

Sinking of the USS *Thresher* - I

Lead: Just after 9:00 AM on the morning of April 10, 1963, a pipe burst in the engine room of the nuclear submarine USS *Thresher* floating 1000 feet below the surface of the Atlantic off Cape Cod. Within minutes the vessel had been transformed into a twisted metallic tomb for 129 men.

Intro.: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: *Thresher* was a new type of submarine, one designed specifically to hunt, attack, and destroy Soviet atomic-powered submarines. The need

for such a vessel was demonstrated by USS *Nautilus*, launched in 1954, it was the world's first nuclear submarine. *Nautilus* was so quiet and powerful and so good at making kills and getting away without detection that the Navy was forced to change its strategy. Convinced that the Soviets would soon have the same deadly capability, designers came up with a killer submarine specifically to hunt other subs.

***Thresher* was the first of this class, but the political pressure to get these predator submarines on line was so high that Navy contractors began to cut corners. Later investigators discovered that a double standard was in play. The nuclear power plant was**

built with very exacting standards, but the submarine constructed around it did not receive the same quality control. These new subs were expected to perform at a higher level, to go faster, farther, and deeper, but except for the nuclear power plant, they were built using older technology, cheaper materials, and at a pace that sacrificed safety.

On the last morning of its life *Thresher* made the sacrifice for careless construction. At 9:09 AM the crew was trying to stop the Atlantic from invading the engine room and they were losing. Captain John H. Harvey, a 1950 graduate of the Naval Academy, gave orders to blow the ballast tanks and head for the surface.

There followed a heart-wrenching series of mechanical failures and slowly *Thresher* slipped backward to its icy doom. Next time: the death cry of *Thresher*.

At the University of Richmond, this is Dan Roberts.

Resources

Bentley, John. *The Thresher Disaster: The Most Tragic Dive in Submarine History*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Publishing Company, 1974.

Golembeski, Dean J. “What Sank the *Thresher*,” *American Heritage of Invention and Technology* (Summer 1997): 25-31.

