began a series of plunging rushes as she swung to port and began running with the in-rushing seas — white water creaming on either side



With America's entry into WWI, the US Navy's small submarine service was pressed into immediate action.

of the conning tower as she leaped ahead on steepening crests.

Suddenly, a peaking sea heaved the sub's stern high, then broke in a crashing maelstrom over its entire length, broaching it to starboard. Backing full on one engine was to no avail. The sub rammed hard aground broadside on the sandy bottom, rolling viciously in pounding breakers.

The four men ducked quickly below, battening the watertight hatches behind them. An urgent SOS was sent requesting speed in rescue because several men had been injured and battery gas was filling the sub.

The *H-3* had grounded on Samoa Beach, a long, half-mile-wide sand spit that stretches north from the Humboldt channel entrance.

The radio operator at the Samoa Beach Lifesaving Station received the call, and the lifesaving crew quickly trundled its cart-transported surfboat from its boathouse and labored with it across three-miles of sandy beach, where they found the *H-3* rolling murderously, 300-yards offshore.

On the sand spit a short distance to the east, a smokestack rearing from the mist at a nearby lumber mill revealed itself as the object — mistaken for a channel marker — that had lured the *H-3* to disaster.

The lifesaving crew deemed the breakers too heavy to risk launching the surfboat, so a Lyle line-throwing cannon was quickly rigged and on the second attempt, a line was fired across the sub's breaker-bashed deck.

Shortly, a man clambered from the conning tower, secured the line as high as possible and scrambled below. He had no sooner dropped from sight than the sub rolled to seaward, almost on beams' end, and the line parted. Another line was shot across the sub, but no one came from below to make it fast. Battery gas and the terrible buffeting inside the sub had so stupefied those aboard that no one was capable of climbing up through the lurching conning tower.

Speedy action had to be taken if death to all hands was to be averted. The only alternative was to launch the surfboat. Without hesitation, the surfmen shoved the cart into the frothing surf, launched their bucking craft safely and, pulling mightily, battled through roaring combers to the wallowing sub. Watching their chance between breakers, lest the boat be smashed against the sub's rolling steel side, the surfmen worked close enough to permit some of their men to leap aboard, where they secured and rigged the hauling line and breeches buoy apparatus.

All 27 of the bruised, groggy officers and men aboard the *H-3* were hauled safely ashore.

Pounding breakers during following high tides drove the *H-3* farther onto the beach until, at low tide, she lay high and dry on the sand. Inspection proved her to be virtually undamaged.

Milwaukee, now at a noticeable list, is still flying her flag but most of the sailors have escaped the doomed ship.