

The real X-men

Timothy Brown | June 26, 2009

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NEARLY 66 years ago, a flotilla of mini-submarines set off to sink or cripple the mighty German battleship Tirpitz. Among the men behind this attack was Max Shean from Perth, a volunteer for one of World War II's most daring and hazardous naval missions.

Shean's courage in command of the X-craft submarines in Europe and the Pacific earned him an unrivalled reputation as a leader whose aggressive instincts were always tempered by concern for his crew.

He died on June 15, aged 90.

Born in July 1918, Shean was in his third year of an engineering degree when news of the Dunkirk evacuation inspired him to join the Royal Australian Naval Volunteer Reserves. A man of slender build, Shean was no swashbuckler. He was a man of quiet purpose, optimism and integrity. He was a meticulous planner. Shean trained in anti-submarine warfare in Sydney before serving on a British corvette, HMS Bluebell, on Atlantic convoy escort duty.

When the British admiralty called for volunteers for "special and hazardous service", he volunteered without hesitation. After 15 months crossing the U-boat infested North Atlantic, Shean thought this special service couldn't be more hazardous than what he had been doing.

Unaware that his new job meant manning top-secret X-craft submarines, he joined 12 other volunteers and began training at the submarine base HMS Dolphin, Gosport, in 1942. They soon learned that their mission was to penetrate German harbour defences with a crew of three.

Each had to be competent divers, so they could cut their way through anti-submarine nets to lay a pair of two-tonne explosive charges under the Tirpitz, an awesome machine of war that threatened Britain's trans-Atlantic supply lines. They had six months to prepare for the attack, which was initially planned for April 1943.

Conditions were cramped on the X-craft. These submarines were developed to penetrate the most heavily defended waterways and survive unrealistic odds.

Shean's engineering skills proved crucial during the X-craft sea trials. The X-craft became part of him for the rest of his life.

He was the perfect choice for such a mission. With his energy and friendly nature he became a popular member of the young group of submariners. In an effort to maintain secrecy, the British navy applied strict rules, but Shean wanted to capture the moment and smuggled a small Box Brownie camera in with him. As a result, he developed a unique record of the X-craft world.

However, the biggest obstacle to their mission was developing a means to cut the anti-submarine nets protecting the Tirpitz at its anchorage in a Norwegian fjord. In early training attempts to cut a submarine through a net, all divers had had great difficulty and one unfortunately drowned in the process. It fell on Shean to devise a solution.

Typical of a man who grew up playing around with boats on the Swan River, Shean found a way. He felt this to be his greatest contribution to the war effort.

In September 1943, Shean set sail with six X-craft submarines to carry out Operation Source, the sinking of the Tirpitz in Kaa Fjord. Although qualified as an X-craft commanding officer, Shean was appointed as the diving officer of X-9.

To reach the operations area, the X-craft had to be towed by an ocean-going submarine. Shean was on board the towing submarine, HMS Syrtis, with the rest of X-9's operational crew when it was discovered that X-9 had broken the tow and disappeared.

The shredded towline had become caught in Syrtis's port propeller and Shean was sent out to clear the snag. Working without his diving suit, which was in X-9, he dived into the freezing Arctic waters and managed to clear the line. However, the X-9, which was being manned at the time by another crew, was lost with all hands. The operation was over and, with it, Shean's chance to take part. The X-craft eventually achieved their mission and the Tirpitz was so severely damaged that it never put to sea again. But none of the X-craft survived the raid and nine men were lost.

Soon after returning from Operation Source, the British had built more X-craft, and in April 1944 Shean was appointed in command of the X-24 for Operation Guidance. The Germans had been using Bergen in Norway as a U-boat base, with a floating dock for maintenance and repair. It was Shean's task to destroy the dock, an almost impossible task given that the approach was 40 nautical miles from the open sea through busy and confined waterways patrolled by German vessels and protected by two minefields and anti-torpedo nets. The X-24 was towed to the drop-off point by HMS Sceptre, commanded by another Australian submariner, Ian McIntosh. At dusk on April 13, McIntosh slipped Shean's submarine and X-24 dived. Before departing, the two Australians coordinated a rendezvous. This mission was perilous from its inception and never before had only one X-craft been considered for such an operation.

Reflecting on Shean's selection as the submarine's captain, his engineer Vernon "Ginger" Coles said: "Max was the only captain I would sail with. When we went into Bergen the demeanour of Max was such that one would have thought we were going on exercise. He was cheerful, confident and pleased that we were doing something useful with no thought of not coming back."

Shean was just 25.

The X-24 negotiated the minefields and, on returning to periscope depth, passed so close to a patrolling German patrol boat that Shean could see its swastika flag. Shean calmly ducked directly underneath. The X-24 slowly crept up to the target area, where Shean manoeuvred the X-24 close to the Bergen docks. As he approached his target, Shean could see the wharf facilities looming out of the haze. The basin, however, was full of busy marine traffic. Later, he confided that it was at this point he was overcome with fear, but his sense of responsibility for his crew forced him to keep a steady head. He had to do the job. He had to get his crew home safely. He took the X-24 deep and made his run to the target.

The underwater picture was confused but the X-24 laid the charges, set with a four-hour time delay. Exhausted and starved of fresh air, Shean and his crew steered back through the heavily defended waters to the rendezvous with Sceptre. In the dark night that awaited them, a relieved McIntosh greeted Shean with a submariner's nonchalance, but through their exploits the young Australians forged a deep bond and remained close friends for the rest of their lives.

On their return to Scotland, Shean was to learn that faulty intelligence and incorrect charts had led him to lay the charges on a large enemy ammunition ship, the Barenfels, which was destroyed. Shean asked to be sent back for a second attack, a request that was refused. The British claimed the attack as a success; a significant target was

sunk and the X-craft returned unscathed.

After the previous Tirpitz raid, when all six boats were lost, morale in the flotilla was low. The mere fact Shean had penetrated a heavily defended fjord and harbour 40 nautical miles deep and returned home was a great morale booster. It was the first time an enemy ship had been sunk at its berth without any loss to Allied navy personnel. More significantly, the attack proved to be a strategic success and the Admiralty gained great confidence in the ability of the X-craft in the war effort. This would later prove vital in the Pacific.

Shean was awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his leadership.

But a new threat had arisen and, following D-Day, the X-craft were required in the Pacific. Leaving his new bride in Scotland, Shean was posted to a submarine depot ship and sailed to the Pacific. He was again selected to command a special mission in which he was given the job of cutting two submarine telegraph cables that were part of the Japanese communications network linking Singapore, Saigon, Hong Kong and Tokyo. The Allies could not intercept and listen to Japanese communications sent via these underwater cables. If the X-craft men could sever this link, then the Japanese would have to revert to their secondary radio communications, which the Allies had the means to decipher.

At that stage it was vital for the war effort to understand the Japanese intentions, for it would be the cue to the Allies on whether to drop the atomic bomb. The mission was no easy task and Shean's engineering background again proved most useful. He developed a special flat grapnel for XE4 that was eventually used for the X-craft mission.

After training in Hervey Bay in Queensland, Shean sailed to Borneo in July 1945, then to The Philippines where the X-craft were launched on their mission to Saigon. He almost drowned en route after being swept overboard but was able to swim back and climb aboard after swimming the fastest few strokes of his life.

On July 31, the cable was cut. For his efforts in the Pacific, Shean was awarded a bar to his DSO and a US Bronze Star.

On completion of the war, Shean graduated with honours in engineering before a career in the West Australian power industry. He was an avid sailor and in 1978 sailed his yacht Bluebell from Fremantle to Britain in the 150-year celebration Parmelia race, in the open division, which he won.

Shean was a proud submariner until his final days. He maintained close links with his X-craft comrades; Coles and he wrote to each other every three months.

McIntosh and Shean together were patrons of the submarine museum in Fremantle.

Shean is survived by his wife of 65 years, Mary; two daughters, Ruth and Heather; five grandchildren; and three great-grandchildren.

Timothy Brown is a serving submarine officer in the Royal Australian Navy.