

THE ALCEDO

By Drexel Paul

By

A. J. Drexel Paul

Lieutenant John T. Melvin

James R. Daniel (Sea. 2C)
Allen T. Edwards (Sea. 2C)
Frank W. Fingerling (F 2C)
Charles F. Gaus (Sea. 2C)
Virgil E. Harrington (Ap. Sea.)
Michael A. Picciano (Boiler Mak.)
William W. Smook (Sea. 2C)
Ermons J. Towle (Sea. 2C)
William W. Surratt (Ap. Sea.)
John W. Brunkhardt (Sea.)
William R. Holler (Sea. 2C)
Richard W. Riker (Sea. 2C)
Richard Wesche (Sea. 2C)
James J. Cleary (Sea. 2C)
Edward R. Gozzett (Sea. 2C)
Ernest R. Harrison (M. Att. 1C)
Frank W. Higgins (Yeo. 2C)
Luther O. Weaver (Sea.)
John Winne Jr. (Sea.)
Robert McCray (S.C. 2C)

Lost on the Alcedo

In the Autumn of 1906 I went around the world with Morris Gray, Jr. of Boston. When we arrived at Alexandria, Egypt, we found that my uncle George Drexel was at Port Said on his yacht, the ALCEDO, and he invited us to go with him to India. We had a very interesting trip to Bombay, stopping at places we ordinarily would not have had the opportunity to see: Suakim, Jibuti in French Somaliland, Jedda (The Port to Mohommedan Mecca), and Aden.

In the autumn of 1917, the ALCEDO was the first ship in the United States Navy to be torpedoed and sunk by the Germans. Her record in the Navy was a short one of three months, and during that time I served on her as a Watch and Division Officer.

The ALCEDO was designed by G. L. Watson, was built by D.&W.Henderson & Company, Glasgow, Scotland, and was launched in 1895. Her original name was the VEGLIA. Her dimensions were as follows:

Length Water line	238 feet
Length over all	275 "
Beam	31 "
Depth	13 " 7 inches
Draft	17 "
Net tonnage	388 tons
Gross tonnage	983 "

Shortly after the United States declared war, the Government took over my yacht, DRUSILLA, an 84 foot power boat, as a Patrol Boat. She went through the war as Scout Patrol #375 and did mostly Boarding Duty, that is, boarding steamers and examining their papers. She was based on Cape May, New Jersey.

Frazier Harrison, who had been South with me that winter on the DRUSILLA, and I were given commissions in the Fourth Class of the Reserve Force, Fourth Naval District, on May 14, 1917. I was made a Junior Grade Lieutenant and given command of the DRUSILLA.

We took her to Essington to have her converted into a Patrol Boat, and then reported back to the Philadelphia Navy Yard for duty. We were assigned to patrol the Delaware River front of the Yard, our chief duty

to allow no one to land at the Navy Yard without proper credentials. We would stay on duty twenty-four hours at a time, patrolling all night, but standing by at a Pier during the day.

Lieutenant-Commander W. T. Coan, U.S.N., came over to us one day to tell us he had been given command of the *ALCEDO* and was to see foreign service. He was looking for officers, and Harrison and I both volunteered to go with him. It was by chance, therefore, that I found myself an officer on the *ALCEDO*.

Several days after this, she passed us on the river on her way to New York, very much changed in appearance from the last time I had seen her in 1906. She was now painted gray and her bowsprit, topmasts, and yard arm had been taken off, and, of course, she had no awnings or anything of a yachting appearance left.

Harrison and I applied for transfers and were relieved of duty on the *DEUSILLA*. About July first, we reported at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, from where we were sent to the *ALCEDO* at Tebo's Ship Yard in Brooklyn. We were in New York fitting out about a month, half the time at Tebo's, the other half at Robinson's Ship Yard. Among other yachts at Tebo's being fitted out for war were the *DIANA* and *CYPRESS*, which had been sold to the Russian Government and had Russian Crews on board. The *CYPRESS*, we heard later, foundered in a storm on the way to Russia. A war vessel named *DIANA* played a prominent part in the Russian Navy mutiny of 1917. Whether this was the same, I don't know.

The *MAY*, once owned by my uncle, Alexander Van Rensselaer, was here, though she did not arrive in France till January, 1918. On the way over she ran into a gale and sprang a leak. The water was getting the better of the pumps, when one of the sailors, an ex-Champion swimmer, volunteered to find the leak. He went into the flooded compartment, dove down till he found the leak, and stopped it up so that the water could be pumped out and a more permanent caulking job could be done.

The MAY had a fine record during the rest of the war. In the summer of 1918, she was sent one time to search for the WESTWARD HO, a large Supply Ship with a valuable cargo on board, whose crew had abandoned ship. She found the ship over a hundred miles off the coast, and put a volunteer crew on board. She was too much down by the head to be towed forward, so they started to tow her stern foremost into Brest. The MAY was joined soon after by several other boats, and they got her into Brest.

After the war the MAY was kept in service, and was assigned as a flag ship to the Military Governor of San Domingo. In July, 1919, she ran on the rocks of Haiti and was a total loss.

At Robinson's Yard there was much activity. Several German ships interned in this Country since 1914 were being converted into transports. The American Liner ST. PAUL was here and the Oil Ship GULFLIGHT. She was famous at the time because she had been torpedoed (but not sunk) the year before by the Germans, and was the cause of one of President Wilson's notes of protest to Germany, one of the notes on account of which Germany abandoned for a year relentless submarine warfare. This is the same GULFLIGHT that was bombed in Spain during the Civil War there. One day there was a great deal of excitement when a large ship near us caught fire and was completely burned out. The ALCEDO had to be moved to safety, and we witnessed a great display of fire fighting from fire-tugs and fire-engines on land. They controlled the fire and kept it from spreading, and saved a situation which might have been very serious.

Many changes had to be made to the ALCEDO to provide quarters for the crew, petty officers and officers. Six gun mounts and platforms for three inch guns were installed, though the Navy Department allotted only four guns to us, which were mounted two forward and two aft. Ammunition magazines were constructed, one forward and one aft, also a magazine aft to store depth charges. A small sound and light proof radio room was built, near the bridge.

The end of July we were moved to the International Mercantile Marine Company's pier at Fifty-seventh Street. Here we found the rest of our Division, the six other yachts with which we were going to France, and here we were assigned our crew.

There were about ninety-five in our crew and the following officers:

Lieutenant-Commander, Wm. T. Conn, U.S.N., Captain;

Lieutenant (J.G.) John T. Melvin, Fleet Reserve, Executive Officer;

Lieutenant (J.G.) Harry R. Leonard, Fleet Reserve, Navigator;

Lieutenant (J.G.) A.J. Drexel Paul, U.S.N.R.F., First Lieutenant,
Watch and Division Officer;

Ensign W. F. Harrison, U.S.N.R.F. Ordnance Officer, Watch and
Division Officer;

Lieutenant (J.G.) Harry T. Peterson, Reserve Force, Engineer Officer;

P.A. Surgeon Paul Andreae, Naval Volunteers, Ship's Doctor.

We had as passengers, in addition, Chaplain Stevenson, U.S.N., Ensign Cassidy, Fleet Reserve; and Assistant Paymaster Hunter.

The other yachts in our Division left before us, and we pulled out on August 5, 1917. As it was a Sunday morning, there was little traffic on the river. On the way down we passed close to the ex-German "VATERLAND", soon to be the U.S.S. "LEVIATHAN", at the time the next largest ship in the world, and soon to be our largest and most famous troop ship. At the narrows we passed at attention the flag-ship of the New York Naval District. When we got out in open water we swung ship for compass errors and then proceeded to Newport, R. I., where we arrived shortly after daybreak on August 6th.

On the way in we passed the cruiser SAN DIEGO, going out for target practice. In July, 1918 she was blown up off Long Island, by what was thought to be a German mine.

We went direct to the Government Coaling Dock in Newport, coaled ship, and then dropped down into the Harbor, where we anchored.

Andrew Robeson, whom I had known at school and college, joined us

(OFFICIAL)

THE UNITED STATES NAVY IN THE WAR.

Josephus Daniels, Secretary of the Navy, issued an official report on Dec. 8, 1918, in which he presented a full account, of which the following is a part, of the work of the Navy during the war:

Up to Nov. 1, 1918, of the total number of United States troops in Europe, 924,578 made passage in United States naval convoys under escort of United States cruisers and destroyers. Since Nov. 1, 1917, there have been 289 sailings of naval transports from American ports. In these operations of the cruiser and transport force of the Atlantic fleet not one east bound American transport has been torpedoed or damaged by the enemy and only three were sunk on the return voyage.

Our destroyers and patrol vessels, in addition to convoy duty, have waged an unceasing offensive warfare against the submarines. In spite of all this, our naval losses have been gratifyingly small. Only three American troopships - the Antilles, the President Lincoln, and the Covington - were sunk on the return voyage. Only three fighting ships have been lost as a result of enemy action - the patrol ship Alcedo, a converted yacht, sunk off the coast of France Nov. 5, 1917; the torpedo boat destroyer Jacob Jones, sunk off the British coast Dec. 6, 1917, and the cruiser San Diego, sunk near Fire Island, off the New York coast, on July 19, 1918, by striking a mine supposedly set adrift by a German submarine. The transport Finland and the destroyer Cassin, which were torpedoed, reached port and were soon repaired and placed back in service. The transport Mount Vernon, struck by a torpedo on Sept. 5 last, proceeded to port under its own steam and was repaired.

On November 5, the converted yacht Alcedo, which had been on almost constant escort duty and had rescued 117 survivors of the Antilles when that vessel was torpedoed, was sunk by enemy submarine while escorting a convoy from Quiberon. The night was dark, the weather hazy, and at times the ships of the convoy were not visible. One officer and twenty men of the crew were lost. Commander W. T. Conn Jr., the commanding officer, having written his night orders, had left the bridge and turned in when the torpedo struck. He gave this personal account of the sinking of the vessel:

"At or about 1:45 A.M., November 5, while sleeping in emergency cabin, immediately under upper bridge, I was awakened by a commotion and immediately received a report from some man unknown, 'Submarine, captain'. I jumped out of bed and went to the upper bridge and the officer of the deck, Lieutenant Paul, stated he had sounded 'general quarters', had seen submarine on surface about 300 yards on port bow, and submarine had fired a torpedo, which was approaching. I took station on port wing of upper bridge and saw torpedo approaching about two hundred feet distant. Lieutenant Paul had put the rudder full right before I arrived on bridge, hoping to avoid the torpedo. The ship answered slowly to her helm, however, and before any other action could be taken the torpedo I saw struck the ship's side immediately under the port forward chain plates, the detonation occurring instantly. I was thrown down for a few seconds dazed by falling debris and water.

"Upon regaining my feet I sounded the submarine alarm on the siren, to call all hands if they had not heard the general alarm gong, and to direct the attention of the convoy and other

escorting vessels. Called to the forward gun crews to see if at stations, but by this time realized that the top gallant forecastle was practically awash. The foremast had fallen, carrying away radio aerial. I called out to abandon ship.

"I then left the upper bridge and went into the chart house to obtain ship's position on the chart, but, as there was no light, could not see. I went out of the chart house and met the Navigator, Lieutenant Leonard, and asked him if he had sent any radio, and he replied 'No'. I directed him and accompanied him to the main deck and told him to take charge of cutting away forward dories and life rafts.

"I then proceeded along starboard gangway and found a man lying face down in gangway. I stopped and rolled him over and spoke to him, but received no reply and was unable to learn his identity, owing to the darkness. It is my opinion that this man was dead.

"I continued to the after end of ship, took station on after-gun platform. I realized that the ship was filling rapidly and her bulwarks amidships were level with the water. I directed the after dories and life rafts to be cut away and thrown overboard and ordered the men in the immediate vicinity to jump over the side, intending to follow them.

"Before I could jump, however, the ship listed heavily to port, plunging by the head, and sank, carrying me down with the suction. I experienced no difficulty, however, in getting clear, and when I came to the surface I swam a few yards to a life raft, to which were clinging three men. We climbed on board this raft and upon looking around observed Doyle, chief boatswain's mate, and one other man in the whaleboat. We paddled to the whaleboat and embarked from the life raft.

"The whaleboat was about half full of water, and we immediately started bailing and then to rescue men from the wreckage, and quickly filled the whaleboat to more than its maximum capacity, so that no others could be taken on board. We then picked up two overturned dories which were nested together, separated them and righted them, only to find out that their sterns had been broken. We then located another nest of dories, which were separated and righted and found to be sea-worthy. Transferred some men from the whaleboat into these dories and proceeded to pick up other men from the wreckage. During this time cries were heard from two men in the water some distance away who were holding on to wreckage and calling for assistance. It is believed that these two men were Ernest M. Harrison, mess attendant, and John Winne, Jr., seaman. As soon as the dories were available we proceeded to where they were last seen, but could find no trace of them.

"About this time, which was probably an hour after the ship sank, a German submarine approached the scene of the torpedoing and lay to near some of the dories and life rafts. She was in the light condition, and from my observation of her I am of the opinion that she was of the U-27-31 type. This has been confirmed by having a number of officers and men check the silhouette book. The submarine was probably 100 yards distant from my whaleboat, and I hear no remarks from anyone on the submarine, although I observed three persons standing on top of conning tower. After laying on the surface about half an hour the submarine steered off and submerged.

"I then proceeded with the whaleboat and two dories searching through the wreckage to make sure that no survivors were left in the water. No other people being seen, at 4:30 A.M. we

"The Alcedo was sunk, as near as I can estimate, 75 miles west true of north end of Belle Ile. The torpedo struck ship at 1:46 by the officer of the deck's watch, and the same watch stopped at 1:54 A.M., November 5, this showing that the ship remained afloat eight minutes.

"The flare of Penmarch Light was visible, and I headed for it and ascertained the course by Polaris to be approximately north-east. We rowed until 1:55, when Penmarch Light was sighted. Continued rowing until 5:15 P.M., when Penmarch Lighthouse was distant about $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles. We were then picked up by French torpedo boat 275, and upon going on board I requested the commanding officer to radio immediately to Brest reporting the fact of torpedoing and that three officers and 40 men were proceeding to Brest. The French gave all assistance possible for the comfort of the survivors. We arrived at Brest at about 11 P.M. Those requiring medical attention were sent to the hospital and the others were sent off to the Panther to be quartered.

"Upon arrival at Brest I was informed that two other dories containing Lieutenant H. R. Leonard, Lieutenant H. A. Peterson, Passed Assistant Surgeon Paul O. M. Andreae, and 25 men had landed at Penmarch Point. This was my first information that these officers and men had been saved, as they had not been seen by any of my party at the scene of the torpedoing."