MORE SUB TALES

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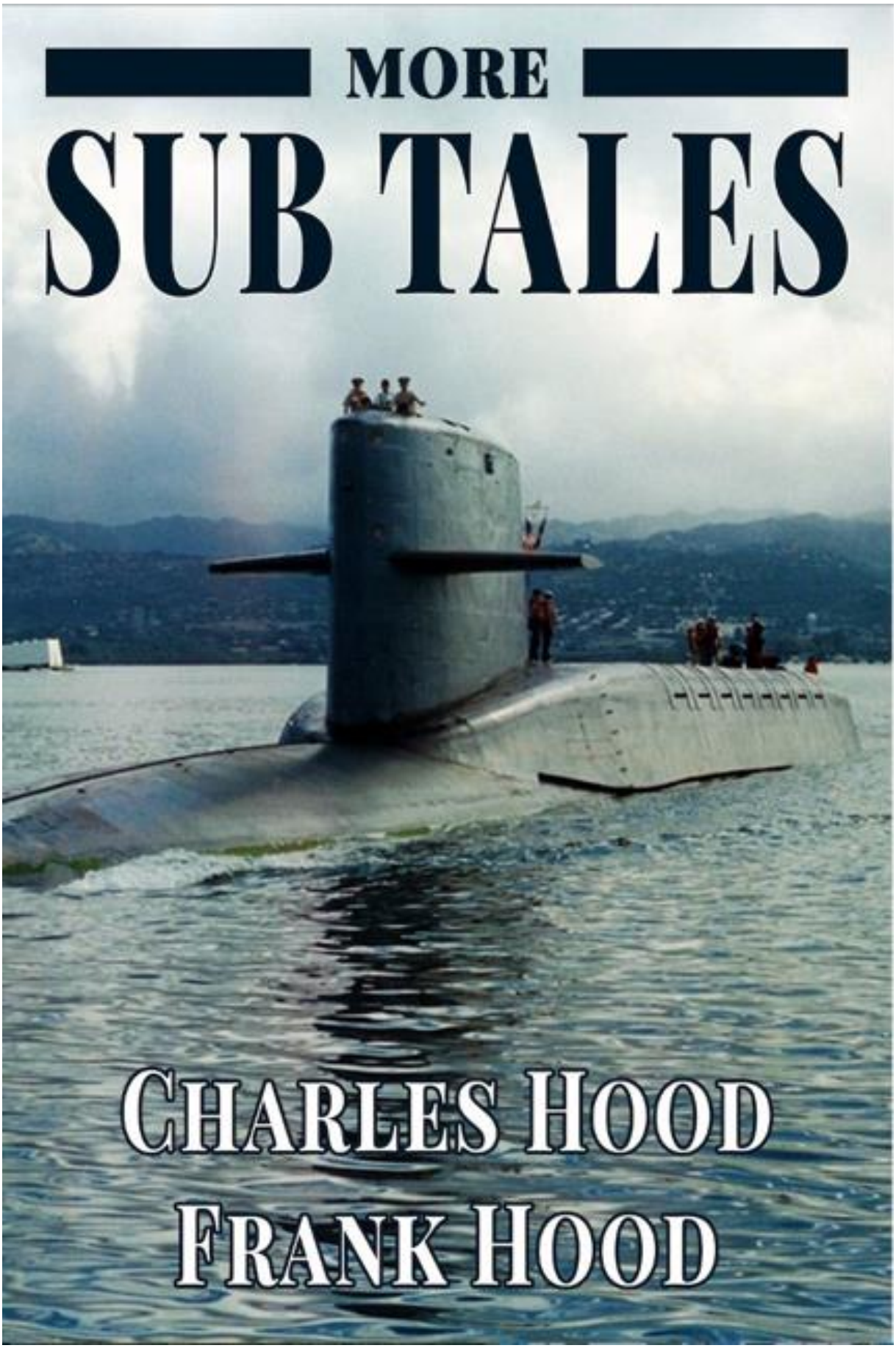

BOOK PREVIEW

From the chapter "Appendicitis at Sea"

The USS Seadragon (SS-194) began her fourth war patrol in late August 1942 based out of Fremantle, Australia. The Sargo-class submarine with a crew of 55 men was transiting the Celebes Sea near Indonesia on 08 September. That's when Darrell Rector, an 18-year-old seaman first class from Chautauqua, KS, began to experience abdominal pain and nausea. Rector paid a visit to the boat's medical specialist, Wheeler "Johnny" Lipes. A native of New Castle, VA, Lipes was a 23-year-old pharmacist's mate first class.

Lipes examined Rector and prescribed bed rest and a liquid diet. However, Rector's condition steadily deteriorated over the next couple of days, such that on the occasion of Rector's 19th birthday—11 September 1942—Lipes recognized that his patient had developed the so-called "peritoneal signs" of a serious condition, including abdominal rigidity and rebound tenderness to gentle manual pressure over McBurney's point. Rector was suffering from severe and unrelenting pain in his right lower abdomen, and Lipes concluded that his patient had all of the telltale signs of acute appendicitis.

Before joining the Seadragon, Lipes had trained in the hospital corps at Navy institutions in San Diego, Philadelphia, and Manila. He had assisted surgeons during appendectomies on several occasions, but he was no physician himself. His particular specialty was in performing electrocardiograms (EKGs). Approaching the commanding officer (CO) of the Seadragon, LCDR William Ferrall, Lipes grimly confided that, without an emergency appendectomy, Rector would likely die. Both men knew that medical evacuation was impossible. Ferrall both surprised and challenged Lipes with his response to the news. "What do you intend to do?"

Lipes hesitated. With an air of resignation, he initially replied, "Nothing, sir." He assured the skipper that he would continue supportive measures and keep his stricken shipmate as comfortable as possible. Ferrall was not satisfied with the answer. He reminded Lipes that everyone on board was expected to give their best effort even though there were no guarantees for success. "I fire torpedoes every day, and some of them miss," Ferrall mused, implying that the fear of failure was no excuse for vacillation.

Ferrall got right to the point. "Could you do the surgery?", he dared his young pharmacist's mate. At that moment, Lipes realized that he could not let his commanding officer down. Gathering his confidence and sounding much more resolute, he said, "Yes, sir, I can do it." Hearing the desired response, Ferrall ordered Lipes to proceed once Rector had given his consent.

The two men paid Rector a visit in his rack, where he was nursing an ice pack on his belly and appearing very ill. Ferrell told him that although they had no good options, Lipes was willing to give the operation a try. Otherwise, Ferrell told his young seaman, the condition could prove fatal in the near term. Understanding the risks involved, Rector gave his full consent for the surgery. Subsequently, the entire ship's company scrambled to prepare for the first underwater appendectomy attempt.

The list of items assembled and tasks performed to substitute for a standard appendectomy—normally performed in a sterile environment by trained surgical personnel with dedicated instruments—speaks to the improvisational skills of the Submarine Force:

- The wardroom table served as the operating table
- Ether dipped in sterilized gauze pads inside a tea strainer placed over the face served as the general anesthesia mask

- A blade clipped by a pair of hemostats from the first-aid kit served as the scalpel to create the abdominal wall incision
- Soup spoons bent backward along their handles served as tissue retractors held by assistants, giving the operator a better look at the operative field through the narrow incision
- Sulfa tablets baked in the ship's oven to kill spores and then ground up into powder served as the antibiotic "irrigant" of the peritoneal lining to minimize the chance of postoperative infection
- Torpedo juice or "gilly" (along with phenol solution) served as the sterilizing medium for cleaning the appendiceal stump after clipping

While the patient was being prepped on the table in the wardroom, the CO ordered the Seadragon to a steady depth of 120 feet. The submarine was passing through the Mindoro Strait near the coast of the Philippines at the time. Pharmacist's Mate Lipes boned up quickly on his anatomy by studying the illustrations from a medical textbook. He then gowned (pajamas), gloved (oversized rubber work gloves dipped in alcohol), and stood over his patient with volunteer assistants by his side. The anesthesia was administered at 1046, and Lipes made the four-inch incision in the abdominal wall about 20 minutes later.

While McBurney's point serves as a crude indicator of the position of the appendix in most patients, it is not an infallible guide. In a small number of individuals, the appendix doesn't hang down from the base of the colon; instead, it curls up toward the liver behind the colon. As described in his oral history, Lipes made this discovery of the so-called "retrocecal" appendix the hard way during his first and only appendectomy:

When I got to the appendix, it wasn't there … I slipped my finger down under the cecum … and felt it there. Suddenly I understood why it hadn't popped up where I could see it. I turned the cecum over. The appendix … looked gangrenous two-thirds of the way. What luck, I thought. My first one (appendectomy) couldn't be easy.

The operation concluded at 1322 as Lipes threw his last stitch on the skin incision. The patient awakened shortly before 1400. The three-hour operation was a complete success. Rector recovered from his illness very quickly, and the incision healed nicely.

From the Chapter "Christening Through the Ages"

Christening—the ceremony of naming a ship and blessing it before launch—represents one of the Navy's most venerable rituals. Even in this age of 5G wireless communications, robotics, space travel, organ transplantation, and, yes, super-sophisticated nuclear submarines—christening stands apart as a timeless tradition. Let's examine the origins of this practice, discuss some of the specifics of the US Navy ceremony, and highlight a few of the more memorable christening events during the submarine era.
The origins of christening a ship for good luck and safe travel may be traced back to the earliest days of sailing. Consider this Babylonian poem describing the completion of a new ship:

Openings to the water I stopped;
I searched for cracks, and the wanting parts I fixed;
Three sari of bitumen I poured over the outside;
To the gods I caused oxen to be sacrificed.

The Greeks and Romans spilled water or wine on the decks of their new ships to appease the wrath of the gods. Certain other cultures relied upon a more barbaric protocol to earn the blessing of the spirits governing the seas; the Polynesians and the Norse performed human sacrifices during launch, based on

the conviction that only human blood spilled beneath the hull could assure the ship and crew of long life (at least for them).

During the Renaissance, the ceremony in the Western world took on a far tamer tone. For example, 17th-century British ships were christened by a presiding official taking a sip of wine from a ceremonial cup and then pouring the remainder of the cup's contents on the deck. Red wine was withdrawn from the list of beverages chosen for this task after repeated objections from the Catholic Church (based upon the unintended similarity of christening to the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist). By the 19th century, water, champagne and white wine had emerged as the primary choices for christening in Europe and North America.

In the US Navy, the first recorded warship christening occurred in Boston in October 1797 with the launch of "Old Ironsides", the USS Constitution. Perhaps as a harbinger of things to come, the proceedings did not transpire without a hitch. The ship's sponsor, Captain James Sever, attempted twice to dislodge the ship from her ways (and down into the drink) with what was customary at that time—a bottle of water. Frustrated by his lack of success, Sever substituted a valuable bottle of Madeira donated from the cellar of a prominent Boston merchant for his third swing. Upon striking the bow with the wine bottle, the Constitution slid immediately into the water, and a new American tradition was born: simple water was no longer considered suitable for christening ceremonies.

The practice of enlisting a woman to "sponsor" a new ship also became commonplace by the 19th century. The practice amplified upon a longstanding tradition of feminizing a ship's identity; in other words, the rationale for why we refer to a boat as "she". Choosing a female to symbolically give birth to a seagoing vessel through the act of christening was a natural extension of the near universal concept of motherhood as an innately protective force. Such a gender-based belief was thought to favorably influence the gods and inoculate the ship and crew from harm. The first female sponsor of a US Navy vessel was Miss Lavinia Fanning Watson, the daughter of a prominent Philadelphia businessman. She christened the sloop-of-war USS Germantown in August 1846 by breaking a bottle of white wine over the bow.

Originally the bottle of spirits was broken against the ship's bow without any safety enhancements. A British christening in the 19th century was marred by an injury when the champagne bottle slipped from the sponsor's hand while swinging and plunked a bystander in the head. A simple lanyard was added to the bottle to prevent such a mishap from recurring. Also, the striking of the bow by the bottle of spirits was supposed to coincide with the release of the boat from its position on the ways, as if the impact of the bottle had miraculously awakened the boat to movement. As we shall see, the timing of these two events was not always perfectly choreographed.

Two additional modifications to the champagne bottle were adopted. First, the bottle was placed inside a protective mesh sleeve that allowed liquid but not glass shards to be sprayed in the immediate vicinity of the ship's bow upon breakage. Second, the bottle itself was prepared in advance by scoring it in several locations to weaken the glass and maximize the likelihood of a successful strike by the sponsor. This trick yielded mixed results, but it certainly made the sponsor's job easier—as First Lady Bess Truman found out the hard way during an unexpectedly challenging launch ceremony in 1945.

With her husband, President Harry Truman, looking on with quiet amusement, the First Lady swung a champagne bottle over and over again against the nose of one of the naval ambulance planes she was attempting to christen. There were both winces and snickers in the small crowd as Mrs. Truman's repeated smacks registered loud metallic thuds but no champagne spray. Not wishing to witness further futility, a helpful worker came up on the platform and held the claw of his hammer against the plane, giving Mrs. Truman a sharpened target to aim for. Meanwhile, a Navy official had fetched a second

bottle of champagne. With the assistance of both men, the First Lady's next swing was true, the bottle finally burst, and the two planes were duly christened.

The first submarine of the US Navy, the USS Holland (SS-1), entered into the fleet in 1900. However, the boat had originally been christened as the Holland VI at Elizabethport, NJ, in May 1897. The wife of the shipyard owner, Mrs. Lewis Nixon, served as the new boat's sponsor. She broke a bottle of wine over her bow just before the last timber was pulled away on the ways, and the boat slid down into the Arthur Kill, the tidal strait separating New Jersey from Staten Island. A paragraph from the New York Times account of the historic launch, published the day after the launch, was eerily prescient:

Few boats built in recent years have attracted so much attention among naval officers as the Holland. If she proves a success, she might render the great floating forts of the nations useless, for she has the most powerful weapon of all means of destruction, the torpedo, combined with the most effective of all armors, being invisible and traveling, when in action, beneath the water.

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