

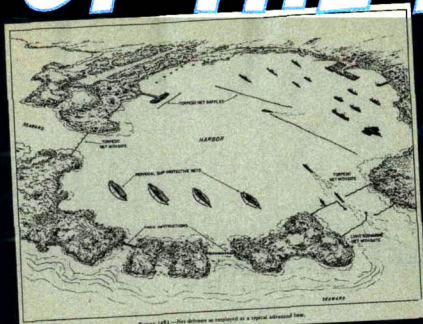
Few knew what they did and even fewer knew why. They labored around the clock performing the most underrated of all wartime tasks — protecting warships at anchor by keeping the harbor defenses secure

# THE BOOM BOYS:

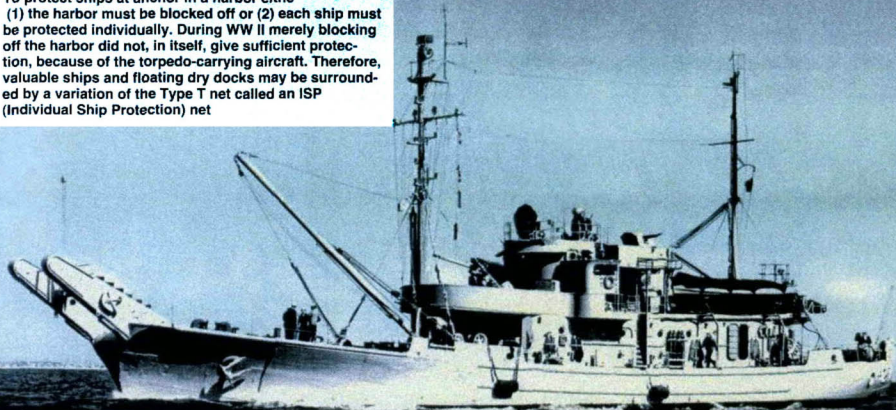
## UNSUNG HEROES OF THE NET NAVY

BY BURKE WILKINSON

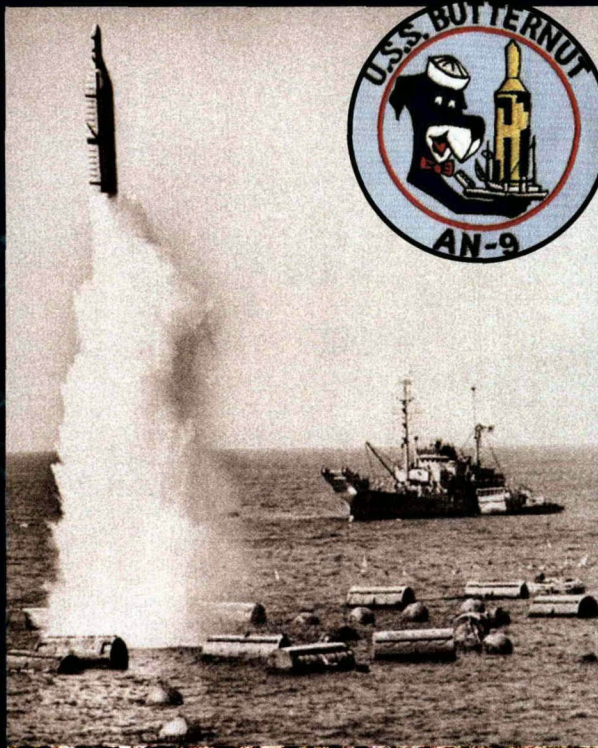
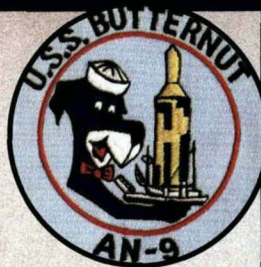
**T**he “Net and Boom Boys,” as they liked to be called, were undoubtedly less well-known than any branch of the Navy. An aura of mystery surrounded their very presence for they manned odd-looking ships with horns on their bows; ships that had that scruffy look of lots of wear and tear even though few aboard the warships they helped to protect knew what they did and why they did it. They were the men of the “Net Navy” — a select group of rugged individualists whose sole unheralded purpose was to open, close, rig, and maintain the underwater steel nets that prevented enemy ships and submarines from sneaking into a vulnerable Fleet anchorage.



To protect ships at anchor in a harbor either (1) the harbor must be blocked off or (2) each ship must be protected individually. During WW II merely blocking off the harbor did not, in itself, give sufficient protection, because of the torpedo-carrying aircraft. Therefore, valuable ships and floating dry docks may be surrounded by a variation of the Type T net called an ISP (Individual Ship Protection) net



USS *Mulberry* (YN/AN-27) fought the Pacific War, downing four planes and helping to snare a Japanese submarine, then spent 5-yrns operating out of Yokosuka until 1955. She retired in 1960 and transferred in 1965 to become the Ecuadorian Navy's *Orion*.



USS *Butternut* (AN-9), one of the longer-serving ANs, is seen here overseeing Pacific missile tests in 1963. She stayed active until 1969, was stricken in 1971. Twenty-five steel-hulled war-built ANs served the Navy well into the Vietnam era. Several transferred to Allied Navies, and a few became merchantmen.

That they manned strange-looking horn-bowed vessels heightened the isolation most of the crews felt. The flagship of the Net Navy was the AN-class net layer; a ship so unusual in appearance that its oddity heighten-ed the sense of seperateness its crews enjoyed.

John Singer Sargent once defined a portrait as a picture of someone with something wrong with the mouth. The net layer is a ship with something wrong with the nose, for her bow is formed by two steel horns of great size and strength which look like a drawbridge in a constant state of elevation. A modern cruiser with her raked bow, or a straight-stemmed destroyer, cuts the water with marvelous grace. But the split-nosed net layer seems to

just muddle along, a thing of harbors and river mouths.

Yet the World War II record reveals some surprising facts. Besides their regular duties, net layers crossed oceans many times, shot down enemy planes, carried out depth charge attacks, salvaged aircraft, transported raiding parties, and towed damaged ships to port. In the words of one Navy man with 20-years experience at sea, they were "the most useful and versatile of all minor Navy craft."

Originally, the net layers were known as net tenders and bore the designation of YNs — Y being the identification of District or "Yard" craft, N for Nets. YN-1, *Aloe*, was launched in 1940. By late 1943, the designation was officially changed to AN, A for

Fleet Auxiliary, N for Nets. This was in recognition of the fact that — as the Pacific War rolled northward — their primary duties lay with the Fleet. In many assaults, such as at Iwo Jima and Okinawa, the ANs installed their offshore net defenses while the shore itself was still in enemy hands. The name net tender was also changed to net layer at this time, but the former name has a way of clinging.

The 90-odd ANs in commission during the war closely resembled the original steel-hulled *Aloe* in silhouette and function. Their length was a 150-ft and displacement 700-tons (in the later stages of the war, for economy's sake, the net layers were of wooden construction, with somewhat increased length and tonnage). Normal complement was four officers and 44 crew. The strange horns were — and are — as vital to the AN as wings are to a plane. Over the horns run winch wires. The horns supply the purchase angle which facilitates the lowering and recovery of heavy gear.

The job of installing these massive net and boom defenses under the hazards of modern warfare and the age-old ones of wind and tide was a difficult and at times a dangerous one. And yet, because of its unusual proboscis, the net layer, like *Cyrano de Bergerac*, became the butt of considerable fun. Back in 1940 when those first sturdy craft were put in commission, *Franklin P. Adams'* column in the *New York Post* printed a poem about them which ran in part:

*Teaberry, Pepperwood, Teak  
and Yew*

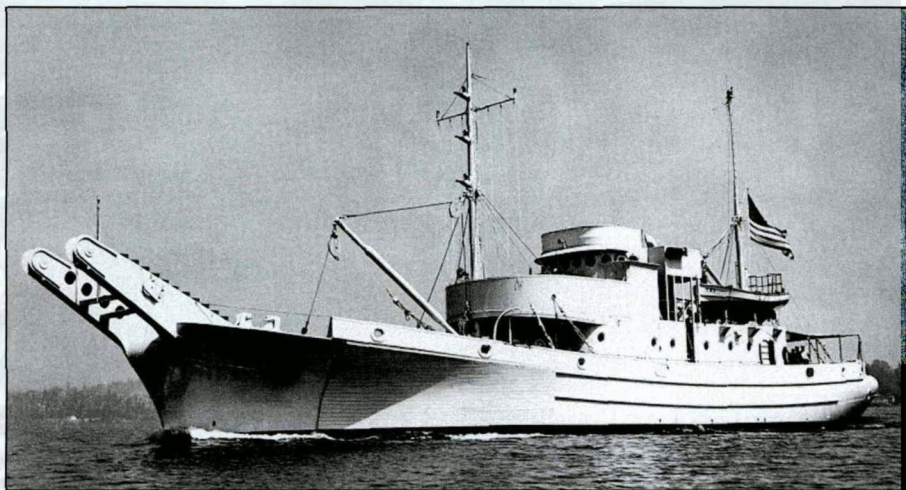
*Will sail away with a  
nautical crew —*

*With a boom-a-lay boom for the  
boom net tenders,  
Hip hooray for our  
port's defenders!*

*Pepperwood, Teaberry, Yew  
and Teak,*

*Tight ships all with nary a leak —  
Sing boom, boom, boom for the  
boom net tenders,  
Yo-ho for protection each  
ship renders!*

The fact that the vessels were named for trees and shrubs of



The 152-foot horn-bowed USS *Boxwood* (YN-3) of 1940 was one of 32 steel-hulled net tenders procured in 1940/1941. Rated at 560-tons light displacement, they were known as the *Tree*-class powered by 1000-hp diesel electric engines giving them a top speed of 14-kts. The horn-bowed booms combined with a powerful winch gave them immense leverage in being able to raise and lower heavy steel anti-submarine nets strung across harbor entrances worldwide.

course contributed to this lighthearted state of affairs. All the early ships had familiar names like those in the poem. But as the tribe increased, the names grew more exotic: *Cliff Rose*, *Satinwood*, *Canotia*, *Manchineel*. Webster defines the last name as "a poisonous tropical American tree having a blistering milky juice." The breaking point came when one of the new ANs was nominated *Gingko*. The Japanese origin of this tree, plus its *Madame Butterfly* and *Mikado* associations, prompted a request by net officers, through channels, for a reconsideration. The Bureau of Personnel, which names all new ships, countered with *Mastic*, "a small Mediterranean evergreen tree."

Despite these leafy patronymics, and the mild levity associated with their horned craft, AN skippers and their crews became a respected part of the Dungeness Navy. From one celebrated invasion outpost in the South Pacific came the following casual evidence of how the groundwork for that respect was laid:

*We've been up here since the beginning, and, though the tactical situation was such that we couldn't lay nets, we got into the thick of the battle. We had a good time even if we weren't netting. I think we are the only net group that has helped capture the*

*place they are to net. We took Marines on raiding parties, charted most of the north coast of Guadalcanal, unloaded ships, placed moorings and aids to navigation...*

Net layers showed that they had teeth as well as horns. One alert AN shot down a Jap Zero at Pearl Harbor. Another winged two enemy planes in the South Pacific. These planes had dive-bombed a Navy oiler on the other side of a small island and were just pulling out of their dive. They either did not see the AN tied up at the dock, or did not suspect her fire power. Two bursts sufficed to show them their fatal mistake.

The US Navy did not underrate the part net defenses played. Hundreds of officers and thousands of enlisted men were engaged in the backbreaking, unglamorous task of netting harbors. The WWII anti-submarine and anti-torpedo nets were extremely heavy and, popular belief to the contrary, they could not be slung between palm trees on opposite banks.

This is as good a point as any to describe the basic differences between these two types of defense. The anti-submarine net (A/S) was a panel of steel wire woven in 8-ft square sections. In harbors, it usually hung surface-to-bottom, unless the depths were extremely great, and it was

designed to snare any submarine that sought entrance to the harbor. During WWII, as the threat of small submarines and human torpedoes increased, the size of the sections was reduced to 4-ft.

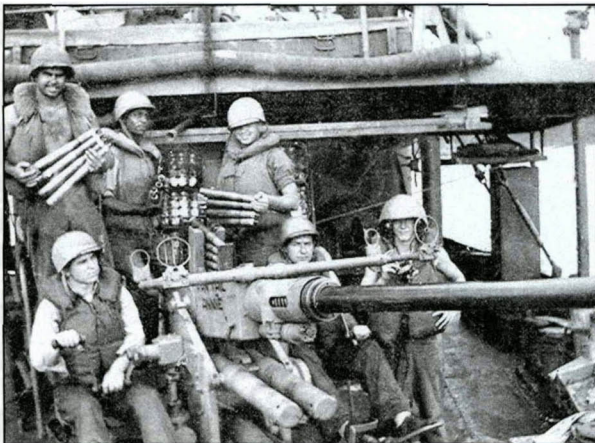
The anti-torpedo net (A/T) consisted of panels of 16-in steel grommets, interwoven like chain mail and designed to detonate or intercept the torpedo before it could reach the target area — harbor, fleet anchorage, or individual ship. Because of its great weight, its depth was rarely more than the 40-ft necessary to protect the deepest-draft vessels, but anti-submarine skirt nets could be suspended below it to give complete protection. The powerful linked-steel grommets of the A/T net also afforded full anti-submarine protection, so it could function as an all-purpose net in shallow harbors. The A/T and A/S moorings which had to absorb the shock of the attacker were ponderous affairs. When a net layer was completely "dressed" to lay a line of these moorings, she looked like some weird new type of Christmas tree. Three-ton iron anchors hung between her horns. Lengths of 2-in chain were faked down on her fore deck, ready for running. Great yellow flotation buoys were suspended outboard, festooned with cable and manila line. It took a nice skill in seamanship to position

the ship exactly on the spot where this mass of material was to be dropped. Nor was it easy to back down on the correct bearing as tons of gear went overboard from bow to quarters.

To the outsider or new recruit, the technique of net laying was a mystery. It seemed to consist entirely of dropping these heavy anchors, buoys and chain, then picking them up part way and dropping them over again. But the stakes were high. A parted sling or shackle spelled tragedy. On the other hand, speed, and accuracy in laying might snare dangerous game — steel “fish” or submarines or eel-like sneak craft, destruction-bent.

The principal requirements of a net officer or rating were seamanship and

agility. The countless odd jobs the ANs carried out successfully, over and above their net duties, testified to the seamanship of their officers and crews. Seamanship of the “marlin-spike” kind, dealing with blocks and tackles, knots and splicing, was vital to the enlisted man. Agility was useful to one and all when anchors were released and the heavy chain started running crazily between the horns. Some learned the hard way. One AN skipper, after tangling with a shot of running chain at a remote assignment, found it increasingly difficult to carry out his duties on the bridge. Only after he made port some days later did he discover that a broken leg was the principal cause of his slowdown.



*Chinqualpin's* (AN-17) 40mm gunners shot down three Japanese planes at Okinawa. The net tenders performed a wide variety of duties at Okinawa, namely rescuing



The Navy operated several freighters to transport the heavy chain-linked anti-submarine nets muscled into position by the net tenders and small tugs. USS *Keokuk* (AKN-4) was built in 1914. Other net transports were Liberty ships specially converted for the role.

While the net layers were the capital ships of the Net Navy, many other types of craft did yeoman service. In the later stages of the war the AKN served as a kind of floating net depot, operating with the Fleet. The AKNs were converted merchantmen for the most part but one, *Terror*, was a former minelayer. A stood for Fleet Auxiliary, K for Cargo and N for nets. Pontoon barges, buoy boats, motor launches, and even whale boats, had their uses. Give your net man almost any craft with a little open space and good power (horse or man), and he'd go fishing. Ingenuity and improvisation were, in fact, words that bulked large in the net business. “Lay the best you can with what you've got — or can steal,” summed up the realistic code of the net officer.

These officers learned their trade in Naval Net Training Schools on the East and West Coasts. One of these schools was located at Melville, Rhode Island, and the other at Tiburon, in San Francisco Bay. Their official *curricula* were complete with *Jujitsu* and geopolitics and all the myriad matters a young officer should know. In actual fact, classroom work was kept to a minimum. The job in hand was to learn to lay nets, and there was only one way to do it — by laying them.

In 1940, Melville was a Naval Fuel Depot notable chiefly for its mint patch and the excellent fishing in the government-stocked ponds. Two retired ferry boats were tied up for all time at one of the piers, and rabbits overran the station. Soon all was changed. Melville became a great gash in the flank of green Aquidneck Island. On a concrete slab 2-mi long, scores of men wove nets for far harbors.

Towering piles of net material presented vistas from a Jules Verne world. The two ferry boats disappeared, one of them back in harness for duration. In the pleasant reaches of Narragansett Bay, the practice in laying and recovery of nets went endlessly on, summer and winter, in sun or rain, fog or sleet. The grunt of cranes, the hiss of the welding torch, and the occasional muffled roar of running chain filled the air. The rabbits soon fled to greener ground.

*Tiburon*, too, mushroomed in a short time. San Francisco Bay, with its swift currents and good depths, made an excellent classroom.

The first day I saw Melville, the gash was mostly mud. I had just finished the Navy's “90-day-wonder

course" for deck officers, only we had been rushed through in 60-days because of the need in the South Pacific. That was in the bad time, in early 1942. But instead of South Pacific duty, I received no delay orders to Melville, and at the same time was informed by the Commanding Officer of the school that my mission was both secret and highly important.

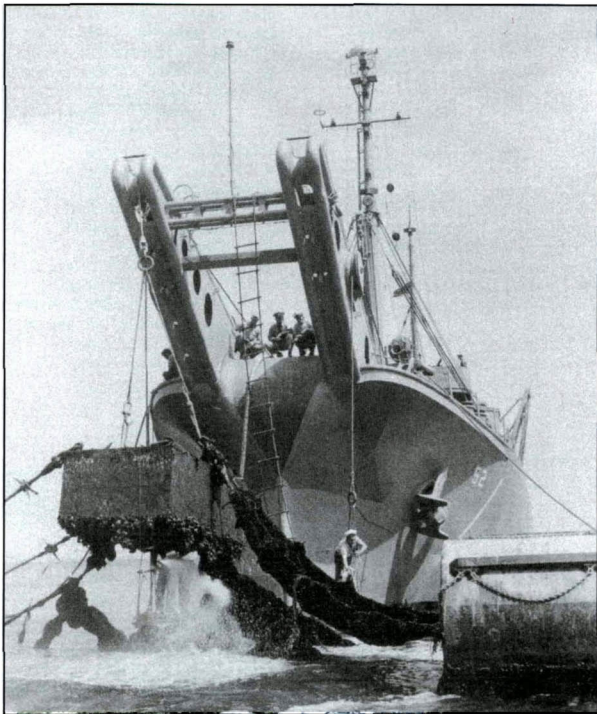
Early one Spring morning, I reported at the Security Office on the main road above Melville. I had read that it was desirable for an officer to wear whites on reporting to his new CO. Fresh from school and anxious to do the correct thing, I had my whites in the top of my suitcase and my calling card easily available. The Security Officer, who answered to the remarkable name of De Persia, greeted me sleepily.

"Do you think I should wear my whites in reporting to Capt. Brown?" I asked nervously.

De Persia sighted down the sea of mud to where the Net Depot lay along its great concrete slab.

"I don't believe that will be necessary," said De Persia, with an odd little grin on his face, as he logged me in. It wasn't. For the next three-months a dozen of us, hand-picked for this hazardous duty, learned the net business the hard way. We wove anti-submarine panels on the .2-mi-long slab under a broiling sun, twisting the heavy steel-wire cables into squares and clamping them with metal crosspieces. We "streamed" them in the pleasant waters of Narragansett Bay. Then we pulled them out. Then we wove more nets, and envied the boys in the shooting war, as the news of Coral Sea and Midway filtered back.

Many members of early net classes in pre-Pearl Harbor days were old-timers back in service, "mustangs" up from the ranks and merchant skippers, men who could gauge a crane's strength at a glance and gentle a ship to her berth without nicking her paint job. But these men grew harder to come by. Later classes were a cross section of American college men. My own class at Melville included a trial lawyer, concrete salesman, athletic coach, agricultural expert, economist, advertising copy writer, and a brace of life insurance salesmen. It was typical of American know-how that these new officers, most of them desk-ridden and non-mechanical, learned their strange trade quickly. Yet that very quickness presented a problem, for a little net



USS *Snowbell* (AN-52) was one of the larger 194-ft wooden-hulled *Ailanthus*-class net tenders of 1942 rated at 1058-tons light load. Very similar to the all-steel *Tree*-class, they too carried a single 3-in/50, three 20mm, four .50-cal machine guns and one 40mm gun. Net tenders were named for woods of various types. The power of their booms made them excellent all-around salvage vessels, a role they frequently performed in the midst of combat actions.



USS *Yazoo* (AN-92) was a 168-ft *Cohoes*-class AN commissioned in March 1945, decommissioned in May 1962, and scrapped in 1975. Assigned to Naval Service Squadrons these work-a-day ships and their hard-working crews were considered part of the esteemed "Dungaree Navy."



A good side view of USS *Butternut* showing the variety of deck gear that was their stock and trade. Their forward boom was rated at 12-tons lifting capacity. Originally designated YNs, they were reclassified ANs in December 1942.

learning is a dangerous thing. It is only by constant practice that a healthy respect for the ever-present hazards of net work can be instilled.

## NETS AND BOOMS THROUGH THE AGES

Early in history, man began to cast his nets for human catch. In 42 BC, while investing the Lycian town of Xanthus, Marcus Brutus found that some of the Xanthians were trying to escape by "swimming and diving." Brutus put an end to this by letting down into the channel a number of nets which "had little bells at the top to give notice when anyone was taken in them." The use of chain booms for closing harbors can be traced back to the 14th Century. A "mighty chaine of yron" was forged in 1522 to close the harbor of Portsmouth. An old plan shows the chain across the harbor mouth, buoyed by three lighters to support its vast weight.

In 1667, when the Dutch Admiral de Ruyter was goading the slumbering British lion, the Duke of Albemarle rigged a chain across the Medway to protect the British fleet. Below it he sank two blockships. A small shore battery at each end, and two ships of the line above, covered the obstruction. De Ruyter, unabashed, sent a fireship at the chain. She broke through and fastened herself alongside one of the covering vessels.

The vessel promptly caught fire and blew up. De Ruyter, however, failed to follow up his advantage.

Until modern times, these massive harbor defenses were more impressive than effective. One such boom, slung across the River Foyle at Londonderry in 1689 to prevent relief of the beleaguered garrison from seaward, so impressed the relieving force that they waited weeks for reinforcements. Finally, with a merchantman in the lead, the assault was made — and the boom was broken at the first attempt.

A few years later, Adm. Rooke of the British Fleet overruled his staff, who considered the Spanish boom at Vigo Bay impregnable. It consisted of masts, chain, cables, and casks, stoutly anchored. A French and Spanish fleet lay within this defense. Admiral Rooke wrote in his journal that he examined the entrance and "the more I looked, the more I liked it, for I saw the passage was .5-mi wide, so that it was impossible a boom of that length could be of any strength." With a strong favoring wind and some difficulty, his ships parted the boom and hacked their way through the remnants. Every enemy ship within was either destroyed or taken. That was in 1702, when the British lion was roaring again.

During the American Revolution, a heavy chain cable was placed across the Hudson at West Point to

keep the British downstream. Links of this massive chain are still prized by collectors.

With the advent of the torpedo late in the 19th Century, the task of harbor defenses acquired a new dimension. Previously only surface, or boom, protection to keep vessels beyond firing range was required. Now underwater defense-in-depth to snag this new weapon came into being. At first, the "steel fish" won. No nets could be devised capable of absorbing the impact of this vicious, headlong weapon. Toward the end of the first war, anti-torpedo nets did begin to come into their own. But peace came before they had much chance to prove their worth.

The anti-submarine net was, however, widely used in WWI. The British strung 600-mi of steel netting across 85 of their harbors and bases all over the world. Only one submarine attack — and that abortive — against this form of defense is recorded.

During the fat '20s and the lean years that followed them, the British continued to experiment on boom defenses with some success. The word "boom" in British terminology includes protection against both surface and underwater attack. The men who tended the highly efficient nets in England during WWII were affectionately known as "Boom Boys."

Come hell, high water or strafing planes, the Boom Boys did their unsung job, sealing the harbors of the nook-shotten isle and her Dominions.

There were, as we have seen, several widely publicized attacks on net defenses during WWII. One was the Japanese midget submarine operation at Pearl Harbor. The most celebrated penetrations of harbors were made by Gunther Prien at Scapa and by Luigi De La Penne and his fellow frogmen at Alexandria.

In defense of the Boom Boys, it should be noted that special circumstances existed in each instance — at Scapa, the installation was incomplete; at Alexandria, the attackers had the remarkable good fortune of riding through the gate with the returning British destroyers; at Gibraltar, the use of a supposedly neutralized tanker as mother ship for a brood of human torpedoes was an improbable situation to say the least.

Less well known is the story of the German U-boat which coolly surfaced off the small West Indian harbor of Barbados one summer day in 1942. She fired six torpedoes at the merchantmen within. Either the captain did not see the line of AT nets between him and his victims or, in his arrogance, could not believe that so modest-appearing a barrier could thwart him. Five torpedoes exploded harmlessly in the net, far wide of their mark. The sixth penetrated through a gap made by one of the other five. It hit the stern of a cargo vessel, without

great damage to her. In this one unprofitable episode, the U-boat wasted a good part of her lethal load to little purpose, and her voyage of destruction was cut short.

Naturally enough, the task of destroying enemy nets and booms was dramatized far more than the endless job of laying and maintaining them. The old fourstacker *Dallas*, for example, received the Presidential Unit Citation:

*...for outstanding participation in the capture of Port Lyautey, French Morocco, 10 November 1942. The Dallas, crossing a treacherous bar against heavy surf, broke through a steel cable boom obstructing the channel, forced her course 10-mi upstream under heavy fire, and successfully landed troops without material damage or loss of life.*

In the same campaign, the late Capt. Frederick Peters of the Royal Navy led two ex-US Coast Guard cutters in a spectacular dash into Oran. He received the Victoria Cross for knifing through the boom there.

The 53-yr-old skipper (reported the *New York Herald Tribune*), led the *Walney* and the *Hartland* to their objectives through point-blank fire of shore batteries, a destroyer, and a cruiser. He was the only man of 17 on the bridge of his flagship who survived. His ship, the *Walney*, rammed the ship, sank the destroyer, attacked the cruiser, and reached the

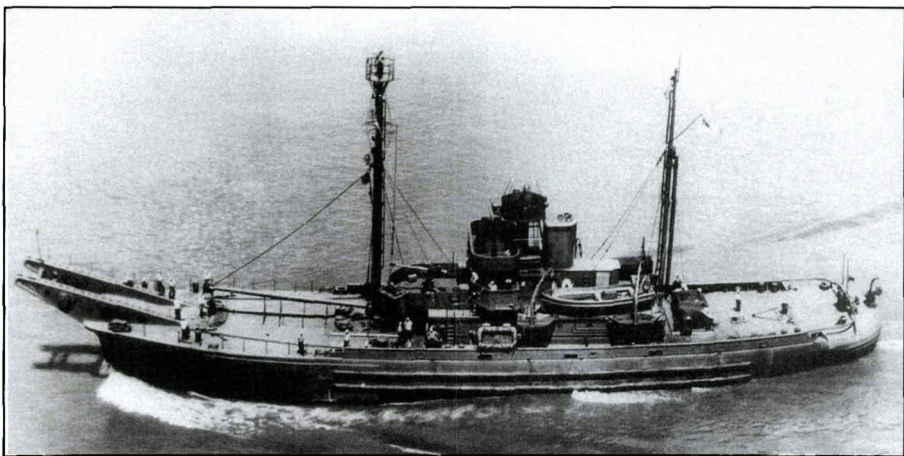
jetty, but was disabled and ablaze and went down with colors flying.

Captain Peters was killed a month later in a plane crash.

In such gallant deeds the face of danger was very clear and bright. But it took courage, too, of a dogged kind, to do the job our net layers and their motley flotillas of small craft did. The men of the Net Navy viewed their relative obscurity philosophically. Their trade had its own satisfactions. They knew that the protection they supplied gave breathing space to capital ships, which could safely relax behind net defenses. They knew that every torpedo they snagged played a part in shortening the war. They took pride in their ships, and in hard work well done.

Yet their task was never really finished. Once installed, net and boom defenses had to be vigilantly serviced; steel corroded, buoys leaked, moorings dragged. The nets themselves acquired matted coats of sea growth up to a foot thick. Maintenance had to go on in all kinds of weather. When gales swept in and heavy seas piled up, the danger of being washed overboard was added to that of being crushed by falling weights or trapped in a net and carried to the bottom.

Almost unnoticed, the net layers went about their business, picking 'em up and laying 'em down, Navy style. In the wind-blown Aleutians and the gleaming ports of the Mediterranean, the sturdy little ships did their part. They sowed their strange crops off



A good view of the all-wood *Alanthus*-class USS *Stagbush* (AN-69). The wooden-hulled vessels saw heavy use in WWII and were quickly retired at war's end. Note that some later versions had their main deck gun relocated aft of the bridge.



The last class of ANs built in WWII were the steel-hulled *Cohoes*-class in 1944/1945. They were 168-ft LOA and were rated at 560-tons with 1000-shp diesels. ANs carried wartime crews of from 48 to 60 men, depending on their gunnery requirements. Here, class leader *Cohoes* (ANL-78) is seen lifting a sunken 50-ft LCM. They carried hull numbers AN-78 to 92.

coral reefs and in the ice-green waters of the North Atlantic. And the morale of the men was strong, their hope for a harvest of steel and blood was always high. For, as we used to say in the Navy, the net business was booming.

After the end of the war, in October of 1945, the United States Navy decided to see what would happen if a submarine actually did try to ram its way through a net defense. Three sections of net were accordingly laid in a restricted area off Block Island and a Fleet-type submarine ordered to attempt penetration at full underwater speed. According to slide-rule calculations, even were she to become completely fouled she could bring the whole underwater installation to the surface if she blew her tanks. And, on the other hand, by the thrust of her powerful bow she might burst her way through.

She charged the net, fully submerged and at full speed. The

headlong thrust parted the grommets of the net, which scraped and dragged along her deck. From the forward torpedo room several of us who were covering the trials as observers could hear the net skittering along the deck above us. When the net reached the deck gun, the forward motion of the submarine was brought to a halt. The grommets snared the deck gun and other deck installations in such a way that the submarine was held like a rat in a trap. She blew, and carried the whole net panel to the surface with her as we had expected her to. No one, except perhaps the skipper of the submarine, was as relieved as I was when our calculations proved to be correct.

It took many hours with a cutting torch to free the snared submarine. So now we knew by first-hand evidence that our harbors really could be sealed from submarine attack.

No such attack took place in WWII, to my knowledge. There were attempts to follow ships through open gates, or to slither around net defenses, but no frontal attack on a fully netted harbor. At Port Castries on the Caribbean island of Santa Lucia, a German submarine did actually enter the harbor at night, surfaced and fired two torpedoes, one of which was a perfect shot at the stern of *Lady Nelson*, and the second hit a merchantman amidships. Then she backed out with .30-cal fire from the shore clicking like sparks on her casing, and made her getaway. But Port Castries was not netted until after the raid, which took place in March of 1942.

The Net Navy is history now; the horn-bowed ships long ago scrapped as advances in underwater detection technology did away with their need. Although few today remember the important role they played, the men who manned the antisubmarine net ships of the wartime harbors fully deserve to be honored for their dedication to a vital, but unsung aspect of the greatest sea war in history. **SC**

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