



Artifact Spotlight: *Sealion II* Battle Flag

Submarine battle flags emerged during World War II as a way of marking the number of enemy ships a submarine sank. The designs and symbols used in these unofficial records varied, as each battle flag was individually sewn by the crew of a particular submarine. Most battle flags included an insignia or logo that represented the submarine. Depictions of the Japanese flag signified the submarine's kills: military ships were denoted by a rising sun flag while merchant ships were represented by a red circle on a white background. Many flags also recorded other significant events or actions like enemy ships damaged, rescue missions performed, and commendations received.

USS *Sealion* (SS-315) was a Balao-class submarine built by the Electric Boat Company after Japanese forces sunk the first *Sealion* (SS-195) during their attack on the Cavite Navy Yard in 1941. *Sealion II*, as she was often called, was launched 31 October 1943 and commissioned on 8 March 1944 with Lieutenant Commander Eli T. Reich as her first skipper.

Sealion completed six patrols during World War II, earning five battle stars and a President Unit Citation, the highest award a submarine can receive. While traversing the Luzon Strait on her third patrol, *Sealion* and submarines USS *Growler* (SS-215) and USS *Pampanito* (SS-383) attacked a large convoy of Japanese ships. The American submarines took out four ships and two escorts and then pursued the remnants of the convoy to Hong Kong. Three days later, *Pampanito* encountered a raft of people and discovered that completely unbeknownst to the Americans, the torpedoed transports had been carrying 1,350 British and Australian prisoners from Singapore to Japan. *Sealion* and nearby submarines USS *SBarb* (SS-220) and USS *Queenfish* (SS-393) immediately returned to retrieve survivors. One hundred fifty-nine men were plucked from the water, all covered in crude oil and suffering from malnutrition and other diseases. *Sealion* saved fifty-four men, four of whom died before they could be transferred to an Army hospital in Tanapag Harbor.

Two months later, *Sealion* accomplished an incredible feat: the sinking of Japanese battleship *Kongo*. On the night of 21 November 1944, *Sealion's* radar picked a large contact 40,000 yards away. Japanese battleships *Kongo* and *Haruna*, escorted by two cruisers and three destroyers, were en route back to Japan. Lieutenant Commander Reich made a daring surface attack, firing nine Mark 18 torpedoes at the convoy. Escort destroyer *Urakaze* was sunk on the spot; *Kongo* sustained serious damage but tried to flee. *Sealion II* gave chase and caught up with *Kongo* a few hours later. As Lieutenant Commander Reich was about to order another attack on the stricken battleship, *Kongo* exploded and sunk to the East China Sea floor. *Sealion* holds the distinction of being the only Allied submarine to sink a battleship during World War II.

The *Sealion* battleflag in the collections of the Naval Undersea Museum records these and other important events from the submarine's third war patrol. The upper left quadrant contains the submarine's insignia, a black sea lion riding a red torpedo. The upper right and lower left quadrants depict Japanese merchant ships sunk – six tankers and five freighters, respectively. The submarine's most significant actions are represented in the lower right quadrant: the large battleship above the broken rising sun flag is *Kongo*, the smaller battleship with the intact rising sun flag is damaged battleship *Haruna*, and the number 50 atop the red cross refers to the 50 prisoners of war that *Sealion* rescued from torpedoed Japanese transport *Rakuyo Maru*. The crew of *Sealion* created this battleflag and presented it to *Sealion* skipper Lieutenant Eli Reich.

After World War II, *Sealion* was converted to a troop carrier. Her torpedo tubes and forward engines were removed and her forward engine room and after forward and after torpedo rooms were converted to hold up to 123 troops. She was recommissioned on November 2, 1948 with hull designation SSP-315 (later

reclassified ASSP-315, then APSS-315, and finally LPSS-315). *Sealion* was used for training exercises during the Cold War before being decommissioned in February 1970.



The crew of *Sealion* created this battleflag to mark her impressive accomplishments during her third war patrol and presented it to *Sealion's* skipper, Lieutenant Commander Eli T. Reich. The flag has been carefully preserved and is on display at the Naval Undersea Museum in Keyport, Washington.



Sealion (SS-315) on her launch day, 31 October 1943.



Sealion crew members pull British and Australian prisoners of war to safety after the Japanese transports carrying them were torpedoed by *Sealion*.



Sealion sunk Japanese Imperial Navy battleship *Kongo* on November 21, 1944. *Kongo* was the only battleship sunk by an Allied submarine during the war.



Sealion found a second life as a troop carrier after World War II. This photograph shows her as troop carrier APSS-315 in October 1964.