

USS Skate (SSN578) Romancing the Bottom

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By Otis Franks, CWO USN Retired **My Recollections of the event:**

The USS Skate (SSN578) was transiting from Key West Florida to Norfolk VA in the Fall of 1962. While enroute, the Operational orders were given to enter the Chesapeake Bay without observation by Task Group Alpha, a specialty Aircraft Carrier Task force designed to find and destroy enemy submarines. Task Group Alpha was relatively inexperienced in detecting nuclear subs such as the Skate during this time. The orders were to have no transmissions that would give our position away. This included all active Sonar and the Fathometer, a depth to the seabed from keel finding device.

The transit was largely with the gulfstream flow, giving the sub a four-knot advantage while paralleling the Atlantic coastline. I was the Chief of the Watch and Diving Officer. Lt. Wesley E. Hewitt was the Officer of the Deck (OOD) and Conning Officer. Lt. Rod Wolfe was the Junior OOD. The transit to this point was routine. The boat's depth at 600 feet, with a speed close to 20 knots (approximately 25 miles per hour), not counting the gulfstream advantage. In actuality the Skate's speed over the ground was approximately 30 miles per hour.

The time was about 11:30 p.m. and the control room was rigged for red, with no white lights on. This was essential to prevent night blindness to anyone who looks through the periscope or, in case of surfacing, the OOD and bridge lookouts could still retain their night vision. The red lighting is limiting due to its dimness and is slightly eerie.

Timing meant everything to the Skate that night. Due to Navy custom and tradition, watches are relieved fifteen minutes before the hour. Extraordinary events occurred when Navigation First Class Petty Officer Frank A. Calta, a very experienced and qualified Quartermaster, decided, since he was 'up and about', to relieve Quartermaster Second Class C. E. Frost earlier than usual. Frost was the junior Quartermaster on board. He was qualified but required supervision due to his relative inexperience. Calta came to the Control Room navigation table and asked Frost to show him the ship's position on the chart. On the Skate, the Executive Officer was also the Navigator. He had Four Enlisted assistants (Quartermasters). His instructions to them are written in the 'Night Order Book'. Frost pointed to where he thought the sub's position was, approaching the continental shelf via approved submarine sea-lanes off the coast of North Carolina. Calta immediately sized-up the situation and said, "We're going too fast at this depth to not know exactly where we are." He repeated this to the OOD and me while reaching to turn Fathometer's sounding single ping "on." Lt. Hewitt said, "That's been ordered off." Calta said, "I don't care, we're in trouble." Lt. Hewitt concurred with a single ping. The Chart showed about 400 feet under us and the bottom was approaching us fast. Calta switched to continuous run and then to medium range. The bottom was still coming toward us fast.

Just moments before, I had rotated a trainee Bowplanesman into the seat. Yeoman Second Class Fred T. Crickman was the Bowplanesman on watch and trainer. Full rise on both planes was ordered. The trainee bobbled the yoke joystick, so I reached in and pulled the bowplanes controls to full rise. The ship immediately rose to a 35 degree up angle. Calta switched to the shallow range, which switched to scope view. I could see we had only about 25 feet below us. Lt. Hewitt ordered "All back Full." I countered with "Don't ring that up, I need the speed."

The scope showed six feet below the keel, for what seemed an unusually long period of time, but turned out to be just minutes. The air and water manifold operator, Machinist First Class Marshall E. "Ski" Kovalycsik, was chomping at the bit, twice saying you want me to blow? meaning the main ballast tanks. I said "Not now! The fleet is above us." The sub would have popped up like a cork in a bathtub. All the time this was going on, everything shifted into mental slow motion. I expected my face to slam into the diving panel at any time.

The Ship's Captain, Joseph L. Skoog CDR USN, sensed a problem and came out of the Wardroom to the Control Room. He had to pass the Sonar Room door where Sonar Petty Officer Third Class R. J. Higgins stood in the doorway and, due to the steep up angle, dropped his cup of coffee in the passageway to the Control Room.

By now the up-angle had increased to 45 degrees and the Captain slipped and slid on his butt to the Reactor Compartment, colliding with the oncoming Interior Communications Watchstander, First Class Petty Officer Roderick F. Cashes.

I did not see the Captain's downhill slide, but I witnessed the uphill struggle of the Captain pulling himself up, by whatever means available, to the Periscope Stand. At this time I could see more distance between the keel and the bottom and I ordered zero degrees on both planes. We leveled off at about 150 feet depth, then, on Lt. Hewitt's order, proceeded back down to 200 feet leaving a comfortable 200 feet below.

Naturally, the Captain asked a lot of questions to ascertain what went on. The only deviation from emergency procedures was the OOD had failed to sound the collision alarm and it was later agreed upon that it would have only added to the confusion and 'dogged' hatches would not have helped had we "hit the wall."

The Navigator reread his night orders and stated "well I'm covered!" My thoughts were to 'cover' him with blows from my fists. It was his not taking the 'setting ahead' of the gulfstream into consideration that put the ship 20 miles ahead of track and in extremeis.

My relief, Storekeeper Chief Petty Officer Jessie Owens, worked his way through the crowd and graciously took the vital information and took the dive. He sensed the emotional stress I had not shown up to this point. I worked my way to the crew's mess, poured a cup of coffee and started to sip, but my hand was shaking so much I couldn't mate the cup up with my lips.

Soon, Lt. Hewitt came to the crew's mess and asked how I was doing, I was somewhat settled by then. He complimented me on my 'cool headiness' during the emergency. I thanked him for not forcing the back full bell that would have lowered the stern, as it was the engine room watchstanders reported that they felt the rudder drag, I did not feel a drag as I was totally distracted with what was going on. Lt. Hewitt held up the chart strip and, to this day, I can remember the depth tracing.

The Facts emerge:

Rod Wolfe still remembers some of the details of the dive. He said "I don't remember who said what to whom, but, in rapid succession, the Fathometer was put in continuous mode, The OOD ordered, I think, an urgent depth change to 100 feet, maybe full rise on both planes to get us started up smartly and I watched the Fathometer trace on the shallowest scale go to near zero depth under the keel."

"I remember that I wanted to blow the bow buoyancy tank," Kovalycsik said. "I

held off because we had a very good up angle as the loose gear and people were going everywhere."

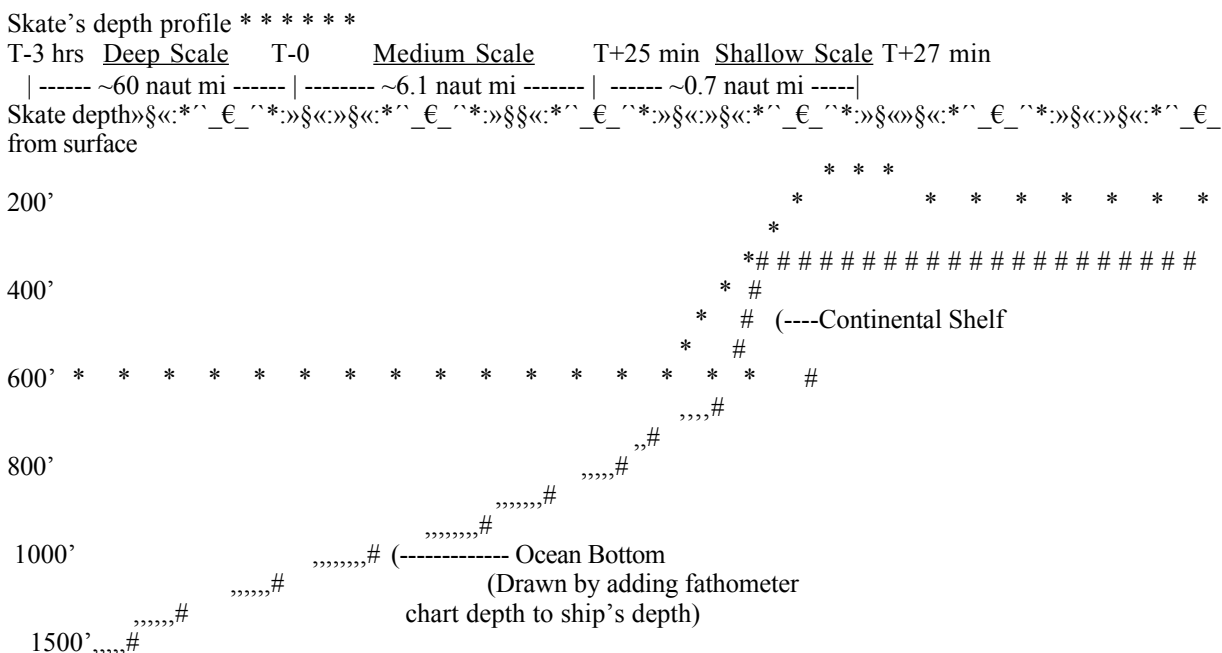
"I was coming to the Control Room to report that I had relieved as the Forward IC Watch when the boat took a sharp up angle," Cashes said. "I ran, slid, rolled, and flopped and saw Chief Franks with the planes in his hands and the OOD standing with his mouth open." Later the Chief Engineer, Lt. Patrick Garner, said that if we had hit we wouldn't have to worry about headaches, because we would have watched the main turbines pass through us on their way to the torpedo room.

Note: This is prophetic since it is exactly what happened during the sinking of the USS Scorpion in 1968, the engine room telescoped into the reactor compartment and control room. Until photos of the wreckage were seen, this model of damage had not been described. Ironically Lcdr. Garner, Executive Officer of the USS Thresher, died during its sinking April 10 1963.

In looking back, both the Navigator and Wes Hewitt were right. The standing orders were to maintain at least 10 feet per knot beneath the keel. All along Hewitt had been monitoring the depth closely and was thinking ahead toward decreasing depth soon. What was wrong? The ten foot per knot guide was simply too low at higher speeds, too permissive. It may have been adequate had the next caution been applied. Project yourself ahead of track from your last fix to the end of your watch using the worst case scenario of tolerances of instrumentation, underwater currents, speed, and direction. In other words, be cautiously pessimistic. Was this observed?

What went right? Everything! Frank Calta brought the urgency to the diving team's attention in a manner that it could not be ignored. A wake-up call. Wes Hewitt ordered Full rise on Both planes and marveled at the speed of response to that order in his subsequent retelling of the event. Can you guess why? Although under control of the Conning Officer, in special circumstances the Diving Officer exercises discretionary authority, I had the planes on full rise at least one second before his order came out of his mouth. (See Depth profile.)

Conceptual Profile View Depth profile.



It turns out that there was no Task Group Alpha above us! That was a convenient cover story. The real test was to the grid of hydrophones and their listener/operators with a clearance of 'Top Secret' plus need to know at that time. However, this did not diminish the concern of surfacing without a clearing sonar sweep for vessels of all sorts, as many are in that area at all times. After full disclosure to the Captain by Lt. Hewitt, followed by a chewing out, Captain Skoog duly made his report in person (without an in-depth inquiry of others present) to the Atlantic Submarine Commander, Vice Admiral "Joe" Grenfeld, who rode Skate to sea the next day.

Let's make it right.

This incident, which within one second would have destroyed Skate and all it's crew, before Thresher and Scorpion, perhaps the wreckage never to be found, an incident that normally would have produced medals and commendations to the shipsavers and lifesavers, was allowed to quietly slip into history. In the end, Frank Calta deserves all the credit for the heads-up by turning the Fathometer to the medium scale. Unfortunately he died in 1988 of lung cancer. He left a widow and two teenage children, without any formal recognition for 'sounding the alarm' that saved us all because, without his actions, the efforts of the rest of the diving team would have been in vain. Others who were there and read this may have a different concept as to what happened that night. Please write it the way you saw it and get it to me. Those who were there and I didn't mention your name; it's because time has erased your names but not your faces. Get in touch so I can 'complete the picture.'



Chief Franks on watch as Skate's Diving Officer, 1962

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