Our Ocean Backyard

Gary Griggs

Article No. 393

A submarine on Sunset State Beach

On the morning of October 11, 1912, a visitor to the shoreline at what is now Sunset State Beach, due west from Watsonville, would have witnessed a sight never seen before or since. A United States Navy submarine known simply as USS F-1, was aground on her side just off the beach in shallow water. There were three submarines there on that day, F-1, F-2 and F-3, but only F-1 was stranded on the beach. The three vessels were anchored at what was then Port Watsonville, a short-lived pier, when on the early morning of October 11, heavy seas, not that uncommon at this location, snapped the anchor cable and washed the submarine onto the shoreline. It took eight days until a U.S. Navy battleship and two tugboats were finally able to break her free and tow her to Mare Island Naval Shipyard in San Francisco bay for repairs. Seventeen members of the crew were rescued , but two men unfortunately fell overboard and drowned in the incident.

There were actually two piers built at this location in the early years of the last century in an effort to give Watsonville its own port and access to the sea. Both suffered the same fate, however. In 1903 a 1,300-foot-long pier was completed, but heavy seas destroyed it within its first year. Eight years later a longer pier was built at the same location. This second pier was given the name Port Watsonville and was where the three submarine were anchored in 1912.

The USS F-1 was built by the Union Iron Works in San Francisco and was launched on September 6, 1911, and commissioned on June 19, 1912. This was fairly early in the submarine history of the U.S. Navy, with the first submarine in the Navy commissioned on April 1, 2000.

Following commissioning the F-1 was assigned to the impressive sounding First Submarine Group, Pacific Torpedo Flotilla. She was still undergoing trials and tests through January 1913 when she joined the flotilla for training between San Pedro and the San Diego Submarine Base. The beaching incident at Sunset Beach took place while the vessel was still in its shakedown period.

Her career was rather short, however, due to a more serious and deadly disaster that occurred during the World War I years. On December 17, 1917, F-1, F-2 and F-3 were in a training run between San Pedro Bay and La Jolla, about 82 miles to the south. This exercise included a number of maneuvers to test the stamina of the crew as well as the ship and her capabilities. On this particular morning the three companion submarines were to make a run abreast of each other to the south from San Pedro at about 10 knots (11 miles per hours) and when they reached the La Jolla light, they were to reverse course and head back to San Pedro. This was to be repeated three times, taking a total of about 48 hours.

Their formation had gotten a little ragged during the run south, however, and it had also gotten dark. While they were at the surface with running lights on, they began to run into a thick fog. Even though the three ships were not far apart, they were operating independently and were no longer running in formation. Each was to report to the others any changes in speed and course heading.

However, in their independent maneuvers in the fog to reverse course a problem had ensued. The radio message from F-1 reporting a change in course was evidently not received by either of the other two vessels. In the fog and confusion of course changes, F-3 finally saw through the fog that they were on a direct collision course with F-1. While attempts were made by both vessels to change their courses and avert an accident, F-3 struck F-1 on the port (left) side between the control and engine rooms. This impact punched a three-foot-wide by ten-foot-high hole in the upper hull of F-1. The ship rolled to starboard (right side), throwing the four men who were on the bridge into the water. F-3 reversed engines to pull out of the hole they had created, which caused the now severely damaged F-1 to roll back to port and to begin taking on seawater rapidly. One man in the conning tower was able to climb out through the flood of incoming water, but those below deck couldn’t open the hatch to get out because of the pressure of the water.

While the five men at the surface were rescued the 19 sailors below deck went down with the submarine in 635 feet of water and became the first U.S. Navy wartime submarine loss. In October 1975, a U.S. Navy oceanographic vessel was using new sonar equipment in the area searching for an F-J4 airplane that was known to have crashed in the ocean off Point Loma. Their side scan sonar picked up what appeared to be a submarine. On closer inspection they were able to positively identify the F-1 in remarkably good shape, with a hole in its side still clearly visible, 58 years later.

