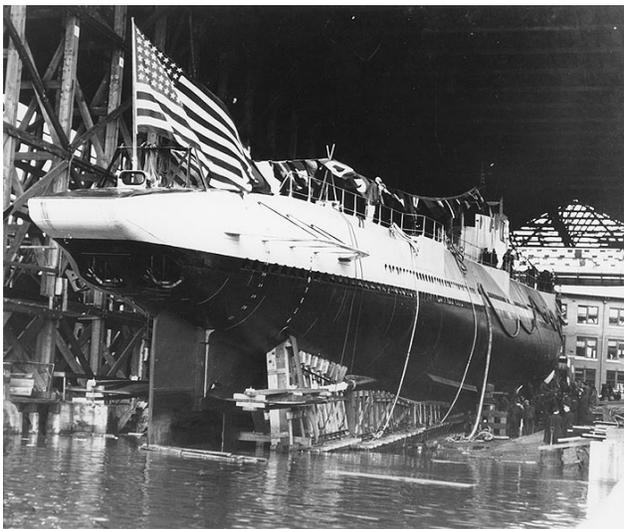


USS Argonaut Background

The early months of 1943 were a dark time for the submarines of the US Navy in the Pacific. Within a little over two months, four American submarines went missing. They were the Argonaut, Amberjack, Grampus, and Triton. Of the four, only the Argonaut (V-4 Class), lost 10-JAN 1943, were details ever discovered. The Amberjack (Gato Class) was lost on 16-FEB 1943. The Grampus (Tambor Class) was lost 5-MAR 1943. The Triton was lost on 15-MAR 1943. All four of these submarines remain missing today. There is a group call the "The Lost 52 Project" searching for those submarines unaccounted for from World War II. They are dedicated to preserving and telling the story of WWII Submarines and Submariners. Their quest is to provide the fullest possible accounting of our missing WWII Navy Sailors for their families and the nation.



The Argonaut was a peculiar submarine. The keel was laid down (start of construction) in 1925. With the designation V-4, she was part of a program of big "cruiser submarines" designed for long endurance more than high speed. The Argonaut was 381 feet long, with a displacement of 4,080 tons submerged. By comparison, the Tambor-class submarines, Grampus and were 307 feet long and displaced 2,400 tons submerged. The Gato-Class Amberjack was 311 feet long and displaced 2,424 tons.

The Argonaut was a big slow monster with a maximum surface speed of 15 knots and a submerged speed of 8 knots. In addition, the Argonaut was slow to dive and cumbersome. She was the largest US submarine ever built until nuclear submarines came on the scene in 1954.

The Argonaut was also the only US submarine ever designed as a minelayer. At her stern she originally had two 40-inch mine-laying chutes, handling equipment, and room for 60 mines. Forward she had four 21-inch torpedo tubes for more traditional submarine operations. Unlike other submarines, the Argonaut also had two 6-inch deck guns, the largest deck guns ever mounted on a US submarine, one forward of the conning tower, the other aft. The Argonaut had more weapons than any other submarine at the time.

By the time the war in the Pacific started, the Argonaut's great size, low speed, lack of maneuverability, and meager torpedo armament made her useless or at the least disadvantaged in fleet command. Rear Admiral Richard H. O'Kane, who had served aboard the Argonaut for four years before becoming famous as skipper of the Tang, said of her fighting capability, "If a fleet boat were stripped of one battery, two engines, six torpedo tubes, and could use no more than 15 degrees of rudder, she would still have greater torpedo attack and evasion ability than Argonaut." Clay Blair* would describe the Argonaut as "ancient and clumsy." Ironically, the

ancient and clumsy Argonaut would be called upon to make one of the first attack approaches of the Pacific War.

*Editors note: Clay Blair saw service on the fleet submarine Guardfish in World War II and later wrote for Time and Life magazines before becoming editor-in-chief of The Saturday Evening Post. The author of several other popular books on submarines, he died in 1998.

While patrolling south of Midway atoll on 7-DEC 1941, the Argonaut under skipper Lieutenant Commander Stephen G. Barchet was battling small internal electrical fires. Her lack of air conditioning combined with all-day dives sent the humidity inside the boat skyrocketing. The high humidity led to excessive condensation, which dripped onto the electrical wiring, causing short circuits and knocking nearly half her major machinery offline. After sunset, she surfaced to air out the stuffy boat. It was then that she received the radio announcement of the Pearl Harbor attack and the commencement of hostilities with Japan.

Moving slowly along the surface at 9:45 pm, the Argonaut saw what looked like gunfire west of Midway. Nine minutes later, the Midway base reported it was being shelled. Was it a Japanese invasion force? The big submarine moved in slowly to investigate. What she found were two Japanese ships, "big destroyers or small cruisers," later identified as the destroyers Ushio and Sazanami, bombarding Midway with their main batteries. The Argonaut maneuvered to make a submerged torpedo attack, but one of the destroyers apparently saw her dive and headed in her direction. The Argonaut went deep, her attempt at an attack spoiled, while the Japanese crisscrossed and literally ran rings around her position, trying to locate her. At dawn, the big submarine surfaced to recharge her batteries nearby Midway and their air cover. Later she was unsuccessfully bombed by a United States plane from Midway.

Convinced the Argonaut was useless in combat, Lieutenant Commander Barchet chose not to attack a force of three or four destroyers that she detected a week later, sparking an angry exchange with the executive officer and a trip back to Pearl, where the US Navy agreed that the Argonaut was useless in submarine combat.

But the US Navy had an idea and plan to retrofit the Argonaut. The Argonaut was sent to Mare Island to have her minelaying gear ripped out and two external torpedo tubes bolted to her stern, and she was designated as a troop transport submarine. It was an ingenious concept because the Argonaut could transport about 120 troops. In August 1942, the Argonaut and her sister boat Nautilus, another former V-boat, transported two companies of Marine Raiders to Makin in the Gilbert Islands for a raid intended to be a diversion from the invasion of Guadalcanal. Despite the trip being uncomfortable and many of the Marines getting seasick, the raid was successful in damaging the Japanese, if not in diverting their attention from Guadalcanal.

The Argonaut made her way back to Pearl Harbor, where her official designation was changed from SM-1 (Submarine Minelayer) to APS-1 (Transport submarine). The Argonaut had gone from being the first minelaying submarine to being the first transport submarine. Somewhere along the line she also received the unofficial designation of SS-166 (Regular Submarine) which, though

unofficial, was painted on her hull. Calling the Argonaut, a regular submarine, was far from accurate. Assigning the Argonaut typical submarine missions would prove costly.

On 24-NOV 1943, the Argonaut, now skippered by Lieutenant Commander John R. Pierce, sailed from Pearl Harbor for the South Pacific. She was being transferred to Captain Fife's Task Force 42 in Brisbane Australia. Her job would be to land reconnaissance and raiding parties for General MacArthur in the Solomons and New Guinea area. This was a task for which she was well suited.



As if to practice for her new assignments, after dusk on December 5th the Argonaut surfaced near Ocean Island west of the Gilberts (now Banaba Island, Kiribati) and bombarded Japanese positions with her 6-inch guns. But on December 6th, she was ordered to break off her patrol to Brisbane and make for Espiritu Santo, where she arrived on December 9 and was topped off and replenished.

It was about December 27th when Lieutenant Commander Pierce received orders from Captain Fife to make not for Brisbane but for the area between Bougainville and New Britain. It was an area that was always dangerous, being so close to the Japanese bases at Rabaul and the Shortlands but at this time it was even more so.

Because while it was still bad for the Japanese on Guadalcanal, at least the Imperial Army was holding its own. Not on New Guinea. On 2-JAN 1943, after a campaign that was much longer and more costly than it should have been, Buna on the north coast of Papua finally fell to General MacArthur's forces. The Japanese 51st Division was on its way. They were too late to save Buna, but it could reinforce the Japanese fortress at Lae northwest of Buna.

On January 5, five transports – Brazil Maru, Nichiryu Maru, Clyde Maru, Chifuku Maru, and Myoko Maru – carrying the division left Simpson Harbor for Lae. They were escorted by the destroyer Maikaze and the 17th Destroyer Division with Isokaze, Urakaze, Tanikaze, and Hamakaze. The transports were very well protected and an attack would be highly dangerous.

The Navy was able to identify the convoy on January 9th. The next day, Captain Fife assigned his submarines, Grampus and Argonaut to intercept. In the words of Kent Budge's Pacific War Online Encyclopedia, the Argonaut "really had no business making a regular war patrol." However, Captain Fife deployed the slow, clumsy Argonaut.

Argonaut attacked a Japanese vessel called either Ebon Maru (American sources) or Eban Maru (Japanese sources) in the Bismarck Sea on 2-JAN 1943. Though it seems the Argonaut made a game effort, the targets were not sunk. A message was received from the Argonaut in the wee hours of 10-JAN 1943, presumably Lieutenant Commander Pierce acknowledging the intercept

order. Nothing more was ever received from the Argonaut. Before her crew left for their third war patrol, they had donated Argonaut's bell.



Nearly 20 months after her loss, the Submarine Memorial Chapel was built and dedicated on the Submarine Base in Pearl Harbor. The bell hanging in her steeple comes from Argonaut, and still rings today for services.