

Mariner's Victory at Sea

By Anita Lesko

In June 1943 a German U-boat arrived off the coast of Brazil, menacing Allied shipping. Claiming a Swedish vessel on 21 June, a Brazilian freighter on 30 June and two Liberty ships on 3 July and 16 July, respectively, *U-513*'s luck was outstanding. But on 19 July its luck would change, thanks to the pilot of a Patrol Squadron (VP) 74 PBM *Mariner*.

Part of the U.S. Fourth Fleet, VP-74 was stationed in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The squadron's 12 PBMs included radar equipment which made them highly successful at locating subs and surprising them with an attack. When *U-513* was detected near Brazil, VP-74 and the tender *Barnegat* (AVP 10) were dispatched to Florianópolis, about 400 miles south of Rio, on 18 July.

The next day, Lieutenant (jg) Roy Whitcomb's PBM was selected for the first patrol. At about 1330 a pip was picked up on the radar at a distance of about 22 miles. The weather was good, with some clouds and no turbulence. Whitcomb, the pilot and plane commander, turned to fly in the direction of the object detected on radar.

As they got closer, he identified the object as an enemy submarine

A PBM *Mariner* of VP-74, piloted by Ltjg. Roy S. Whitcomb, right, sunk German sub *U-513* on 19 July 1943 off the coast of Brazil. One of the survivors was the sub's commander, Kapitänleutnant zur See Fritz Guggenberger, below, a highly decorated German officer who was notorious for having sunk the British aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* in 1941.



sitting on the surface. Whitcomb turned to port and climbed up to the heavy part of the clouds so he could make an attack from out of the sun. As the plane emerged from the clouds, the sub suddenly turned and picked up speed. Figuring that the sub had spotted them and was getting ready to crash dive, Whitcomb cut the descent short and started the attack. As soon as

he began, heavy antiaircraft fire started, including two men who were running up and down the deck of the sub firing machine guns at the PBM. With two .50 caliber guns in the bow, Whitcomb started shooting back.

Then came the shining moment. Whitcomb got into position to release the bombs and signaled copilot AP1 Don Ward, who dropped six Mark 44 depth charges set at 50 feet, saving two for a second run if necessary. The pilot banked away to avoid further fire, and the PBM's tail gunner then started yelling, "We got him, we got him!" The U-boat was blown right out of the water, propeller still churning.

Flying back over the area to verify the damage that had been done, the crew observed debris and

oil plus about 15 people swimming in the water. Whitcomb ordered a raft to be thrown down, along with all the spare life jackets. He then radioed the base asking permission to land and pick up the survivors, a dangerous maneuver in high seas. The orders came back not to land but instead to stay on station and await relief by another plane, which arrived about 1600. The seas were still too rough for a safe seaplane landing, so it was not until *Barnegat* arrived around midnight that the remaining seven survivors were recovered. Sharks had gotten the others.

The Germans were given medical attention but kept isolated from one another aboard *Barnegat*, and were interrogated individually. Intelligence soon learned that one of the survivors was not only the commander of the sub, he was the

notorious Kapitänleutnant zur See Fritz Guggenberger. Most well known for sinking the British aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* in November 1941, Guggenberger was credited with sinking nine ships for a total of 57,500 tons over the course of the war. He remained a prisoner until the end of the war, when he returned to Germany; he later retired as a rear admiral. Whitcomb received the Distinguished Flying Cross for sinking the U-boat; he retired from



the Navy as a commander in 1971.

Three days after the attack, while still in *Barnegat's* medical facility, Guggenberger requested to meet the pilot who had sunk his sub. In fluent English, Guggenberger congratulated Whitcomb on his victory, but concluded that if he had sighted Whitcomb sooner, he would have been able to shoot him down. Moreover, Guggenberger admitted that when he first spotted the PBM, he thought it looked "like some old crate!" But under the command of Ltjg. Roy Whitcomb, that "old crate" scored one more victory in the long and deadly struggle against the German U-boat menace. ✈

Ms. Lesko is a military aviation journalist and photographer in Pensacola, Fla. She can be contacted by email at fighterwriter@netscape.net. This account was taken from Mr. Whitcomb's recollections of the experience.



Above, the crew that participated in the U-boat sinking included, left to right: Ltjg. Roy Whitcomb; AP1 Don Ward; AMM1 F. P. Green; AMM2 G. L. Cole; ARM2 J. R. Burleson; SN C. L. Matthews; ARM2 W. S. Stotts; AMM3 T. W. Govern; and AOM3 H. E. Hill; not pictured are Ltjg. Jordan Collins and Ens. Robert Sparks. Top, Ltjg. Whitcomb received the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions, as did his copilot, AP1 Ward, who dropped the depth charges; the remainder of the crew received the Air Medal. Right, the VP-74 crew's PBM *Mariner* was affectionately dubbed the "Nickel Boat."

