Frank W. Fenno

“Golden Voyage of the Trout”

Surrounded in the Philippines

Within 60 days of the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Japanese Navy had established a virtual stranglehold on the Pacific. Nipponese controlled waters spread from the Bearing Sea to the Indian Ocean, ranging from China to New Guinea, and eastward beyond Wake Island. The two last bastions of American hope lay at Midway and on the big Philippine Island of Luzon. Unlike Midway, which was still surrounded by Allied controlled water, the Philippines were cut off and surrounded by hundreds of miles of hostile sea, heavily patrolled by a seemingly invincible Japanese Navy.

Luzon itself had felt the crushing blow of an unstoppable aerial bombardment that had virtually destroyed the Far East Air Force. By the end of January, rarely could a single American plane be fielded to try and deter the Japanese attacks from the sky. Japanese General Homma’s highly trained and combat-experienced forces were well-entrenched on Luzon by early January and were advancing southward against a poorly supplied American force under General Jonathan Wainwright and the valiant but battered Philippine Scouts who desperately struggled to defend their homeland.

Before the Philippine Capitol City of Manila was declared an

open city and occupied by the Japanese on New Years Day, General Douglas MacArthur and his command moved to the island fortress of Corregidor. The rocky, tadpole-shaped island measures only a mile-and-a-half at its widest point, but its meager 3-square-mile surface was defended by strong rock and sandbagged emplacements and a massive tunnel command post. Situated at the opening to Manila Bay, Corregidor was a commanding position protected by three miles of open water on its north shore, the closest point to any landmass. That landmass was the Bataan Peninsula where the Japanese continued their advance, despite a valiant resistance against all odds.

From the air, Corregidor stuck out like a sore thumb, a tempting and easy target for Japanese bombers. When enemy intelligence became aware of MacArthur’s presence on the Island Fortress, along with his staff and command, the rock as it was nicknamed, became a prime target. With dwindling supplies, the anti-aircraft batteries that had shot down thirteen enemy bombers in the first of what became daily air attacks were close to shutting down. A desperate call for resupply was sent back to Pearl Harbor. Corregidor was close to being bombed into a rock pile.

The United States Pacific Fleet was still reeling from the attack at Pearl Harbor that had sunk or damaged every one of the seven battleships assigned to the Pacific, as well as dozens of other craft. Reinforcing and resupplying the Philippine Defense

Force was a virtual impossibility—even had there been a shipping lane into the Island. For the Japanese forces fighting to control Bataan, it was simply a matter of time before Wainwright's forces were out of ammunition and supplies, and starved into defeat. Also, without resupply, the guns on the Rock would soon cease firing and Corregidor would become a helpless target to be quickly bombed into submission.

Any American craft attempting to traverse the thousands of miles of Japanese-controlled Pacific waters to resupply the Philippine Islands by air or on the surface was destined to swift destruction. It was for that reason that the Navy turned to an unusual supply ship: the U.S.S. Trout (SS-202), an American submarine.

Cargo Sub

Lieutenant Commander Frank Wesley Fenno had missed all the action on that fateful December day when the United States was attacked and plunged into war. Fenno's submarine, the U.S.S. Trout had been on a peace-time patrol in the waters near Midway when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Soon thereafter he witnessed the attack on Midway by returning ships of the enemy fleet from a distance too great to intervene. Returning to Pearl Harbor to refuel and rearm upon completion of what was now the vessel's first War Patrol, the U.S.S. Trout was actually disarmed. Stripped of virtually all unnecessary items including TORPEDOES, save for one torpedo in each of the submarine tubes, the Trout was refitted for a special mission. That mission was later vaguely spelled out in Frank Fenno's first award of the Navy Cross:

For exceptionally meritorious service in a duty of great responsibility, as Commanding Officer of the U.S.S. Trout (SS-202), in successfully completing an unusual and special mission through enemy controlled waters for the United States War Department during the month of January 1942. Upon completion of this mission, and while returning to Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii, through enemy infested waters, with a special cargo on board, the U.S.S. Trout attacked and sank a 5,000 ton enemy merchant vessel on February 10, 1942. Furthermore, on the same date, upon being attacked by torpedoes from an enemy patrol vessel, the U.S.S. Trout attacked and sank the enemy attacking ship, and continued her voyage to Pearl Harbor, arriving there without damageto material or injury to personnel throughout the hazardous operations.

That "unusual and special mission" was to be the delivery of 3,500 rounds of high-

altitude anti-aircraft artillery for the defenders at Corregidor. Since no surface or aircraft could negotiate the Nipponese gauntlet, the only hope lay in reaching the island beneath the surface. It was a daring and desperate attempt to provide relief to the Philippine Defense Force. The award of the Army's Distinguished Service Cross, also presented to Lieutenant Commander Fenno for this top-secret mission provided more details than the Navy Cross citation:

For extraordinary heroism in connection with military operations against an armed enemy while serving as Commanding Officer, U.S.S. Trout, while operating his submarine in enemy-controlled waters during January – March 1942 in the performance of an unusual and hazardous mission for the War Department. Carrying a heavy load of antiaircraft ammunition urgently needed by the beleaguered forces of General Douglas MacArthur in the Philippine Islands, the U.S.S. Trout departed from Pearl Harbor, Territory of Hawaii for Corregidor Island, Manila Bay, at 0900, 12 January 1942, refueling at Midway Island on 16 January 1942. The Trout proceeded on the surface until 21 January, traveling submerged thereafter during daylight hours. At 0230, 27 January, an unsuccessful night attack was made on a lighted enemy vessel, resulting in the Trout being chased by the vessel at such speed as to force the Trout to dive in order to escape. On 3 February 1942, after dark, the Trout made rendezvous off Corregidor with an escort motor torpedo boat. The Trout then followed the escort at high speed through a winding passage in a minefield to South Docks, Corregidor Island, where she unloaded 3500 rounds of antiaircraft artillery ammunition for the Army Forces defending Bataan Peninsula and Corregidor…

As harrowing as the trip through the enemy-controlled waters of the Pacific had been, slipping into Manila Bay was much more dangerous. Enemy surface ships heavily patrolled all approaches, and Japanese aircraft monitored all activity in the harbor. The Trout slipped in beneath the enemy cordon and surfaced in the heavily guarded harbor at 7:40 pm, under cover of darkness. Ten minutes later, maneuvering cautiously in the night, Fenno made contact with Patrol Boat 43 (PT-43) which was under the command of a bearded officer who looked more like a pirate than a sailor. The grizzled Lieutenant John Duncan Bulkeley and his small squadron had been waging his own desperate war against the Japanese for two months. He had already earned the Navy Cross himself and was destined to add two Army DSCs as well, becoming a legend in his own right.

Bulkeley's PT Boat guided the Trout to the dock at Corregidor where almost

immediately the process of unloading the 3,500 rounds of badly needed artillery commenced by hand. As the bucket brigade conveyed the cargo ashore, the Trout rose higher and higher in the water. By midnight Fenno knew he was facing a new problem, ballast. Without something to replace the weight removed when the cargo was unloaded, he would be unable to properly submerge for the dangerous return home. Fenno requested 25 tons of rock and sandbags to replace the lost ballast but was denied. Every rock, every bag of sand, was desperately needed for the defensive positions on the battered island fortress.

The solution that was finally approved was destined to make the Trout's return trip to Pearl Harbor one of the most unusual in history!

On December 24, 1941, when the fall of the Philippine Islands appeared imminent and General MacArthur departed Manila to continue the fight from Corregidor he had company. Philippine President Manuel L. Quezon also took the necessary step of moving the seat of government to the island fortress, where he remained until he was evacuated in February.

In the days between Christmas and New Years, under the watchful distant eyes of the Japanese, and often under fire, small boats ferried MacArthur, Quezon, both men's' families, staff, and personal belongings to the Malinta Tunnel on the Rock. As these boats carefully made their way into the mouth of the harbor they also carried other important and valuable items: documents, diplomatic papers, securities, and—gold!

The Treasury of the Philippine economy, held in twelve banks in Manila, could NOT be left behind to fall into Japanese hands. The nation's wealth would certainly inure to further destruction if it made its way into the treasury of Japan. Under the First War Powers Act, Francis B. Sayre, The High Commissioner to the Philippine Islands, ordered the burning of $3,000,000 in American currency, $28,000,000 in Philippine paper currency, and $38,000,000 in Treasury Checks. (Serial numbers were recorded for the destroyed bills, a large task in itself.) Francis Sayre assigned the task of supervising the destruction of paper currency to his Executive Assistant and financial advisor, Woodbury Willoughby, who upon burning nearly $80,000,000, effected the transfer of 20 tons of Philippine gold and silver, which could not be so easily destroyed, to Corregidor. The ultimate plan was that at some later date if conditions did not improve, the gold and silver would be taken into deep water and sunk where the Japanese would be unable to recover them.

Thus, as Lieutenant Commander Frank Fenno sought a solution to his need for weight to provide ballast for his submarine, the rock and sand he had requested became…gold!

The bucket brigade that unloaded the artillery rounds from the Trout swiftly bent to the task of alternating their conveyor-belt system to pass bar after bar of Philippine gold down their ranks and into the belly of the submarine. Each of the 40-pound gold bars carried a value of $23,000 dollars, marketable in the currency of virtually any nation in the world. As the crew of the Trout stowed each bar inside the submarine, they knew that each 40-pound golden bar also provided more than a monetary value, it provided the weight necessary to submerge their submarine and get them safely home. For them, gold might be the difference between life and death.

By 3:00 am a total of 319 gold bars, with a monetary value of more than 7 million dollars, were loaded inside the Trout to provide more than six tons of needed ballast. Fenno’s ballast problem was being solved by simultaneously solving another problem for Francis Sayer and Woodbury Willoughby, safely preserving the Philippine gold reserve from falling into Japanese hands without having to jettison it into the sea.

The gold itself provided only part of the needed ballast, however. The remainder was to be provided from 630 bags of coins, each bag containing a thousand silver pesos. Time ran out before the transfer of all this wealth could be accomplished, so in the pre-dawn hours, Frank Fenno maneuvered his submarine away from the dock, cruised three miles out into the deeper waters of the harbor, and submerged. Throughout the day on February 4, the Trout lay quietly on the floor of the harbor, sheltered from enemy eyes in the sky by 140 feet of sea.

That night the Trout again surfaced in the dangerous waters of Manila Bay, where it was met by a small boat from Corregidor carrying the remaining bags of silver pesos.

The closing lines of Fenno's Distinguished Service Cross citation tell the rest:

> *Twenty tons of gold and silver, securities, diplomatic and United States mail and two additional torpedoes were loaded on the Trout for the return voyage. The Trout cleared Corregidor dock at 0400, 4 February, and bottomed in Manila Bay during daylight 4 February. Surfacing that night, additional securities and mail were loaded before the Trout departed from Manila Bay through the mine field. On the return trip one enemy merchant vessel and one patrol vessel were attacked and sunk. The Trout arrived at Pearl harbor 3 March 1942 after 51 days at sea.*

Unloading Philippine Gold from the USS Trout by hand, March 3, 1942

Two days before arriving back at Pearl Harbor, the Trout rendezvoused with the U.S.S. Litchfield, which then escorted the submarine and its $10 million cargo into home port. On March 3, 1942, the Trout moored next to the U.S.S. Detroit for transfer of the gold bars and paper securities, for transportation back to the United States and safekeeping until the end of the war.

Though details of the Trout's golden voyage remained secret for three months, Frank Fenno was awarded the Navy Cross for his ship's Second War Patrol. General MacArthur submitted him for the Army's Distinguished Service Cross as well. On May 25, 1942, TIME magazine at last publicly published limited details of the Trout's unusual

mission, noting that in addition to the awards to Lieutenant Commander Fenno, each of the 70 officers and enlisted men of the submarine's daring crew were awarded the Silver Star for their 51-day daring run of the enemy gauntlet to provide needed ammunition to their comrades at Corregidor.

It is of interest that when the gold was transferred from the banks in Manila for storage at Corregidor, the bars had numbered 320. In fact, only 319 of the $23,000 bars were ferried out of the Philippines on board the Trout.

That small discrepancy did not go unnoticed by the author of the Time magazine report, who closed the brief story on Trout's golden voyage by noting:

> *"Last week (Woodbury) Willoughby turned up in San Francisco with a sheepish grin and one bar of gold, which he turned over to authorities, saying, 'Here's one I forgot.'"*

FOOTNOTE:
Frank Fenno commanded the *U.S.S. Trout* through two subsequent war patrols, earning a second Navy Cross on the *Trout's* Third War Patrol. On the submarine's Fourth during the Battle of Midway, the sub rescued two Japanese sailors from a sunken ship and returned with the two POWs to Pearl Harbor, having not found opportunity to fire a single torpedo. Frank Fenno earned a well-deserved break in action when he was replaced by Lieutenant Commander Lawson *Red* Ramage who guided the vessel through four more war patrols, earning the Medal of Honor aboard her before subsequently earning the Navy Cross twice as commander of the *U.S.S. Parche* (SS-384). Fenno himself returned to combat action in 1943, commanding the *U.S.S. Runner* (SS-275) through its first two war patrols and earning a third award of the Navy Cross.
The *Trout's* third skipper, Lieutenant Commander Albert H. Clark, guided the submarine through three war patrols (9th, 10th, and 11th). On or about April 17, 1944, the *Trout* was lost at sea along with 81 members of the crew. In the vessel's ten completed war patrols *Trout* made 32 torpedo attacks, firing 85 torpedoes, including 34 hits, 5 confirmed premature detonations, 5 confirmed duds, and 25 suspected duds. The *U.S.S. Trout* was credited with sinking 23 enemy ships for a total of 87,000 tons sunk, and damaged 6 ships, for an additional 75,000 tons. She was also involved in six battle surface actions and was attacked with depth charges eight times.

Sources:
Sullivan, Fred, "Fenno's Submarine Controlled the Pacific Seas", Worceser Telegram & Gazette, January 14, 2007
Thomas, Lowell, "The Escape of the Treasure", These Men Shall Never Die, John C. Winston Company, 1943

“Willoughby Crashes Through”, *TIME Magazine*, May 25, 1942
Dettbarn, Ensign John L., USN, “The Golden Patrol of the USS Trout”

Heroes Stories Index