SS-81: a Sub’s Story

By Thomas Neil Knowles
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Among the photographs historian Wright Langley collected over the years was one taken during World War II of a submarine that had been hoisted upon the cradle of the marine railway at the Key West Naval Station (page 1). The photographer is unknown and there was no notation with the negative explaining why that particular picture was taken, although the impressive sight of a mass of steel 186 feet long and as tall as a three story building on the ways would be reason enough. The sub appeared to be of World War I vintage and to have seen many years of service. There was nothing to suggest that this boat was of any historic significance; however, some research scraped away the rust and barnacles of time and revealed her hidden story. Incredibly, this submarine had played a role in saving the aviation arm of the U.S. Navy.

The boat was one of twenty coastal and harbor defense submarines of the R-1 class authorized by the Congress in 1916. The keel was laid down at a shipyard in Quincy, Massachusetts in October 1917 with launching following a year later. In March 1919, seven months before the armistice ending World War I was signed, she was commissioned the USS R-4. In July 1920 the Navy began assigning hull numbers and the submarine was designated SS-81. The R-1 class subs did not have names; SS-81 was often referred to as USS R-4 (SS-81) or simply as “R-4”.

SS-81 carried a crew of two officers and 27 enlisted men. The hull was constructed of riveted steel plates and had been tested to a depth of 200 feet, although in later years the accumulated stress on the rivets restricted the sub to dives of 90 feet. The eight, 21” torpedoes carried aboard could be fired from four torpedo tubes mounted in the bow. The narrow deck running forward from the conning tower bulged out

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Soceity News
By Tom & Lynda Hambright

Monica Faraldo speaking to the Society at the Library in January. Photo credit: Ed Little.

The Society continues with its lectures and field trips. During November, we had a presentation by Commander George Sherman and his exploits in World War II and his part in recovering the Japanese code that played an important part in our victory in the Pacific. In January Monica Fardalo shared her findings from an archaeology excavation at the Audubon house. In February Tom gave a presentation on the Spanish America War and the boys of 1898.

During the 50th anniversary of World War Two we wrote articles about the war and the effect on the Florida Keys. During this time we searched for the records that could be found. One of the documents we could not find was the War Diary of the Gulf Sea Frontier. Chief Warrant Officer Anthony Atwood, who had the article on the Battleship Main Plot, in the last issue, found the microfilm of the diary and we were able to get a copy for the Monroe County Library. The seventeen rolls of microfilm are now available in the Florida History Room. The Diary begins in April 1942. On page three is a reprint of the introduction to the diary that has a summary of events, from the start of the war to April and a summary of the forces then available to the command. We will have other parts of the Diary in future issues of the Journal.

The Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal is now on the internet. The Key West Art and Historical Society has agreed to carry the Journal. The address is “http://www.kwahs.com”. On the home page look for the USS Shark as seen on our masthead.

Two other web-sites of interest are the Monroe County Library site that has photos and the origin of keys names. The address is “http://www.mile-markers.org.” The other site has the Sanborn Maps. The maps were for fire insurance purposes. They show to the footprint of the building in Key West on the date of the maps and we use them to help determine the age of buildings. The Key West maps online are 1889, 1892, 1899 and 1912. The site is “http://web.uflib.ufl.edu/digital/collections/Ephemeralcities/.

New Member
Cape Air, Key West Airport; Ray & Shirley Henderson, Albury, VT; Diana Latham, Mineola, NY; Brenda Trovato, Hyannis, MA; Schooner Western Union; Washington Street Inn, Key West.

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Production: Tom Hambright

Letters and articles are welcome. Please write to: Editor, Florida Keys Sea Heritage Journal, KWMHS, P.O. Box 695, Key West, FL 33041.

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Gulf Sea Frontier War Diary

Following is the introduction to Gulf Sea Frontier War Diary written in March 1942.

Headquarter Commander Gulf Sea Frontier Key West, Florida

War Diary
March 31, 1942

Subj: Gulf Sea Frontier Force

Introduction

The Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier, as Task Force Commander of the Gulf Sea Frontier Force will commence keeping a daily War Diary on April 1, 1942, as required by the Chief of Naval Operations and Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet joint letter Serial #291 of February 22, 1942.

Since the Gulf Sea Frontier Force is composed of a number of aircraft and surface vessels operating from assigned bases and covering assigned areas at sea adjacent to these bases, it is not practical to include position reports in the Diary as called for in paragraph 1(d) of the General Instructions for preparation of daily War Diaries. Weather, meteorological and sea information will not be included except when it is such as to directly effect operations.

A brief summary of the formation, organization, composition, and operation of the Gulf Sea Frontier Force from the beginning of the War to date follows as a part of this Introduction.

Upon the outbreak of War, December 7, 1941, the present Gulf Sea Frontier was a part of the Southern Naval Coastal Frontier. The Commander, Southern Naval Coastal Frontier was the Commandant, Sixth Naval District, located at Navy Yard, Charleston, South Carolina. The forces available to him for formation of the Southern Naval Coastal Frontier Force were the Coast Guard and Inshore Patrol forces, comprising the Naval Local Defense Force of the Sixth, Seventh and Eight Naval District, The Gulf Patrol, composed of the vessels of the Sound School, based at Key West, a Task Group of the Atlantic Fleet, was operating under order to be ready to take action against enemy vessels in Florida Straits and Yucatan Channels and approaches thereto. The Gulf Patrol was available to the Commander, Southern Naval Coastal Frontier in emergencies. The senior operation plan in effect was U.S. Atlantic fleet Operation Plan 7G-41. This Operation Plan was revised and superseded by U.S. Atlantic Fleet Operation Plan 6-41, dated December 20, 1941, which plan continued in effect until superseded by U.S. Atlantic Fleet Operation Plan No. 1-42, dated March 4, 1942. The U.S. Atlantic Fleet Operation Plan No. 1-42 is the senior operation plan in effect on April 1, 1942.

On January 4, 1942, the Commander of the Gulf Patrol was transferred from Commander, Southern Naval Coastal Frontier (Com SIX) to Assistant Commandant, Seventh Naval District - Captain R.S. Crenshaw, located at Key West, Florida. The Seventh Naval District Local Defense Force was already organized and functioning under the Assistant Commandant.

On February 1, 1942, the Headquarters of the Commandant Seventh Naval District was moved from Navy Yard, Charleston, S.C. to Naval Station, Key West, Florida and Captain Crenshaw named Acting Commandant, Seventh Naval District.

On February 4, 1942, Nassau and Duval Counties in northeast Florida were transferred from the Seventh Naval District to the Sixth Naval district. The Sixth Naval District was transferred from the Southern to North Atlantic Naval Coastal Frontier, leaving the Coastal Frontier of the Seventh and Eight Naval Districts comprising the new Southern Naval Coastal Frontier. Commandant, Seventh

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Naval District was ordered as Commander, Southern Naval Coastal Frontier Vice Commandant, Sixth Naval District.

On February 6, 1942, the name of the Southern Naval Coastal Frontier was changed to Gulf Sea Frontier, and the Southern Naval Coastal Frontier Force was changed to Gulf Sea Frontier Force. The North, Eastern, and Southern boundaries of the Gulf Sea Frontier were fixed as follows: Between the Gulf and Eastern Sea Frontiers from the boundary between Nassau and St. Johns Counties above St. Augustine, a straight line Southeast to a point in Lat. 25 W. and Long. 72 W. Between Gulf and Caribbean Frontiers from a point in Lat. 25 N. and Long. 72 W. To a point on the north coast of Cuba in approximate Lat. 22-47 N. and Long. 79-47 W. Thence westerly around shore of Cuba, easterly along the southern coast of Cuba to Cienfuegos Light Lat. 22-02 N. and Long. 80-27 W., placing entire land area of Cuba, Isle of Pines and other coastal island of Cuba in Caribbean Sea Frontier. Thence South from Cienfuegos Light to point in Lat. 18-05 N. Long. 80-27 W. Between Gulf and Panama Sea Frontiers from point in Lat. 18-05 N. Long. 80-27 W. Westerly to boundary between Mexico and British Honduras in approximate Lat. 18-05 N. Long. 87-45 W. The above boundaries place all of the Gulf of Mexico, the Yucatan Channel, The Florida Straits and some of the Bahamian waters in the Gulf Sea Frontier.

On February 8, 1942, at 2132, GCT, the U.S.S. Biddle, while escorting the Army transports Evangeline and Florida in company with the U.S.S. Breckinridge, made sound contact with what was believed to be an Axis submarine in Lat. 20-35 N. Long. 83-39 W. Three depth charge attacks were made. After the third attack sound contact was lost. No positive results were obtained. No debris or oil was brought to the surface. The Breckinridge turned over the convoy to the relieving escorts from Caribbean Sea Frontier and joined the Biddle with orders to continue search and destroy the submarine. At 1819, GCT, February 9, 1942, good sound contact was made in Lat. 20-29 N. Long. 84-14 W., distance thirty-three miles bearing 260 from contact position previous day. Three depth charge attacks were made before sound contact was again lost. No positive results were obtained. No debris or oil was sighted. Searching continued in the area until 1300 GCT, February 10, 1942, without further sound contacts being made. Detailed action report submitted by the Commanding Officer of the Biddle to Headquarters, Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Fleet, Readiness Section, Navy Department dated February 14, 1942.

On February 15, 1942, the composition and status of the Gulf Sea Frontier Force was as follows:


All vessels this group assigned primary duty with Sound School. Available to Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier Force in emergency to use as Search and Striking force in Florida Straits and Yucatan Channel.

2. Seventh Naval District Patrol

U.S. CGC Nike, U.S. CGC Nemesis, Carnelian (YP-19), Emerald (PYC-1). The Nike and Nemesis were operating against enemy submarines in the Eastern Sea Frontier, therefore, not available to Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier Force. The Carnelian and Emerald were assigned to duty with the District Local Defense Force for normal operations, being available to Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier Force in any emergency.

(3) The Eight Naval District Patrol

U.S. CGC Woodbury and U.S. CGC Boutwell. The Boutwell was undergoing annual overhaul. The Woodbury was operating with the Eastern Frontier Force. When available, both these vessels are to be assigned to duty with Eight Naval District Local Defense Force, being available to Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier Force in emergencies.

(4) Aircraft

Fleet Air Detachment, Naval Air Station, Key West, Florida. Fleet Air Detachment, Naval Air Station, Panama River, Florida. The above two air squadrons are primarily Fleet Training units and available to Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier Force only in emergencies or when the mission is carried out as routine training.

The aircraft of the Seventh Naval District Local Defense Force consisted of five Coast Guard amphibian observation planes at Coast Guard Air Base, Miami and five Coast Guard planes same type at Coast Guard Air Base, St. Petersburg with planes available from Naval Air Station, Miami, in emergencies or when assigned mission can be carried out by routine training flights. The aircraft of Eight Naval District Local Defense Force consisted of five Coast Guard amphibian observation planes located at Coast Guard Air Base, Biloxi, and patrol planes from Naval Air Station, Pensacola and Naval Air Station, Corpus Christi in emergencies or when assigned mission could be accomplished by
routine training flights.

The Army stationed one observation squadron at each of the following locations for assisting the Navy in patrolling the sea lanes and approaches to strategic coastal areas: West Palm Beach, Miami, and Valparaiso, Florida; New Orleans, Louisiana; and Houston, Texas. Bomber groups were located at West Palm Beach and Miami. The Army planes established a regular patrol schedule and were available upon request to the Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier Force, for search and striking force.

(5) The surface vessels regularly assigned to the Local Defense forces of both Seventh Naval District and Eighth Naval District are not equipped with sound equipment and therefore are not suitable for efficient submarine search. These vessels are organized for patrol of sea lanes and other tasks assigned the Local Defense Forces.

The first damage and loss of life and property resulting from enemy submarine operations in the Gulf Sea Frontier was in the Seventh Naval District off east coast of Florida in the Cape Canaveral Area, when on February 19, 1942, at 1351 EWT, the SS Pan Massachusetts was sunk in Lat. 28-06 N. Long. 80 W., with two more sinking on night of twenty-first and twenty-second when the tankers Cities Service Empire and Republic were torpedoed in the Jupiter-Palm Beach Area. This area was searched continuously by the following ships: USCG Triton, USCG Vigilant, Carnelian (PY-19), and Emerald (PYC-1), and all available planes at the command of Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier. Planes were available from Fleet Air Detachment, Banana River; Naval Air Station, Miami; Observation Squadron at Morrison Field; and Army Bomber Detachment, Miami. On the night of the twenty-second and twenty-third, the SS WD Anderson was torpedoed and sunk in Lat. 26-58 N, Long. 79-52 W. At 0115 EWT, February 23, 1942, a Navy type SOC Dive Bomber from Naval Air Station, Miami, Lt. Ontrosm piloting, sighted by moonlight and attacked a submarine on the surface fifteen miles bearing 050 true from Jupiter Light, scoring what the pilot believed to be a hit. Results unknown. This was apparently the submarine which sank the WD Anderson as attacks or sinking were made in or near this area by this submarine. Evaluated as reasonably certain that his submarine was destroyed by the above Navy bomber.

On February 25, 1942, the Army increased its bomber force at Miami to four type B-25 and located now force of two B-25 and one B-18 bombers at Morrison Field, West Palm Beach. Also Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier was granted authority to request air assistance when needed from Naval Air Station, Jacksonville.

At 1100 EWT, on February 28, 1942, the keeper at American Shoals Light, hearing gunfire and seeing a merchant ship a few miles away turn and list, believed it was a submarine attack and so reported it. A PBY-5 plane from Squadron VP-81, Naval Air Station, Key West, was sent to investigate. The USCG Triton and Submarine R-11 were conducting sound school operations in that area. The R-11 was surfaced and returned to port. The Triton

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proceeded to area of reported submarine attack and began searching at noon. At 1325, EWT, the plane, Lt. Crowley, USNR, piloting, then being on course 120, bearing 150 distant fifteen miles from American Shoals Light, sighted what appeared to be either a periscope of top of conning tower. Float lights were dropped and pilot circled for attack. After five minutes search, pilot sighted a submerged object appearing to be a submarine. Port blister lookout reported seeing a “whale” on port side. Two float lights were dropped and bombing run made. Two depth charges were dropped. Second officer again reported definitely recognizing the object as a submarine. Contact reports were broadcast and surface vessels appeared on the scene about twenty minutes later. At 1340 EWT, the Triton, with PC-449 near by and Destroyer Hamilton approaching from westward, made sound contact. After fifteen minutes contact was lost. About fifteen minutes later the Hamilton made sound contact and delivered a depth charge attack. A patch of oil fifty by twenty-five yards was brought up by second charge. Sound contact was lost. A scouting line with six mile front was then formed with Hamilton, Triton, Pandora, PC-449, PC-450, and PC-453 in line course 180 true. At 1502 EWT, when only a few hundred yards from scene of Hamilton attack, the Triton made a contact close aboard and delivered an attack with seven depth charges. Results negative. The Triton made sound contact again at 1512 EWT, and delivered another attack dropping six depth charges. Where the starboard Y-gun exploded an unusual agitation was observed with quantities of air and foam coming up. In a few seconds a large black object projecting two feet out of water and tapering twenty feet back to water arose in the center of the area, and immediately slipped back under water. Personnel on board asserted that the part of the submarine seen was curved oblong part which came out of the water at an angle and disappeared in the same manner. The conning tower was not seen. Very little oil was seen. Evaluated by the Commanding Officers of Triton and Hamilton as a submarine probably sunk. The scouting line was taken thought the contact area twice without further contact. The scouting line continued on probable escape course and 1705 EWT, another contact was made by the Triton. The contacts were separated by twenty-one miles and two hours and twenty minutes. At 1730, Triton delivered an attack with last three of her depth charges. The Hamilton supported the Triton attack by crossing her stern and dropping three more depth charges to give a total of six charges in the attack. Results negative. Sound contact was lost. The scouting line reformed and course reversed. An oil patch five hundred yards long and one hundred yards wide was observed. Shortly after passing the oil patch a firm sound contact was made by Hamilton, range four hundred fifty yards - submarine moving slowly. Hamilton made attack dropping three depth charges upon rack jammed. Soon thereafter the PC-449 made contact in the same position and attacked. No additional oil or debris observed. Area was swept with no further contacts. Evaluated as a second submarine badly damaged or sunk. Detailed action reports submitted by Commanding Officers of Triton and Hamilton with Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier’s endorsements thereon, dated March 5, 1942, were forwarded to Commander-in-Chief of the U.S. Fleet.

At 1639 EWT, March 5, 1942, the SS O.S. Knudson was torpedoed and sunk in Lat. 26-13 N. Long. 75-50 W., east of Bahamas. Planes searched area. No contact.

On March 6, 1942, the Gulf Patrol (Atlantic Fleet Task Group 6.2) became the Gulf Sea Frontier Group 26.2 with vessels assigned by Atlantic Fleet, forming Task Unit 26.2.1 and known as Service Squadron (Servron) Nine. Vessels assigned were Desdiv 66 less two ships (until relieved by Damlgren and Noa). Damlgren and Noa upon reporting, Sub-Chaser Division 31, Coral, Subdiv 112, USCGC Galatea, Pandora, Thetis, Triton.

On March 8, 1942, the USCGC Nike and Nemesis returned to duty in the Gulf Sea Frontier from temporary duty in the Eastern Sea Frontier. They were assigned to the local Defense Forces, Seventh Naval District for duty, to be available for operation with Gulf Sea Frontier Force in emergency or whenever needed.

On March 10, 1942, five scouting seaplanes type OS2N arrived Naval Air Station, Banana River, for formation of Squadron VS1-07. This squadron was commissioned on March 12, 1942, and assigned to the Seventh Naval District Local Defense Force.

At 1640 EWT, March 13, 1942, the SS Datonian was torpedoed and sunk at Lat. 26-37 N. Long. 74-55 W., east of the Bahamas.

On March 12 and 13, 1942, three merchant vessels, the SS Texan, the SS Colabee, and the SS Olga were sunk off northeast coast of Cuba in vicinity Lat. 21-28 N. Long. 76-28 W., which is in Caribbean Sea Frontier. Plane and surface vessels were concentrated on search of Old Bahama, Santeren, and Nicholas Channels, but no contacts were made.

On March 15, 1942, the SS Athel
Queen, was torpedoed and shelled Lat. 26-50 N. Long. 75-40 W., east of the Bahamas. Army bombers ordered to search area and destroy submarine. No contact was made.

On March 17, 1942, planes from Banana River searched Providence Channels for possible submarine reported sighted in Lat. 25 N. Long. 83-15 W. Army bombers from Miami and Navy PBYs from Key West searched area. No contact made.

On March 20, 1942, at 1600 EWT, submarine was sighted in Lat. 29-10 N. Long. 80-45 N. Patrol vessels Nike, Nemesis, and Carnelian plus planes from Squadron VS1-07 searched area. No contact.

At 0127 EWT, March 21, 1942, in Lat. 29 N. Long. 80-30 W., a submarine fired two torpedoes at the SS Female - both missed. Planes and patrol vessels ordered to scene of attack, but failed to make any enemy contact.

At 2140 EWT, March 22 1942, in Lat. 27-28 N. Long. 80-08 W., a submarine fired a torpedo at the SS Pan Amaco but missed her. Twenty minutes later the submarine surface alongside the SS Pan Amaco but an attack was evaded. Planes and patrol vessels ordered to search the area.

At 1145 EWT, on March 23, 1942, a plane from Squadron VS1-07, Banana River sighted an oil slick in Lat. 28-18 N. Long. 80-08 W., moving on course 050. Plane made attack bringing up oil but slick continued moving on slowly on course 050. At 1515 the Nemesis made sound contest in Lat. 28-20 N. Long. 80-05 W. At 1517 Nemesis delivered an attack dropping three depth charges. Results unknown. At 1549 EWT, contact again made on the submarine which was leaving a definite oil slick heading 0 true and about one-half mile from where depth charge attack was delivered. Another attack was delivered and buoy put over to mark position. At 1615, a good echo contact was made again three hundred yards from the buoy but object was not moving. At 1618 an attack was delivered, dropping three depth charges directly over the object bringing up oil and white smoke or gas. The object remained stationary, and additional charges brought up oil. A radar equipped plane made night search of this area in support of Nemesis without any contacts.

Analysis of this oil showed it to be fuel oil and not Diesel oil. Therefore it is possible that the last object attacked was the wreck of the Pan Massachusetts. However, the early stages of this operation clearly indicated a moving target. Since no further enemy submarine operations took place in or near this area for sixteen days it is reasonably certain that this submarine was badly damaged or sunk by the Nemesis and planes of Squadron VS1-07. Detailed reports of this section were forwarded to the Chief of Naval Operations by Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier on April 16, 1942.

On March 25, 1942, in accordance with Cominch dispatch, the Army planes assigned to protection of shipping and operation over the sea against enemy submarines or enemy seaborne activities and located as follows: 106th Observation Squadron, Jacksonville; 97th Observation Squadron, Miami; 113th Observation Squadron, New Orleans; 115th Observation Squadron, Houston; Army bomber detachment of five 5-25s, Jacksonville, and bomber detachment of five B-25s at Miami, were placed under the tactical command of Commander, Gulf Sea Frontier. For efficiency and coordination in practical operations the 113th and 115th Observation Squadrons were placed under the tactical command of the Commandant, Eight Naval District.

R.S. Crenshaw, Captain, U.S. Navy.
to provide a platform for a 3\"/50 caliber deck gun.

With fuel tanks that could hold 18,800 gallons, the submarine could travel 3,700 miles and return to base. Twin screws connected to two, 1,200 HP diesel engines, could push the boat at a top speed of 13.5 knots on the surface, but the normal cruising speed was 10 knots. Underwater with batteries fully charged, the two 934 HP electric engines could propel the sub at 10.5 knots for a short time or at slower speeds for longer periods.

Entering the active fleet at the end of World War I, SS-81 was too old for use in combat zones in World War II and never saw hostile action. In 1921, the sub departed Norfolk, Virginia and joined the Pacific Fleet. From 1923 to 1930 SS-81 was stationed at Pearl Harbor. There in August 1925 orders were received for SS-81 to search for a missing plane; it was a mission that would earn the boat and its crew a place in history.

The mid 1920s were turbulent times for the Navy. Since 1919 General Billy Mitchell had been lobbying to combine the aviation units of the Navy and Army into an air force independent of other branches of the military. By 1924, Mitchell had stepped up his efforts; it appeared to the Navy, which was strongly opposed to losing its Bureau of Aeronautics (BUAERO), that he was on the verge of achieving his objective. This prompted BUAERO to develop a mission intended to impressively demonstrate to the public in general and to the Congress in particular the Navy’s unique aviation capabilities. BUAERO decided to fly seaplanes nonstop from California to Hawaii, a flight of more than 2000 miles over the Pacific Ocean. No one had made such a flight before (Lindbergh would not cross the Atlantic until 1927) and it would be a spectacular accomplishment.

Special planes were built and hand-picked crews were assembled. Originally the plan called for three Navy planes to make the trip, but on August 30, 1925 only two of
The aircraft were ready to begin the journey. Five hours into the flight, one of the planes had to abort and was picked up by one of the guard ships stationed at intervals along the planned route. The other seaplane, PNP-1, continued on laboring against stronger than anticipated headwinds and straying off the planned route due to erroneous bearings provided by one of the guard ships. Finally, 25 hours and 23 minutes after leaving San Francisco, PN9-1 ran out of fuel and was forced to land in the open sea, far north of its intended flight path. The seaplane with a crew of five was adrift 450 miles from Hawaii, her radio transmitter disabled and her location unknown to the guard ships.

The officer in command of the flight, Commander John Rodgers, was aboard the missing biplane. His father and grandfather had served in the Navy with great distinction and were well-respected. A massive search was initiated using ships as well as aircraft from the carrier USS Langley. Submarines from Pearl Harbor including SS-81 were also deployed. The failure to complete the transpacific flight was an embarrassment for BUAERO; for the Navy, failure to recover the downed plane and the loss of 5 men including the son/grandson of Naval heros would be a public relations disaster. As days passed, Rodgers and his crew realized they would probably not be found. With food and drinking water running out, they rigged a sail using a portion of the fabric covering the wing and sailed the plane toward Hawaii.

Ten days after their forced landing, barely alive, they were within sight of the island of Kauai when Lt. Donald Osborn, Jr. and his crew on the SS-81 spotted the seaplane and took it in tow to a safe harbor at Kauai. Had SS-81 not seen and rescued the disabled plane, there was a good probability that PN9-1 would have been either destroyed on the reefs around Kauai or swept by the current past the Hawaiian Islands and lost in the vast reaches of the Pacific.

Much to the chagrin of the Navy and no doubt to the delight of General Mitchell, the flight, search, and eventual rescue of the downed plane and its crew was front page news across the Nation for almost two weeks. It was only overshadowed by the crash on September 3, 1925 of the USS Shenandoah, the Navy’s huge rigid airship. The Shenandoah had begun a publicity tour of seven state fairs when she was torn apart in a storm over Ohio. Fourteen of her

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crew were killed; miraculously, 29 of their shipmates survived.

The two naval aviation debacles occurring within days of each other sent tremors through BUAERO. Mitchell could not resist capitalizing on the unfortunate incidents; he went public with aggressive demands for a unified and independent aviation branch of the military. His manner was so brash that he was eventually court-martialed.

Dwight Messimer in his book, “No Margin For Error,” credits the failed flight to Hawaii, the destruction of the airship, and the resulting exploitation of these events by General Mitchell with generating so much dissension in the armed forces and political upheaval that President Coolidge was forced to deal with and resolve the military aviation issue much sooner and more decisively than may otherwise have been the case. The outcome was that the Navy was allowed to keep its aviation arm.

Meanwhile, Commander Rodgers and the other men aboard the PN9-1 all recovered from their ordeal. The seaplane, although damaged from rough seas and the cannibalization required to convert it to a sailing vessel, was repaired and flew again. Almost a year later in a different plane, Rodgers was killed in a crash while making a routine flight to Philadelphia.

In 1927, SS-81 was involved in another attempt to fly non-stop to Hawaii, this time as one of the guard ships stationed along the route. After Lindbergh successfully flew across the Atlantic in May of that year, James Dole, who had
made a fortune in the Hawaiian pineapple industry, offered prizes of $25,000 for the first and $10,000 for the second non-military planes to make the trip from San Francisco to Hawaii. On June 8, 1927, two army fliers had successfully made the crossing in a military plane, but what was to become known as the Dole Race was for civilian planes. Out of 16 entries, only 8 planes attempted takeoff on August 16th and of those only 4 were able to begin the trip. Two planes completed the journey and won the prizes. The two other planes were never heard from again. This time, neither the SS-81 nor any of the other guard ships were able to rescue the five fliers who vanished during the race.

In 1941, before the attack on Pearl Harbor, SS-81 along with six other R-1 class subs was stationed at Key West to patrol the Florida Straits and to act as training boats for the Fleet Sonar School and Navy pilots. Other R-1 class boats were stationed at Bermuda. During the war years, some changed duty stations, but SS-81 remained attached to the Key West squadron. The aging subs performed their duty, but not without mishap. USS R-12 (SS-89) floundered off Key West on June 12, 1943 taking the lives of 42 men.

Although SS-81 had rescued PN9-1 and had been involved in an event that was instrumental in the perpetuation of U. S. Naval aviation, it was not enough to save her from being scrapped. On June 4, 1945 she departed Key West for the last time and was escorted by a sub chaser to the Philadelphia Naval Shipyard. Within eight weeks the old sub had been decommissioned and retired from the Navy list. In January 1946, the vessel was sold for scrap to the North American Smelting Company.

Special thanks to Joan Langley of the Wright Langley Archives for permission to use the photograph credited to that source. The Wright Langley Archives may be contacted by email at info@langleypress.com or by telephone at (305) 294-3156.

Recommended Additional Reading
All web sites listed below were active as of November 2004.


Tom Knowles is a fourth generation Conch whose ancestors (Knowles and Archers) migrated from the Bahamas in the 1800s. He holds a bachelors degree in mechanical engineering from Georgia Tech and a masters in business administration from Florida State University, where he recently retired after 32 years managing the operation and construction of FSU’s facilities. Although he resides in Tallahassee, his roots remain firmly attached to the Island City, and he is currently working on a historical book about the Labor Day hurricane of 1935. He is the brother of Joan Langley of Key West.
Marooning
From Key West to Cedar Keys

moveable bracketed pieces of wood. The center one fitting on the center of the forward combing; the others on the side combings, one foot from the after part of the cockpit. The after pieces have an inch hole in each, and the center one terminates in a rounded end, which fits into the holes of the side pieces. By this arrangement I secure a substantial frame elevated at the after part and center one foot above the combing. Over this frame I place a canvas tarpaulin, which is fastened to each side of the boat, and through the medium of which I dispense with the necessity of shipping seas. I provided a 10-ounce duck tarpaulin twelve feet long, which was thrown over the boom at nights and fastened on each side of the boat; the front of the tent was closed with two half aprons attached to each side, and fastened in the center and to screw eyes in the deck. When my tent was in position and boom in place supported by truss and throat halliards, I had six feet of room between boom and floor of cockpit.

In the after part of the boat under deck is a locker measuring two feet fore and aft. In front of this was a moveable box arrangement, furnishing a locker and seat on each side, as high as under surface of deck; in the center was a depressed portion to enable me to reach after-locker. The after-locker furnished stowage for boat compass, ammunition, clothing and other plunder. The box on one side received pots and pans, the other, with central portion, enabled me to carry firewood for two days’ consumption. On one side of the cockpit under the deck I had a rack for gun and rifle, and on opposite side a similar arrangement for rods and maps. Below and on face of racks I fastened boards eight inches wide, inside of which was stowage for many things. I tacked a width of canvas to the inner face of the combing on each aide forming curtains which protected contents from rain or spray.

Cruising among mangrove islands and marshy places, makes it difficult at times to find a suitable camping place, and I always carry a stove, and cook and sleep on my boat. I have a two-hole Etna stove, and carry a light wooden box in which it fits snugly. When not in use the box is placed abaft the trunk, furnishing a seat, and if required, moveable ballast. When wanted for cooking, the lid of the box is placed on the after part of the boat, and the stove on it. The box furnished stowage for stove, pipe, frying-pan, etc.

In addition to the impedimenta mentioned I carried a barrel of pilot bread packed in starch boxes, three five-gallon kegs for fresh water; 16 pounds breakfast bacon; 18 pounds lard, 6 pounds ground coffee in tin box, 8 pounds sugar, 6 cans condensed milk, half bushel Irish potatoes, 1 peck onions, 1 gallon of kerosene oil in bottles (stowed under floor), salt, pepper, matches, pots, plates, cups, knives, ax, shovel, pail, boat compass, tobacco, nails, screws, tacks, saw, palm, needles, gimblet, hammer, oyster knife, charts, tackle, ammunition, mattress, blankets, pillow, and other plunder. By economizing space and careful stowage I had ample room to work my boat. When my canvas tent was erected I would stow stove-box and water-kegs on deck, which would give me a clear cock pit and two feet under deck on each side of the trunk. I occupied the space to the right of the central line, and my shipmate the other side. In addition, I carried a grains, crab-net and oars on deck, and a sixteen-foot light
These citizens are remarkable for cigar making, fishing and sponging. The occupations of the residents are 12,000 inhabitants. The principal West is, a pleasant city of about 12,000 inhabitants. The principal West on Sunday at 9 a.m. Key Henderson a short voyage on the Gulf we would extend their trip beyond the beaten track, and enjoy the balmy air of and the steamships, the Keys and Key West two staunch vessels are new, staunch and sea-worthy, have ample power, and are vessels are ten feet wide, covered with a large arched trellis twenty feet long and twenty-five miles from starting point. With the exception of Becachica channel, over the entire distance the water was shallow, varying from two to six feet. At many places bars will obstruct the movements of a boat, but by keeping a good lookout passes will be discovered and no difficulty will be experienced in navigating a boat of light draft. At bedtime weather looked threatening, and I felt in my old barometric bones that I would have to tight an old-fashioned nor'-easter on the morrow. But, as I had weathered many such on many oceans, I turned in and slept as becometh a marooner.

Tuesday I was up at 5 a.m., cooked breakfast, stowed plunder, and was ready to start at daylight. During the night wind had increased to a gale; with severe rain squalls; but, as there appeared nothing very attractive about a mangrove island, I resolved upon attempting the passage over the Bay of Florida. Up anchor and left the protection of the island; wind blowing a gale; heavy sea with quantum suf of rain. Beat until 1 p.m.; made about six miles, and as I was not disposed to spend the night at sea with Old Aaron, who knew nothing about sailing a boat, I put about and anchored under the lee of Hurricane Key, filled, plunder stowed, and the crew, consisting of “Al Fresco” and Old Aaron, were under way for the main land sixty miles distant. At this point we cannot refrain from referring to the kindness extended to “Al Fresco” by Captain Philbrich, Dr Harris, the editor of the Key of the Gulf, Captain Smart, and others of the good peoples of the beautiful island of Key West. The day was pleasant and warm, the wind dead ahead. We left the westerly keys on the port hand, and at night anchored under the lee of Hurricane Key, twenty-five miles from starting point. With the exception of Becachica channel, over the entire distance the water was shallow, varying from two to six feet. At many places bars will obstruct the movements of a boat, but by keeping a good lookout passes will be discovered and no difficulty will be experienced in navigating a boat of light draft. At bedtime weather looked threatening, and I felt in my old barometric bones that I would have to tight an old-fashioned nor'-easter on the morrow. But, as I had weathered many such on many oceans, I turned in and slept as becometh a marooner.

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(Continued on page 14)
Wednesday, repeated the dose of early rising; wind blowing a gale; heavy rain squalls; high, choppy sea; rapid tide running at right angles, with wind piling up the water irregularly, and rendering the motions of a small boat anything but pleasant or enjoyable. Left anchorage at daylight and attempted to cross the bay; weather more threatening, equally with heavy rain; every wave broke over the noble little craft, but she proved to be able and sea-worthy. At 11 a.m. I had made about six miles against a head wind and sea, and I deemed it to beat a retreat, and came to anchor, under Bay Honda Key, thirty miles from Cape Sable, my objective point. After coming to an anchor, I cooked dinner, and before stowing stove, threw ashes and cinders overboard, and several cat-fish showed themselves on the surface to ascertain what was the matter. Taking the hint, I rigged a pole and commenced fishing. This species is more slender than those of northern waters; the skin is very white and the fins long; spines long, slender and barbed. I captured several before one came in contact with the knuckle of index finger of right hand, and one of the spines entered about half an inch. I instantly removed the unpleasant appendage, and an intense burning pain succeeded. In a very short time my hand commenced swelling, and I suffered much from pain. Old Aaron had several plugs of knock-me-down tobacco, and I resolved upon applying a sailor’s remedy. I carefully separated a number of the leaves from a plug, moistened them in salt water, and applied to the hand. I passed a restless night in consequence of pain. In the morning my hand was swollen and stiff, and several days elapsed before the swelling disappeared.

As I write, two months after the reception of the injury, the knuckle is tender to the touch. From all I can learn, they are more poisonous than their relations in northern waters. Memo.- When you catch a Gulf cat-fish hit him on the head with a shillelah before removing him from the hook.

The Florida Keys; extend from the Tortugas to the Miami river. They vary in size from small to very large islands. Some are covered with mangrove bushes, and others with pines and cabbage palms. During severe hurricanes nearly all are subject to overflow. Under the mangroves at some of the islands snapper, grouper and large craw-fish can be captured. Under ordinary circumstances, a cruise among these keys is pleasant. With the exception of Bay Honda channel, the water is shallow, and by working to the northward and eastward until lower Matacombe Key is reached no difficulty will be experienced in reaching the main land fifteen miles east of Cape Sable. By taking this course a harbor can be made at any time under one of the keys. An accurate survey has been made of this region by the government, and five large charts have been published, the expense of the set being $7.50. These charts show all the islands, surfs, channels and bars. My object was to reach Cape Sable by the shortest road, and I resolved not to take the longest way round.

Thursday-Up early, breakfast cooked, and dishes polished with waste paper. From Bay Honda Key to Cape Sable, thirty miles; gale still blowing, and dead ahead with heavy sea; occasional showers of rain; no lee or protection unless I made for Sandy Key, eight miles to the west of my course; hand swollen and somewhat painful. Becoming annoyed at my back-track proceedings, I resolved upon making the mainland. Daylight saw the anchor on deck, and the Doni to Bay Honda channel. The ball opened and dancing commenced. We lacked the music of a brass band, but the whistling of the wind against the halliards supplied the want, and the Doni danced a fandango. I shall refrain from minutely describing the motions of the boat and crew, and how the brine was distributed. After the channel was crossed, the wind hauled more to the eastward, the rain ceased, and Old Sol winked at us occasionally. Sea was heavy, but we were at last enabled to lug a cruise to Cape Sable, under the lee of which we arrived at half-past one, thankful that the humpy surface of Bay Honda was in the rear. With a free sheet we bore to the northward, within a stome-throw of the shore.

From the best information obtainable, at a point about twenty-two miles east of Cape Sable, and southwest of Key Largo, will be found the Hallalahchee River, which is reported as being navigable for small boats, and by which White Water Bay can be reached at its easterly end. I found one party who had attempted to enter it, but the tide was low, and his boat grounded on the mud flats. This whole section is a terra incognito, and is worthy of the notice of boasters, and the time...
may come when Al. Fresco will unravel the mystery that surrounds it. I have questioned many old coasters, fishermen and spongers, regarding the lower portion of the peninsula, and I find that they are ignorant as regards everything inside of the coast line. They are acquainted with the headlands, a few islands and channels, but the rest is a blank.

Correctly speaking, there are three capes-East, Middle and North Cape. At East Cape Sable a stake will be noticed; twenty yards inland from this, an earthwork, the remains of Fort Poinsett, and fifty yards back of this a well with good water. About half a mile to the westward of the middle cape is a clump of about one dozen large trees, and thirty yards from the beach a well of excellent water. If mariners cannot find the wells, potable water can be obtained by digging a well two or three feet deep, to a low place a hundred or more yards from the beach. At one time a noble grove of royal palms existed in this locality, but all were destroyed by the hurricane of '74. One stump, about fifteen feet high, is still standing as a sentinel over the departed glory of what was once a truly royal grove. The middle cape is easily distinguished by the existence of a small prairie (described by Vignolles in 1823 as the “Yamasee Old Field”), in the front a few mangrove bushes, and in the rear some cabbage palms. From information received, a lagoon exists within half a mile of the beach, emptying into Cape Sable Creek. During the winter months this is a favorite resort for ducks, and the surrounding country is stocked with deer and turkey. Unless the wind is from southward and westward a landing can be made on the beach, as there is no swell or undertow as on the Atlantic. About a month before my visit Dr. Harris’ men were proceeding from Rogers River to Key West, and noticed a man on the cape making signals. They took him on board, and found that he was a Dutchman, and had been three days without food. It was ascertained that he had, purchased a yawl-boat at Key West, and had started for Cedar Keys. He was caught in a gale, and boat was wrecked on the Cape. He remarked that he had been hunting for a farm-house for three days, but could not find one. A few years since a Key Wester located on Cape Sable and engaged in the culture of cabbages and pineapples. He prospered, but one day a hurricane came along and washed his family and improvements inland. For the benefit of cruisers, I may remark that aerial whirligigs never occur during the winter months, and the only cause of complaint will be too frequent calms.

To the north of the middle cape I sighted and entered Cape Sable (a navigable stream) with the intention of camping landed on a sand bank, but such landing was made a few weeks too soon, for I was greeted by a cloud of sand flies, and myriads of insects, which immediately instituted phebotomizing operations. When entering the creek a small schooner belonging to Dr. R. Harris, of Key West was seen working to the northward, and I followed. She entered and anchored for the night in Shark River, and I made fast to her stern. The entrance to Shark River can be easily found, for on the southern side there is a projecting point, densely covered with tall mangroves. In this connection I have a shark yarn to spin, but as it is too fishy for this issue I will keep it for the next.

A1. Fresco.
The USS R-4 (SS-81) entering the marine railway on October 22, 1941, the first Naval vessel to be docked on the new facility. Photo credit: Monroe County Library.

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