

# A Scorpion's Tale



## ALL HANDS SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

*"SIR: I read the item about USS Scorpion in your last issue, and found it — as I have the other material you have published on Scorpion — very interesting, since I was attached to that ship from 1908 to 1910."*

*Thus begins a letter to ALL HANDS from Charles Conner, a retired chief warrant officer. It is typical of letters we have been receiving since January 1959, when we printed our first item about the yacht which served as our station ship at Constantinople, Turkey, from 1908 until the 1920s. In fact, the response might also lead us to believe Scorpion had the largest crew in the history of the Navy—were it not for all the "I-was-there" details our letter-writers can recall.*

*Because this particular Scorpion was a colorful ship, and because she brought back the good old days for so many readers, she may have done a bit of scene stealing on the ALL HANDS stage. However, we have not forgotten that American Navymen have long sailed in ships named Scorpion — among them a submarine that fought and died in World War II and the nuclear sub, SS (N) 589, which is helping to defend the free world today.*

**T**HE OLDEST *Scorpion* within first hand recollection of Navymen or ex-Navymen now living was the fourth U. S. Navy ship to bear the name. Built in 1896 in Brooklyn, as the private yacht *Sovereign*, she had steel decks covered with selected pine, a large deck house which contained a chart room, deck salon, galley, upper fireroom, lavatory, storeroom and entrance to the engine room. Below decks in the forecabin were quarters for a crew of 36 enlisted men and 10 officers.

Aft these quarters were: The main salon in San Domingo mahogany (which contained an organ, piano and other furniture); a pantry, companion and bath; engine and boiler rooms; the owner's stateroom, decorated in ivory white and mahogany, and extending the breadth of the ship; two good-sized staterooms fitted in the same manner; an after salon, and two other staterooms fitted similarly.

All deck fittings were of Honduras mahogany and her main deck aft, which extended 100 feet from the after part of the deck house to the taffrail, was as unobstructed as a sailing yacht. She had two pole masts and carried two naphtha launches, a gig, a cutter and two dinghies.

The luxury ship was purchased by the Navy for \$300,000, renamed *Scorpion*, and taken to the Brooklyn Navy Yard for conversion. Her mainmast and fittings were entirely removed, the bowsprit cut down, and a battery of 12 guns installed. Steel plating, seven-eighths of an inch thick and eight feet wide, was fitted on the outside for the entire length of her engine and boiler rooms.

This ship, which had a maximum speed of 17.85 knots, was commissioned at the New York Navy Yard on 11 Apr 1898. She arrived at Norfolk, Va., on the first day of May and joined Commodore Schley's Flying Squadron, which included the armored cruiser *USS Brooklyn*, and the battleships *Texas* and *Massachusetts*.

**O**N THE 13th of May, 1898, the ships left Hampton Roads and steamed, by way of Key West, to help establish a blockade off Cienfuegos, Cuba. *Scorpion* was detached from that blockading station on 29



FIRST DUTY for USS *Scorpion* was with Commodore Schley's Flying Squadron shown here at Santiago.

Jun 1898 and arrived off Cape Cruz the following day to help blockade Spanish gunboats in the harbor of Manzanillo, Cuba. In the following days, *Scorpion* harassed the Spanish ships and even captured an 80-ton provisions lighter on 3 July. The crew transferred her coal, which allowed *Scorpion* to remain on station for an extra day.

After the Spanish Squadron had been destroyed at Santiago on 3 July by Admiral Sampson's Fleet, the ships of the blockading force which included *Wilmington*, *Helena*, *Scorpion*, *Hist*, *Hornet*, *Wompatuck* and *Osceola*, sailed again for Manzanillo,

The next morning *Wilmington* and *Helena* entered the northern channel, *Scorpion* and *Osceola* entered in mid-channel between two cays, while the other three vessels steamed up the south entrance.

After running one gunboat on shore, *Scorpion's* starboard five-inch guns became disabled and she was forced to back in to bring her five-inch port battery to bear on other gunboats south of the city.

In succession, another gunboat was sunk and a third set on fire and blown up. Unable to reach a fourth gunboat which lay close inshore to the city, *Scorpion* was turned, and took position abreast of this enemy. After obtaining the range with two of her six-pounders, the first shell from *Scorpion's* five-inch gun blew up the gunboat, apparently having hit the boilers.

During this action she came so close inshore that her sharpshooters attempted to pick off officers on horseback as they rode to issue orders to different shore batteries. She returned the fire of the enemy batteries as long as in range, then steamed out of the harbor to resume blockading station. In this action the blockading force destroyed five enemy gunboats, three transports and a storeship.

**S**CORPION REMAINED ON BLOCKADE duty off Cape Cruz until 3 Aug 1898, then shifted her base of operations to Guantanamo Bay. She carried dispatches between various ports of Cuba until 27 November when she put to sea from Havana for return to the New York Navy Yard on 24 Dec 1898. She was placed out of commission in that yard on

14 Jan 1899 for conversion to a gunboat. During the conversion period, her armament was reduced to two 4-inch rapid-fire guns, six 6-pounders and four 6-mm. Colt machine guns.

*Scorpion* was recommissioned on 22 Aug 1899, and left New York on 20 Sep 1899 to accompany the battleship *Kearsarge* during trial runs off the coast of Massachusetts. She returned to New York on 28 September and entered the Norfolk Navy Yard on 14 October to be fitted out for duty with the Isthmian Canal Commission.

This group was studying a possible canal route between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. With the exception of a short tour of dispatch-carrying and patrol duty between Venezuela and Curacao, Netherlands West Indies, *Scorpion* spent most of this period of commissioned time sailing with the canal group.

*Scorpion* was recommissioned for the third time on 9 Aug 1908, and she sailed for Guantanamo Bay on the 17th of August. She later visited New York City and Philadelphia and on 22 Oct 1908 left for duty as station ship at Constantinople. She arrived on 4 Dec 1908.

Shortly afterwards, *Scorpion* received word of an earthquake at Messina, Sicily. She got underway from Constantinople and arrived at Messina on 3 Jan 1909. In cooperation with the International Medical Service, her medical officer, Assistant Surgeon C. E. Rhoades, treated many of the injured and sick with the assistance of his staff on board *Scorpion*. She took seriously injured persons to hospitals at Naples on 4 and 5 January, then returned to Messina to continue treating injured earthquake victims until 8 Jan 1909.

She then resumed her duties as station ship at Constantinople until 6 February when she sailed for Naples, Italy, for repairs. While anchored in the Bay of Naples on 26 Apr 1909, an explosion rocked the nearby Italian submarine *Foca*. The officers and men of *Scorpion* were the first to reach the scene and saved many of the crewmen. Assistant Surgeon Rhoades was again heroic both at the scene of the disaster and later in the dressing station of the Royal Arsenal.

ON 15 JUL 1909 *Scorpion* left Naples to resume her duties as station ship at Constantinople. She continued to act as a ship of mercy during the following years. *Scorpion* also often carried the United States Ambassador on brief diplomatic voyages to various ports of Turkey and Greece.

Serious earthquakes occurred in Turkey on 12 Aug 1912, and *Scorpion* got underway from Constantinople the following day to give medical assistance at the Turkish ports of Sarwi, Heraclytze, Myrophyto, and Kora. She returned to her station at Constantinople on 17 Aug 1912.

When Turkey formed an alliance with Germany at the outbreak of war in Europe, *Scorpion* was requested to shift from her usual winter moorings in the harbor at Constantinople, to the Merchant Basin, Golden Horn, Constantinople. She moored there on 7 Aug 1915 and remained idle until the end of World War I.

Since the United States had not declared war against Turkey, *Scorpion* was not seized, but she was interned on 11 Apr 1917 and kept under Turkish guard until 23 Oct 1918. Her crew was not molested and was allowed liberty ashore. (This is the period which has been the subject of so many letters to the editor of ALL HANDS.)

British prisoners who had been liberated from various prisons in Turkey began to appear in Constantinople on 25 October, and during the next three days *Scorpion* took aboard and helped rehabilitate about 50 of these liberated men.

The ship remained at Constantinople after the war to serve Rear Admiral Mark L. Bristol, High Commissioner to Turkey. As the flagship of the U. S. Naval Detachment in Turkish Waters, she often transported members of various Allied relief organizations between Turkey, Greece and Italy, also landing supplies for the unfortunate people of these and other nations bordering the Mediterranean. She continued duty with the Naval Detachment in Turkish Waters until 4 Nov 1923 when she arrived at Phaleron Bay, Greece, for duty with the U. S. Naval Detachment,

Eastern Mediterranean. Thereafter her principal cruises were conducted from Naples to Ports of France, Spain, Turkey, Greece and Algeria.

*Scorpion* put to sea from Gibraltar on 16 Jun 1927 and returned to the United States. Steaming by way of the Azores and Hamilton, Bermuda, she arrived at Philadelphia on 11 Jul 1927. She was decommissioned in the Philadelphia Navy Yard on 22 October 1927 and remained in that status until her name was stricken from the Navy list on 24 Mar 1929. *Scorpion* was sold on 25 Jun 1929, to an iron and metal company in Baltimore, Md.

THIS WAS THE END of a colorful ship which operated in a colorful era. There were, however, several other U. S. Navy ships named *Scorpion*.

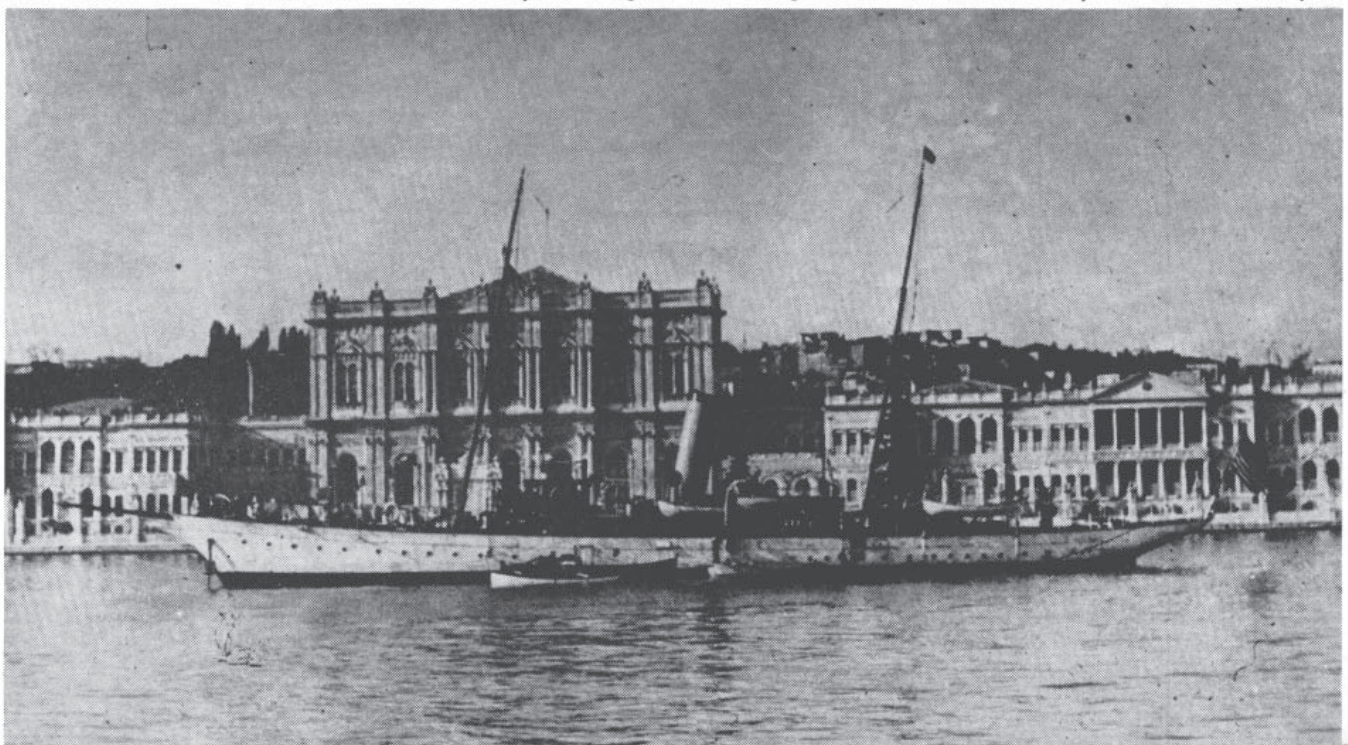
The first was a schooner which operated from 1812 to 1814 in the Washington, D. C., area. She was armed with one 18-pounder and two 12-pounders and was classed as a cutter or sloop. On 21 Aug 1814 that *Scorpion* was burned by a detail of U. S. sailors, rather than have the ship captured by the British.

*Scorpion* number two was a two-gun schooner which had a complement of 35 officers and enlisted men. She was launched in the spring of 1813 and in the summer of that year, joined Commodore Oliver H. Perry's squadron for the Battle of Lake Erie, fought on 10 Sep 1813. After the victory, which resulted in the capture of two British ships, two brigs, one schooner and a sloop, *Scorpion* operated in the Thames River in support of General William Henry Harrison's forces. Her main job was to transport ammunition and stores captured from the enemy.

After being laid up at Erie, Pa., during the ice-bound winter months of 1813-1814, *Scorpion* and another schooner, *Tigress*, moved to Lake Huron to set up a blockade of Canada's Nautawassaga River and Lake Simcoe.

The two schooners effectively cut off supplies and provisions so that by September 1814, the enemy garrison at Fort Mackinaw was threatened with starvation.

ON STATION—In December 1908 *Scorpion* began her long cruise as station ship at Constantinople.



While anchored near the shore off St. Joseph's during the evening of 3 Sep 1814, *Tigress* was surprised by a force of 100 British and Indians which had been sent out in five boats from Mackinaw to raise the blockade. Outnumbered three to one, the men of *Tigress* were soon overwhelmed by the enemy boarders. The enemy remained aboard *Tigress*, which was kept in the same position with her pennant flying. The men hid when *Scorpion* approached on 5 September to within two miles of *Tigress* to anchor for the night. At dawn on 6 September, *Tigress* ran alongside the unsuspecting *Scorpion*, and the enemy boarders rushed from their concealment to capture the small crew and hoist the British flag. Both schooners were taken into Mackinaw where their crews were imprisoned. *Scorpion* was then taken into the service of the Royal Navy as the 4-gun schooner *Confiance*.

**T**HE THIRD *Scorpion* was the former steamer *Aurora*. She was built in 1846 and purchased by the U. S. Navy for \$65,000. She had an over-all length of 152 feet, beam of 25 feet, and a depth of hold of 10 feet.

This *Scorpion* was commissioned at the New York Navy Yard on 23 Feb 1847 and put to sea on 4 Mar 1847. After repairs in the Philadelphia Navy Yard, she steamed, by way of Havana, Cuba, to join the Home Squadron in the Gulf of Mexico.

The squadron arrived at Anton Lizardo on 27 April, and on 16 Jun 1847 *Scorpion* was the flagship of Commodore Matthew C. Perry in the expedition against Tabasco. She towed *Vesuvius* and *Washington* up the Tabasco River, landed a force at Tabasco, and gave other assistance for the occupation of that city. She returned to Anton Lizardo on 24 Jul 1847 and frequently cruised from that base to Vera Cruz, Alvarado, Frontera, and Salmadina, carrying troops and provisions. In January 1847 she arrived at Laguna, where she remained until the close of the Mexican War. *Scorpion* left Laguna on 23 Jul 1848, steamed by way of Havana and Norfolk, and arrived at the Brooklyn Navy Yard on 11 Aug 1848. She was decommissioned ten days later and sold at public auction on 18 Oct 1848 for \$14,500.

**T**HE FOURTH *Scorpion* was, of course, the one already discussed. *Scorpion* number four was also

the last U. S. Navy surface ship of that name to be commissioned.

The fifth *Scorpion* was a submarine (SS 278) and was not named for the other four *Scorpions*. This *Scorpion* was named for a fish that is found off the coast of California.

*Scorpion* wasted little time between her keel laying and the war. Her keel was laid on 20 Mar 1942 at Portsmouth, N. H. She was launched on 20 July 1942, commissioned on 1 Oct 1942, left on her shake-down cruise on 15 Jan 1943, and left Pearl Harbor for her first war patrol off the coast of Honshu, Japan, on 5 Apr 1943.

After planting 22 mines about 30 miles south of Naka Minato, *Scorpion* commenced her first search for enemy shipping. A little before noon on 20 Apr 1943, she torpedoed and sank the 1934-ton converted gunboat *Meiji Maru No. 1*.

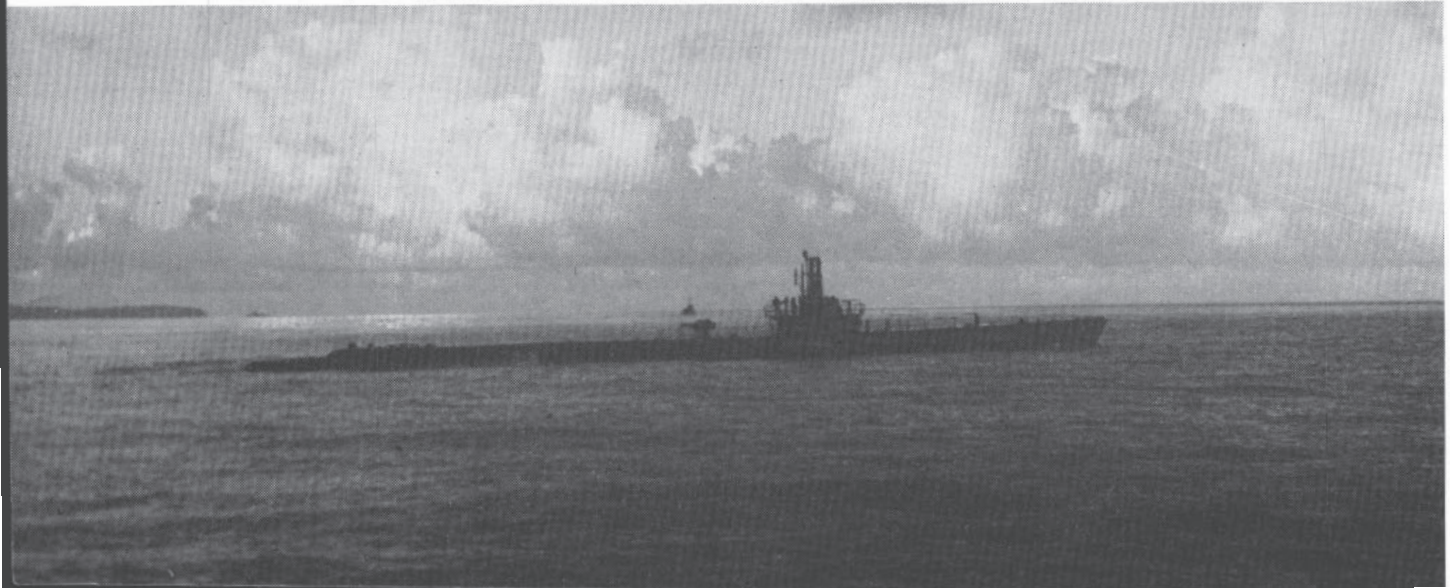
She riddled a sampan with three-inch gunfire the next day and on 23 April, intercepted two freighters under escort of a destroyer. *Scorpion* made a high-speed submerged approach in the early morning moonlight, fired three torpedoes at the lead freighter and managed to fire another at the second freighter.

The escorting destroyer headed her way, but *Scorpion* maneuvered clear of a string of 13 depth charges and upped periscope to observe the first target running toward the horizon and the second freighter almost dead in the water and down by the stern. *Scorpion* started to give chase, but was discouraged when the enemy destroyer headed in at high speed to break off this attack.

Four days later *Scorpion* found a convoy of four freighters steaming in columns of two with an escort in front center. She fired a spread of four torpedoes at the lead freighter in one column, then shifted attack to the second ship in line. As she swept the sea with her periscope, two torpedoes exploded just forward and aft of the stack of the lead freighter, followed by two more hits on the enemy's bow and stern.

A moment later the escorting destroyer appeared "to rise out of the water" and headed for *Scorpion*. A deft maneuver put *Scorpion* clear of eight depth charges which exploded harmlessly in the water some distance away.

**SAME NAME**—*Scorpion* number five, a sub in WW II, disappeared while on fourth patrol in Pacific.



**E**ARLY THE NEXT MORNING, *Scorpion* sank the 6380-ton passenger-cargo ship *Yuzan Maru*, and then battle-surfaced and sank a 100-ton patrol vessel with gunfire. On 30 April *Scorpion* closed a 600-ton patrol vessel.

As she passed broadside at 800 yards, her three-inch gun jammed, but she raked the patrol vessel with her other guns. *Scorpion* drew out of range to clear the three-inch gun while the enemy released a heavy white smoke marker for aircraft and drew off to the south. *Scorpion* moved in at flank speed for another try, and her first shot hit the enemy's stern, raising a big smoke cloud. All guns were firing as she closed to about 400 yards.

By this time the target had stopped dead in the water with her forward gun out of action. From several points along the bulwarks, however, the flash of machine gun fire was observed, and it persisted in spite of *Scorpion's* rapid fire.

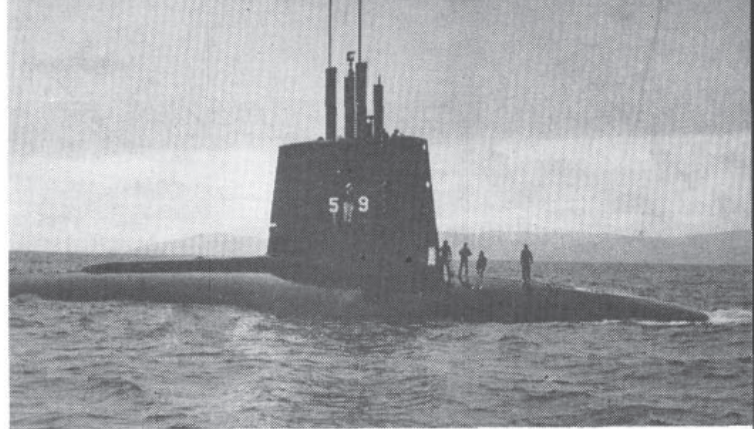
During this action LCDR Reginald Marbury Raymond, making the patrol as prospective commanding officer, was fatally wounded by an enemy bullet as he fired a Browning automatic rifle from *Scorpion's* bridge railing. The enemy ship refused to sink after this second attack, although riddled with gunfire. *Scorpion* then spun to bows on, backed to 500-yard range, and fired her last remaining torpedo — which disintegrated the enemy in a tremendous explosion. Seven minutes later her radar picked up an enemy plane and she made a quick dive as two aerial bombs exploded in the sea at a considerable distance away. She ended her patrol at Pearl Harbor on 8 May 1943.

**T**WENTY-ONE DAYS LATER *Scorpion* left Pearl Harbor for her second war patrol. During the morning of 3 July she went to battle stations when a contact developed into a convoy of five freighters with destroyer escort. She fired salvos of five and three torpedoes with divergent spread and heard five resulting explosions. The 3890-ton cargo ship *Azan Maru* and the 6112-ton passenger-cargo ship *Kokuryu Maru* were sunk.

*Scorpion* didn't wait around to watch the fire. There were three "policemen" on the beam ready to attack. *Scorpion* started down after the last shot, and received seven close depth charges as she stopped screws and settled to the bottom to avoid stirring up a mud trail.

Two minutes later a chain or cable was dragged over her hull, followed by close depth charges. The drag passed over her hull again as she moved ahead to deeper water with radical course changes, enduring four more close depth charge attacks before evading the enemy.

**O**N 8 NOV 1943 *Scorpion* was running up the Marianas group from Agrihan to Farallon de Pajaros Islands. She sighted smoke and commenced an end-around to submerge in the track ahead of what appeared to be a 3000-ton steamer. Three torpedoes were fired at the enemy, but they passed directly under the shallow draft of the "target," a Q-boat which turned sharply with the whine of high-speed diesel engines and dropped 11 depth charges, eight of which were awfully close.



TODAY—USS *Scorpion*, 55(N) 589, sails off Scotland.

(A Q-boat, to all outward appearances, is a humble, unarmed ship plodding across the ocean — but appearances can be deceiving. In this case, behind collapsible bulwarks and canvas screens were concealed heavy guns, depth charges and even torpedo tubes. Down below, watertight compartments were loaded with timbers designed to keep the vessel afloat despite repeated torpedoings.)

*Scorpion* moved on.

Near daylight on 13 Nov 1943 *Scorpion* made her third contact, a convoy of one freighter and a large tanker, screened by three escorts. Despite the threat of the three escorts which patrolled ahead on the port beam and on the port quarter of the tanker, *Scorpion* attacked and scored one torpedo hit.

With one escort only 150 yards off her port quarter she went deep to evade a string of nine depth charges. About two hours later she came up for a look just in time to see all the escorts attempting to locate her with cross bearings. The tanker was now dead in the water and down by the stern. About this time one escort reversed course and headed for *Scorpion*. The sub quickly cleared the area for reconnaissance of Saipan Island.

**T**HE FIFTH *Scorpion* was lost on her fourth war patrol. Commander M. G. Schmidt took her to sea from the Submarine Base at Pearl Harbor on 29 Dec 1943. After fueling at Midway, she cleared that harbor to patrol the China Coast.

*Scorpion* was to depart her patrol area no later than sunset on 12 Feb 1944 and stop at Midway for fuel before return to Pearl Harbor for refit. On the afternoon of 4 Jan 1944 she reported that one man had sustained a simple fracture of the upper arm and requested rendezvous with USS *Herring* (SS 233) which was then in her vicinity and returning from patrol.

*Herring* made rendezvous with *Scorpion* on the afternoon of 5 Jan 1944, but heavy seas made it impossible to transfer the injured man to *Herring* for return to Midway. *Scorpion* reported the case under control before midnight and *Herring* set course for Midway. *Scorpion* was not seen or heard from again. She was presumed lost on 6 Mar 1944, and Japanese records examined after the close of the war furnished no clue to her fate. It is possible that she struck one of the mines which were strung in an extremely thin barrier across the Yellow Sea.

*These were the Navy's five Scorpions. Fine ships with a fine, historic name. If the foregoing account strikes a nostalgic chord or recalls some facts that we have failed to mention, let us hear from you.*