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ONE BRAVE MAN

gets his due

# They were at the end of the line either escape now, or die

BRAVE

From LA

Lieutenant, just two years out of the Naval Academy, the engineering officer and fourth senior officer out of eight aboard the USS Billfish, a new sub making its second war patrol out of Fremantle, Australia. Billfish was to operate in a two-boat wolfpack with Bowfin. They'd patrol off Borneo in Makassar Strait, through which the Japanese shipped home Indonesian oil so pure it didn't have to be refined. That oil, literally, fueled the Japanese empire.

The patrol was the second for Billfish but was Rush's sixth. He had gone out five times as a junior officer on Thresher, commanded by William "Moke" Millican, one of the most famous — legendary — sub skippers of the war. On one patrol in Makassar Strait, Thresher sank a large Japanese ship solely with its 5-inch deck gun. Furious at having pumped two salvos of dud torpedoes into the troop ship, Millican took his sub to the surface, at night, and ordered his gun crew to shoot. The gunnery officer strapped binoculars to the gun to rig up a sight. The gun crew shot 85 rounds into the transport during a running gun battle, both sides firing wildly. The transport finally ran into shallow water and sank. Rush was the gunnery officer.

Rush was awarded the Bronze Star for his service on Thresher, a fact that came to light only through public documents. Rush is decidedly reticent about his own exploits.

"I learned everything I knew about subs from Moke Millican," Rush says. "He was fearless, a leader. Not reckless. He was mad as hell about those torpedoes. Everybody knew that we were getting duds, a disgrace. If our torpedoes worked — throughout the fleet, not just on Thresher — we'd have sunk half the Japanese navy."

## A fateful November afternoon

On Billfish, Rush would soon need to call upon everything he learned from Moke Millican. The sub was commanded by a peace-time submariner who was making only his second war patrol. The boat headed out of Fremantle, back to Makassar Strait, where the waters are flat, calm, the worst type of water to poke a periscope from.

It was just after lunch, on the 11th of November, Rush says. "I was the watch officer, in the conning tower, at the periscope. I spotted a Japanese destroyer, a *chidori* actually, a small, fast, lethal, nimble anti-sub ship. Deadly things they were. The ship was 90 degrees off our port bow. I lowered the scope and called for the captain. The captain came right up to the conning tower, put up the scope, looked, and he said, 'He's 10 degrees off the starboard bow. He's zigzagging.'"

That would imply that the Japanese ship was running away from somebody, or trying to avoid a lurking sub. But the destroyer's new course meant it was leading right for Billfish, and fast.

"I told the captain, 'He's not zigging. He's got us,'" Rush says. "The captain said, 'Impossible, he's too far away.' Then he asked, 'What should I do?' I told the captain, 'Either you take us deep or we're dead. Right there, I had an unsettling feeling. Captains do not ask junior officers what to do. Ever.'"

The captain told Rush to make the dive. "I went down the hatch, from the conning tower into the control room. Ordered a hard dive, full down on the bow and stern planes. Those are sort of like wings that direct the boat up, down. Anyway, nothing happened. The boat didn't respond. I looked at the engine speed, and we were running dead slow. We needed speed. So I ordered 'all ahead full.'"

The captain should have given that order to full speed. He had not. But Rush is careful, very careful, not to denigrate his superior, even 60 years.

The sub slipped down from periscope depth, about 60 feet. Slipped lower, 90 feet, 150, 200. The test depth — the safest depth for operation — of the hull was 412 feet. Billfish — and Rush — had never gone deeper than 412 feet.

## 12 hours of hell

Then, the sound of the destroyer's propellers churned overhead, getting close, closer, audible to the Billfish crew, even without sonar carphones. Hell was about to embrace the Billfish.

"When we got to 200 feet, he dropped a pattern of six depth charges. They were extremely close. A roar, shaking, lights exploding, *extremely* close. We had major damage in the aft engine room and maneuvering room. That's where all the heavy-duty electrical circuit breakers are, to switch the boat from diesel power to battery power. And the packing had blown out of the stern tube shaft, the shaft that connects the power plant to the screws. Seawater was pouring in. You must stop it or you will sink. And if the salt water hits the batteries, you'll get chlorine gas. Deadly. It's all bad."

The first salvo had also ruptured the ballast fuel tanks. Billfish was sending up a trail of oil. It might as well have been towing a target buoy. The destroyers — more had joined the chase — followed the oil, took sonar soundings and pummeled the sub.

"I took it down to almost 600 feet," Rush says. "I didn't want any charges going off under the ship. It's much more dangerous to have one go off under you than beside or above you. So we went deep."

Six hundred feet. Almost 200 feet beyond test depth. At that depth, if the explosives didn't crush the boat, the ocean would, sooner or later, as fittings failed and seals gave way.

Meanwhile, back in the flooding stern,



Charles Rush with his recently awarded Navy Cross. "I could have filed charges of cowardice in the face of the enemy," he says. "Why file the charges? Who would it help? The war effort? The ship? The men? Me? No. You let it go. . . . That's how the Navy works."

CHRS MATULA/Staff Photographer

Chief Electrician John Rendenick, a senior enlisted man, was packing grease into the ruptured tube, tightening every bolt he could get a wrench onto. He saved the maneuvering room, saved the electrical systems on the boat. The stern pumps were broken, so Rendenick formed a bucket brigade, lined up crew members the length of the boat, all the way to the bow, where the buckets were emptied into the forward bilges. There, the pumps were working. But the men couldn't keep up that pace for long: The air on the boat was foul, too much carbon dioxide; the overheated batteries were leaking hydrogen; oxygen was vanishing.

The barrage continued. And continued. For 12 hours. More destroyers showed up. The radioman, John Denning, thought some of them were doing sonar soundings. They would then direct another to do the shooting. They had the Billfish dead in their sights. Every once in a while Denning would take off his headphones and say, "Here they come."

In the darkness, men grabbed ladders and waited for the blasts, waited for the end.

Rush was in the control room, below the conning tower. Above him were the helm, the radioman, the captain and the second in command, the executive officer. They were — or should have been — plotting the course, taking evasive action. Rush was too busy to know what was happening up above. He did not know then that the third senior officer, a lieutenant, never made it to the control room. He had to be sedated by the pharmacist mate.

And he did not know that the pressure hull — the steel cocoon that is the most vital component of any sub — had cracked. He knew they had been submerged for more than 20 hours, under attack for 12.

The boat and the men were at the end of the line. Either they escaped now, right now, or they would die.

## Leaking fuel masked getaway

Charles Rush's Navy Cross citation tells the story: After almost 12 hours under attack, Rush was relieved of damage control efforts by another officer. He went up into the conning tower, where the senior officers were "incapacitated." The helm — the steering wheel of the boat — was unmanned. Rush took charge, called for a helmsman, reversed course, back and under the oil slick. In effect he used his boat's leaking fuel to mask his getaway.

Four hours later, with dawn approaching, he surfaced and recharged his batteries. The sub was so low on oxygen and so full of carbon dioxide by then that the men were to the point of passing out. But they had made it. Just Rush, then a lieutenant, had saved the boat. The final line of the citation for extraordinary heroism: "Captain Rush reflected great credit upon himself and upheld the highest traditions of the United States Naval Services."

End of a story that began almost 60 years ago.

Almost.

A few years ago, a retired Navy captain heard about Rush's story. The captain contacted the Navy and began the proceedings that ended with Rush's medal. When Rush learned what was going on, he insisted that Chief Electrician Rendenick be considered for a Silver Star. A combined petition was filed.

Then, Rule 1A reared its head. Rule 1A is a critical rule: A citation for heroism can be given only upon the recommendation of a senior officer who was witness to the event cited. Rush was senior to Rendenick, but Rush's captain was dead. The combined citation petition was killed. Rush asked that he be deleted from the petition so Rendenick could finally get his medal. And then, somewhere in the Navy, a ranking officer discarded Rule 1A. Both men could be honored.

"The enlisted men never got enough credit," Rush says. "They didn't get their share of medals. Imagine being 600 feet down, under fire. You're just a kid. Your life is in the hands of the officers. You have no control. You may live, may die. The air turns. It's dark. Their courage is beyond comprehension."

Why hadn't the two men been honored decades ago? The usual answer: Not all acts of courage in wartime can be noted. There was a war on, after all. War, not medals, was the priority.

## Senior officers 'incapacitated'

*Silent Victory*, by Clay Blair Jr., is the definitive work on submarine warfare in World War II, more than 1,000 pages on the Pacific War alone. Every mission, every captain, every torpedo fired, depth charges taken, every mishap is chronicled. Blair even accounts for the 85 shells fired by Thresher at the Japanese troop ship, a fact Rush can attest to, because he's the guy who fired them. Exactly 85.

Blair's sources are official, declassified, Navy reports. His book is so well-respected the Navy uses it. Sure enough, in chapter 23 of the Pacific volume, Blair writes about the Bowfin and Billfish mission of November 1942. There is not a word about depth charges. No mention of the 16 hours of terror. Billfish was "patrolling to sea," a phrase that means nothing more than a boat was not so much patrolling — hunting — as away from the action, out of harm's way. Then, an aside: Upon return to port, Billfish's captain requested a transfer to surface ships. It was granted by Adm. Ralph Christie, with regret. Christie wrote in his diary that he was at all unhappy with the Billfish captain.

Was Blair's book correct? Or had the Billfish captain filed a false report, and if so, why?

Rush ponders the question.

There's no need to get into that, "he says. "The citation says the senior officers were incapacitated. Why get into anything more?"

Because the real reason he had to wait 60 years for recognition is a vital part of the story, of more than casual interest. And, young soldiers are going to Afghanistan. From movies, TV and legends, they might think all soldiers are supermen all the time. Maybe an occasional story of human frailty would help today's fighters keep things in better perspective.

Rush crosses his arms. Sighs. A long pause.

"He cracked," he says. "The captain cracked. The exec, he was just kind of exhausted, burned down like a candle wick. I air. And, truth is, we were running out of air. And the third officer, he was sedated. Men crack. All of these men went to the hospital elsewhere and served with honor. But command demands of you that you don't crack. But men are only human, no?"

Rush pauses.

"The captain omitted more from his report, along with the depth-charging, of course. I didn't see his report for almost 50 years. It was a masterpiece of obfuscation. You see, 17 nights later we found a convoy, freighters, sitting ducks. The captain wouldn't go in, would not attack. I told him, 'Captain, we have to go in.' We ran arduous. We ran so hard we almost ran into a freighter that was running from us. We shot at that one, from beyond shooting range. With our stern tubes. Because we were running away."

Another sigh. Rush takes a deep breath. He is 83, lean and fit. But it appears either a great weight is lifting from or descending onto him. LaVonne, his wife of 25 years, has brought an iced tea into the dining room. She touches his shoulder, a gentle brush. Then she quietly leaves the room and allows him to finish his story.

"I've never told this story before, at least not in public. We got back to Fremantle. I could have filed charges of cowardice in the face of the enemy. But I went down to Adelaide for two weeks of retooling of medals on the beach. Why file the charges? Who would it help? The war effort? The ship? The men? Me? No. You let it go. When I got back, the captain was gone. Not a man in the crew ever said a word. That's how the Navy works."

And, perhaps, still does.

In his speech at the April 5 award ceremony, the admiral who presented Rush his Navy Cross referred to inconsistencies in the *Silent Victory* account. "Why no additional details on this patrol? The crew of the Billfish knew and after reading Charlie's citation, I think we'll all know." This is as close as the admiral could come to acknowledging what is now obvious.

Charles W. Rush Jr. had finally gotten his due. Chief Engineer John Rendenick's family accepted his Silver Star at the same ceremony. The chief died in December, before the secretary of the Navy approved his medal.

Paul Reid/pbpost.com