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## Book Reviews

by  
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### **Few Survived. A History of Submarine Disasters**

**Edwin Gray**

Since the first submarines of the 18th century through to 1995, some 1761 submarines were lost world wide. 313 by accident or error, and the remaining 1,148 being war losses.

This is the first comprehensive account of every peacetime submarine disaster from 1774 to the present day. It is, however, very far from being just a list of what submarines sank where, when and why, for the author examines most of the major sinkings in considerable detail. Analysing what went wrong and describing the attempts made at rescuing the crew and/or vessel.

The first recorded submarine loss was John Day's experimental MARIA with one death in Plymouth sound, England, on June 20, 1774. This was due to design fault.

Russia's nuclear powered KOMSO-MOLETS was the last due to an onboard fire caused by a short circuit. She sank south-west of Bear Island in the Barents Sea on April 7, 1989, losing 41 crew members with another 28 surviving.

Germany heads the submarine loss list with an incredible 1,000 boats, 75 through accident of error and the rest due to war. Britain comes next with 162 (55 by accident/error) followed by Russia 149 (38 by accident/error), Japan 137 (20 by accident/error), Italy 98, USA 75, and France 58.

Australia has recorded two losses along with Poland and France. Our two losses both being from World War One, AE1 (accidentally lost in 1914) and AE2 (enemy action) in 1915.

Collisions at sea claimed 36 submarines during World War Two, the worst loss being Germany's U-439 and U-659 colliding west of Cape Finisterre on May 4, 1943. Both boats sank with some 84 lives lost. There were 12 survivors.

The largest loss of life in a submarine was when the French submarine SURCOUF. Armed with twin 8-inch deck guns, was lost in the Gulf of Mexico when it collided with the American merchantman SS THOMAS LYKES on February 18, 1942.

One of the most intriguing episodes in this book is the account of the loss of HMS AF- FRAY in the English Channel in April 1951 with a number of clairvoyants, mediums and other sources of paranormal phenomena all claiming to know where the submarine was located, all centering around one specific area outside the main search area.

The weight of evidence convinced the British Admiralty to investigate the position, immediately reporting very loud echoes on the Asdic, but further investigation revealed absolutely nothing in the area!

Then there was the Rear Admiral's wife who related strange manifestations the night AFFRAY was reported missing claiming that an engineer officer who had previously served with her husband in a cruiser appeared in her room dressed in normal submariner's uniform.

He spoke quite clearly and said: "Tell your husband we are at the north end of Hurd Deep, nearly 70 miles from the lighthouse at St Catherine's Point. It happened very quickly and none of us expected it". After that the speaker vanished.

The woman immediately telephoned her husband who pointed out that the Hurd Deep was well outside the main search area. He also implied politely that he had no intention of interfering with the search operation on the basis of a ghost story. And there the matter rested. When HMS AFFRAY was finally found in June it was where the ghostly apparition had described it food for thought.

A story of a wartime submarine accident which fortunately is included in the loss of the famous USN boat USS TANG which torpedoed herself with her last torpedo after decimating a Japanese convoy in the Straits of Formosa on 24 October 1944.

One of the most successful submarines to operate in the Pacific, TANG was commanded by Commander Richard O'Kane. During her brief eight-month career and on her fifth war patrol, TANG sank 24 ships totalling 93 824 tons before the rogue torpedo turned a half-circle and hit TANG in the aft torpedo room.

O'Kane was one of the 15 survivors, only none of whom returned home after the brutality of Japanese POW camps. He was awarded the congressional medal of Honour in 1946.

This book is supported by an interesting series of six comprehensive and accurate appendices covering:

1. Pioneer and experimental submarines lost before 1900
2. Naval submarines lost by accident or error since 1961
3. Selected accidents which did not result loss of the submarine
4. Analysis of submarine losses 1914-1918
5. Submarines sunk between 1 September 1939 and 2 September 1945
6. World submarine losses 1774-1995

I noted that a total of 338 submarines were lost to all causes in World War One and a staggering 1,280 were lost in World War Two, including 107 to accidents or error.

Author Edwin Gray has produced a most interesting book in *Few Survived*. First published in 1986, with this, the revised edition published a decade later by Pen & Ink Books Ltd of 47 church Street, Barnsley, South Yorkshire S70 2AS. England, including previously unknown submarine disasters suffered by the Soviet Navy.

*Few Survived* is distributed in Australia through Peribo Pty Ltd of 58 Beaumont road, Mount Ku-Ring-Gai, NSW, 2080. If unavailable in your bookstore, it can be ordered and retails at a very reasonable \$37-95.

This is an invaluable reference book for naval historians and also a most fascinating read for the layman, being packed with drama and suspense from beginning to end hard top-up to down once you pick it up, *Few Survived* is highly recommended.

*Editor's Note: If, like the inquisitive Editor, you were wondering how many were lost in the worst disaster, the Guinness Book of Records reports that Le Surcouf lost 130 men when she sank.*