



## **REPORT ON THE LOSS OF HM SUBMARINE STRATAGEM**

by Lieutenant D C Douglas

(After release from Japanese hands in August 1945)

HM Submarine *Stratagem* sailed from Trincomalee on 10th November 1944 for patrol off the port of Malacca. Passage, until well down into the entrance of the Strait of Malacca, was uneventful, the enemy not being sighted in any form. On 16th November, whilst proceeding on the surface, a junk was sighted. This was investigated and found to be of no importance. However, further passage by daylight was carried out submerged. Many junks of varying sizes were sighted in the vicinity of Malacca. Our presence was possibly suspected, as indicated by the activities of a Japanese Zero floatplane carrying out search patrols in the area.

The 17th and 18th November were spent off the port, with little of interest happening. A thorough search was carried out for the pier, which was reported by Intelligence to be in existence and which was thought to be in use by the enemy as a loading pier for bauxite ore. No traces of this pier could be found. During the night 18th/19th the submarine proceeded south and daylight found us in a position about 30 miles south of the port.

At approximately 15.00 on 19th November, smoke was sighted to the southward. This soon proved to be coming from a convoy of five Japanese ships. The convoy, escorted by three small destroyers, all appeared to be in

ballast and were steaming in line ahead on a steady course. The escorts were disposed one ahead and one on either side of the convoy.

At about 15.30 torpedoes were fired with 'impact only' pistols, from Nos. 1, 2 and 3 tubes. The range at the time of firing was 2,500 yards. The Commanding Officer - Lieutenant G R Pelly, Royal Navy - had chosen the second ship in the line for his target and stated that it was a cargo vessel of about 2,000 tons. This, as I later learned from the Japanese at Singapore was probably incorrect. The ship was stated to be a tanker. (*The ship was not a tanker; she was the 1,945-ton cargo vessel Nichinan Maru and Pelly was right and his estimate of tonnage was accurate.*) One hit was observed well forward on the target. The destroyers then commenced a wild and ineffective counter-attack, dropping about 20 charges. The submarine was taken deep and turned through 180°. While charges were still being dropped, the submarine was brought to periscope depth. The captain reported that the target was still afloat, although stopped and very much down by the bow. The external (stern) tube was then fired at a range of 1,000 yards. This torpedo was observed to hit the target which immediately split in two and sank. The counter-attack continued but was still ineffective and we were able to get clear of the area.

During the hours of darkness the submarine was taken to a position north of Malacca. The captain, changing his mind about going north to the junk area, returned to the port of Malacca on 21st November. Daylight on the 22nd found us in a position four miles off the shore. When I was relieved of the watch at 08.30, the submarine was in a position as ordered by Lieutenant Pelly, approximately three miles south-west of the port.

The report of activities during the forenoon on the 22nd is compiled from information received from Leading Seaman Gibbs. This rating was on watch in the control room during the forenoon.

The aforementioned reconnaissance plane appears to have been very active in our area during the four hours preceding our depth-charging and the captain, who spent the greater part of the watch on the periscope, reported

the presence of a Japanese destroyer patrolling up and down the coast close inshore.

At approximately 12.10 I was awakened by the order "Diving Stations." As soon as I arrived in the tube space the order "Shut off for depth-charging" was passed. This was carried out and a report sent to the control room. About four minutes elapsed without any further orders coming through - no one in the fore ends knowing what was taking place - then the thrash of the Japanese destroyer could be heard very loud as she passed overhead. Almost immediately a depth-charge exploded somewhere extremely close under us, lifting the stern and causing us to hit bottom hard. This charge extinguished the greater part of the lighting although one or two of the emergency lights held. About five seconds later a second charge exploded, as far as I could calculate, right amidships, extinguishing the remaining lights. By this time I had a torch in operation and could see water flooding through the door at the after end of the torpedo stowage compartment. Immediately I gave the order "Shut water-tight doors" and turned to make sure that the three ratings in the tube space were brought out of that compartment before the door was shut. By the time this door was shut, the water was flooding very much faster and had risen above the deck boards in the torpedo stowage compartment. It was now above our knees. It was flooding through the after door so fast that the ratings were unable to shut this door. The position of the stop (retaining door in 'open' position) on this water-tight door was such that to remove it one had to stand in the doorway as the port side of the door was blocked by stores. Hence, due to the furious rate of flooding, this stop could not be removed.

According to Able Seaman Westwood, who came forward from the control room, the captain gave the order for main ballast to be blown as soon as he found that the ship was being flooded. The valves on the panel were opened without effect.

In what appeared to be an incredibly short time, I was keeping above water by clinging on to a hammock which was slung from the deckhead. The crew in my compartment began to sing but I ordered this to stop and told the crew to

get out and put on DSEA sets. The first I managed to reach had a defective valve on the oxygen bottle and I could not move it. The second was in working order and I put this over the head of one of the older ratings who was panicking and in tears due to the pressure effect on his eyes. The pressure in the boat at the time was immense and the chlorine content in the air considerable. The water all round us must have been full of oil fuel as we were all drenched with it, although I did not notice it at the time. The air could be heard to be escaping through the hull forward and the water was still rising fast. At this time Leading Seaman Gibbs was in the escape hatch trying to slack back the clips. He shouted to me that he could not move the third clip. Speaking was nearly impossible due to the pressure. I swung up into the trunk alongside Gibbs and tried to remove the clip. After what seemed like an hour, and what I suppose was really a minute, I managed to move the clip by hammering it with my fist. By this time there was no hope of using the escape trunk as the water was already up to the metal combing which houses the twill trunking. I took off the last clip and as I did so, the hatch commenced to open. Immediately this clip was free the hatch was blown open and Leading Seaman Gibbs was shot out so suddenly that I cannot remember him going. The hatch slammed shut again and hit me on the top of my head but immediately blew open again and I was shot out in a bubble of air.

Ten of the men in the compartment, which contained 14 at the time, are known to have left the submarine alive although only eight were picked up. The ship's cook was later seen to be floating, face downwards, on the surface but was obviously drowned. Another rating was seen, while in the submarine, to have on a DSEA set and apparently working it correctly; although he was observed to leave the boat he was not seen on the surface. The Japanese destroyer had dropped two more charges after we were hit but these were not so close and did not seem to harm us although they probably accelerated the flooding.

Throughout the above experiences the behaviour of the crew in my compartment was magnificent. I should especially like to mention the ship's cook (Leading Cook Weatherhead) who kept up a cheerful narrative about the

wonderful fruit cake which he had recently cooked and who showed great bravery and coolness throughout the dreadful experiences in the flooded submarine. This rating was responsible for the singing and by his behaviour greatly assisted in preventing panic. It is with deepest regret that I have to report that this extremely brave rating failed to survive the ascent to the surface.

The following is a report of experiences after escaping from the submarine. The destroyer circled us for about three-quarters of an hour, dropping a lifebelt and some baulks of timber. All of us were suffering from 'bends' and I do not know about the ratings, but I myself was scared 'pea green' at the sight of the Japanese ensign flying from their masthead. This was more or less justified as we later found out. However, I managed to overcome this somewhat by swimming around and seeing to the ratings. Able Seaman Westwood was just on the verge of sinking. His eyes were full of oil and he could hardly keep himself afloat. I fixed him into the lifebelt and then went to the assistance of AB Phillips. He was in a similar plight but a puff of air into his DSEA set kept his head above water and he was all right, although he was almost delirious with shock.

The Japanese eventually lowered a cutter and picked us up, clubbing us as they hauled us into the boat. Then we were each compelled to pull an oar. This was practically impossible due to 'bends' but we reached the destroyer assisted by their clouts and unpleasantness. By this time another destroyer of a similar type had arrived on the scene. The Japanese were certain there was another submarine in the vicinity and got furious with us when we denied this. On being hauled on board we were bound, blindfolded and beaten. We were not given food at any time whilst on board the destroyer and spent the night on the top of the hatch which was about three feet square, all bound together. We were not clothed and the night was extremely cold. The pain from the 'bends' was now at its worst and every time someone murmured, the guards would come and hit us over the head with their clubs. We were being taken to Singapore where we arrived at about 21.00 on 23rd November. No food was given us and we were locked in separate cells, still bound and blindfolded. We

remained in this condition for 28 days although I was allowed to remove my bonds after about ten days.

Our first meal arrived on the evening of the 24th and consisted of a small rice ball. When I stated that I did not like rice, I was informed that I should soon learn to like it. Little did I know at the time how true this statement was to prove. However, I eagerly devoured my first rice ball after returning from six hours' extensive interrogation by a Japanese captain. My first interrogation had taken place at about midnight on the night of my arriving in the base. At this I was in very bad shape and refused to give them any information except that permitted by international law. However, I was informed by the interpreter that I had better give some sort of answer otherwise I would be shot. I later brought to mind a lecture which I had attended in England on the subject of being taken prisoners, where the lecturer had told us that the Japanese would never recognise international law and that they would probably use all manner of torture for extracting information.

Daily interrogation, varying from two to six hours at a time, continued, all manner of Japanese individuals being employed for the purpose. The ratings were also being taken away for interrogation although not for such long periods. I was greatly assisted in misinforming my captors by the Japanese interpreter. This individual had no pro-Japanese tendencies whatsoever. He was born, educated and had lived in England all his life prior to his coming to Japan in 1940. He had been educated at Kingston Grammar School and was born of an English mother. He had been brought to Japan by his father, against his mother's will, in 1940, had been unable to return before the Pearl Harbour episode and had been conscripted into the Japanese Navy. Being employed on short wave radio, he was able to bring me the BBC news each night and in this manner I was able to keep up with world affairs. He also took messages to my shipmates, brought me cigarettes and sweets etc and kept me well informed as to how the others were being interrogated. Later on I always knew what to expect before I went in front of my questioners and also if they had any idea of the answers to their questions.

After about a week I was interrogated about every third day or so, the Japanese being particularly interested in codes and radar. However, at every questioning, both in Singapore and in Japan, I denied any knowledge of these subjects - stating that I was the Torpedo Officer and that these subjects did not concern me - and to my relief, managed to get away with this answer. I found that as long as one gave them some sort of answer, regardless of its true nature, they were satisfied. On one occasion, some time in March 1945 whilst in Japan, I was nearly baffled in this respect by the Japanese producing a copy (photographic copy of the very torn and burned original) of one page of the 'Special S/M Secret Cypher.' However, I looked at it in blank amazement for most of one afternoon and the nine men who had come all the way from Tokyo (at a time when transport was unobtainable) walked away disappointed. On another occasion I was badly shaken by the Japanese producing copies of one of our back signal logs. They could not understand the abbreviations and apart from gaining knowledge of some of the flotilla's names, this was of little value to them.

After a month of starvation diet in the cells at Singapore, Leading Seaman Gibbs, AB Robinson and myself were all flown to Japan, bound and blindfolded throughout the trip. We were allowed to remove our blindfolds while in the aircraft. Leaving Singapore on 19th December, we called at Saigon, Shanghai and some other port in the south of Japan before reaching Tokyo on the 23rd. We were then taken to 'OFUNA' POW Camp. In spite of being assured by the Japanese that we should be recognised as fully qualified POWs, on arrival in Tokyo we were never treated as such, we were never registered and were imprisoned in a camp, the existence of which remained unknown to the Red Cross throughout the whole time we were there. Hence we were never reported as Prisoners of War. The treatment in this camp was particularly brutal and at times almost beyond endurance. Our food - nine parts barley and one part rice, with very watery vegetable soups - was given us three times daily and varied very much in quantity. It was never sufficient to keep us in health and very soon we contracted beriberi and other illnesses. We were not permitted the use of writing material, razors, books (although we

received a supply of these in April) or anything which might have helped our morale to hold body and soul together. In the warmer months we lacked soap. The camp became lousy and we spent the greater part of the day removing foreign bodies from our bodies and clothing.

My interrogation still continued frequently in 'OFUNA.' On arrival there I was questioned most days and, as the weeks went by, this dropped off to once or twice a week. Being a regular naval officer I was supposed to be able to answer all the questions they put to me. At this stage in the interrogations they were getting short of questions and I never knew what to expect next. Sometimes it was a question about the RAF or the Royal Navy or it might be about England's political outlook. In fact it appeared that any question which cropped up inside their stupid heads was put to me. It was very noticeable towards the latter months of the war, from the questions, that the Japanese were putting out peace feelers. They expected me to be able to give them an answer to these. It was quite obvious to me then that if the Japanese were willing to waste their time (and I had plenty of time in which to entertain them) on such ridiculous subjects, they must have abandoned all hopes of victory.

The worst time of our captivity was during the winter months, when we were given only one pair of poor quality rubber gym shoes and clothed in ragged cotton Japanese uniforms. We nearly all contracted frostbite which, in my case, did not heal until two days after I was liberated. The Japanese stated this to be the coldest winter for many years and we experienced the heaviest snowfalls that Japan had had in 40 years.

In April 1945 Able Seaman Robinson was drafted to 'OMORI' Camp in Tokyo. This was known to be a registered camp, so we felt that there was a possibility of news reaching home through this rating. However, this later proved not to be the case as, even in this camp, Robinson was not registered.

Some time, I think during the month of March, the Japanese informed me that they had sunk HM Submarine *Porpoise* in the Malacca Strait north of Sumatra, when she had been attempting to carry commando troops to



Singapore. *(The Japanese apparently linked the official announcement of Porpoise being missing from patrol - January 1945 - with her activities in a Special Operation when she landed a party on Merapas Island - south-east of Singapore - in September 1944. The Japanese captured a number of this party.)* I had hoped, as they were so sure of the submarine's name, that there might have been some survivors. However, no one appeared in the camp, but I put this down to a possible lack of transport.

The Red Cross personnel reached the camp on 26th August 1945, after hearing of its existence for the first time through POWs at 'OMORI' Camp, Tokyo. They were absolutely enraged by the conditions in the camp and ordered drastic changes to take place. At the conference, which I attended with Commander Houston USN, as representative of the British, we were able to inform the Red Cross personnel of the greater part of the life in the camp and after we had conducted them on a tour of inspection, they gave orders to the effect that all the sick prisoners were to be moved to Shinagawa POW hospital immediately.

Gibbs and myself, therefore, left this camp on the following day, 27th August, for the hospital where we received excellent treatment from British (POW) doctors. We were liberated by the American Navy on the 29th and taken on board the Hospital Ship *Benevolence*. We were both suffering from beriberi and malnutrition, I being 47 lbs under weight and Leading Seaman Gibbs in a similar condition. During our captivity my weight dropped to as low as 114 lbs.

I should like to report that in spite of the fact that in this prison camp there was no distinction between officers and men, the two ratings with me conducted themselves, through all these very hard and trying times, in a manner which was a credit to the service and an example to all our Allies in the camp with us, who were in a majority of about 20 to 1.

*(Kindly submitted by COFEPOW member Michael Mills)*

**People in story:**

Terry McAlinden, Francis John McAlinden

**Location of story:**

Straits of Malacca

**Background to story:**

Royal Navy

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Title: Our Frank.

Story submitted by Terry McAlinden on behalf of Leading Seaman Francis John McAlinden.

Name of unit: HM Submarine Stratagem, Royal Navy.

Location: Straits of Malacca.

My brother Frank, a lad from Salford, was imbued with a spirit of adventure, excited by the promises of life and looking forward to a career at sea. Soon promoted to Leading Seaman, he was based at Plymouth where he met and married his young wife Margaret. With a baby on the way, he transferred to the submarine service where the pay was better and he could afford to send more money home. It was then that he joined the ill-fated crew of HM Submarine Stratagem.

I was based at Uckfield in Sussex, a sergeant in the South Lancashire Regiment. Coming on leave to my parents' home in Salford, I was met by a neighbour, a friend of the family, who told me the bad news. Our Frank had been reported "Missing presumed killed". I found my mother in a state of shock, a kind of dead-eyed disbelief. For the next three months, she rarely spoke, and the rest of her life was tinged with a sadness that had not been there before. Dad was different. He knew life had to go on and, though every bit as heartbroken as my mother, he did his best to hold the family together. Eventually I discovered that Frank's sub the Stratagem had sailed to Trincomalee on the 10th of November, 1944, with orders to patrol in the vicinity of the port of Malacca. On the 18th, the Stratagem attacked and sank a Japanese cargo ship the 2000-ton Nichinan Maru. On the 22nd, a Japanese aircraft spotted the Stratagem and directed a destroyer to where it had dived. Just after midday on the 22nd, the destroyer attacked, the first depth charge causing the Stratagem's bow to strike the bottom. The submarine was plunged into darkness and the forward area began to flood. Attempts to close

the watertight door to the forward compartment failed and the crew were forced to make their escape. Ten men are known to have left the submarine alive, but Frank was not one of them. One man drowned on his way to the surface, one was unaccounted for, and eight were picked up by the Japanese and taken to Singapore. Three were transferred to Japan where, as they had been in Singapore, they were subject to constant interrogation, severe beatings and ill-treatment, forced to exist on a starvation diet until they were rescued by the Red Cross and taken to a hospital at Shinagawa. These three survived the war. It is known that the remaining five, despite the daily beatings and dreadful conditions, were alive in December 1944. There is no official record of how these men died but they are known to have all died on the same day, suggesting that they were executed.

Our Frank didn't live to see his newborn son, but in view of what happened to the survivors - the torture, the beatings, the starvation at the hands of the Japanese - there may be some small comfort in the knowledge that he must have been in the forward compartment and did not survive the initial blast.

18 July 2005

Tel 01625 574848

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[www.forceszsurvivors](http://www.forceszsurvivors)

**HM Submarine  
 STRATAGEM**

Donald Cameron	Douglas	Lt Diving & Torpedo Off	POW L	
John Henry	Frankham	L St	P/KX 91545 Age 26	22 Nov 1944
<b>Reginald Charles</b>	<b>Howlett</b>	<b>St 1C</b>	<b>D/KX164938 Age 20</b>	<b>31 Dec 1944</b>
Thomas	McCauley	P O St	P/K 65360 Age 39	22 Nov 1944
Michael	Mills			
Clifford Raymond	Pelly DSC	Lt Cmdr CO	KIA	22 Nov 1944
Francis John James	Phillips	A B	D/JX420937 Age 19	31 Dec 1944
Stanley Herbert	Ritchens	A B	D/JX148278 Age 24	31 Dec 1944
Peter Jack	Webb	A B	P/JX382419 Age 21	31 Dec 1944
Arthur Leonard	Westwood	A B	P/JX220335 Age 24	31 Dec 1944

