

# UNDERSEAWARFARE

The Official Magazine of the U.S. Submarine Force

Summer 2004

U.S. Submarines... Because Stealth Matters



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# Saviors and Suppliers

World War II Submarine Special Operations in the Philippines

by Thomas Holian

6<sup>th</sup> ANNUAL  
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Anyone happening to glance towards the American fleet-type submarine *USS Gudgeon* (SS-211) during the night of Sunday, 27 December 1942, as she lay moored to the dock at Fremantle, Australia, might have observed an unusual sight. Seven mess boys boarded the submarine, saluted the colors, and then immediately proceeded down the hatch. No sooner were they below decks than *Gudgeon*, captained by LCDR William Stovall, Jr., slid away from the dock and quietly maneuvered out to sea.

The “mess boys” were in fact disguised Filipino soldiers and intelligence officers, led by

Major Jesus Villamor, U.S. Army. Two days earlier, *Gudgeon's* crew had loaded her with a ton of equipment specially ordered for the mission their passengers were about to embark upon. *Gudgeon's* top- secret task: to deliver the soldiers and their gear to Mindanao and Panay, two key Philippine islands, to help bolster the Philippine guerilla forces resisting the Japanese occupation, without being detected.



The fleet-type submarine USS *Gudgeon* (SS-211) in San Francisco Bay, California in August 1943. *Gudgeon* was sent on the first official guerrilla submarine mission to the Philippines, and later completed one more. *Gudgeon's* CO on the second occasion concluded his official report by stating: "As long as a torpedo shortage exists, it seems feasible and highly desirable that every submarine bound for the Philippines or the South China Sea carry what men and equipment it can to [the Philippine guerrilla] troops who are on the spot and capable of seriously harassing the enemy."

One year before *Gudgeon* slipped out of Fremantle, General Douglas MacArthur, responsible for the defense of the Philippine Islands, was forced to declare the capital, Manila, an open city in the face of Japanese invasion forces. At his new headquarters on the fortified island of Corregidor in Manila Bay, MacArthur searched for effective ways to fight back against the wave of Japanese invaders threatening to take over the island nation. The general quickly realized that, should the invaders secure the whole country, the best hope for retaking the islands would be to enlist the support of native forces to harass the enemy while the U.S. military prepared for its counter-offensive. Soon enough, messengers were sent out to encourage loyal Filipinos to set up guerrilla units to gather intelligence and keep the Japanese forces distracted. Unfortunately for MacArthur, it soon became clear that these guerrilla forces were doomed to failure in their initial state of preparation. Brave and loyal though they may have been, they did not have the strong leadership necessary to perform meaningful operations. Nor did they have any means for receiving badly-needed supplies from outside the country.

A solution to the latter problem began to take shape in MacArthur's mind as he watched submarines slink into the small anchorage at Corregidor during the Japanese siege of that stronghold. The boats were on special missions to deliver supplies and to evacuate people and equipment while under constant threat from Japanese air and surface attack. The first boat to arrive was USS *Seawolf* (SS-197), commanded by LCDR Frederick "Fearless Freddy" Warder. Warder's greatest concern was about mines in Manila Bay. The U.S. Navy had mined the area in anticipation of the Japanese invasion, and the locations of the mines were not well documented. Worse, with the Japanese now in control, nobody knew if they had mined the bay as well. Warder, guessing that the Japanese didn't expect a counter-attack soon, gambled that they had not mined the area. He also assumed that the Japanese did not anticipate American submarines operating behind their lines. Both gambles paid off, and after Warder delivered his cargo of ammunition, he was able to leave Corregidor with 25 rescued Americans (mostly pilots), 16 torpedoes, and various spare submarine parts. Impressed by *Gudgeon's* success, General MacArthur began to wonder whether similar submarine missions could be used to supply Filipino guerrillas.





"Fearless Freddy" Warder (on the right), CO of USS *Seawolf* (SS-197) during the early stages of the guerrilla campaign, was the first to sneak much-needed ammunition and supplies to the defenders on Corregidor. Warder is shown here with Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz at the U.S. Naval Reserve Training Center, Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1961. By this time, Warder had risen to the rank of Rear Admiral.

Under direct orders from President Roosevelt, General MacArthur was finally evacuated from Corregidor for Australia in March 1942. The submarine resupply missions continued until the fall of Corregidor in May, but during this interim, MacArthur had begun hearing that meaningful groups of Filipino guerrillas had formed and were awaiting supplies and instructions. Remembering his experience in Corregidor, MacArthur started inquiring about whether submarines could be used in top-secret supply missions to the Philippines. His staff informed him that the standard fleet-type boats could carry between five and 10 tons of supplies, plus six passengers, when leaving Australia on regular combat patrols. In view of the sizable requests MacArthur was receiving from his guerrillas, he pushed for a better alternative. His staff suggested he ask for the services of the Navy's two much larger transport-type submarines, USS *Narwhal* (SS-167) and USS *Nautilus* (SS-168). To MacArthur's dismay, he learned that those submarines were so old and in such disrepair that *Narwhal* would not be available until November 1943, and *Nautilus* needed a complete overhaul before she could put back to sea. Instead, ADM Chester Nimitz suggested that, with a modified wartime weapon load-out, the fleet-type submarines could carry up to 34 tons of cargo and 25 passengers, and would be better suited to the narrow passages in and around the islands anyway. MacArthur agreed with this approach, and as recounted

above, *Gudgeon* was underway for the Philippines by late December.

After departing Fremantle, *Gudgeon* set out towards her destination on Mindanao, running on the surface but diving regularly only to maintain her trim and to avoid Japanese patrols. As they approached the archipelago, Major Villamor informed LCDR Stovall that there was a change in plans. Villamor had apparently received intelligence just before departing Fremantle that Japanese patrols had increased in the original landing area. The new destination was on the island of Negros. Furthermore, Villamor announced he and his men would not use the 18-foot dinghy that had been lashed to the exterior of the boat for the beach landing, but would rather put ashore in the inflatable rafts they had practiced with. Stovall was not pleased with these last-minute revelations, especially since he could have taken a shorter route to Negros, and the now-unneeded dinghy had adversely affected his diving characteristics. However, he agreed to the changes, provided that periscope reconnaissance of the shore proved the landing could be made safely for both the landing party and the submarine. The first night, high winds and seas prohibited approaching the original landing site, so the submerged *Gudgeon* moved quietly along the coast into the next day, scanning for a new location. That night, another likely choice was negated after a number of mysterious lights suddenly appeared on the beach. Subsequently, one of Villamor's men identified them as Filipino night fishermen. Finally on the third night, 14 January 1943, a deserted beach was identified, and Villamor successfully loaded his men and supplies into the rafts and landed ashore.

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### One thing submariners making guerrilla runs to the Philippines learned quickly was to expect the unexpected. No two missions were exactly the same, and very few were performed exactly according to plan...

Soon after submarines started making regular guerrilla runs to the Philippines, a way was found to ameliorate the lack of a strong, relatively-unified command for the native Filipino forces. The solution took the form of one Charles "Chick" Parsons. Parsons was a young American businessman living and operating out of Manila. He was also a Lieutenant Commander in an Intelligence Unit of the U.S. Naval Reserve who had remained behind in the city to collect intelligence on the Japanese occupiers. Fluent in several of the over 70 native dialects, intimately familiar with the islands, and a good friend of MacArthur from their days together in Manila, Parsons was just the man the General was looking for to act as a go-between with the Filipino guerrillas.

After being called to Australia to meet with MacArthur to discuss the situation, Parsons accepted the position. In late February 1943, he was spirited to Labangan aboard the submarine USS *Tambor* (SS-198), captained by LCDR S. H. Ambruster. His mission was to deliver \$10,000 in cash and two tons of ammunition to Army LT COL Wendell Fertig, one of the guerrilla leaders in the region. Parsons also carried ashore a substantial amount of radio equipment for use in setting up a spy network, codenamed "Spyron." Parsons' first clandestine visit back to the Philippines lasted until July 1943. During that time, he criss-crossed several islands on foot, horseback, and canoe, always at great personal risk of capture or death by the Japanese, meeting and coordinating with guerrilla leaders, setting up coast watchers, taking part in ambushes, rendezvousing with other submarines to pick up supplies and men, and making contacts for future Spyron stations. He would later make at least four more secret trips to the Philippines to bolster the guerrilla effort and, ultimately, pave the way for the U.S. invasion.

One thing submariners making guerrilla runs to the Philippines learned quickly was to expect the unexpected. No two missions were exactly the same, and very few were performed exactly according to plan, whether due to mechanical problems, enemy interference, weather, or simply no-shows on the beach. One of the greatest fears the submariners had were airplanes, even friendly ones. One never knew when a pilot, friend or foe, would take a submarine for a target and open fire. As a result, the submariners kept a vigilant watch on the skies and dove at the first sign of any aircraft.

The two transport submarines, *Narwhal* and *Nautilus*, finally entered the guerrilla game in 1943, and the next year *Nautilus*, commanded by CDR George Sharp, had an interesting run-in with patrolling aircraft. In late July, *Nautilus* was ordered to deliver one Navy officer, 22 enlisted men, and 10 tons of supplies to Mindoro; two Filipino Army enlisted men and 30 tons of supplies to Bohol; and two U.S. Army enlisted men and 30 tons of supplies to Leyte. At dawn on the very first morning of her mission, radar detected an airplane at five miles and closing. The plane was immediately recognized as friendly, but the pilot was less observant. He dove towards the submarine and dropped a bomb, which luckily landed harmlessly in front of the ship. His ensuing strafing attempt was also unsuccessful, missing his target by 100 yards. With that, the pilot inexplicably broke away, and was never seen or heard from again.

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Later that same day *Nautilus* detected several more air contacts, causing the submarine to constantly dive quickly and then cautiously return to the surface to continue with the mission. Finally, the drop-off at Mindoro was completed successfully. The delivery to Bohol was called off due to the sudden arrival of a Japanese occupation force, so Sharp proceeded to Leyte. The submarine failed to make contact with the guerrillas there, so Sharp proceeded to

the alternate site, where security signals were successfully exchanged with one of the guerrilla leaders, LT COL Roberto Kangeleon. With the goods safely on the beach, *Nautilus* headed for home, but not before another accuracy-challenged bombardier attacked with a bomb that exploded wide and well above the slow-diving submarine. The plane harassed *Nautilus* all day, keeping the submarine below water until nightfall, when she was finally able to continue on her journey home to Fremantle.





Colonel Ruperto Kangleon, Philippine guerrilla leader, reporting to General Douglas MacArthur in Tacloban, Leyte, on 23 October 1944, three days after American forces re-invaded the Philippines there. Early on, the various guerrilla groups on the islands fought each other as frequently as the Japanese, with one of the worst situations on Leyte. Chick Parsons resolved the issue on that island by convincing the much-respected Kangleon to come out of retirement and assume leadership of all local guerrilla factions.

At first, most submarines on secret missions to the Philippines delivered supplies and



military personnel before heading off to perform more traditional wartime patrols in search of Japanese ships to sink. In the spring of 1944, this began to change as pressure from the United States pushed the Japanese back into the western Pacific. This drive kept the submarines too busy to supply the Philippines on their way to the theater, but many were tasked with picking people up from the islands on the return leg of a deployment. USS *Crevalle* (SS-291), commanded by LCDR F. D. Walker, Jr., was ordered to pick up 25 evacuees on Negros. Upon arriving at the designated location, Walker discovered the expected 25 evacuees in one boat, plus 16 others with baggage in another. Many children were among those escaping the island, and Walker accepted both boatloads. During the return trip to Australia, the refugees were fed in the galley, requiring them to pass through the control room for each meal. The children were fascinated by the lights and switches there and couldn't resist trying to play with them. In the words of Walker, "the Chief of the Watch solved this by putting a sign on the switchboard reading, 'Any children found in the control room without their parents will be shot.' The mothers read this gravely to their kids, who seemed to take it as a matter of course. Considering that some of them could not remember when they were not fugitives, perhaps this is understandable."

In addition to the new underage menace within the ship, *Crevalle* and her passengers still had external threats to worry about before reaching the safety of Australia. After being forced to dive twice by aircraft, the submarine detected a large Japanese convoy. Walker set a course to cut off the last ship in the group, but the convoy suddenly changed course and bore directly down on *Crevalle*. Walker's superiors later attributed the convoy's maneuver to an alert by the second aircraft encountered earlier. Whatever the case, *Crevalle* suddenly had no option but to dive. As the convoy passed 90 feet above the submarine without incident, Walker ordered the boat to level off and maintain depth. Moments later, two groups of two depth charges exploded close aboard, knocking out the sonar in what Walker described as the worst depth charging he had experienced. When the sonar was fixed, the crew found the attackers still searching directly above them, and the submarine crept away as quickly and as quietly as possible. Although heavily damaged by the depth charge attack, *Crevalle* reached Australia with all hands.



The transport submarine USS *Nautilus* (SS-168) is shown here returning to Pearl Harbor in August 1942 after transporting part of the Marine Corps' 2nd Raider Battalion – "Carlson's Raiders" – to Makin Island to divert Japanese attention and supplies from the battle for Guadalcanal ranging over 1,000 miles to the southwest. That mission foreshadowed her later clandestine runs to the Philippines, transporting men and supplies to anti-Japanese guerrilla fighters there.

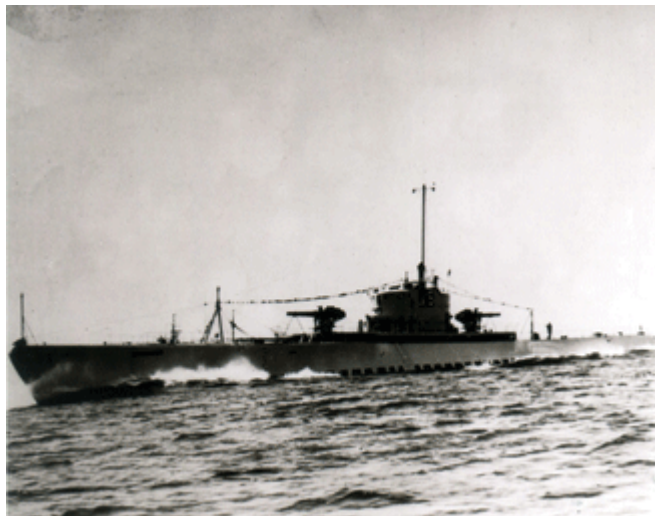
In all, 19 submarines participated in a total of 41 secret missions to the Philippine Islands, beginning with *Gudgeon's* run in late December 1942. The last officially recorded guerrilla run, by USS *Stingray* (SS-186) on New Year's Day, 1945, took place between the re-invasion of the Philippines at Leyte Gulf on 20 October 1944 and the liberation of Manila on 4 February 1945. Of the conventional submarines, only *Stingray* participated in more than two runs (her total being five), and the two transport submarines, *Nautilus* and *Narwhal*, were the true workhorses of the operation, with six and nine operations respectively. In the course of the campaign, U.S. submarines delivered 331 people, evacuated 472, and delivered some 1,325 tons of supplies to the Philippines.

Parsons' network of spies and coast watchers proved invaluable not only to the liberation of the Philippines, but also to the Pacific war effort as a whole. In one somewhat amusing example of their effectiveness, on 4 August 1944 USS *Cero* (SS-225), commanded by CDR E. F. Dissette, torpedoed a tanker and observed it breaking up but was forced to dive beneath the tanker's attacking escorts to escape. After dark, Dissette surfaced to send his action report, but before he even got on the air, he received a message from headquarters:

"Nice work *CERO*. Coast watcher reports sub sank 10,000 ton tanker off coast your assigned area. It had to be you." Several months prior to that incident, the coast watchers were also the first to alert Southwest Pacific Headquarters in Brisbane, Australia, to a massing of Japanese naval power in the islands. This information led to a submarine net being thrown around the Japanese, tracking their every move, and eventually resulted in the U.S. Navy gaining a major victory in the Battle of the Philippine Sea – the so-called "Marianas Turkey Shoot."

In every radio broadcast he made from Australia to the Japanese-occupied Philippines, General MacArthur had famously insisted, "I shall return," a morale-boosting promise heard by many Filipinos on radio equipment brought to the islands on "guerrilla" submarines. When the tide of the war fully turned in favor of the Americans, and MacArthur was finally able to liberate the Philippines from the Japanese, those U.S. boats had already played a major role in making preparations on the ground.

Mr. Holian is an analyst with Anteon Corporation in Washington, D.C.



The transport submarine USS *Narwhal* (SS-167) during trials off Provincetown, Massachusetts in July 1930. During a 1943 mission with Chick Parsons aboard, *Narwhal* encountered two Japanese patrol ships while running on the surface. The boat's near miraculous escape from the ensuing stern chase led the captain to dub the boat's four ancient and rickety diesel engines "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John" – the four Apostles.

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