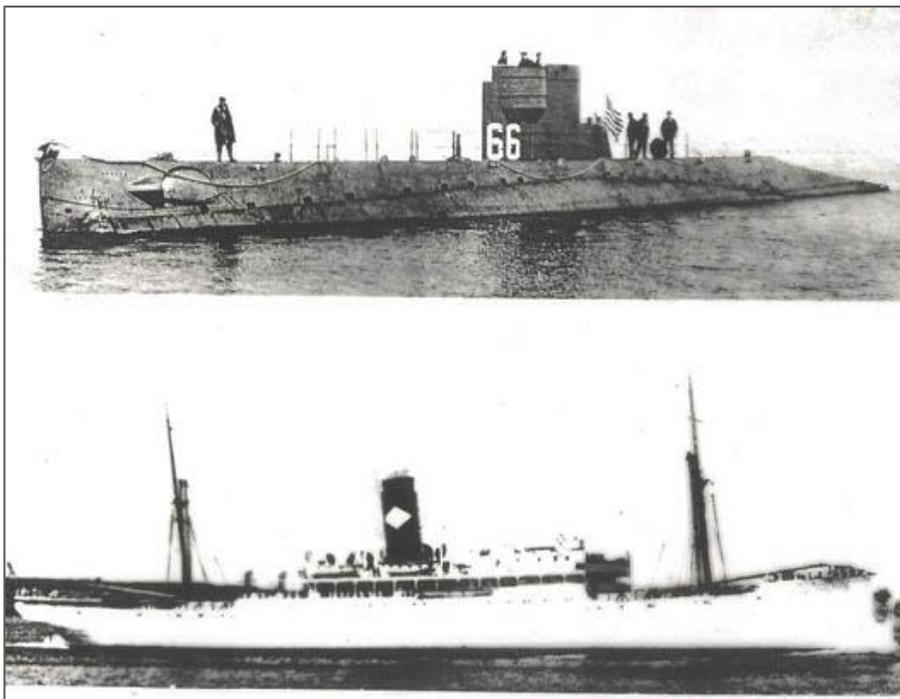


## **THE SUBMARINE *USS O-5* IS DOWN**

*By Capt. Julius Grigore, Jr., USN, Ret. - February 1972*

*Edited by Louie Celerier - August 2015*

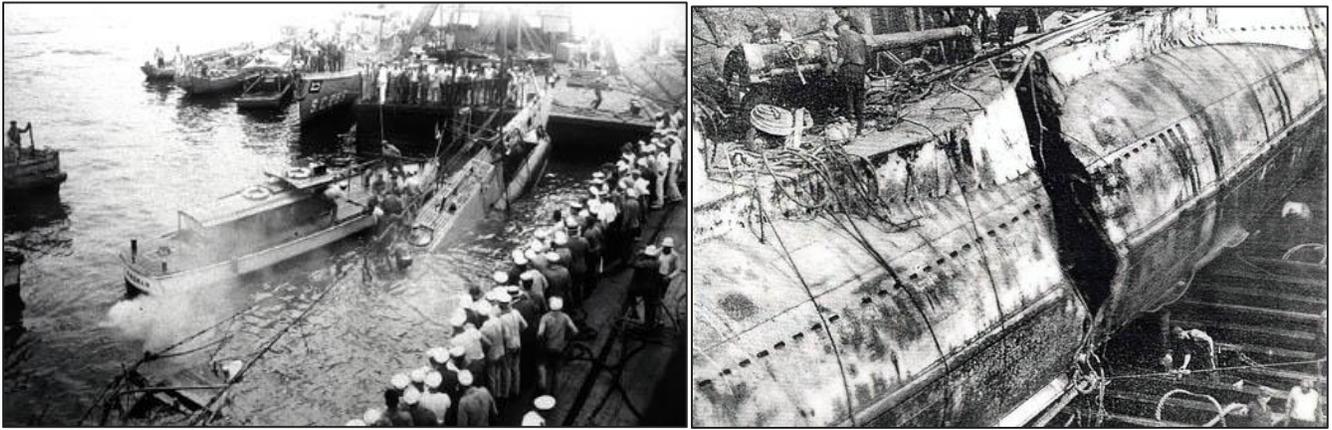
On Sunday morning, October 28, 1923, the surfaced U.S. Navy submarine *USS O-5 (SS-66)* was heading south on Limon Bay, on the Atlantic entrance to the Panama Canal, leading the submarines *USS O-3*, *USS O-6* and *USS O-8* on a routine transit of the Canal to the Pacific Ocean. The United Fruit Company freighter *SS Abangarez* arriving from Havana, Cuba, was on its way to Dock 6 at Cristobal, Canal Zone. The Panama Canal tugboat *U.S. Porto Bello* was on its way to aid the *Abangarez* in docking. Shortly after receiving the Panama Canal pilot on board, the *O-5* stopped its diesel engines in order to switch to its electric motors. During this



*The submarine USS O-5 (SS -66), the United Fruit Company SS Abangarez and the PC crane U.S. Ajax.*

moment when its engines were stopped and unable to maneuver, at 6:24 AM as recorded by the *Porto Bello's* captain, the *Abangarez* struck the *O-5* on the starboard (right) side making a 10-foot vertical gash 3 feet wide just ahead of the conning tower.

The *O-5*, with 21 officers and men, plus the Canal pilot on board, rolled 15 degrees to port (left side) and then righted. She then sank by the bow in seven fathoms (42 feet) of water within one minute. Fortunately, upon seeing the imminent collision, an officer in the conning tower of the submarine gave the order for all hands top side preventing a greater tragedy. All but six made it out when the officer gave the order. Eight minutes after the sinking, another sailor was shot to



*The O-5 shortly after the rescue and in dry dock showing the fatal gash.*

the surface in a bubble of water. Two bodies were found floating shortly afterward leaving three unaccounted for. The *Porto Bello* and the *Abangarez* picked up all the sailors in the water while Navy divers stationed at Coco Solo Naval Station rushed to the scene to begin rescue operations for the three missing seamen. Banging on the hull brought a response indicating that two men were still alive in the forward torpedo room (the third missing sailor was never found); however, the divers were completely helpless to rescue the trapped men.

Artificial lungs and rescue chambers had not been invented yet and salvage pontoons were not available in the Canal Zone. The only option left was to lift the submarine off the bottom in order to reach the men through a hatch. Enter the Panama Canal super crane *U.S. Ajax*. The *Ajax* was one of two of the largest crane barges in the world with a 250-ton capacity; the other was *Hercules*. Both were in the Panama Canal as they had been built specifically to handle the enormous gates on the locks and the Navy wasted no time requesting it for the rescue operation. However, both cranes were on the south side of Gaillard Cut at Paraiso and blocked by a slide on that cut, the first slide in that cut since 1916. But the spirit of all involved remained undaunted and two behemoth dipper dredges, the *U.S. Cascade* and the *U.S. Paraiso*, went into high gear and by 2:00 PM of that same day they had cleared enough space for *Ajax* to squeeze through arriving at the site of the sinking by 10:30 that night.

Meanwhile, in advance of the arrival of the *Ajax*, Panama Canal salvage forces had assembled over the luckless submarine and taken over the rescue and salvage operations. Leading the diving operations was Sheppard J. Shreaves, a qualified diver and foreman of the highly proficient salvage and diving crew of the Panama Canal Mechanical Division. Divers had determined that *O-5* was resting upright on a bed of soft mud making it easy to jet a tunnel using a fire hose, but this also presented a danger of a cave-in trapping the diver under the submarine. Rather than risk the lives of his men, Shep, as he was known, decided to go down himself to do the work of tunneling and positioning of the cable with support from his crew. First, he managed to enter the submarine and reach the bulkhead (wall) of engine room. Tapping with his diving hammer he communicated with the trapped sailors. He also admitted his feeling of helplessness that he could do no more at the time.

With all the necessary equipment at hand, Shep began tunneling around 11:00 the morning of the mishap. He would not shed his diving suit for the next 24 hours. Swirling black mud engulfed him forcing him to work only by feel and instinct taking care not to dredge too

much from under the bow to avoid a cave-in. On the first try, the cable broke and would do so two more times. The weight of the flooded submarine and the mud suction had proven too heavy.

All this while, Shep kept on working through the rest of the day and through the night, surfacing occasionally to make progress reports and allow a medical check-up. By mid-morning of the second day, the crew was ready for a fourth try. This time, however, they brought equipment to blow compressed air into the engine room to lighten the vessel. With the cable in place again, Shep gave the signal and *Ajax* once again began the tug-of-war. Little by little *Ajax* continued to haul and, after what seemed an eternity, the bow of the *O-5* broke the surface. Rescuers immediately jumped on the exposed bow deck and opened the forward hatch. The time was 1:30 PM, October 29, 1923.

When the two imprisoned men crawled out, one fainted from prostration. The moment was charged with emotion and many wept in relief and thanksgiving. The two sailors had been under water for 31 hours. They were whisked away to a decompression chamber at Coco Solo Naval Hospital.

At a celebration party that night in the Strangers Club in Colon, Shep Shreaves fell asleep in spite of all the noise. After more than 24 hours of continued hard work under very difficult circumstances, he deserved a good rest.

The *O-5* incident established a world record for Sheppard Shreaves. His were the longest duration underwater dives up to that time.

The two trapped sailors, Henry Breault and Lawrence T. Brown also had a unique story to tell. Upon hearing the order to abandon ship, Breault left the forward torpedo room, but realizing that his friend Brown was still there sleeping he rushed back to get him, securing the hatch cover as he did so. He found Brown awake, but unaware of what had happened. With water engulfing them, they attempted to escape through the conning tower, but a deluge blocked their route. They struggled back to the forward torpedo room and forced shut the watertight door.

Immediately afterward, the battery room flooded, shorted the batteries, ignited the chlorine gas and a violent explosion took place. About three hours later, Breault and Brown heard the first hammer taps from a diver coming through and they replied. Breault and Brown then separated to hammer on two sides of the hull so that divers would know there were two of them. Brown said that "Breault played a kind of tune with his hammer, indicating to the diver that we were in good shape and cheerful". Neither knew Morse Code. They had no food or water and only one flashlight, but they were confident they could last 48 hours. The high pressure and foul air gave them headaches so they did very little talking or moving. They heard scraping on the hull for hours which gave them hope as it was a sign work was going on to get them out. A couple of times they felt being lifted and then got a jolt when the sling broke. Finally, Brown said, "the sub began to be tilted upward slowly . . . it seemed forever . . . then we heard our comrades walking on deck . . . we were saved".

Breault was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for his selflessness and valor in going to the assistance of his shipmate in the face of death. President Calvin A. Coolidge made the presentation on April 4, 1924.



*Torpedoman Second Class Henry Breault (left) and PC Diver Sheppard Shreaves (middle) and diver.*

Shreaves was also honored for his exploit receiving the Congressional Life Saving Medal, as recommended by Acting Governor of the Canal Zone H. Burgess. He also received an 18-Karat gold watch from 800 grateful members of the Coco Solo Submarine Base. Breault and Brown made the presentation at a banquet in Shreaves' honor.

On November 26, 1923, the captain of the *O-5* was found responsible for the collision, but was later cleared by a Court of Naval Inquire. On August 14, 1927, the *Abangarez* was sized by U.S. Marshalls in New Orleans with libels of more than \$336,000 brought against her for her part in the collision. The ship was released and all charges dropped on August 20, 1934, when Federal Judge Wayne G. Borah ruled the *O-5* at fault in the collision. The *O-5* was stripped and sold as scrap for \$3,125 on December 12, 1924. Her original cost had been \$638,000 when she was commissioned on June 8, 1918.