

WWII Sub Veterans Have No Regrets, But Lots of Stories

By Ed Friedrich (Contact)
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Seattle resident Jim Hafner, 84, right, greets former shipmate Erv Schmidt, 93, of Edmonds at a gathering of World War II submarine veterans in Silverdale on Thursday. (CAROLYN J. YASCHUR | KITSAP SUN)



Erv Schmidt, 93, of Edmonds examines a float that was on display this week in front of the Silverdale Beach Hotel. Schmidt served on two submarines, the USS Saury and the USS Torsk, during the Second World War. (CAROLYN J. YASCHUR | KITSAP SUN)



World War II veteran Tudor Davis, left, from the Clark County town of Battleground, discusses the war with Ray Bedford of South Philadelphia. Both were at the Silverdale Beach Hotel for a gathering of World War II-era submarine veterans. (CAROLYN J. YASCHUR | KITSAP SUN)



Don Loughridge

Twenty-five World War II submariners swapped war stories last week at Silverdale Beach Hotel. The tales didn't need any embellishing.

Ninety-three-year-old Ervin Schmidt was among the group, which was joined at a conference by another 95 postwar submariners and family members. The Edmonds man survived the torpedoing of the battleship USS California at Pearl Harbor and the 1943 sinking of the heavy cruiser USS Chicago before switching to submarines.

"A shipmate and I vowed if we lived through this, we'd volunteer for submarine duty," he said. And they did.

But it was no less dangerous. Fifty-two submarines were sunk and 3,505 submariners were killed during the war. One out of every five submariners was killed, the highest mortality rate in the U.S. military.

Schmidt and his pals aboard the USS Saury and USS Torsk dished out more than they received, however.

A radioman, Schmidt and his mates on the Saury sank nine Japanese ships. He got four more after transferring to the brand new Torsk.

On Schmidt's first war patrol, the Saury sank a tanker and three other ships. The petty officer received his combat pin upon returning to Honolulu. On his fourth war patrol aboard the Saury, Schmidt and his crew were run over by a Japanese destroyer, wiping out the sub's periscope and radar and rolling the sub over.

"We were getting ready to attack a big Japanese convoy and this ship came toward us doing 245 RPM. on the screws," he said.

The Saury hid on the bottom for a day, and when no sound was heard above, slowly crept back to Midway. The collision tore up the bottom of the destroyer, and it "sank by accident," Schmidt said.

After a fifth patrol, Schmidt moved to the Torsk, went on two war patrols, and "sent the last four Japanese ships (two sub chasers, or small patrol craft designed to combat submarines, and two smaller ships) to the bottom of the Sea of Japan," just before the war ended.

There was no mourning for the enemy, Schmidt said.

"It helped end the war," he said. "If they could've, they would've sunk us. That's what the damn war was all about."

Don Loughridge felt the same way. Ships were just targets.

"We thought it was only proper we were killing them. They were trying to kill us," he said.

Except for once. While Loughridge was a junior officer aboard the USS Lizardfish, its mission was to destroy Japanese tankers in the East Indies. But by the time he got there, they were mostly gone.

What remained were sub chasers and small wooden ships used to transport goods. The latter were too small to torpedo, so the sub surfaced to blast them with its guns.

They found seven or eight of the ships along the Sumatran coast.

Loughridge, of Saratoga, Calif., and two other gunners shot at a person steering one of the boats "and we could see we all hit this man at the same time and he just disappeared," he said. "I felt like we just killed this guy who was doing the best he can. That's one case where we later felt a little bad about it."

Loughridge's biggest moment on the Lizardfish came when they spotted several enemy ships in a small harbor in Java.

Just before attacking a sub chaser, the captain spotted about 20 Japanese sailors returning on a liberty ship. He waited until they came aboard and then "shot the torpedo at them and blew them all to pieces," the 86-year-old Loughridge said. Then the sub surfaced and "shot up everything on the beach. We claimed one sub chaser, a number of small landing craft and 20 palm trees."

Loughridge, a communications officer, said the submariners were proud and well trained.

"We were all there because we wanted to be there," he said. "I think that's why we've always been so close."