

THE STORY OF HMS SEAL



On taking command of HMS Seal in November 1938, Captain Lonsdale observed that HMS Seal's company was "*one of the biggest collections of scallywags that the Submarine Service has ever put together*", who considered Lonsdale to be "*too much of a gentleman to be a good submarine captain*". However, in a very brief time, through no discernable means, the captain had gained the complete respect and confidence of the ship's crew, and they of his. This bond was to sustain them all during the dark days ahead.



During the Norwegian campaign, HMS Seal, a replacement for HMS Cachalot, was ordered to conduct a mine lay intended to interrupt German re-supply lines to their troops in Norway.

In preparation for this voyage, *Seal* loaded her full complement of 50 mines. Her mission, Operation FD7, was to enter the Strait of Skagerrak and proceed to the much more difficult and dangerous Strait of Kattegat. There she was to lay her minefield. The Admiralty assigned two nearby alternative sites in case *Seal* could not safely enter the primary mine laying location. The Kattegat was a dangerous place for a large mine laying submarine, as it was patrolled by enemy aircraft and ships. *Seal* set out on this mission on April 29, 1940.

At 0130 on May 4, *Seal* entered the Kattegat on the surface, although Lonsdale had trimmed down the boat so that the conning tower was awash to reduce her silhouette. Daylight came early on May mornings in this northern latitude, and Lonsdale feared that *Seal* would not remain undetected for long. He was right. *Seal* dived at 0230, only minutes before full dawn broke and just seconds before an approaching German reconnaissance aircraft dropped a bomb nearby, causing minor damage.



Proceeding at periscope depth, at around 0800, he detected a group of anti-submarine trawlers sweeping the waters ahead of *Seal*, blocking her entry into the primary mining position. Lonsdale immediately chose to drop her mines in the first alternative position, which lay ahead and to one side of the area the trawlers were now sweeping. Mine laying started at 0900 and took only 45 minutes to complete. Lonsdale's challenge was now to extricate *Seal* safely from the Kattegat and return to Britain.

The captain turned *Seal* around and began his hazardous homeward trip. The trawlers continued their sweep and slowly overhauled the submarine. At about 1500, Lonsdale detected through the periscope another group of hunters, this one to the north east. These were modern German motor torpedo boats, each carrying depth-charge throwers in addition to two torpedo tubes. *Seal* continued her cautious evasion. Lonsdale's goal was to evade both enemy forces until after dark, when *Seal* could surface and break for safety out of the Kattegat using diesel power.

The water depth was only just over 100 feet, giving *Seal* no chance of going deep and running for it on weakening battery power. But one other possible evasive manoeuvre remained. Gambling that the torpedo boats and trawlers carried only listening hydrophones for detection, Lonsdale adjusted trim and settled *Seal* on a salt water layer, at a depth of about 60 feet. The boat now slowly drifted with the current at a constant depth, in the ultra quiet state.

As the submarine became silent, the terrifying sound of a wire scraping the starboard side of the hull could be heard. Soon the after hydroplanes jammed. However, before Lonsdale could do anything about this latest danger, *Seal* resumed trim and the scraping wire seemed to have been cast off. It was now 1830.

Lonsdale ordered the crew to be served their evening meal, but at 1855 an explosion aft shattered this peaceful interlude. At first, *Sea's* crew believed one of the surface ships above had dropped a depth charge. When no more explosions followed, however, another cause seemed more logical. Lonsdale reasoned that *Sea* had become entangled in a mooring wire for a German mine, which had created the scraping sound along the hull and temporarily jammed the after hydroplanes. As the submarine gradually drifted with the current, the mine had been pulled into the hull and exploded. A quick damage survey revealed that all crew members were safe, but that the aftermost compartment had been partially flooded, with perhaps 130 tons of sea water inside the hull. *Sea's* main ballast tank capacity was 380 tons; hence, Lonsdale and his chief engineer, Lieutenant R.H.S. Clark, calculated that *Sea*, now resting on the sea bottom at a depth of 130 feet, should have sufficient buoyancy to surface when her ballast tanks were blown. Lonsdale had the word passed that the submarine would attempt to surface after dark. In the meantime, all members of the crew were advised to rest and conserve the dwindling oxygen in the boat.

At 2230, Lonsdale made the first surfacing attempt. *Sea* rose forward, but her stern remained buried in the bottom mud of the Kattegat, held there by suction and the weight of seawater inside her hull. Lonsdale stopped both the motors and blowing tanks, and *Sea* gradually descended back to the seabed.

Conditions aboard the submarine were now deteriorating. Rapidly diminishing oxygen was making many crew members sluggish and weak. Lonsdale decided to use more aggressive techniques during his second attempt to surface. Compressed air was used to blow a second group of fuel tanks and the midships freshwater tanks. In addition, the 11-ton drop keel was released from the hull. The latter decision was significant, because this release – normally resorted to only in case of extreme emergency – would preclude *Sea's* diving again. Despite these drastic added measures, *Sea* refused to surface.

Lonsdale had compressed air and battery power for one more attempt to surface, and he knew it had to be made quickly; too many crew members were being immobilised by lack of oxygen and carbon dioxide poisoning.

For this last attempt, Lonsdale ordered two small, previously overlooked ballast tanks aft by the motor room to be blown – and told as many of the crew members as were able to move forward in the pressure hull, now noticeably up by the bow. Lonsdale, a man of faith, requested crew members to join him in Prayers, and they all recited the Lord's Prayer. Then Lonsdale prayed "*Dear God, we have tried everything in our power to save ourselves and we have failed. Yet we believe that You can do all things which are impossible to men. Please, O Lord, deliver us*".

At 0110 on May 5, nearly 23 hours after *Sea* had dived, the final effort to surface began. Using his remaining battery power to go ahead on both engines, Lonsdale blew the small after ballast tanks with *Sea's* remaining compressed air.

Suddenly, *Sea* shuddered, and her stern broke free of the sea floor. At 0130, she surfaced. But her problems were just beginning.

Ordering the crew to remain in position, Lonsdale laboriously opened the conning tower hatch and climbed to the bridge. As fresh air rushed in, many crew members, suffering from carbon dioxide poisoning, were afflicted with severe headaches and began vomiting. Fearing possible capture, Lonsdale ordered secret code books and materials jettisoned over the side and had an encrypted situation report sent to the Admiralty, which acknowledged receipt of his message. He also ordered secret asdic (sonar) gear smashed and nautical charts with minefields plotted on them jettisoned in weighted bags. It was now about 0200, and Lonsdale decided to run for the Swedish coast. At 2010 he sent a coded message to the Admiralty reporting *Sea's* damaged condition and his intent to run for Sweden. About 90 minutes later the Admiralty sent a fateful response to Lonsdale, but one that he unfortunately never received: 'Safety of personnel should be your first consideration after destruction of Asdics'. Failure to receive that message – which supported his subsequent decision – was to cause him severe anguish until he learned of it.

Initially, only the starboard engine could be started, and it soon became evident that the steering mechanism was inoperative. Lonsdale concluded that the exploding mine had bent or jammed the rudder. At this juncture the port engine started, and Lonsdale prepared to steer with the engines. But *Sea* could not be turned towards Sweden with the engines alone. As a final resort, the captain decided to go astern towards Sweden, which was initially successful. Hope among the crew members increased that they

might somehow escape. Their optimism was soon dashed, however, when the starboard engine lost lubricating oil pressure and seized up completely. Repair attempts failed, and *Sea/* was now left to wallow on the surface, unable to dive and capable only of going in circles. It was almost 0230, with dawn close at hand. Soon the drone of an approaching German Arado Ar-196 reconnaissance seaplane spelled more trouble.

Immediately after surfacing, Lonsdale had had *Sea/*'s two Lewis guns brought up and mounted on the after end of the conning tower. He chose not to fire them as the Arado made its first attack, hoping to convince the German airmen that *Sea/* was a disabled Swedish submarine returning to port. This ruse failed, however; the Arado commander recognised *Sea/*'s British markings and continued his attack with machine guns, cannon and two bombs.

Then a second Arado arrived in response to the alert sent by the first pilot. This time Lonsdale himself manned one Lewis gun. But the attacks by the Arados took their toll among the crew members on *Sea/*'s bridge. Lieutenant Terence Butler suffered a shrapnel wound in the leg and had to be taken below for treatment. One able seaman was also wounded. Miraculously, however, Lonsdale remained unscathed in the hail of enemy fire. Now one of *Sea/*'s Lewis guns jammed, and cannon fire from the second Arado perforated the port side main ballast tank, creating a pronounced list to port. A larger German Heinkel He-115 bomber soon arrived on the scene and commenced a new attack on the listing *Sea/*, whose second Lewis gun also jammed.



Lonsdale now realised that *Sea/* was helpless and his entire crew was in jeopardy. But he was caught in a commanding officer's ultimate dilemma. The proud tradition of the Royal Navy argued against surrendering *Sea/*, which might be salvaged by the Germans and used for propaganda purposes. Lonsdale's one alternative was to ensure the submarine's destruction by scuttling her. For this purpose, the submarine was fitted with two depth charges in the bilges, set to explode at a depth of 50 feet if the boat was flooded internally by any cause. But two considerations prevented Lonsdale from scuttling his ship. First, there were no German vessels in sight to rescue *Sea/*'s crew, some of whom could not swim. Second, if the crew abandoned the boat before scuttling her, they would be floating in the sea above the submarine when her depth charges exploded, causing certain injury or death to many of them. Lonsdale was sure that *Sea/* would sink of her own volition before she could be captured and salvaged by the enemy. She was already listing to port and was down by the stern.

Accordingly, Lonsdale asked that the white wardroom tablecloth be passed up from below, and he waved it at the second Arado, still lurking in the vicinity, which then landed nearby. The Arado's commander demanded that *Sea/*'s skipper swim to the aircraft. After pondering for a moment, Lonsdale turned over command of the vessel to Lieutenant Trevor Beet, the boat's navigator, because Butler was still being treated below for wounds, and swam to the Arado. The report described his action in leaving the submarine as "one I have ever afterwards deeply regretted, but at the same time seemed the only thing to do". *Sea/*, barely afloat, had now been surrendered to the enemy and her commanding officer taken prisoner. The first Arado seaplane that had attacked *Sea/* then landed alongside and took one petty officer aboard as an additional hostage.

Nearly three hours later, with the He-115 bomber still circling overhead, a German converted trawler, U-Jäger (submarine hunter) *UJ-128*, hove to near the foundering sub at 0630. Her first lieutenant, Heinz Nolte, and three sailors boarded the submarine from a small boat.

Nolte, a regular officer who spoke English, quickly went below to assess the condition of the submarine and was appalled by the internal damage inflicted by *Sea/*'s crew. Based on this inspection, the German lieutenant decided that *Sea/* was in imminent danger of sinking. He ordered all members of the submarine's crew to be transferred to *UJ-128* before she foundered. By this time, *Sea/* was listing even more badly to port and settling down by the stern. Neither the Germans nor the British thought the boat would remain afloat.

With *Sea/*'s remaining crew members aboard as prisoners, *UJ-128* began towing the badly damaged submarine toward the small port of Frederikshavn, on the eastern coast of Denmark.

On the morning of May 10, the tug *Seeteufel* began towing the temporarily repaired *Seal* south, through the Kattegat to German navy headquarters at Kiel, heavily escorted by minesweepers, submarine chasers and aircraft. *Seal* arrived there on the afternoon of May 11, greeted by a host of naval dignitaries. The commander of the German naval base at Kiel had already received his orders. *Seal* was to be restored and refitted as a German U-boat. Despite her sorry condition, the British submarine's perceived propaganda value justified any repair expenses.

However, German hopes for a propaganda coup from *Seal* soon ran into trouble and the attempt turned out to be a failure. She was used primarily as a propaganda exhibit and instructional vessel. She was scrapped in 1943 and left moored as a stripped hull in a remote basin at Kiel naval dockyard. There she was sunk by British bombers near the end of the war.

Lonsdale and the crew of *Seal* remained German prisoners throughout the war in Europe, being housed in a variety of POW camps until reunited in Marlag camp in Germany. It was from here that the remarkable relationship with the villagers of *Seal* flourished. Over 260 parcels were received by the grateful prisoners, as well as being supported in many other ways including the welfare of their families.

They were liberated by Allied forces in April 1945. In April 1946, the court-martial for Captain Lonsdale and Lieutenant Beet, who assumed command after Lonsdale's swim to the Arado seaplane, convened in Portsmouth. Beet was charged with negligently failing to take steps to ensure the sinking of *Seal* to prevent her from falling into enemy hands. After one day of testimony, the five-officer court-martial board honourably acquitted him. Lonsdale's court-martial followed the next day. He was charged with failing to take immediate action to engage the enemy aircraft that attacked *Seal*, and failing to take steps to ensure her sinking when it appeared possible she might fall into the hands of the enemy. His friend was no less a man than Captain George Phillips GM DSO, who described Rupert Lonsdale as a 'hero'.

The court-martial panel of five Royal Navy captains heard testimony for two days, but they required less than one hour to reach a verdict. Lonsdale was honourably acquitted of all charges, after which the president of the court advised him, "*I have much pleasure in handing you back your sword*". In addition to those *Seal* crew members called as witnesses by the court, many others among the captured crew had travelled to Portsmouth at their own expense to attend the trial. These men now surged forward to congratulate their respected captain and shake his hand.

CAREER (UNITED KINGDOM)	
Class and Type:	<i>Grampus</i> -class submarine
Name:	HMS <i>Seal</i>
Builder:	Chatham Dockyard
Laid down:	9 December 1936
Launched:	27 September 1938
Commissioned:	24 May 1939
Fate:	Captured by Germans, 5 May 1940

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS	
Displacement:	1,810 tons surfaced 2,157 tons submerged
Length:	293 ft (89 m)
Beam:	25 ft 6 in (7.77 m)
Draught:	16 ft 10 in (5.13 m)
Propulsion:	2 shaft, Diesel (3300 hp) plus electric (1630 hp)
Speed:	15.5 knots surfaced 8.75 knots submerged
Complement:	59
Armament:	6 x 21 in torpedo tubes (bow) 12 torpedoes 1 x 4 inch deck gun 50 mines