



Commander Submarine Force, U.S. Pacific Fleet

USS S-4 (SS 109)

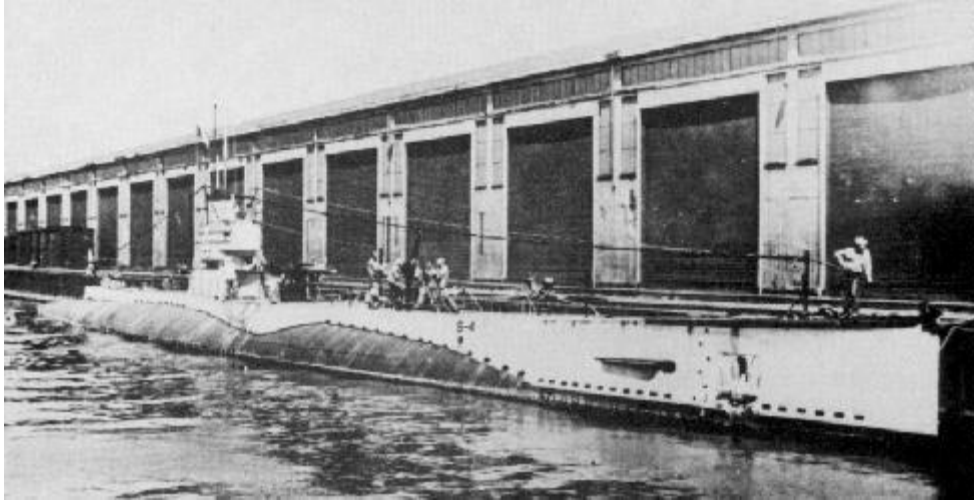
December 17, 1927 - 34

Men Lost

USS S-4 (SS-109) was lost on 17-Dec-1927 with the loss of 34 officers and men when it was sunk after being rammed by USCG Paulding.

- Keel laid down by the Portsmouth Naval Shipyard, Kittery, ME, December 4, 1917;
- Launched: August 27, 1919; Sponsored by Mrs. Herbert S. Howard;
- Commissioned: November 19, 1919 with LCDR Percy K. Robottom in command;
- Lost December 17, 1927;
- Salvaged: March 17, 1928;
- Decommissioned: March 19, 1928;
- Recommissioned: October 16, 1928;
- Decommissioned April 7, 1932;
- Struck from the Navy List January 15, 1936;
- Scuttled March 15, 1936

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Following acceptance trials and a visit to Havana, Cuba, from 14 to 19 January 1920, and subsequent operations along the Gulf and New England coasts, USS S-4 (SS-109) departed New London on 18 November 1920 to rendezvous with her assigned division, SubDiv12, and SubDiv18 off New Hampshire. The two divisions were about to embark on a historic voyage which, at that time, was to be the longest cruise undertaken by American submarines. Assigned to SubFlot3 of the Asiatic Fleet at Cavite in the Philippine Islands, they sailed via the Panama Canal and Pearl Harbor and arrived at Cavite on 1 December 1921.

S-4 operated out of the Cavite Naval Station, with occasional visits to Chinese ports, until late in 1924, when the two divisions were reassigned to the west coast. Departing Cavite on 29 October, they arrived at Mare Island, California, on 30 December.

Remaining at Mare Island in 1925, she operated along the west coast through 1926, mainly at San Francisco, San Pedro, and San Diego. She departed Mare Island on 10 February 1927 and sailed to the Panama Canal Zone, where she operated through March and April, then proceeded to New London, arriving on 3 May. For the remainder of the year, she operated off the New England coast.

On 17 December 1927, S-4, having recently received extensive refitting at PNSY, was one of the Navy's most serviceable submarines, albeit an old one of WWI vintage. She had just completed her run of the measured mile prior to returning to the fleet and, having checked the surface for other vessels in her vicinity, her periscopes were housed as she planed up to be rammed by USCGC PAULDING, sending her back down to the oceans depths for the last time.

Paulding was making nearly eighteen knots when a lookout spotted the periscopes and shears of S-4 coming up close aboard on the port bow. The lookout reported and the OOD ordered the engines full reverse and the rudder hard to port, hopefully to pass to port over the still submerged stern of S-4. Paulding, however, struck S-4 at nearly the point of max beam half-way

between the forward and aft Battery Compartment bulkheads about two feet above the battery well deck. The blow was somewhat glancing. The forefoot of the cutter telescoped and broke off in the hole torn in S-4's side. The hole in the sub was nearly four feet long and two feet high in the ballast tank and two and a half feet long by a foot high in the Battery Compartment pressure hull. About three feet of the crumpled forefoot girder was stuck in the hole, not enough to stem the blast of cold water hosing through.

S-4 heeled far to port and started down by the bow. Paulding got on her radio and announced she had just collided with a submerged object, probably a submarine and gave her position. She then stopped and waited for the sub to surface. It didn't. The men inside the boat were thrown about by the impact. Some in the Battery Compartment started to jam whatever was handy into the stream of water to stem the flow. The inrush was, however, too great and it was readily obvious that the Battery Compartment would have to be abandoned. Six men were in the Torpedo Room and slammed the door shut, dogging it tight. The remainder of the crew that were in the Battery Compartment made their way up the steepening deck to the Control Room door and when all had made it through, the door was shut and dogged. The water continued to fill the Battery Compartment, compressing the air inside. The battery well held tight and did not leak too much. The pressure in the bubble of air in the upper aft end of the space rose to about 50 pounds per square inch flooding Control.

The initial stream of water spray and air had shorted sections of the switchboard throwing the entire boat into the dark. The commanding officer, ordered the space evacuated and when all the personnel in Control had made their way back to the Engine Room, he slammed and dogged the door. Now the crew was in serious trouble. There were fourteen men in the Engine Room with an additional fourteen in the Motor Room. The air was foul with chlorine, it was dark and getting cold fast. When at last, the noise of rushing water had stopped and the boat got quiet, it was obvious that access to Control Room was out of the question. There was no way to lift the stern of the boat as USS S-5 (SS-110) had done. The only thing left was to wait for help.

The rest of the story is a tragedy of divers struggling to save those left of the crew and failing. The boat was a pivot point in the story of submarine design. The first production model of a standard government design, she had a tragic accident which lead to better cooperation in navigation by setting aside areas for submarine operations and requiring other ships not transit these places. The death of her crew and the painful inability of the Navy to be able to rescue them became the basis for an effort to make submarine escape and salvage a viable option. The men died but the legacy they left saved the life of at least forty-six others because they used the devices invented and may have saved an untold number more because of the improved safety and navigation required after the accident.

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S-4 was finally raised on 17 March 1928 and towed to the Boston Navy Yard for dry docking. She was decommissioned on the 19th.

S-4 was recommissioned on 16 October, after repairs. She served at Key West, Florida, early in 1929 and 1930, and in the northeast during the remainder of those years. In 1931, she operated again at New London until departing there on 3 January 1932 for Pearl Harbor. Sailing via the Panama Canal, she arrived at Pearl on 29 August. On 7 April 1933, S-4 was decommissioned and laid up. She was struck from the Navy List on 15 January 1936 and destroyed on 15 March by sinking.

Shipmates on Eternal Patrol in USS S-4 (SS-109):

Clarence F. Bethke, EN / Walter Bishop, RM / Earl W. Boone, ENC / Henry H. Brown, FN / C.F. Burrell, SN / Charles B. Calcott, MM / Elmer L. Cash, RMC / Russell A. Crabb, TM / William Dempsey, MM / R.W. Difenbach, SM / John J. Fenell, MM / Graham N. Fitch, LT / Daniel M. Galvin, FN / Donald F. Goering, EM / Peder Haaland, MM / Victor Hanet, CS / Buster Harris, SN / Aaron A. Hodges, MMC / Arthur F. Hodges, MM / R.K. Jones, LCDR (CO) / Paul R. Kemper, EM / J.H. Long, FN / J.A. McGinley, LT / Fred H. O'Shields, EN / George Pelham, SN / John J. Powers, COX / Rudolph J. Rose, EM / A.E. Seaton / Roger L. Short, TM / Frank Snizek, TM / T.W. Sternman, EN / Joseph L. Stevens, SN / C.B. Strange, SN / Mariano Tedah, SD / Carl H. Thompson, EN / Walter R. Tolson, SN / Donald Weller, LT / James J. White, FN