



Contact: blevinst@gmail.com



BLOW NEGATIVE

VETERANS FREE PRESS

Special Edition

Publisher/Editor Timothy Blevins



The Official Newsletter of
South Lake Florida
Chartered chapter of USSVI
USS Cochino
August 1948

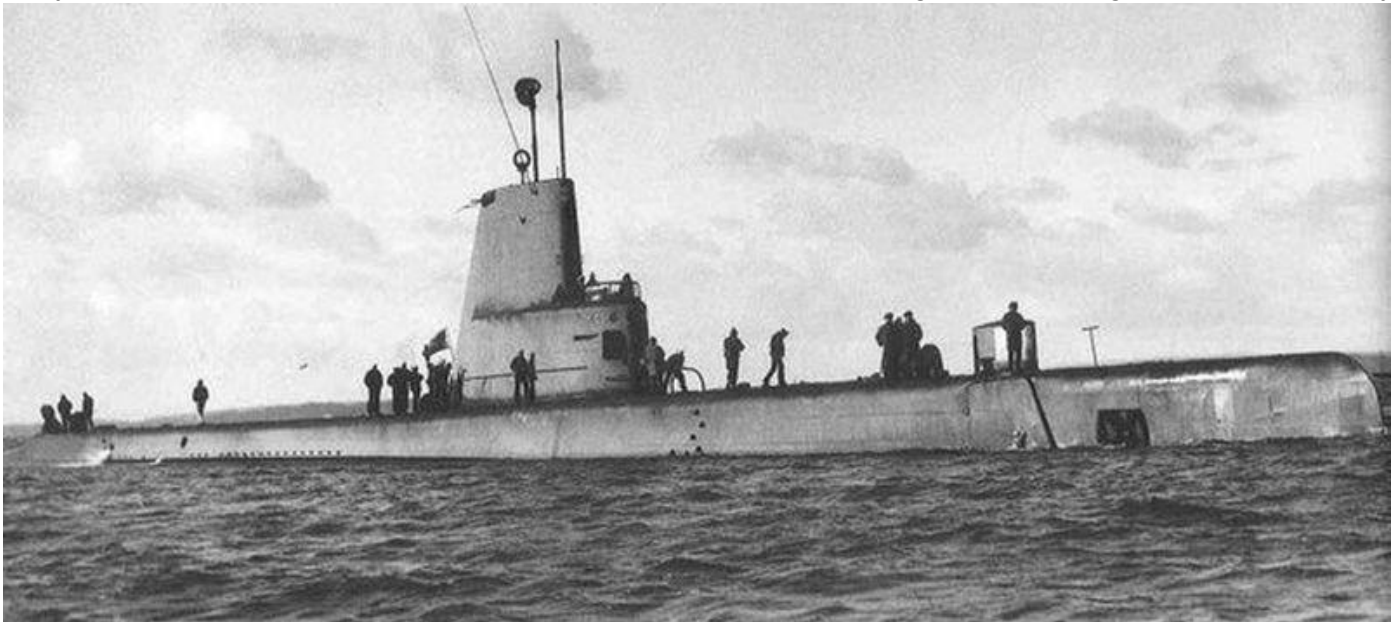
USS Cochino (SS-345)¹

Author: Don Messner

The 25th of August 1949 marked a cold day in history in more ways than one. The first U.S. Submarine casualty after World War II occurred. The submarine COCHINO was heading home having completed one of the first Cold War patrols off the coast of northern Russia - Murmansk area to be exact, home of the Soviet Fleet. While transiting off the coast of Hammerfest, Norway, COCHINO experienced a tremendous explosion in the after battery well which resulted in an

17th at Manitowoc Shipyard in Manitowoc, WI. She was a Balao class boat, often referred to as a thick skin boat with a test depth of 412 feet to differentiate it from the previous Gato class, thin skin boats which had a test depth of 312 feet. She had just been converted to a Guppy II at EB in February of 1949. A Guppy II conversion consisted of modernizing a WWII Fleet boat by streamlining the bow, streamlining and enclosing the top side superstructure with a sail, striping

experimental passive sonar. The Brits were more sonar savvy than the Americans and this design captured from the Germans at the end of WWII was recognized as superior to anything the Allies had. The same scenario applied to the snorkel whereas late in WWII, the U-Boats were using a Dutch designed schnorkel. U-Boat crews hated it as it was clumsy and time consuming to rig but mainly because if depth control wasn't accurately kept and the valve's sensors got wet, it would cycle



uncontrollable fire determining her fate.

USS COCHINO SS-345 was one of the Navy's newest and finest submarines in the fleet of 80 in 1949. She was built by Electric Boat (EB) Company in Groton, CT and was the second submarine commissioned after the end of World War II. VJ Day was 15 August 1945 and COCHINO was commissioned on 25 August shortly after the USS MERO SS-378, was commissioned on the

off the top side armament, removing the small auxiliary generator (the dinky), adding a snorkel within the streamlined sail and changing the battery configuration from two main batteries with 126 cells each to four main batteries with 126 high capacity cells each.

In early August 1949, COCHINO departed the British Naval Base at Londonderry, North Ireland where she had been outfitted with a German designed GHG

(shut) and the engines would draw a vacuum in the boat - a most unpleasant feeling for the crew - an experience difficult to relate to unless personally experienced. It clearly needed refinement.

Upon leaving Londonderry, COCHINO rendezvoused with USS TUSK (SS-426) and headed for the Arctic Ocean. Their original mission was to test the experimental sonar and significantly modified snorkel system in the cold water

¹ <https://archive.navalsubleague.org/2014/arctic-sea-disaster>, NSL April 2014

environment by playing the traditional cat and mouse games, i.e., one is the prey and hides and the other tries to outguess and find her. COCHINO, however, had a change in priorities. While being fitted out with the new sonar in Londonderry, an intelligence agent (often referred to as a spook) joined the crew for a top secret mission which superseded her previous mission with TUSK. The Spook, a navy white hat, brought aboard some special equipment such as radios, recorders, antennas as well as special orders. COCHINO's priority now was to covertly eavesdrop on the Russians off Murmansk and intercept and record radio, radar and beacon transmissions as well as catalog propeller count of navy and merchant ships in the area and look for missile testing activity.

COCHINO and TUSK parted company at the Arctic Circle but would later rendezvous when COCHINO's top secret mission was completed. Upon completion of her covert mission, COCHINO departed the Murmansk area in the Barents Sea and headed west for the confines of the Greenland/Norwegian Seas and her date with TUSK 400 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

At about 0800 on the 25th of August while running submerged in an operation with TUSK, COCHINO was rocked by an explosion. Within seconds the report, "Fire in After Battery", came to the conning tower and Commander Rafael C. Benitez the Commanding Officer (CO). Benitez immediately ordered the boat to surface—he had to ventilate it. (Fire is one of the diesel submariner's three worst enemies, the other two being Hydrogen gas and Chlorine gas—not necessarily in that order). The Executive Officer (XO), Lt. Cmdr. Richard M. Wright, immediately formed a

firefighting party of five. He was in the Forward Engine Room, the compartment immediately aft of the After Battery compartment, with 18 crew men with him in the engine spaces. The After Battery compartment was now isolated but not before acrid fumes and gases had spread forward and men were passing out. In the next few minutes, the forward compartments were evacuated, and 60 men were brought topside and lashed to the superstructure, some in their underwear, to face the turbulent North Atlantic seas and frigid temperatures.

Word came to Benitez that a short circuit between Battery #3 and Battery #4 had caused the fire and one of the batteries was now effectively charging the other and creating extremely volatile hydrogen gas, another of the submariner's worst enemies. Electricians were trying to remove the short from the Maneuvering Room control panel when at 0836 two seemingly unrelated incidents occurred almost simultaneously. A second explosion shook COCHINO resulting in injury to five crew men, and to make matters worse, a furious North Atlantic storm was battering the now surfaced COCHINO when the CO heard the dreaded cry, "Man overboard". Commander Benitez, not fully aware of the extent of conditions below decks, and with full faith and confidence that his XO could handle the below deck emergency, kept his attention on the man on the water. With the help of a crew member who jumped in the water to aid the one washed overboard and a second crew member who stood on the top of the saddle tanks, CO Benitez maneuvered COCHINO to affect a rescue within five minutes, amazing given the state of the sea.

Meanwhile, XO Wright got word that the short could only be cleared

by pulling the battery disconnects located in the battery well in the After Battery compartment. He made the decision to enter the compartment, which was by then fully ablaze, and clear the short circuit at the disconnect panel, a most dangerous if not impossible task given the conditions. He donned the rescue breathing apparatus, checked it out, put on gloves and attempted to open the hatch between the After Battery compartment and the Forward Engine Room. The hatch handles were red hot and burned right through the gloves. Wright did, however, get the hatch open and immediately the engine space was flooded with smoke and acrid fumes. As he was attempting to enter the burning compartment another explosion knocked him back severely burning his arms and legs which were not protected by the rescue breathing apparatus. Badly burned, Wright realized that entry into the After Battery compartment was futile and summoned all the energy he can muster to secure the hatch.

The atmosphere in the Forward Engine Room was now loaded with hydrogen as well as smoke and acrid fumes. The hydrogen in the air mixed with diesel fuel and caused the engines to run away screaming at a high pitch. They were shut down by two badly burned enginemen cutting off the fuel supply, and the compartment was evacuated as it also was then ablaze. All in the firefighting party were also burned and they were ushered back to the After Torpedo Room for treatment. XO Wright was so badly burned he was not expected to live.

Disaster begets disaster. COCHINO then lost all auxiliary power and engines #3 and #4 in the After Engine Room shut down. All propulsion was lost and COCHINO foundered in the rough

seas. TUSK in the meantime had sent over a line which was used to ferry a small, unmanned life raft with medical supplies. Communication was by semaphore flags. Two of COCHINO's crew manned the life raft and returned to TUSK to brief her CO as to the extent of the problems, including the possibility of abandoning ship. A series of gigantic waves hit TUSK and washed 12 men overboard—11 of TUSK's crew and one of the COCHINO messengers. TUSK pulled away to initiate rescue operational procedures. COCHINO was unaware of the situation. In two hours of maneuvering in a windblown tossing sea, Commander Robert Worthington, CO of TUSK, was able to locate and save only five of the men in the water. He made the decision to abandon the effort to save the remaining men in the water realizing they had probably drowned and turned his attention back to aiding COCHINO. The time was then 1350.

A turn for the better happened when the electricians restored auxiliary power. The enginemen were successful in restarting the After Engine Room diesels. COCHINO now has propulsion and steerage, albeit the rudder is being manually controlled from the After Torpedo Room. Their position was then about 200 nautical miles from the coast of Norway to which they headed, slowly. TUSK reappeared and led COCHINO in pursuit of safe harbor in a Norwegian port or fjord. Of the 60 men topside on COCHINO, 47 were lashed to the superstructure with no protection from the weather. The other 13 were inside the protective shield of the sail. CO Benitez ordered the 47 to stuff themselves into the confines of the sail literally like sardines in a can to offer some protection from the arctic cold. The time was then

1528.

Five hours later at 2039, COCHINO's fortunes took a turn for the worse. An explosion rocked the After Engine Room—probably from hydrogen leaking through the sealed off ventilation or engine exhaust systems. Benitez on the bridge got word that the After Engine Room was on fire, was filled with gas and had been abandoned. All hands aft were now in the Maneuvering Room or After Torpedo Room. TUSK, a mile ahead, is notified by a signalman using semaphore and reversed course. Visibility was no problem as this was the land of the midnight sun.

The stern was settling, and water was washing over the After Torpedo Room hatch—the only way out for the crew. CO Benitez ordered all hands topside—no response came from the After Torpedo Room on the sound powered phones. Wasting no time 19 year old Quartermaster Willard Whitman on the bridge shed his sound powered phones, jumped from the bridge, raced aft through the perilous waves washing over the slippery steel deck and opened the After Torpedo Room hatch. By 2155 all hands were topside except the hospital corpsman and XO Wright. Whitman was standing by at the hatch and TUSK was alongside to affect a rescue. The corpsman helped the badly burned Wright to the ladder. Wright, with the morphine wearing off and in great pain, tried to ascend. He asked the Lord for help knowing he couldn't pull himself up the ladder with the muscles in his hands and legs all burned. The corpsman could not possibly push Wright's dead weight high enough and Wright could not possibly pull himself up the ladder in his badly burned condition when all of a sudden Whitman was grabbing him under the arm pits and pulling

him clear.

Grabbing hold of the lifeline, Whitman then helped Wright navigate the treacherous, slippery deck 200 feet to the superstructure area where a plank had been placed between TUSK and COCHINO which had been tied together with mooring lines. None of the COCHINO crew had crossed over to TUSK yet. The plank was slippery, the boats were bobbing like corks in the churning surf, and if one fell, he would most likely be crushed between the hulls of two submarines.

Upon seeing Wright and Whitman approaching, the crew gave them a cheer of encouragement. Wright, not known for wasting time, assessed the situation, stepped on the plank, waited for the two boats to be level and staggered across the plank on his own. The rest of the crew followed one at a time as COCHINO continued to take on water aft and settle by the stern. At 2229 CO Benitez was the last man over the plank. TUSK crewmen cut the last of the taut mooring lines, COCHINO's bow rose and she slipped under water for the final time. She came to rest on the ocean floor 900 feet below the surface at 71° 35' North and 23° 35' East - 70 miles NNE from Hammerfest, Norway and safety.

EPILOGUE: Quartermaster Willard Whitman was credited with saving the life of Executive Officer Lt. Cmdr. Richard M. Wright. He was presented with a Letter of Commendation and Commendation Medal from the Secretary of Navy on 26 May 1950 for his "outstanding performance of duty" while serving on board USS COCHINO SS-345 as related above.

Willard Seth Whitman, born 18 March 1930 in Hibbing, MN, graduated from Hibbing High

School, class of '48, enlisted in the US Navy 16 June 1948, graduated from Great Lakes Naval Training Center (Boot Camp) September 1948 and later Basic Submarine School 17 December 1948 and

was then assigned to one of the finest and most modern submarines, USS COCHINO SS-345. Discharged from the Navy 05 June 1952, he settled in the St. Louis, MO area where he went on

eternal patrol 16 August 1997.

Sailor, rest your oar - no one could have asked for a finer shipmate with whom to sail

AUTHOR's Note: Whitman and I grew up in the same neighborhood together – a block apart. He had to walk past my house on the way to school or downtown, and he always waved and said, "Hi", to us younger kids. Five years after he joined the Navy, I followed in his footsteps. After completing Boot Camp at Great Lakes and Electronics Technician School at Treasure Island, I volunteered for Submarine duty. 40 of us graduates volunteered for 4 open billets. During the interview process, I used Whitman as a reference. The three interviewers, a white hat, a chief and a lieutenant – all submariners, knew about COCHINO – I got one of the 4 billets. I never had a chance to thank Whitman as our paths never crossed again. This article then is my way of completing that unfinished business feeling. Thanks Willard.

From the NHHC website: On 25 August 1949, however, Cochino ran into a violent polar storm off Norway. The huge waves slammed the submarines' snorkel so violently and jolted the boat so severely that the pounding caused an electrical fire and battery explosion, followed by the release of deadly hydrogen gas. Defying the most wretched weather conditions, men of Cochino and Tusk (SS-426) fought to save the submarine for 14 hours, performing acts of skillful seamanship and high courage in the storm-lashed, frozen seas. A second battery explosion on 26 August, however, made "Abandon Ship" the only possible order, and after the crew made a dangerous rope transfer to Tusk, the abandoned Cochino sank at 71°35' N., 23°35' E. Cochino's only fatality was a Bureau of Ships technician, Robert W. Philo, swept overboard by an icy wave. Tusk lost six of her own men by the same cause in the attempt to save Cochino.²

² <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/history/nhrc/research/histories/ship-histories/danfs/c/cochino.html>