

May day tragedy haunted Mare Island

By Jerry Bowen

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Sometimes events in a person's life are so indelibly imprinted on their mind that they can remember the tiniest of details for the rest of their life. So it was on the morning of May 16, 1969, as I drove from Napa to work at Mare Island. After working in the inside Weapons Electronics Shop 36 for two years, I was finally transferred to the waterfront to work on the submarine, Guitarro, SSN-665. That is where I wanted to be. I enjoyed the challenge of installing, testing and troubleshooting the torpedo and missile fire control systems.

I had been working on the boat for about a year when we were nearly ready for final testing on the torpedo fire control systems. The previous day we had been shooting water slugs (torpedo tubes full of water) as part of overall system testing. As I drove into work that day still somewhat drowsy and only half listening to the car radio, I thought I heard the news that the Guitarro had sunk alongside the pier during the night.

"Naahh, that can't be" I thought. "I must have missed something."

There was nothing out of the ordinary or sense of urgency as I passed through the North Gate and drove toward the waterfront. As I pulled up to the pier area, I was dumbfounded. There was the Guitarro leaning at a sharp angle with only its sail visible above the waterline. Floodlights were playing over a tugboat that was nudged up against the sail to keep the submarine from turning over. I can still see it as clearly as if it happened yesterday. All I could do for the next few minutes was stand and stare at the spectacle in disbelief and wonder how in blazes this could happen!

Rumors began to run rampant around the shipyard.

Navy officials began arriving at the shipyard from all over the country as the work began to raise the Guitarro. Three days later it was resting in dry-dock. The interior of the ship was a surreal scene. The decks were slippery with slime, and the overhead dripped like a rain forest. All the electronic equipment's video screens had imploded. Water poured out of the equipment when it was opened and the air smelled like a fishy graveyard.

With the Guitarro in dry-dock, 12-hour shifts began around the clock to remove everything from the ship's interior and wash it down with fresh water. It was disheartening to see months of painstaking and exacting work reduced to a mass of muddy debris being hosed down and soaked in hastily constructed tanks. Within a few

days of the resurrection, the equipment was completely stripped from the hull.

Mare Island workers felt the reputation as one of the world's best shipyards had just suffered a major setback. In an allout effort to help reduce the cost of the salvage and repairs, everyone volunteered to give up part of their vacation credits, but the offer was turned down.

As the investigations began, many of us wondered if our historic shipyard would survive the tragedy.

The inquiry conducted by the House of Representatives Committee on Armed Services with Samuel Stratton presiding and members William Randall and John Hunt, started May 26, 1969, and lasted three days.

Their findings found a tragic lack of communication between two separate groups conducting system tests. Both test gangs required a certain forward and aft level of the ship to accomplish their particular system tests. Each group trimmed the ship by adding water to the ballast tanks unknown to the other test crew. The subsequent teeter-totter effect caused the ship to sink lower and lower until the Napa River poured into the forward hatch. At this point it was too late to do anything about it. The hatch without a cofferdam was plugged with shore service cables and hoses. The ship sank in spite of considerable efforts of the safety watchman to contact someone in authority in time to stop the impending disaster. As luck would have it, many upper and middle management personnel were off-yard in Vallejo attending a speech by Assistant Secretary of the Navy James D. Little.

The only positive note in the incident was that the incident occurred during the lunch break, so there were no injuries or loss of life. Had the flooding taken place an hour earlier or later there probably would have been many casualties. Entering and exiting a submarine undergoing construction or renovation is generally difficult and slow.

Many new regulations and work processes were changed over the years after the Guitarro sank. New administrative offices were created to track and approve the different work and testing processes. Meetings to coordinate the work grew in number, and there certainly was no lack of communication as non-nuclear work was coordinated more and more like nuclear work. As a result of the heightened controls, costs increased and schedules slipped even more. In spite of it all, shipyard workers were a talented group who could figuratively install 10 cubic feet of equipment into one cubic foot of space and make it work. Ingenuity was common and achieving the impossible was part of the normal day-to-day routine

Occasionally, I am asked if the tragic events of that fateful day in May were

instrumental in the closing. Hard to say, but the stigma of the incident certainly didn't contribute to its longevity. I do know that when Mare Island finally closed, submarines had grown so large that special flotation equipment was required just to get a boat into dry-dock. In addition, I would speculate that the cost of maintaining the 150-year-old shipyard's aging buildings and machinery were also a determining factor. Whatever the reason or reasons for closing, an extremely talented work force was disbanded and spread throughout the world. And in this man's humble opinion, the working world became the benefactor of their wide ranging talents.

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