

The Battle Between the Blimp and the Sub

By YNC Anthony Atwood

No study of naval warfare or aerial combat can be complete without looking at the night fight that occurred off the coast of Islamorada in the Florida Keys on 18 July 1943: the battle between the blimp and the sub.

Nazi U-boats prowled U.S. shores, and the “slot” of the Florida Straits was a favorite hunting ground and transit channel for them. Navy blimp squadron ZP-21 out of NAS Richmond, Fla., patrolled the straits to stop them. The silvery, nonrigid airships, graceful but enormous targets, were used for spotting and reporting surface ships and aircraft. The K-ships were armed with four depth bombs and a 50-caliber machine gun mounted in the nose of the blimp car—not that these were expected to see much action. Blimp patrols were usually long, tedious and uneventful—until the night of 18 July 1943 when the German submarine *U-134* slipped into the straits.

At dusk on the mainland the flight briefing concluded for the two blimps scheduled to patrol that night, during which two friendlies, a tanker and a freighter, would pass through the straits in convoy. K-74 and sister blimp K-32 would screen the slot. The destroyer *Dahlgren* out of Key West was on station in the straits. The two blimp crews readied for

Cortney Skinner’s painting, “Battle off the Florida Keys: The U.S. Navy K-74 Attacks the German *U-134*,” depicts the heated exchange of deadly gunfire as the blimp stumbled upon the German submarine. With the fate of two vital cargo ships hanging in the balance, the crew of K-74 engaged the sub until the airship could no longer remain aloft.

takeoff. K-74’s crew consisted of Lieutenant Nelson Grills, pilot; Chief Aviation Pilot Jandrowitz, copilot; Ensign Darnley Eversley, navigator; AMM2c Isadore Stessel and AMM3c Schmidt, mechanics/bombardiers; AOM3c Eckert, rigger and gunner; ARM3c Robert Bourne, radioman; ARM3cs Giddings and Rice, assistant radio operators; and SN Kowalski, assistant rigger.

“Up ship!”

The K-ships taxied and soared above the base. K-32 turned south by southwest to fly over Key West and sweep northward up the straits. Lt. Grills and his crew in K-74 headed straight over the Atlantic, then turned south—and into the annals of Naval Aviation history.

Night fell and *U-134* rose from beneath the sea. It was a quiet evening; the sea was mild and the wind light. The sub’s crew threw open the hatches to vent carbon dioxide and take in fresh air, then

clambered topside. The long hours passed while, 500 feet above, K-74 was approaching on an overhead course.

About 2330, a bright spot appeared on the blimp’s radar. The possible contact was encrypted and transmitted back to base. In the cramped gondola, the 10 Navy men took stock of their weapons and the impending situation. The blimp headed toward the radar contact.

“Battle stations!”

K-74 sailed out of a cloud bank and found the U-boat cruising below. The blimp circled as her skipper weighed the realities: the sub was on a course heading right for the two merchant ships, which were sailing





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down the straits 30 minutes behind K-74. The merchant ships were at risk, and K-74 had the element of surprise in her favor. Grills transmitted his intention to attack. At 2350, K-74 dropped to 250 feet and began her bombing run.

As the distance closed, the watchstanders aboard the U-boat sighted the blimp. The Nazis opened fire with 20mm machine guns located aft of the conning tower. AOM3c Eckert returned fire from the car's nose-mounted machine gun. Then, the

German 88mm deck gun commenced firing.

U.S. Navy tracers ricocheted down the length of the sub's deck, while enemy fire thumped into the airship bag. A round punctured the shield beside Eckert's gun. He slapped another belt in and continued firing prolonged bursts.

When the airship passed over the U-boat, antiaircraft fire hit K-74's engines. The starboard engine burst into flames. As AMM3c Schmidt turned to extinguish the fire, ARM3c

Bourne dashed off the squadron's mayday signal: "Urgent. Fired On." The airship was now directly over the sub. AMM2c Stessel pulled the bomb releases, but the bombs did not leave the rack.

With enemy fire punishing her undefended stern, K-74 limped out of range. Schmidt had extinguished the fire, but both engines were damaged. The airship was losing altitude. The crew dumped gas and jettisoned the tanks. No help. K-74 slowly descended. At 2355, the tail of the

airship touched the water and began to settle. The battle had lasted five minutes. Its harrowing aftermath began.

“Abandon ship!”

Wearing their “Mae West” inflatable vests, the crew entered the water through the doors and windows of the flooding blimp car. The life raft, tossed out without a tether line, immediately deployed and drifted away with the Gulf Stream. They were on their own.

Grills swam back around the sinking car to make sure all crewmen had escaped. In so doing, he separated from the others and the same strong current carried him away. When he got his bearings, the blimp was nowhere in sight. Instead, a dark shape was bearing down on him at flank speed; it was one of the merchant ships coming down the slot, oblivious to the battle that had occurred. Grills recalled, “It was coming right at me and I was frantic to get out of the way, shouting and waving my hands. I saw the watch on the fantail, smoking a cigarette.” The ship passed in the night, leaving Grills alone in the water.

The rest of K-74’s crew stayed together beside the settling blimp bag. They held on to each other in two bobbing masses adrift at sea.

Through the long night, they did not know if the Nazi sub would return to capture them as prisoners or finish them off. They had no idea how much damage Eckert’s marksmanship had done. Nor did “Sparks” Bourne realize his mayday transmission was picked up by K-32’s ARM2c Turek, who realized it must be K-74 in trouble and relayed the message to NAS Richmond.

At first light, a Grumman J4F *Widgeon* amphibian from ZP-21 took off to begin the search. At 0749, the



aircraft was over the scene. The sea was getting rougher, while nine men splashed and waved. The aircraft saw them and dipped its wings, but it was too choppy to land. The aircraft flew off to find *Dahlgren* and lead her to the scene. Rescue was on the way.

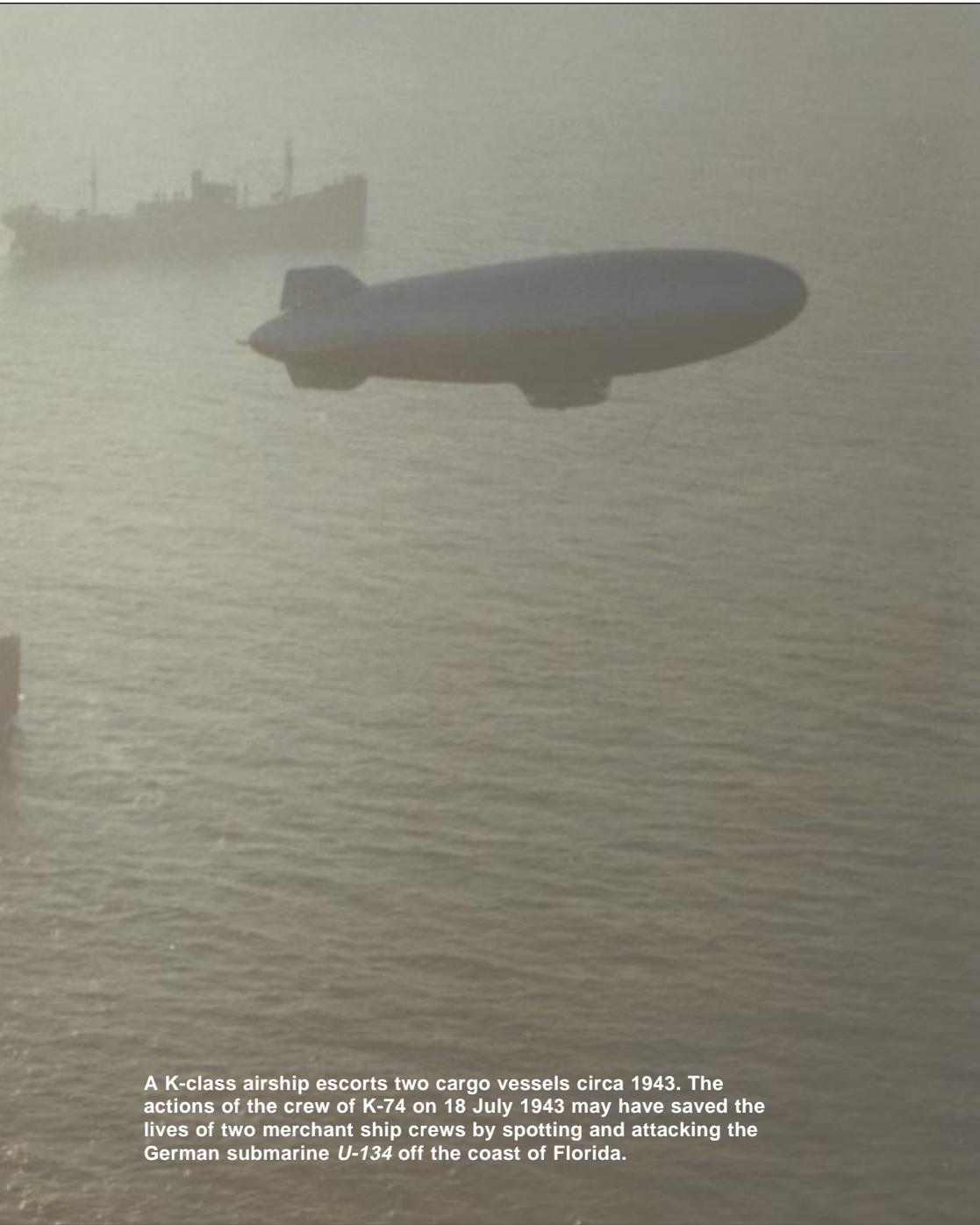
Then came the sharks.

Stessel had become separated from the rest when the men had let go of each other to wave. The others saw the shark fin break the surface and head straight for him. There

was no time to warn Stessel before the shark attacked. The Sailor went under. Momentarily, he reappeared, bathed in crimson. The water frothed as he went under a last time, spreading a red cloud on the surface. The rest of the crew positioned themselves back to back and drew their knives.

At 0815 on 19 July, K-74 finally sank—the only airship lost to enemy action in WW II.

From under the sea came somber



A K-class airship escorts two cargo vessels circa 1943. The actions of the crew of K-74 on 18 July 1943 may have saved the lives of two merchant ship crews by spotting and attacking the German submarine *U-134* off the coast of Florida.

volleys fired in requiem for Petty Officer Stessel. K-74's armed depth bombs detonated, exploding in a mournful salute—as if paying homage to this Navy hero lost in battle.

Dahlgren soon arrived and the Jacob's ladder was thrown over the side for the survivors. Small arms fire kept back the circling sharks while the crew of K-74 climbed to safety. A launch of bluejackets, with a Thompson submachine gun in the bow, searched in vain for any sign of

Stessel.

Meanwhile, the K-74 pilot continued to drift miles away. Grills struck out toward the Florida Keys on the horizon. It was late in the day and the aviator was severely sunburned and nearing exhaustion when K-32 passed over. Keen-eyed AMM3c Max May saw the struggling swimmer, and the K-32 crew dropped flares. Grills had swum six miles before he was sighted, picked up by a launch from a local rescue unit

and transported to *Dahlgren*. He had been in the water for 19 hours.

After the war, German Submarine Command records revealed that *U-134* reported downing a U.S. Navy airship. The sub cited sustaining battle damage to her No. 5 main ballast tank and No. 4 diving tank. After surviving two more attacks, *U-134* was ordered to return to base in France for repairs. En route in August, her luck ran out when two Royal Air Force bombers intercepted her in the Bay of Biscay, and sent her to the bottom.

A blimp for a sub: the wages of war.

Epilogue

If the airship had not joined the battle, the U-boat would have come upon the tanker and freighter before *Dahlgren* or shore-based aircraft could have intervened. Because of the blimp crew's actions, the merchant ships got through.

Grills and Bourne were awarded the Purple Heart. After their release from active duty, Radiomen Bourne and Turek received Letters of Commendation from the Secretary of the Navy for their quick action, as did AMM3c May for his sharp lookout. Twenty years after the event, Grills was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross.

To commemorate the anniversary of the incident, in July of this year, the Miami-area Naval Sea Cadets will cast a wreath into the Gulf Stream in memory of Isadore Stessel, Aviation Machinist's Mate Second Class, U.S. Navy.



Chief Atwood is Youth Programs Coordinator at Navy Recruiting District, Miami, Fla. For prints of the painting, contact the artist at 32 Churchill Ave., Arlington, MA 02174.