

USS *Tang* (SS-306)



USS Tang (SS-306) off Mare Island Navy Yard, December 1943

Named for: Acanthuridae are the family of surgeon fishes, tangs, and unicorn fishes. The family includes about 86 extant species of marine fish living in tropical seas, usually around coral reefs. Many of the species are brightly colored and popular in aquaria.



Ordered: 15 December 1941

Builder: Mare Island Shipyard

Keel: 15 January 1943

Launched: 17 August 1943

Commissioned: 15 October 1943

Stricken: 8 February 1945

Fate: Sunk by own torpedo off China in the Taiwan Strait, 25 October 1944

General Characteristics

Class and type: *Balao*-class diesel-electric submarine

Displacement: 1,470 long tons (1,490 t) surfaced, 2,040 long tons (2,070 t) submerged

Length: 311 ft 10 in, **Beam:** 27 ft 4 in, **Draft:** 16 ft 10 in

Propulsion:

4 × Fairbanks-Morse Model 38D8-1/8 9-cylinder opposed-piston diesel engines driving electrical generators

2 × 126-cell *Sargo* batteries

4 × high-speed Elliott electric motors with reduction gears

2 × propellers

5,400 shp (4.0 MW) surfaced

2,740 shp (2.04 MW) submerged

Speed: 20.25 kn (23.30 mph) surfaced 8.75 kn (10.07 mph) submerged

Range: 11,000 nmi (13,000 mi surfaced at 10 kn (12 mph)

Endurance: 48 hours at 2 kn (2.3 mph submerged, 75 days on patrol.

Test Depth: 400 ft but dived below 600 ft.

Compliment: 10 officers, 68 enlisted

Armament: 10 21-inch torpedo tubes, 6 forward, 4 aft

1 5-inch 25 caliber deck gun

Bofors 40mm and Oerlikon 20mm cannon

USS *Tang* (SS-306) was a *Balao*-class submarine of World War II, the first ship of the United States Navy to bear the name *Tang*. She was built and launched in 1943, serving until being sunk by her own torpedo off China in the Taiwan Strait on 24 October 1944.

In her short career in the Pacific War, *Tang* sank 33 ships totaling 116,454 tons. Commander Richard O'Kane received the Medal of Honor for her last two engagements (23 and 24 October 1944).

Tang was sunk during the last engagement by a circular run of her final torpedo, going down in 180 ft of water. 78 men were lost, and the nine survivors were picked up by a Japanese frigate and taken prisoner of war. This was the only known time that a Momsen lung was used to escape a sunken submarine.

Construction



Original invitation for Tang's commissioning ceremony

The contract to build USS *Tang* was awarded to Mare Island Naval Shipyard on 15 December 1941, and her keel was laid down on 15 January 1943. She was launched on 17 August sponsored by Mrs. Alix M. Pitre, wife of Captain Antonio S. Pitre, Director of Research at the Mare Island Naval Shipyard, and commissioned on 15 October 1943 with Lieutenant Commander Richard O'Kane, former executive officer of *Wahoo*, in command, and delivered to the Navy on 30 November 1943.

Tang completed fitting out at Mare Island and moved south to San Diego for 18 days of training before sailing for Hawaii. She arrived at Pearl Harbor on 8 January 1944 and conducted two more weeks of exercises in preparation for combat.

First War Patrol

Tang departed Pearl Harbor on 22 January 1944 to begin her first war patrol, destined for the Caroline Islands-Mariana Islands area. On the morning of 17 February, she sighted a convoy of two freighters, five smaller ships, and their escort. The submarine tracked the convoy, plotted its course, and then prepared to attack. An escort suddenly appeared at a range of 7,000 yds and closing. *Tang* went deep and received five depth charges before the escort departed. Unscathed, she returned to periscope depth and resumed the attack. The range on the nearest freighter closed to 1,500 yd (1,400 m), and *Tang* fired a spread of four torpedoes. Three hit, and *Gyoten Maru* (6,800 tons) sank by the stern. The submarine cleared the area by running deep and then attempted to get ahead of the convoy for a dawn attack, but the remaining freighter passed out of range, protected by aircraft.

During the night of 22 February, *Tang* made a surface attack on a convoy of three cargo ships and two escorts. She tracked the Japanese ships, through rain squalls which made radar almost useless, for 30 minutes before attaining a firing position, on the surface, 1,500 yds off the port bow of a freighter. A spread of four torpedoes hit *Fukuyama Maru* (3,600 tons) from bow to stern, and the enemy ship disintegrated. Early the next morning, *Tang* made another approach on the convoy. The escort of the lead ship, the 6,800 *Tonya Mashimo Maru*, moved from its covering position on the port bow, and the submarine slipped into it and fired four more torpedoes. The first hit the stern of the merchantman, the second just aft of the stack; and the third just forward of the bridge, producing a terrific secondary explosion. The ship was "twisted, lifted from the water", and began spouting flames as she sank.

On the morning of 24 February, *Tang* sighted a tanker, a freighter, and a destroyer. Rain squalls hampered her as she attempted to attain a good firing position, so she tracked the ships until after nightfall, then made a surface attack. She launched four torpedoes and scored three hits which sank the *Tatutaki Maru*-class freighter. The two remaining ships commenced firing in all directions, and *Tang* submerged to begin evasive action. She shadowed the enemy until morning and then closed the tanker for a submerged attack from extremely close range, just 500 yds, barely enough to allow her torpedoes to arm. Additional lookouts had been posted on the target's deck and, when the spread of torpedoes from *Tang* struck her, they were hurled into the air with other debris from the ship. *Echizen Maru* sank in four minutes as *Tang* went deep and rigged for the depth charge attack that followed. During this evasion, a water leak developed in the forward torpedo room, and *Tang* exceeded her depth gauge maximum reading of 612 feet. Fortunately, the crew was able to get the submarine back under control and eventually return to the surface. (Postwar, Joint Army-Navy Assessment Committee (JANAC) denied credit for the tanker seen to explode.)

Tang contacted a convoy consisting of a freighter, transport, and four escorts on the evening of 26 February. She maneuvered into position to attack the wildly zigzagging transport and fired her last four torpedoes and believed she missed; JANAC credited her with sinking *Choko Maru*, a 1794-ton cargo ship. Having expended all 24 of her torpedoes and scored 16 hits, the submarine arrived at Midway for refit.

Second War Patrol



USS Tang rescuing airmen off Truk in May 1944

Tang's second patrol began on 16 March and took her to waters around the Palau Islands, to Davao Gulf, and to the approaches to Truk. She made five surface contacts, but she had no chance to make any attacks. She was then assigned to lifeguard duty near Truk. *Tang* rescued 22 downed airmen, including some rescued by John Burns' Vought OS2U Kingfisher, and took them to Hawaii at the end of the patrol.

Third War Patrol

Tang departed Pearl Harbor on 8 June and stalked enemy shipping in the East China Sea and Yellow Sea areas. On 24 June, southwest of Kagoshima, the submarine contacted a convoy of six large ships guarded by 16 escorts. *Tang* closed for a surface attack and fired a spread of three torpedoes at one of the ships and then fired a similar spread at a second target. Explosions followed, and *Tang* reported two ships sunk. However, postwar examination of Japanese records revealed by the Japanese government show that two passenger-cargo ships and two freighters were sunk. The ships must have overlapped, and the torpedo spread must have hit and sunk two victims in addition to their intended targets. Those sunk – *Tamahoko Maru*, *Tainan Maru*, *Nasusan Maru*, and *Kennichi Maru* – added up to 16,292 tons of enemy shipping.

On 30 June, while she patrolled the lane from Kyūshū to Dairen, *Tang* sighted another cargo ship steaming without escort. After making an end-around run on the surface which produced two torpedo misses, *Tang* went deep to avoid depth charges, then surfaced and chased the target until she closed the range to 750 yds. A single torpedo blew *Nikkin Maru* in half, and the transport ship sank, taking with her some 3,200 Japanese soldiers.

The next morning, *Tang* sighted a tanker and a freighter. While she sank the freighter *Taiun Maru Number Two*, the tanker *Takatori Maru Number One* fled. The submarine trailed the latter until dark, then she launched two torpedoes which sank the tanker. *Tang* celebrated 4 July at dawn by an end-around, submerged attack on an enemy freighter which was near shore. However, with rapidly shoaling water and her keel about to touch bottom, *Tang* drew back, fired a spread of three with two hits, and then surfaced as survivors of the 6,886 tons cargo ship *Asukazan Maru* were being rescued by fishing boats. That afternoon, *Tang* sighted *Yamaoka Maru*, another cargo

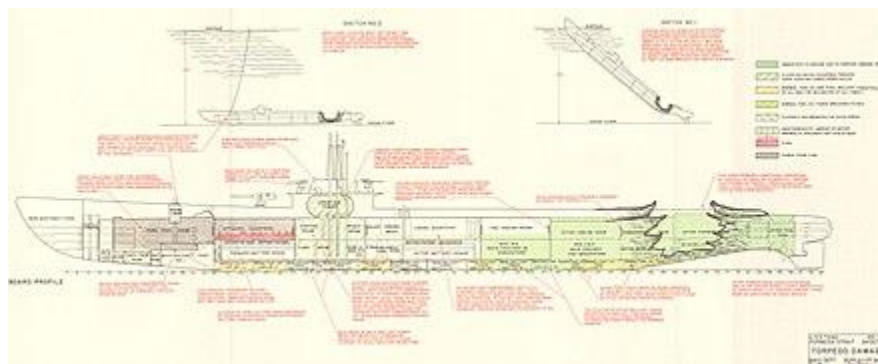
ship of approximately the same size, and sank her with two torpedoes. The submarine surfaced and, with the aid of grapnel hooks and Thompson submachine guns, rescued a survivor who had been clinging to an overturned lifeboat. While prowling the waters off Dairen late the next night, the submarine sighted a cargo ship and, during a submerged attack with her last two torpedoes, sank *Dori Maru*. Credited with eight ships for 56,000 tons at the time, the score confirmed postwar by JANAC for her third patrol was 10 ships for a total of 39,160 tons.

Fourth War Patrol

Her fourth war patrol was conducted from 31 July – 3 September in Japanese home waters off the coast of Honshū. On 10 August, she fired a spread of three torpedoes at a tanker near the beach of Omaezaki but scored no hits. The next day, after locating two freighters and two escorts, she launched three torpedoes at the larger freighter and two at the other. The larger freighter (*Roko Maru*) disintegrated due, apparently, to a torpedo which exploded in her boilers. As the submarine went deep, her crew heard the fourth and fifth torpedoes hit the second ship. After a jarring depth charge attack which lasted 38 minutes, *Tang* returned to periscope depth. Only the two escorts were in sight, and one of them was picking up survivors.

On 14 August, *Tang* attacked a patrol yacht with her deck gun and reduced the Japanese ship's deck house to a shambles with eight hits. Eight days later, she sank a 225 ft patrol boat (*No. 2 Nansatsu Maru*). On 23 August, the submarine closed in on a large ship; Japanese crewmen dressed in white uniforms could be seen lining its superstructure and the bridge. She fired three torpedoes, and two hits caused the 8,135 ton transport *Tsukushi Maru* to sink. Two days later, *Tang* attacked a tanker and an escort with her last three torpedoes, sinking the tanker, *No. 8 Nanko Maru*. *Tang* then returned to Pearl Harbor.

Fifth War Patrol and Loss



Damage to USS Tang from its Own Torpedo

After a refit, *Tang* stood out to sea on 24 September for her fifth war patrol. After topping off her fuel at Midway Island, she sailed for the Formosa Strait on 27 September. In order to reach her area, *Tang* had to pass through narrow waters known to be heavily patrolled by the Japanese. A large area stretching northeast from Formosa was known to have been mined by the enemy, and O'Kane was given the

choice of making the passage north of the island alone, or joining a coordinated attack group (*Silversides*, *Trigger*, and *Salmon*, under Commander John S. Coye, Jr., flag in *Silversides*) which was to patrol off northeast Formosa, and making the passage with them. *Tang* chose to make the passage alone and these vessels never heard from *Tang*, nor did any base, after she left Midway.

The story of *Tang's* fate comes from the report of her surviving commanding officer.

On the night of 10–11 October, *Tang* sank the cargo ships *Joshu Go* and *Ōita Maru*. The submarine continued on patrol until 23 October, when she contacted a large convoy consisting of three tankers, a transport, a freighter, and numerous escorts. Commander O'Kane planned a night surface attack. *Tang* broke into the middle of the formation, firing torpedoes as she closed on the tankers (later identified as freighters). Two torpedoes struck under the stack and engine room of the nearest, a single burst into the stern of the middle one, and two exploded under the stack and engine space of the farthest. The first torpedoes began exploding before the last was fired, and all hit their targets, which were soon either burning or sinking. As the submarine prepared to fire at the tanker, which was crossing her stern, she sighted the transport bearing down on her in an attempt to ram. *Tang* had no room to dive, so she crossed the transport's bow and with full left rudder saved her stern and got inside the transport's turning circle. The transport was forced to continue her swing to avoid the tanker, which had also been coming in to ram. The tanker struck the transport's starboard quarter shortly after the submarine fired four stern torpedoes along their double length at a range of 400 yds. The tanker sank bow first and the transport had a 30° up-angle. With escorts approaching on the port bow and beam and a destroyer closing on the port quarter, *Tang* rang up full speed and headed for open water. When the submarine was 6,000 yds from the transport, another explosion was observed, and its bow disappeared.

On the morning of 24 October, *Tang* began patrolling at periscope depth. She surfaced at dark and headed for Turnabout Island (25.431493°N 119.93989°E). On approaching the island, the submarine's surface search radar showed so many blips that it was almost useless. *Tang* soon identified a large convoy which contained tankers with planes on their decks and transports with crated planes stacked on their bows and sterns. As the submarine tracked the Japanese ships along the coast, the convoy's escorts became suspicious, and the escort commander began signaling with a large searchlight. This illuminated the convoy, and *Tang* chose a large three-deck transport as her first target, a smaller transport as the second, and a large tanker as the third. Their ranges varied from 900 to 1,400 yds. After firing two torpedoes at each target, the submarine paralleled the convoy to choose its next victims. She fired stern torpedoes at another transport and tanker aft.

As *Tang* poured on full speed to escape the gunfire directed at her, a destroyer passed around the stern of the transport and headed for the submarine. The tanker exploded, and a hit was seen on the transport. A few seconds later, the destroyer exploded, either from intercepting *Tang's* third torpedo or from shell fire of two escorts closing on the beam. Only the transport remained afloat, dead in the water. The submarine cleared to 240 ft, rechecked the last two torpedoes which had been loaded in the bow tubes, and returned to finish off the transport. The 23rd torpedo was fired at 900 yds and was

observed running hot, straight, and normal. *Tang's* score for the night would later be confirmed as the freighters *Kogen Maru* (6,600 tons) and *Matsumoto Maru* (7,000 tons).

At 02:30 on the morning of 25 October, the 24th and last torpedo (a Mark 18 electric torpedo) was fired. It broached and curved to the left in a circular run. *Tang* fishtailed under emergency power to clear the turning circle of the torpedo, but it struck her abreast the aft torpedo room approximately 20 seconds after it was fired. The explosion was violent, and men as far forward as the control room received broken limbs. The ship went down by the stern with the aft three compartments flooded. Of the nine officers and men on the bridge, including O'Kane, three were able to swim through the night until picked up eight hours later. One officer escaped from the flooded conning tower and was rescued with the others.

The submarine bottomed at 180 ft and the thirty survivors crowded into the forward torpedo room as the aft compartments flooded, intending to use the forward escape trunk. Publications were burned, and all assembled in the forward room to escape. The escape was delayed by a Japanese patrol which dropped depth charges, and started an electrical fire in the forward battery. Beginning at 6:00 AM on 25 October, using the Momsen lung, the only known case where it was used, thirteen men escaped from the forward torpedo room. By the time the last had exited, the heat from the battery fire was so intense, paint on the bulkhead was scorching, melting, and running down. Of the 13 men who escaped from the forward torpedo room, only five were rescued. One sailor who was near the group of five but injured during the ascent was not rescued. Three who were on the bridge were rescued after swimming for 8 hours. Another survivor escaped the conning tower and used his pants as a flotation device. A total of 78 men were lost. Those who escaped the submarine were greeted in the morning by the sight of the bow of the transport they sank the previous night sticking straight out of the water.

One of the 78 men lost was Rubin MacNiel Raiford, who at age 15, may have been the youngest American person in the military to lose his life in combat.

Nine survivors, including O'Kane, were picked up the next morning by Japanese frigate *CD-34*. Survivors of *Tang's* previous sinkings were on board, and they beat the men from *Tang*. O'Kane stated, "When we realized that our clubbing and kickings were being administered by the burned, mutilated survivors of our handiwork, we found we could take it with less prejudice." The nine captives were placed in a prison camp at Ōfunā until the end of the war, where they were interrogated by Japanese intelligence.

Tang was stricken from the Naval Vessel Register on 8 February 1945.

Awards

Tang received four battle stars and two Presidential Unit Citations for World War II service. Her commanding officer, Richard O'Kane, received the Medal of Honor for *Tang's* final combat action.

During the war, *Tang* was credited with sinking 31 ships in her five patrols, totaling 227,800 tons, and damaging two for 4,100 tons. This was unequaled among American submarines. Postwar comparison with Japanese records by the Joint Army–Navy Assessment Committee (JANAC) reduced this to 24 ships, totaling 93,824 tons, placing her second on the list for ships sunk after USS *Tautog* (with 26) and fourth behind USS *Flasher*, *Rasher*, and *Barb* for total confirmed tonnage. These figures have since been revised to 33 ships totaling 116,454 tons, placing her first in the list of the most successful American submarines in World War II for both number of ships and tonnage. *Tang* also retains the best patrol by number of ships sunk, her third, with ten for 39,100 tons.

In Popular Culture

- In the 1951 movie *Submarine Command*, the opening scenes show a submarine with the hull number SS-306 in the mothball fleet at Mare Island. For the film, SS-306 is named *Tiger Shark*, and is portrayed by USS *Sterlet* (SS-392), another *Balao*-class submarine.
- *Tang* was the subject of two episodes of the syndicated television anthology series *The Silent Service*, which aired during the 1957–1958 season. The two episodes depict *Tang's* second and fifth patrols. *Tang* is also featured in the episode "Fatal Voyage" of the Smithsonian Channel series *Hell Below*.
- *Tang* is one of several submarines (along with the era's USS *Bowfin*, *Growler*, *Seawolf*, and *Spadefish*) whose war patrols can be re-enacted in the 1985 MicroProse computer game *Silent Service* and the game's various ports, including Konami's 1989 release for the Nintendo Entertainment System.
- *Tang* also appears as a playable submarine during a quick mission in *Silent Hunter 4: Wolves of the Pacific*.

Museums

Tang has been memorialized as part of a special interactive exhibit at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, called "Final Mission". Visitors enter into a simulated re-creation of the submarine, are given a card corresponding to one of the 87 men who crewed the boat during its fifth (and final) patrol, and are assigned a station to crew. The events of 24–25 October 1944 are depicted on an overhead screen, while the visitor "crew" is given tasks to complete. The recreation includes the circular run of the 24th torpedo, which returned to hit *Tang* and sink the boat. Upon exiting the simulator, visitors see a wall with pictures of the crew, and can learn if the sailor associated with their card survived the attack.