The Sinking of Submarine No. 6 and Response of the Imperial Japanese Navy

A Look at the Circumstances Surrounding Naval Expansion Following the Russo-Japanese War

YAMAMOTO Masao

Introduction

The accident involving Submarine No. 6 occurred on April 15, 1910 (Meiji 43) and became famous because of the opening line of Lieutenant Tsutomu Sakuma's last entry in the vessel's log: "Words of apology fail me for my recklessness in having sunk His Majesty's Submarine No. 6 and killed my crew."[1] The heroic deaths of Sakuma and his 14-man crew at the dawn of the development of Japanese navy submarines became widely known both in Japan and overseas. Sakuma's apology for causing the accident, and his detailed description of the situation inside the submarine as it sat at the bottom of the sea off Iwakuni, not only gave a considerable boost to the honor of the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN) both at home and overseas, but also raised the morale of serving naval officers and warranted mention in pre-war government-approved textbooks. There was reference in ethics classes to "sunken heroes" and "men doing their duty," and it was also used in the national curriculum for the teaching of loyalty and patriotism.

However, if viewed from a modern perspective, despite the laudable behavior of the commander and his crew after the accident, many questions exist about the accident itself and its handling by naval authorities. Much has been written about this accident and Hoichi Wanami's *Dairokusensuitei sonan tenmatsuki* (An Account of the Foundering of Submarine No. 6), (IJN Ministry Education Bureau, 1926) and Yoshihiro Norimoto's *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), (Kokuminsha, 1944) offer the most fundamental descriptions; both are frequently quoted by the majority of post-war authors.[2]

---

[1] Lt. Sakuma acknowledged that the flooding of the cabin was the reason why the submarine foundered and was subsequently unable to surface, but he also described how his crew faithfully carried out their duties right through to their deaths, and, for the sake of future development of submarines, gave details of the cause of the accident and wrote a message of farewell to his superiors as well. The existing log is a photographic copy of the original, which was removed from Sakuma's pocket. It was copied with the performance details of the submarine removed, and the original that was stored at the *Suikosha* Naval Archives was destroyed in fires that followed the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923 (Taisho 12).

[2] Minoru Taguchi, *Dairokusensuitei to teicho* (Submarine No. 6 and its Captain), *Dairokusensuitei kensho*

NIDS Security Reports, No. 6 (September 2005), pp. 93-119.

The former was published by the Navy Ministry, so naturally it gives a more detailed description of the accident itself, while the latter aims, in the author's own words, "to attempt to avoid contributing to the idolization of the commander of the submarine, …and instead seeks to focus upon how the incident has been handled in various magazines and newspapers,"[3] and therefore gives a detailed coverage of the reaction of the society of the day. However, as is to be expected from books written in the pre-war period, both writers glorify Lt. Sakuma in an attempt to affect national consciousness, rather than to consider the specifics of the accident.

This focus remained basically unchanged in the post-war period, with the accident still being treated as a symbol of the heroism of those in the IJN, and in fact this tendency strengthened with the passage of time as books published in the post-war era drew upon the pre-war literature.[4] Early researchers who attempted to take a more dispassionate look at the accident were unable to confirm their findings. This paper is an attempt to assume such a stance and to clarify the nature of a major incident in Japanese military history.

The research for this paper was carried out primarily by carefully tracing the annals of the accident through the *Kobunbiko*, or Document Files of the Ministry of the Navy. These are the most complete naval records in existence, and are held at the National Institute of Defense Studies in Tokyo. Where necessary, this article compares these official documents with other publications. The approach of this paper is based upon several reports, including that of the official Accident Investigation Panel, as well as written statements by those involved.[5] The article begins by looking at the accident itself, seeking to clarify its background as well as the details of how it unfolded, its cause and where the responsibility lies. Then the article considers how the naval authorities viewed the accident and dealt with it, particularly in the context of the naval expansion that followed the Russo-Japanese War.[6] By doing so, the

---

hozonkai, 1959, p. 26.

[3] Yoshihiro Norimoto, *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), (Kokuminsha, 1944), pp. 3-4.

[4] The best examples of this are "Sea Fights and Shipwrecks" by American Hanson W. Baldwin (translated by Yuzuru Sanematsu *Kainan* (Maritime accident), Fuji Shuppan 1968), Hanover House, 1954, who eulogizes the behavior of the crew during the accident as a manifestation of *bushido*, and Masanori Ito's famous work which one of the classic studies of the Navy*: Daikaigun wo Omou* (Remembering the Navy), (Bungei Shunju Shinsha, 1956).

[5] The *Kobunbiko* summarized form includes the reports and statements submitted by those representing the unit's operation, construction and medical arms, as well as the assessment produced by the Accident Investigation Panel. This Panel was set up under the Investigation Regulation Ordinance No. 166, 1901, whenever there was a need to establish responsibility in accidents involving maritime vessels. While it did not possess the authority to make legal judgments or take punitive measures, its findings were seen to be an essential part of any public prosecution in a military court.

[6] The general situation of the IJN following the Russo-Japanese War is described in detail in such sources as *Senshi Sosho Kaigun Gunsenbi* (1) (Annals of Military History: Naval Battles (1), Military History Research Center, National Institute for Defense Studies (NIDS), Asagumo Shimbunsya, 1969; *Senshi Sosho Daihonei - Kaigunbu Rengo Kantai* (1) (Annals of Military History: Imperial General Headquarters – Navy Combined Fleet), 1975 and *Nihon Kaigunshi Dai Nikan* (Japanese Naval History Vol. 2), Kaigun Rekishi Hozonkai,

author considers that the article manages to get to the previously-untouched essence of an accident still glorified 100 years after it occurred.

The aim of this research is to examine the validity of the accepted theories on an event within the now defunct IJN and, by focusing upon how the Navy handled the matter, to get an insight into the unique nature of the IJN as an organization. While accidents or scandals involving Imperial Army and Navy personnel were handled by a unique system of military justice involving military courts, the public was not informed of the real truth behind such issues, and it was not unusual for the authorities to actually conceal or distort the facts. Their products provide the basis for theories that are accepted for years to come, but at the same time obscures valuable lessons.

I. The Circumstances of the Accident

A. Background – The Decision to Operate Independently

Because submarines were still in an experimental stage as weapons platforms and had problems with reliability, they normally operated together as a group under both the captain of the mother ship and the commander of the submarine force itself. There were also occasions when the captain of the mother ship assumed command over the submarine. The commander of the submarine tender *Toyohashi* was Captain Sadaichi Hiraoka (of the 16th Naval Academy class, and also commander of the No. 2 Submarine Force), and the No. 1 Submarine Force had just been taken over by Commander Yasuhira Yoshikawa (of the 22nd Naval Academy class), with Lt. Sakuma (of the 29th Naval Academy class) in command of Submarine No. 6.

The accident involving Submarine No. 6 occurred when it was operating independently of the submarine tender, and an accident report dated April 24, 1910 (Meiji 43), issued to the Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station (Vice Admiral Tomozaburo Kato, of the 7th Naval Academy class) explains that Submarine No. 6 was under the following orders:

Daiichi Hoki Shuppan, 1995. Also, the relationship between Imperial Defense Policy adopted after the Russo-Japanese War and naval strategy is covered in such works as: Jun Tsunoda, *Meiji Hyakunenshi Sosho-Manshu Mondai to Kokubo Hoshin* (Meiji Hundred Year History Series: The Manchurian Problem and National Defense Policy), (Hara Shobo, 1967); Jun Tsunoda *Seiji to Gunji- Meiji Taisho Showa Shoki no Nihon* (Political and Military Affairs in Japan in the Meiji, Taisho and Early Showa Periods), (Kofu Shuppansha, 1987); Tomoko Masuda, *Kaigun Kakucho Mondai no Seiji Katei – 1906-1914,* (The Political Process Involved in Naval Expansion – 1906-1914), *Nenpo Nihon Kindaishi Kenkyu 4* (Japanese Modern History 4), October 1982. Books such as Yoshio Matsushita's *Nihon Rekishi Shinsho – Meiji no Guntai* (Pocket Edition Japanese History- Meiji Period Military), (Shibundo, 1963), and Kiyoshi Ikeda's *Kaigun to Nihon* (Navy and Japan), (Chuo Koronsha, 1981), written from the standpoint of serving Army or Navy officers of the day, provide an insight into the situation within the IJN at the time. See also, Hiromi Tanaka *Heihachiro Togo,* (Chikuma Shobo Publishing Co., Ltd., 1999), and Hiromi Tanaka *Akiyama Saneyuki*, (Yoshikawa Kobunkan, 2004), both provide new perspectives on the Navy at that time.

Course of Action for Submarine No. 6

On April 11, I (Cmdr Yoshikawa of No. 1 Submarine Force) took command of the No. 1 Submarine Force (excluding Submarine No. 6) and, led by the captain of the submarine tender *Toyohashi*, departed to cruise in the western area of the Seto Inland Sea. Because waves posed problems for Submarine No. 6, it was judged that including it under the same command would be problematic, and so the submarine tender *Rekizan Maru* was assigned to it. Independent training operations were to be carried out under the following orders:

Orders issued to Lt. Sakuma, commander of Submarine No. 6

1. You will assume command of Submarine No. 6 and the submarine tender *Rekizan Maru* and, following the instructions under separate cover, you will carry out training operations in the waters near Miyajima and Shinminato.
2. While training, you will pay attention to changes in the weather, and if necessary, you will move to Shinminato, where you will drop anchor.
3. Be particularly careful in your choice of location to drop anchor.
4. Apart from regular communication, there is no specific requirement for you to contact this station. However, in the event of an unforeseen occurrence, you are instructed to contact the officers in charge at this station and on the *Karasaki* (another submarine tender, like the *Toyohashi*).
5. The location of this station is as indicated on the included cruise plan.

April 10, 1910 Commander (of No. 1 Submarine Force) Yoshikawa[7]

Poor wave resistance was given as the reason for Submarine No. 6's removal from the operations of the No. 1 Submarine Force. It was the first submarine to be manufactured in Japan, and there were numerous problems with its performance. The first IJN submarines were of the "Holland"-type. Five were purchased from the American Electric Boat Company (Submarines No. 1 to 5), and their assembly was completed in October 1905 (Meiji 38). Subsequently, relying on imported basic design documents, Submarines No. 6 and 7, the first two vessels to be built from designs created in Japan, were completed in April 1906 (Meiji 39) at the Kawasaki Dockyard in Kobe. However, in contrast to the standard displacement of the imported vessels of 106 tons, the Japanese-built Submarine No. 6 displaced no more than 57 tons (Submarine No. 7 was 78 tons), making it unreliable for even standard cruising, and in addition, this submarine built by a process of trial and error was constantly plagued with

[7] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2* (National Institute for Defense Studies Library), pp. 784-785. Furthermore, because the *Kobunbiko* does not have page numbers, the numbers cited here are those put on the microfilm records in the National Institute for Defense Studies Library. This is the same for all

technical problems.[8]

These shortcomings resulted in extended trials being ordered for the submarine, but instead, instructions were given to carry out a short period of independent training under the supervision of the *Rekizan Maru*. No detailed records exist of the background as to why independent operations were ordered when submarines normally operated under the command of the Submarine Force, but the testimony found among the written statements in the *Kobunbiko* of Captain Hiraoka of the submarine tender *Toyohashi* does offer some insights.

> I had not originally planned for the *Rekizan Maru* to escort Submarine No. 6 to the area off Shinminato, and I had no intention of ordering it to go there, but with the No. 1 and No. 2 Submarine Forces being ordered to Beppu and Tokuyama, Submarine No. 6 was left with nothing to do. There were numerous requests for it to be allowed to carry out night operations off Shinminato but I persuaded them against this and refused permission … From the 11th to the 14th, six vessels of the No. 1 Submarine Force and two of the No. 2 Force were to go out, so Submarine No. 6 was to be left behind in Kure by itself. Lt. Sakuma was not at all happy with the prospect of his being the only vessel left behind, and he requested to be allowed to go to Shinminato. He made this request through the Commander (of No. 1 Submarine Force) Yoshikawa. I said [to Yoshikawa] that I didn't know what his opinion was, but … that I wanted him to give it a lot of thought. Despite this, the request came yet again from the Commander, so I gave permission for them to go out, as long as they operated with the utmost care. My relenting and giving permission like this was an example of my being weak-willed, and had I stuck to my original position and refused, we would have probably been able to avoid this accident.[9]

We can infer from this that there was conflict among the various commanders over the shortcomings of Submarine No. 6, and also that Lt. Sakuma's frustration at being unable to accompany his unit on its training exercise was actually a subtext contributing to this accident. The independent training operation of Submarine No. 6 was pushed through even though such activities were unheard of in those days.

---

other page references to this source.

[8] Hoichi Wanami, *Dairoku Sensuitei Sonan Tenmatsuki* (An Account of the Foundering of Submarine No. 6) (IJN Ministry Education Bureau, 1929), p. 3.

[9] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, pp. 1079-1081. No. 1 Submarine Force mentioned in these statements had seven vessels, No.'s 1 to 5 were imported from the United States, and No.'s 6 and 7 were made in Japan. The No. 2 Submarine Force was made up of two vessels, No. 8 and No. 9, both large submarines of 286-ton displacement purchased from the British Vickers Co.

B. The Nature of the Accident

According to the assessment provided by the accident report and the record of events in the captain's log, at 9:38 a.m. on April 15, 1910 (Meiji 43), Submarine No. 6 left the mother ship *Rekizan Maru* off Iwakuni-Shinminato, Yamaguchi Prefecture, and commenced submerged cruising at 10:10 a.m., but problems with excessive buoyancy led them to gradually decrease buoyancy, and at 10.45 a.m., submerged cruising was resumed. When large quantities of seawater flooded in through the submarine's snorkel-type ventilator tube, open because the diesel engine was in use, the crew reacted by attempting to close the sluice valve (emergency shut-off valve). However, the chain attached to this valve came off, and while they attempted to close it manually, the amount of water that flooded in exceeded the spare flotation capacity, and electric power was lost due to the switchboard being covered with water, so the vessel sank to the sea bottom at a depth of 10 fathoms (18 meters). Sakuma wrote in the log that the chain broke, but subsequent investigations revealed that rather than breaking, it fell off.

The loss of electric power forced the crew to attempt to pump the water out manually but the interior of the vessel had been plunged into darkness, so this did not go smoothly. By this stage, the switchboard was submerged and the crewmembers were soon surrounded by deadly carbon monoxide gas. Their fate was sealed when, first of all, diesel fuel flooded in after a pipe broke when they were attempting to use air pressure to eject fuel in an attempt to recover buoyancy. To make matters even worse, incorrect use of a valve meant that their attempt to use air pressure to discharge water from the main tanks (the ballast tanks that hold either seawater or air during submerged movement or surfacing) went wrong and actually caused the air pressure inside the submarine itself to rise to extremely high levels. After this occurred, Sakuma made his final entry in the log at 12.40 p.m., and all 14 crewmembers died, suffocated by diesel vapor. In the "Cause of the Sinking," in the *Kobunbiko*, the situation leading to the crew's death is summarized as follows:

1. When the diesel in the fuel tanks was discharged in order to gain buoyancy, the 'air pipe' broke in one place, and air and diesel fuel leaked into the submarine, gradually vaporizing and filling it with gas.
2. Also, when the pump was used, because the suck valve of the pump for the main tank was opened at the same time as the wastewater valve at the front of the cabin, the compressed air used for draining the main tanks (further exacerbated because the main tank's air valve was still open) burst out into the cabin from the main tank together with air from the front air pipe.

Note: Because the main tank pump absorption valve and the wastewater valve in the cabin are both connected to the same wastewater pipe, as shown in the diagram, if both of these valves are opened at the same time, the contents of the main tank will flow through the

wastewater pipe into the cabin (diagram omitted).

> The issues raised in points 1 and 2 greatly accelerated the onset of fatigue and stupor among the crew, which in turn impaired their ability to drain water from the vessel to recover buoyancy, and ultimately led to their deaths, as they had no other means of re-floating the vessel from its sunken state.[10]

This report, entitled, "Cause of the Sinking," was compiled by Lieutenant Commander Toru Otawara, captain of Submarine No. 9 (of the 26th Naval Academy class), and Lieutenant Torai Nakajo, captain of Submarine No. 8 (of the 28th Naval Academy class), both colleagues of Sakuma. In addition to this, they submitted a range of materials written from a technical standpoint to the Accident Investigation Panel, including "Circumstances and Remarks on the Accident of Submarine No. 6." I will quote from this, and while it of course describes the operation of submarines at that time, it also offers numerous insights into the fundamental nature of this accident. The accident report acknowledges that ultimately buoyancy-related issues were integral to this accident, but it also refers to the results of the investigations on the use of the valve connected to the main tanks, stating that, "According to the findings of the examination of the submarine after it was salvaged and taken into dock, it would seem as though there are some aspects of their reaction which are not entirely satisfactory, but in the context of the wretched situation that they were faced with, we acknowledge that we cannot attach blame to the commander and his crew,"[11] indicating that while the naval authorities acknowledged mitigating circumstances, they did mention the mistakes that were made.

Also, while many writers claim that the accident on Submarine No. 6 was reported immediately,[12] in actual fact, it was only reported late that night, resulting in a great delay in rescue operations. It was after 5:00 p.m., as many as six hours after the submarine submerged, that Petty Officer First Class Kazuichi Sanagi, the senior officer on board the submarine tender *Rekizan Maru*, reported the accident by telegram to Lieutenant Commander Otawara, captain of Submarine No. 9, via the submarine tender *Karazaki*, berthed in Kure. This was then relayed on via the more senior headquarters in the Kure Torpedo Corps, arriving at 9:02 p.m. at the submarine tender *Toyohashi,* berthed in Kaminoseki in Yamaguchi Prefecture.[13] We are able to discern just what happened during this time from the "Report on the Accident Involving Submarine No. 6," sent by the Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station to the Vice Minister of the Navy (Rear Admiral Takeshi Takarabe, of the 15th Naval Academy class).

---

[10] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, pp. 997-999.
[11] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 772.
[12] *Dai roku Sensuitei Sonan Tenmatsuki* (An Account of the Foundering of Submarine No. 6) (IJN Ministry Education Bureau, 1929), pp. 11-12; *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), p.303.
[13] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 761.

> When on a training exercise with the mother ship *Rekizan Maru* off Shinminato, Submarine No. 6 did not surface from 11 a.m. today to 5 p.m. There were no officers on board the *Rekizan Maru*, and there were differences of opinion as to how they should react, so the first report was received at 8 p.m. Immediately, torpedo boats and the 7th Destroyer Unit berthed at Miyajima were sent to the scene, and Lieutenant Commander Otawara, captain of Submarine No. 9, and one crew of submariners were ordered to contact the harbor office to instigate rescue operations.[14]

Regardless of the delay in passing on the message, Petty Officer Sanagi of the *Rekizan Maru*, the only non-commissioned officer to be questioned as part of the investigation, gave the following statement about why the first report from the observation vessel was so late:

> On that day, the weather was fine, so there was nothing to be particularly concerned about, so we thought that from about 11:00 a.m. they would carry out concealment tests (stopping the propeller and taking the submarine to the sea bottom) and come back between 12:30 p.m. and 1:00 p.m. There had been quite a few previous occasions on which they had come back late for meals so we didn't think anything was wrong, but then time did start to drag on. From about 2:00 p.m. we prepared to start sweeping the seabed, and the delay in sending a telegram was because we thought we would do so once we had located the submarine. I knew that we should be reporting it, but it was a concealment exercise, and I was fearful that afterwards I would incur the wrath of the submarine commander if it had been a false alarm.[15]

In his statement, as well as testifying that the crew of Submarine No. 6 was known to often continue training activities without resting for meals, he gives the reason for the delay in reporting the accident as, "I knew that we should be reporting it, but … I was fearful that afterwards I would incur the wrath of the submarine commander if it had been a false alarm." In this situation where it would not have been at all out of place to censure the Petty Officer for failing to carry out his duty as a lookout, the investigative panel sympathized with his position and did not seek to attribute blame to him, responding that, "While aspects do remain that could draw some criticism, … there are also points on which they should not be sternly reproached."[16]

---

[14] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, pp. 13-14.
[15] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 1092.
[16] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 773.

C. Salvaging the Submarine

A desperate search by the crews of naval vessels that congregated at the scene resulted in the submarine being located at 3:30 p.m. the next day, April 16, and salvage commenced using heavy lifting equipment. In the "Report on the Search for and the Salvage of Submarine No. 6" that was submitted by the Port Master of Kure to the Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station, the following comments were made about what was observed when the submarine was lifted from the water:

> There were bubbles coming from the area around the conning tower when the bow of the vessel was about four or five feet out of the water and the conning tower still five feet under water, and we could see how seawater had entered the submarine … The water that had gradually entered the submarine increased its weight.[17] Also, as the depth of the water changed, so did the water pressure, and we were able to see that most of the bubbles were coming from the around the rubber seal of the hatch in the conning tower.[18]

This is in keeping with air inside the submarine rushing out when it is moved to a shallower level, and it is testimony to the unusually high level of air pressure that existed inside the submarine. (need further elaboration)

The submarine was eventually lifted out on April 17, and an immediate check was carried out of the situation within the vessel. According to the "Summary of the Accident Involving Submarine No. 6 (Part 3)":

> After 10:00 a.m. that day, when the upper part of the coning tower first appeared on the surface of the water, it was surprisingly easy to open the hatch because the hooks on the inside had been removed. The inside of the cabin was full of water … In the afternoon, it was be to moved into dry dock so a detailed investigation of the vessel's hull and the causes of its sinking could be carried out. Until that was complete, no one was allowed to touch it, ruling out of course any engineering work on it.[19]

From this report, we know that when the conning tower hatch was first opened, the vessel was full of water that had seeped in during the salvage operation, and that any checks of the inside of the submarine needed to be done after the water had been completely drained. After being returned to base at Kure, it was immediately put into dry dock to undergo a detailed

[17] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 1066.
[18] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 1042.
[19] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, pp. 20-21.

examination, which was carried out under extremely tight security. Also, the telegram entitled "In Response to Your Questions," sent from the Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station to the Minister of the Navy on April 18, describes how the water was completely drained and the bodies of the crew were removed before the submarine was transported to Kure. It states: "The water was drained from the submarine, and at 2:00 p.m., once it was lightened, we started back toward the harbor. The submarine cabin was also ventilated and Petty Officer Sanagi was ordered to go inside to open the torpedo loading hatch and the lid to the rear air vent. Then Chief Navy Doctor *Toyohashi* entered with four medical staff to remove the bodies."[20]

Petty Officer Sanagi was ordered to go into the submarine first probably because of his experience as a crewmember of Submarine No. 6 and his familiarity with the inside of the vessel. Many writers have claimed that Commander Yoshikawa, Commander of the 1st Submarine Force, entered the submarine ahead of anyone else,[21] but there is no mention of this in the *Kobunbiko*. The emotional scene when the hatch of the salvaged submarine was opened that was depicted in many books probably owes its origin to the fictionalized piece in Toyo-o Iwata's (Shishi Bunroku) Asahi Shimbun serial, *Shosetsu Kaigun* (Navy Novel) that appeared in 1942 (Showa 17).[22]

II. The Response of the Authorities

A. The Investigation of the Accident

An Accident Investigation Panel was immediately formed with Rear Admiral Suetaka Ijichi, Director of the Kure Navy Yard, as its chairman. Sakuma's log, found during the post-salvage inspection of the vessel, revealed that Submarine No. 6 had foundered because power had been lost when the switchboard became covered with water. The Panel established that the water had entered through the ventilator tube when the vessel was operating submerged on its diesel engine, and that the death of the crew was caused by diesel fuel gas and high air pressure inside the cabin. As a result, the investigation went on to focus on the background circumstances and the situation that led to the accident, and in the process, as previously described, the reasoning behind the independent training operation that existed as a subtext was discovered. The problem was the investigation into the decision to undertake semi-submerged, diesel-powered cruising, which was the immediate cause of, and effectively the greatest reason for the accident. Captain Hiraoka, of the submarine tender *Toyohashi*,

[20] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, p. 49.
[21] *Dai roku Sensuitei Sonan Tenmatsuki* (An Account of the Foundering of Submarine No. 6) (IJN Ministry Education Bureau, 1929) p. 13; *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), p. 310.
[22] Toyo-o Iwata, *Kaigun Shosetsu* (Navy Novel), (Hara shobo, reprint 1967), pp. 294-295. The section describing the emotional scene in which Commander Yoshikawa opened the hatch to look inside the submarine is frequently quoted.

offered the following explanation of the meaning of the term "semi-submerged, diesel-powered cruising":

> Question: What specific regulations are there with regard to the sort of semi-submerged cruising undertaken by Submarine No. 6? Also, did the semi-submerged cruising occurring when the submarine foundered involve anything outside these regulations?
>
> Answer: There are no specific regulations pertaining to semi-submerged, diesel-powered cruising, but established practice is simply to close the conning tower hatch, ensure water-tightness while assuming a light-load situation, and use the ventilator tubes to run on the diesel engines. Signals and distance would be judged by looking through the periscope and the peep hole in the conning tower, and apart from where each member of the crew is positioned during such cruising, since I have been in command, I have not set any more regulations than that. Normally, semi-submerged cruising was carried out by allowing water into either the trim tanks or the main tanks, but because of the risk involved I had decided that this would not be done. … I don't know what Lt. Sakuma was thinking when he ordered this. Only his submarine (No. 6) and No. 7 were fitted with sluice valves. The other submarines didn't have them, so maybe he put too much faith in this sluice valve.[23]

The term "semi-submerged cruising" referred to the situation in which a vessel was effectively at the surface using its diesel engines with its hull submerged, so it was different from modern submarine snorkel cruising. No definitive regulations covering such operations existed, and the captain of the mother ship had forbidden this because of the risk involved in partially reducing buoyancy to achieve a slightly submerged situation. *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lieutenant Sakuma) states that, "this was not the first diesel-powered, submerged cruising operation for this submarine. It had already happened several times under Sakuma's predecessor, Lt. Moritsugu Kumashiro."[24] This also gives us an insight into how far research into the use of submarines as new weapons of war had progressed. While Captain Hiraoka had chosen to put safety first, in his statement he vented his anger that his instructions had been disregarded, causing the accident.

Moreover, the following statement is made in the investigation report: "He (Sakuma) believed that submarines were capable of submerged cruising on their diesel engines, and he had offered suggestions for modifications to the ventilator tube of Submarine No. 6 in order to accomplish this operation. However, he had been unable to win his superior officers over, and was still unable to do anything about it."[25] As is suggested here, Lt. Sakuma was a firm

[23] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, pp. 1079-1082.
[24] *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), p. 299.
[25] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 771.

believer in the tactical potential of the higher speeds that could be achieved using diesel-powered, submerged cruising, and so as well as calling for a modified ventilator tube, he was constantly looking for opportunities to carry out tests. In his statement, Hiraoka said the following about Sakuma's comments: "I didn't really agreed with Lt. Sakuma about modifications to Submarine No. 6, and command changed when his written comments were still screwed up in my hand … no decision of any kind was passed on to Lt. Sakuma,"[26] indicating that while he withheld permission for the requests for modification, he did not give a clear response. Also, Hiraoka was circumspect toward the tactical potential of diesel-powered, submerged cruising, going no further than stating that, "I think that diesel-powered, submerged cruising is an important issue that needs to be properly researched. It is not something to be either decided upon, or undertaken lightly."[27]

Similarly, Commander Yoshikawa of the No. 1 Submarine Force made the following statement about Sakuma's requests:

> I have not yet had a close look at those (Sakuma's) written comments, but they are the same as were submitted to the previous commander, so I am aware of their content. My opinion was that rather than spend a large amount of money modifying Submarine No. 6, it should be used for crew training, and I had told Lt. Sakuma that there was no need to spend any more money on it, and I also told the same thing to Captain Hiraoka. However, while modifications were not necessary to Submarine No. 6, I do consider that they will be needed for future submarines. Also, with regard to diesel-powered, submerged cruising, I cannot see how it would be possible.[28]

While the commander of the submarine force was clearly apprehensive, at the dawn of submarines, Sakuma was driven by a desire to research the operational use of submarines.

In particular, the attempt to find a way to use a diesel, internal combustion engine to solve the problem of low propulsive power from secondary batteries was an innovative idea that was to lead to the invention of snorkel-type devices, and so in that respect it can even be seen as the forerunner of the modern nuclear-powered submarine. However, submarines during the period in question were still at the experimental stage as weapons-delivery platforms, and they were yet to achieve genuine submerged operations. The captain of the mother ship and the commander of the submarine force both responded to Sakuma's submissions by acknowledging the necessity of research into diesel-powered, submerged cruising, but it is clear that neither had any real desire to act. At the same time, it is noteworthy that neither Lieutenant Commander Otawara nor Lieutenant Nakajo, who both submitted important observations and opinions to the Accident Investigation Panel, gave any comments at all about

[26] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 1077.
[27] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 1078.
[28] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, pp. 1086-1087.

the strategic potential of diesel-powered, submerged cruising, and that neither made any attempt to defend Sakuma. Nevertheless, despite "methods of diesel engine propulsion to achieve high speeds being discussed and researched,"[29] no doubt there were many other issues that had priority.

In their written submissions, both the captain of the mother ship and the commander of the submarine force stated that they had doubts about the cost-effectiveness of the modifications to Submarine No. 6 requested by Sakuma for research into diesel-powered, submerged cruising. This can be understood from the inference, "In October 1909 (Meiji 42), we discharged the secondary battery to research long-term preservation, and disconnected/opened part of the engine to put it in back-up status for approximately five months. In February 1910 it was restored, and work was completed on March 14,"[30] found in "Circumstances and Remarks on the Accident of Submarine No. 6." In other words, in the period leading up to the accident, because of the limitations to the scope of its operations, Submarine No. 6 was kept in harbor as a back-up vessel and used for investigation into such issues as the long-term preservation of submarines, and so there was no support for any further investment in this vessel.

Be that as it may, the report of the Accident Investigation Panel did include the following stern comments about this submarine that had been identified as being unsuitable for operations involving dangerous diesel-powered, submerged cruising:

> Because they had been given permission for independent operations, at first the vessel happened to attempt it (diesel-powered, submerged cruising) but because it did not go well, they tried again with the residual buoyancy volume further reduced and the diesel engine used to maximum capacity. This led to seawater coming in through the ventilation tube and ultimately to this unfortunate accident.[31]

Moreover, with regard to the specific cause of the accident, while a problem did exist with the sluice valve on the ventilator tube, the most crucial issue was that the submarine submerged using its diesel engine to a depth at which the ventilator tube went under water. On this matter, some examples of the standard approach of prewar literature are: "For some reason, it went too deep,"[32] "because for some reason, it went too far under,"[33] "mistaken steering saw it go too deep,"[34] and even in modern times, "It is unclear whether it was a

---

[29] *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), p. 6.
[30] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 913.
[31] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2,* p. 771.
[32] *Dairoku Sensuitei Sonan Tenmatsuki* (An Account of the Foundering of Submarine No. 6), p. 8.
[33] *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), p. 300.
[34] *Sensuikan no Shuyo Jiko Narabini Korega Boshi Taisaku* (Measures to Prevent Submarine Accidents) IJN Ministry Education Bureau (1939), p. 1.

malfunction of the trim tanks or a mistake in steering, but the vessel went too deep."[35]

So the flooding of the vessel, which was the main cause of the accident, is handled in a somewhat vague manner, but could this not also be interpreted as avoiding delving too closely into the essence of the accident? The reason I suggest this is because of crucial descriptions found in the logbook retrieved from inside the submarine. In the log, the day's orders are recorded as, "1045 - submerged cruising depth of ten feet," which when compared with Petty Officer Sanagi's testimony, can be assumed to be orders issued immediately prior to the accident.[36] However, what is surprising about this is that in the "Circumstances and Remarks on the Accident of Submarine No. 6," the following statement is made about this depth of ten feet: "At this depth, we can surmise that the top of the conning tower would have been approximately one foot xxx inches under water, and the top of the ventilation tube xxx foot xxx inches under … When all six cylinders of the engine were opened full throttle and the vessel attempted to go down to ten feet, the air-supply ventilation tube went under water, and seawater and intake air flowed into the submarine."[37] In other words, if the vessel were to go down to a depth of ten feet to undertake diesel-powered, submerged cruising with the ventilation tube open, it was obvious that the tube would go under water and that seawater would pour in through it.

However, at the top of that day's log entry, in red writing added afterwards, is the wording: "This has been copied from one of the crew's logbooks, so maybe Lt. Sakuma would not have confirmed this," indicating the possibility of a mistake by a crew member.[38] But at the same time, in the "Cause of the Sinking" the statement, "If we look at the logbook of Submarine No. 6, we see that the depth of submerged cruising is recorded as ten feet. The entries to this log were written as the vessel was operating, so while there is no guarantee of mistaken entries, no mistakes appear if we reference this against the previous day's log, so if we consider that the depth of ten feet is entered twice, it can be presumed to be accurate,"[39] rejects the possibility of this mistaken transfer of orders. This document attributes the direct cause of the submarine sinking to: "(a) The fact that because the cruising depth was mistakenly set too deep there was insufficient distance between the upper edge of the ventilation tube and the surface of the water; (b) buoyancy had been excessively reduced; and (c) excessive speed," but of these three points, (a) is the main cause, and (b) and (c) are secondary causes. Therefore, in this document the issue of the captain's responsibility is summed up in stern terms: "It would not appear that proper consideration was taken of the cruising depth ordered and the height of the ventilation tube."[40] In other words, the fundamental cause of the water flooding in through the ventilation tube was deemed to be the

---

[35] *Nihon Kaigun Sensuikanshi* (A History of Japanese Submarines), Nihon Kaigun Sensuikanshi Kankokai: (Shinkosha, 1979), p. 176.
[36] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2,* p. 952.
[37] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, pp. 922-923.
[38] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 953.
[39] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, pp. 988-989.
[40] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2,* p. 771.

fact that despite the tube being open, the captain's orders were for "submerged cruising at 10 feet," therefore concluding that carelessness was the main cause of the accident. Contradictory recordings of the submarine's depth in the various materials from the investigation have seen some question the validity of the conclusion of this report.[41] However, their statements indicate a lack of understanding of the facts that in turn undermines their comments about the validity of the investigation report.

Why did Sakuma give so little consideration to such basic issues despite being so enthusiastic about research into the specialized task of diesel-powered, submerged cruising? Whether the words "my fault," in the opening paragraph of his entry to the log that day actually represent an acceptance of blame for this will remain a mystery.

Furthermore, with regard to the apportionment of blame, based on the results of the investigative findings, while Captain Hiraoka of the *Toyohashi* was absolved, the supervisory responsibility of Commander Yoshikawa of the No. 1 Submarine Force was drawn into question, and in accordance with suggestions in the investigative report, he was officially admonished by the commander of the Kure Suiraidan (Torpedo Corps of the Kure Naval District).[42] On this point, the report includes the following statement:

> The main cause of this accident lies in the fact that Submarine No. 6 undertook an unexpectedly dangerous course of action that exceeded the bounds of the orders given by the officer-in-command. While no direct responsibility can be attributed to him … in the context of orders given to undertake exercises in what was still largely untried semi-submerged and submerged cruising as part of relatively dangerous submarine operations far outside the scope of his supervision, at the very least, it was injudicious not to take such safety precautions as setting appropriate limits on levels of buoyancy and speed etc. … In short, the failure to properly discharge his duties as officer-in-command was a remote cause of this accident.[43]

With regard to the commander of Submarine No. 6, Lt. Sakuma, the report judges that,

---

[41] Eiichi Iijima, *Dairoku Sensuitei Fujo Sezu…* (Submarine No. 6 Never Surfaced) (Sozosha, 1994), pp. 83-87. Iijima states that the *Kobunbiko* includes contradictory entries about the submarine's depth and concludes that because of the nature of the vessel's hull, water would not flood in through the ventilation tube at a depth of ten feet, but he bases this submerged depth on the line on the vessel's keel. However, in the days when submarines were being introduced at the end of the Meiji Period, the norm was for the depth of the vessel to be measured as the depth of the water inlet duct, and all the various descriptions conform to this. The water inlet duct on Submarine no. 6 was located 5 feet 3 inches above the keel, and so if the depth were judged from the keel, it would not be possible to explain the references to "submerged cruising at a depth of five feet" that are found in records from before the date of the accident.

[42] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2*, p. 770.

[43] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2,* pp. 777-778.

> He placed too much faith in the effectiveness of the sluice valve, so not only was he reckless, but in his zeal to achieve his aim, the wayward attempt he made at submerged cruising while the diesel engine was in operation was without the approval of either his commander or the captain of the mother ship and was outside the scope of the orders he had been given. We acknowledge that if he were still alive, he would be held responsible.[44]

The stance that Sakuma had arbitrarily chosen this dangerous course of action is at odds with the nature of the information the naval authorities circulated to the general public:

> While people did have a tendency to avoid to act in ways that included some degree of risk, Lt. Sakuma considered that diesel-powered, submerged cruising had great tactical potential, and it should be noted that he felt driven to carry this out by the belief that research into it was essential.[45]

Lt. Sakuma would go on to be admired for decades as a symbolic figure in the IJN, but we know that at least as of June 15, 1910 (Meiji 43), when this report was submitted, the naval authorities had already established the truth of the matter and narrowed down the matter of responsibility.

B. The Message to the Public – Handling Sakuma's Log

Long before the details of the investigation report were released, the captain's log retrieved from the salvaged submarine was already stirring up emotions and responses within the IJN. The first mention of the existence of this log was in the "Summary of the Accident Involving Submarine No. 6 (Final)" dated April 18 and sent from the Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station to the Vice-Minister of the Navy. In this document it states that,

> This morning, a notebook was retrieved from the personal items of Lt. Sakuma that describes the cause of the sinking, the situation after the accident occurred and the actions taken, the devotion of his crew, and comments regarding future submarine crews. In circumstances in which both his consciousness and his memory must have been dimming, one can only be impressed by his presence of mind in clearly recording the situation as it developed.[46]

This report was shown to the Minister of the Navy (Admiral Baron Makoto Saito, of the

[44] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2,* pp. 771-772.
[45] *Dairoku Sensuitei Sonan Tenmatsuki* (An Account of the Foundering of Submarine No. 6), p. 7.
[46] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, pp. 22-23.

6th Naval Academy class) and also circulated to the Administration Bureau, the Naval Technical Department, and the Naval General Staff.

At the same time, the following report, entitled, "Releasing the Details of the Late Lt. Sakuma's Logbook," was issued to Secretary of the Navy Ide in the names of Captain Hiraoka of the *Toyohashi*, and Commander Yoshikawa of the No. 1 Submarine Force:

> The last notes of the late Lt. Sakuma are enclosed. They were retrieved from a pocket of the clothing he was wearing when the submarine foundered, and what he writes is quite splendid. Apart from the reference to the cause of the sinking, and the parts which are effectively his last will and testament, we consider that there is much that could be released to the public, and in the hope that you are in agreement, we have made those selections and would like to start by approaching a Tokyo newspaper to publish them. Our selection is as follows [47]

From a modern perspective, it seems rather strange for such a message to go directly from a regional unit commander to the Secretary of the Navy, but to ensure urgency it was marked in a way that would not require it to go via the normal chain of command. It is indeed symbolic that at the stage when proper investigations had only just commenced, these two men first went as far as acclaiming Sakuma's last sentences as typifying military virtue and attempted to make them public as quickly as possible, only to then consistently criticize him during the subsequent investigation.

In response, a message was sent at 2.00 p.m. on April 20 from the Vice-Minister to the Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station stating that, "except for the entries of 'residual air pressure at approximately 500 pounds,' and 'for safety purposes, when on 600-pound motor spare buoyancy we set the trim tanks at about 200 pounds,'" the contents of Sakuma's last entry to the log would be released in Tokyo at 3.00 p.m., and instructed that the same should happen in Kure.[48] These deletions were ordered by the Navy Ministry to hide the figures in the log related to the submarine's performance, namely that "residual air pressure after emptying the main ballast tanks of water was 500 pounds (approximately 240 kilograms)" and that "when operating on the diesel engines, the spare buoyancy was 600 pounds (approximately 290 kilograms), as opposed to 200 pounds (approximately 90 kilograms) for normal submerged cruising." However, for some reason it was made public with only the latter part regarding spare buoyancy removed.

Also, one cannot help but note the extremely short notice involved as these instructions were given just one hour before for the scheduled release of the information at 3.00 p.m. The

---

[47] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, pp. 168-169. Together with Captain Kozaburo Oguri, Secretary of the Navy, Captain Kenji Ide worked hard for the introduction of submarines and was known as one of the fathers of the IJN submarine force.

[48] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, p. 163.

time of the state funeral scheduled for 1.00 p.m. that day, to be attended by Chamberlain to H.I.H. The Crown Prince and Commander Tomojiro Chisaka, was also suddenly changed to 4.00 p.m. to accommodate the schedule of Navy Ministry officials.[49] We can assume that there was some delay in the deliberations within the Ministry over the release of Sakuma's last message and because the release needed to be done at the funeral, the confusion that resulted from this hurried process led to the information being released in a form different from the given instructions. Be that as it may, Lt. Sakuma's last notes were released with some of the references to the submarine's performance removed. The censored version was later printed and distributed by *Suikosha*.

Vice Admiral Hikonojo Kamimura, Commander-in-Chief of the 1st Fleet (of the 4th Naval Academy class), who was stationed in Kure at the time, sent the following heartfelt message to the Minister of the Navy:

> The loss of Submarine No. 6 and the death in the line of duty of the vessel's captain and crew is regrettable in the extreme. I feel the greatest sympathy for the bereaved families. My being stationed here in Kure means that I have witnessed developments first hand, and I believe that the devotion and courage displayed by Lt. Sakuma and his crew stands as a morale-boasting model for those serving in the Imperial Navy. While I grieve over the loss of life, I am also consoled and buoyed to know that this is a tangible example of the fine conduct of the officers and men of the Imperial Japanese Navy.[50]

Vice Admiral Kamimura was a hero from the Russo-Japanese War and a leading figure in the Imperial Japanese Navy. His comments clearly reflect the mode of veneration toward the bravery displayed by Sakuma and his crew that was rapidly spreading through the Navy. Also, the fact that a copy of Sakuma's last message and Kamimura's letter was shown to Vice Admiral Chisaka before he attended the state funeral[51] suggests that the IJN's stance toward the accident was already taking shape before the results of the Accident Investigation Panel were clear. We can assume that this occurred because the state funeral had been scheduled despite there being no specific protocols regarding death in the line of duty during peacetime, and that a funeral expense grant was gifted by Their Majesties The Emperor and Empress,[52] as well as the fact that all crew of non-commissioned officer rank and above were given special consideration for conferment of posthumous rank, and that payments were made to all of the bereaved families.

In this way, the release of Sakuma's last notes not only caused a storm of emotion within the IJN, but also throughout Japan. Even before their release, beginning on April 17, one newspaper after another started reporting on the accident. In addition to conveying the Navy

[49] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9 Maki 26*, p. 403.
[50] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, p. 156.
[51] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki* 25, pp. 154-155.

Ministry announcement, they focused upon what was the first IJN disaster, stating, "Comparisons with submarine accidents in Britain and elsewhere are very troubling. This is the first disaster of its kind in Japan, and it will no doubt be extremely distressing for all those involved."[53] This referred to the coverage of the terrible circumstances of those on board submarines involved in similar accidents in European navies, but at this stage we can see that the accident was viewed with some curiosity.

After the submarine was lifted from the sea, the tone soon changed to praise of Sakuma and his crew for the glorious way they died while carrying out their duty.

> Lt. Sakuma was in the conning tower, just as he had been when commanding his crew in majestic fashion, but instead lying in eternal repose as though still alive. The helmsman had expired with his hand still on the handle of the rudder … That they kept their composure is the mark of military men, and their devotion to the duty in the face of death is moving in the extreme.[54]

The lionizing began in earnest after Sakuma's last message was made public. "That they endured pain without erring in the slightest from their task is truly the mark of soldiers of the Empire and testifies to their status as model citizens."[55]

As though in concert with this, the following episodes also occurred in society. Among such intellectuals as Akiko Yosano, known for her famous anti-war poem "You Shall Not Be Killed, Brother" written in the years between the Russo-Japanese War and the end of the Meiji Era, and Roka Tokutomi, whose anti-war stance was motivated more from a religious point of view, there was a tendency to view disapprove of, or even ridicule of, displays of military valor as an example of progressive thinking. Nevertheless, Soseki Natsume, who had already firmly established himself as a writer of great renown, sent an article entitled "Accomplished and Heroic" to a leading Tokyo newspaper. The crux of the article was that, "Naturalism and heroism are two completely different things… On reading Lieutenant Sakuma's heroic last notes, I was glad to know that here was a military man living in this same rigid society as me, who was prepared to devote his all and be consumed in one glorious moment,"[56] which was in effect a criticism of the naturalist literature of such writers as Katai Tayama and Toson Shimazaki. However, while on the one hand this represented fierce criticism of the anti-military progressive intellectuals of the day, it was also designed to stir up patriotism,[57]

---

[52] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 8 Maki 25*, pp. 269-270.
[53] *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun,* April 17, 1910.
[54] *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun,* April 20, 1910. Furthermore, in the *Kobunbiko Maki 26-2*, *Dairoku Sensuitei Sounanji ni Okeru Teinai Eisei Jokyo ni Kansuru Chosahokoku* (Report on the Conditions Inside the Vessel at the Time of the Submarine No. 6 Accident), Lt. Sakuma is described as having been found at the aft side of the bottom of the conning tower.
[55] *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun,* April 22, 1910.
[56] *Tokyo Asahi Shimbun,* July 19, 1910.
[57] *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt. Sakuma), pp. 515-519.

and due to this, Lt. Sakuma gradually assumed godlike status.

C. The Background of the Times

For Japan's Imperial Army and Navy, the years following victory in the Russo-Japanese War can be summed up as being a period when:

> The great energy of the Meiji Restoration was unfaltering, and having achieved revenge in the victory over Russia, the ringleader of the Triple Intervention, the people of Japan were now at the pinnacle of the rising sun. Wiser from the lessons of the Russo-Japanese War and tempered by strategic considerations toward Russia and the United States, the Imperial Army and Navy were elite in the true sense of the word. … In modern Japanese history there has never been a time such as the last years of the Meiji Period when the people of Japan were so psychologically galvanized, so burning with zeal to create a prosperous country, and the military and citizens of Japan so united.[58]

In particular, the citizens of Japan, who had toiled under the slogan of "perseverance and determination" to strengthen Japan in response to the Triple Intervention by Russia, France and Germany after the Sino-Japanese War, could not have been more satisfied, and at this same point in time Japan was seen to have joined the United States and Europe as a great power.

But at the same time, the fact that Japan had received massive indemnities to put toward national development after the Sino-Japanese War, but only various concessions in Korea and Manchuria after the Russo-Japanese War, caused smoldering resentment among the people of Japan. Fanned by opposition to the Treaty of Portsmouth by some hard-liners, this resentment manifested itself in the Hibiya Riots. To the citizens of the day, the Treaty of Portsmouth was a humiliating settlement, and some even insisted that Japan should go to war with Russia once again. However, in reality, Japan's national strength had already been stretched beyond its limits, and while the country's leaders decided that it was not possible to continue hostilities any further, they had not kept the people informed of the situation in the war against Russia, or of the toll it had taken on the nation. Some suggest that, "This arrogance in victory was one of the reasons why Japan was to later recklessly launch itself into the Pacific War."[59]

Be that as it may, it was only natural that such heightened feelings presaged the need to further strengthen the nation and its military, but because enemy forces no longer existed for the IJN in the Far East, an "Imperial Defense Policy" was created that placed the United States as a hypothetical enemy. Based upon this Defense Policy, the first step was taken

[58] Yoshio Matsushita, *Nihon Rekishi Shinsho – Meiji no Guntai* (Pocket Edition Japanese History- Meiji Period Military), p. 194.
[59] Ibid., p. 157.

toward the construction of an 8-8 fleet,[60] when funds were secured in the 1907 (Meiji 40) budget to complete a 5-7 fleet in fiscal 1913 (Taisho 2). However, in addition to the recession that followed the Russo-Japanese War, the government also had its hands full repaying the foreign debt that it had incurred during the Russo-Japanese War, so at least in financial terms the Imperial Army and Navy faced an extremely difficult situation. With this being the case, "in Meiji 41 (1908), under pressure from the excessive demands of the expansionists within the military who were fueled by the momentum of victory, the Saionji cabinet overspent, and before long was to experience economic rebound and recession, followed by fierce criticism from the financial world for its management of the economy."[61] Inevitably, the completion date for the naval expansion program already budgeted for was postponed from 1913 (Taisho 2) to 1916 (Taisho 5).[62] So not only did the fervor that followed the Russo-Japanese War weaken, but voices of opposition began to be heard about the IJN's expansion program.

Another noteworthy development in society in the latter years of the Meiji Period was the sudden emergence of a socialist movement in Japan. In 1898, (Meiji 31), such prominent figures as Sen Katayama, renowned Christian Tomoyoshi Murai, and newspaper writer Shusui Kotoku (Denjiro) set up the Association for the Study of Socialism and applied themselves to the spread of a socialist ethos in Japan. In 1901 (Meiji 34), Japan's first socialist political party, the Japanese Social Democrat Party, was established. Despite these first labor and socialist movements of the Meiji Era being of a relatively moderate nature, right from the start the government set out to place strict limits on them, and in 1900 (Meiji 33), the Security Police Act and the Administrative Execution Law were promulgated, followed in 1908 (Meiji 41) by the Prison Law.

In response to such crackdowns by the authorities, the socialist movement gradually changed from being moderate to radical, and at the time of the Russo-Japanese War, led by Shusui Kotoku's newspaper, the *Heimin Shimbun* (Commoners' Newspaper), it became publicly involved in the anti-war movement. Even after the Russo-Japanese War, caught up in the confusion that manifested itself in events such as the Hibiya Riots, the socialist movement became even more active, and in addition to the appearance of a range of newspapers designed to spread socialist thinking, in February 1906 (Meiji 39) the Japanese Socialist Party was formed. In May 1910 (Meiji 43), Shusui Kotoku was arrested with many other socialists and anarchists in what was known as the High Treason Incident, and after being tried for participating in a plot to assassinate the emperor, he was executed with 11 others in January 1911. Against the backdrop of such tumultuous times, that same year the Thought Police (the

---

[60] In 1907 (Meiji 40), the first "Imperial Defense Policy" agreed upon by the Imperial Japanese Army and Navy was proposed to the Emperor. It stipulated specific levels of military strength for the Army and Navy in the case of hostilities with Russia, the United States, Germany and France. The "8-8 fleet" was to comprise eight battleships and eight battlecruisers.

[61] Yasushi Ishikawa, *Kaigun Kokubo Shisoshi* (The History of Thinking on Naval Defense), (Harashobo, 1995), p. 54.

[62] *Kaigun Rekishi Hozonkai* (Naval History Preservation Society), *Nihon Kaigunshi Dainikan* (Japanese Naval History Volume Two), (Daiichi-Hoki Shuppan), p. 173.

Tokko) was created to control the activities of left-wing activists, something it did with great vigor until the end of the Pacific War. Moreover, as another example of the beginning of policies designed to increase government control in the area of thought and to help create a united national front, that year the Imperial Military Reservists' Association was established.

The accident involving Submarine No. 6 occurred amidst these developments, so it is not difficult to appreciate how the glorious death of the crew of Submarine No. 6 and the existence of Sakuma's last notes in his log were a godsend to the government and military authorities at a time when the armament policies they were promoting were faced with financial constrictions and anti-military socialist movements. As mentioned above, the content of Sakuma's log was made public five days after the accident, and the following day, Lt. Cdr. Otawara took the log to the Navy Ministry. The authorities moved quickly to make copies, and the British military attaché in Tokyo was asked to provide an English translation.[63] Once this was available, the authorities moved at extraordinary speed to publicize it, taking special consideration to distribute the report overseas through the various military attachés stationed in Tokyo. A submarine accident would not normally be publicized in this way, which proves that they clearly understood the excellent promotional value that Sakuma's log offered.

Copies of Sakuma's log were distributed by naval authorities throughout the country to Army and Navy units, schools, and the main large corporations, where they were used to boost the morale of military personnel, and to add to the moral education of the general public. As can be seen from the observation that, "it was a era in which the military tried to link their militarist and imperialist thought with narrow-minded patriotism, and then impress that upon the people of the nation,"[64] the fact that the accident involving Submarine No. 6 came to be so admired as an example of loyalty and patriotism can be interpreted as having been necessitated by the times.

D. The Subsequent Handling of the Accident

While the people of Japan responded passionately to Lt. Sakuma's courageous behavior, the Accident Investigation Panel quietly continued their inspection and inquiry, eventually presenting their findings on June 15, 1910. By rights, the IJN should have immediately applied the lessons learned and taken steps to avoid any reoccurrence of such accidents, but we are unable to find any instructions or official announcements confirming that such action was taken. There were numerous valuable lessons to be learned about the operations of submarine units, the management of submarine crews (including their commanders), as well as improvements in equipment to make submarines safer.

Despite this, the only mention of the accident involving Submarine No. 6 in the "Measures to Prevent Submarine Accidents," produced as an internal document by the Navy Education Bureau (Navy Ministry Educational Document No. 107-1), was the superficial

[63] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9 Maki 26*, p. 439
[64] *Nihon Rekishi Shinsho – Meiji no Guntai* (Pocket Edition Japanese History- Meiji Period Military), p. 195.

observation that the cause of the accident was: "a.) mistaken operation of the rudder leading to the submarine diving to excessive depth; and b.) a sluice valve on the ventilator tube failing to close," and as we can see from the following comment regarding the lessons learned: "the actions of the crew will serve as a model for those who follow,"[65] the real truth was kept a closely guarded secret even within the IJN itself. Rear Admiral Torai Nakajo (at that stage a lieutenant), who contributed greatly to the investigation and went on to write prolifically about the tactical use of submarines, and also to become the Director of the Naval Submarine School, remained silent for the rest of his life about the truth about Submarine No. 6. In addition, in his memoirs written after World War II, former Vice Admiral Shinzo Onishi (of the 42nd Naval Academy class, and commander of the 7th Submarine Force), wrote that, "For Submarine No. 6, a primitive submarine, to attempt a running trim (note: diving at speed while operating on diesel engines) was extremely reckless, but as to whether this action was initiated by Commander Yoshikawa or happened after Yoshikawa acquiesced to Lieutenant Sakuma's suggestion … (we do not know),"[66] thereby expressing the opinion that the responsibility lay with Commander Yoshikawa for either ordering an act of recklessness, or allowing it to happen. This would suggest that the facts of the matter were known to those within the IJN itself, and those involved in submarines in subsequent years.

Another indication of how determined the naval authorities were to conceal the facts is that in the main reference material for this research, the *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9-2 Maki 26-2,* the "Investigation Report of the Accident of Submarine No. 6" does not even feature in the table of contents. The first of these materials concerning warships is *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 1 Maki 18*, and while it opens with a list of categories of "warships" with volume numbers and their content, for some reason, those for *Maki 26-2* (Volume 26-2) are not listed. Therefore, we can assume that in the years before World War II, the Navy Ministry not only took steps to keep these materials away from public scrutiny, but also tried to make it difficult for anyone to locate them.

The situation after the joint funeral in Kure, when Captain Ide, the adjutant to the Navy Minister, was put in charge of gathering money for a memorial and to give to the bereaved families is also noteworthy.[67] They raised a total of 57,000 yen and decided that the memorial would be constructed within the grounds of the Tai-no-miya Shrine in Kure City, and that as had been planned from the start, the inscription on the memorial would be the full wording of Sakuma's last notes in the submarine log.

One of the organizers, Captain Hiraoka of the submarine tender *Toyohashi*, wrote the following in a letter to Ide:

---

[65] *Sensuikan no Shuyo Jiko Narabini Korega Boshi Taisaku* (Measures to Prevent Submarine Accidents), p. 1.

[66] *Nihon Kaigun Sensuikanshi* (The History of Imperial Japanese Navy Submarines), p. 883.

[67] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9 Maki 26*, p. 705. The 13 organizers included Hayao Shimamura, the then- Commander–in-Chief of the 2nd Fleet; Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station Tomozaburo Kato; Vice Chief of the Naval General Staff Koichi Fujii, and the captain of the *Toyohashi.*

> I have finished circulating the proposal and gathering signatures regarding the use of the donations related to Submarine No. 6, so I hereby return it to you accordingly. Commander-in-Chief Kato has submitted his opinion, as attached, and I ask that you give it careful consideration. If we think calmly about the matter, he presents a strong argument. There is no guarantee that in future years Sakuma's last notes will not become the subject of debate, and so we would be best advised to avoid creating something that might attract either condemnation or admiration. In that respect, I think that it would be advisable to construct a memorial that does not run the risk of being seen as provocative.[68]

So when the submissions from the Kure area concerning the use of the donations were returned, Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station Vice Admiral Tomozaburo Kato's opinion received specific mention. He was opposed to the full text of Sakuma's last notes being inscribed on the memorial, and because this is the opinion of someone who went on to become prime minister and was renowned as the most talented individual the Navy was ever to produce, it can be seen as indirect testimony to the two-sidedness of the approach to the accident. For this reason, I will quote part of Kato's letter to Ide.

I have received the proposal circulated regarding the distribution of donations to the bereaved families and the construction of a monument. I agree completely with both ideas, but I do think that it would not be advisable to inscribe the entire text of Lt. Sakuma's last message onto the monument. … I would like to take this opportunity to candidly state my opinion for your consideration. My reasons for taking issue with the proposal as it stands cannot be overstated. One is that the nature of this message was of course the main reason for the outpouring of sympathy from the public. No one can question the sincerity of the commander of the submarine as he wrote these notes in the face of impending death, but at the same time, if he had the presence of mind to do this, should he not have first applied himself to thinking of ways of getting the submarine to the surface? Moreover, if we are overly sympathetic toward these last notes, in the future, do we not run the risk of creating a situation whereby the first thing that someone in similar circumstances would do would be to start writing and only then attend to their duty. … I cannot help but think that it would be advisable to make the wording on such a permanent memorial something more innocuous. … Of course, if you decide that because these last notes have attracted such public sympathy that you would definitely prefer to inscribe them on the memorial, then I will not go out of my way to oppose this, but I would like to make it known that I hold a different view.

16 June Tomozaburo Kato[69]

This letter, written the day after the Accident Investigation Report was presented, can

[68] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9 Maki 26*, pp. 745-746.
[69] *Meiji 43 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 9 Maki 26*, pp. 747-748.

seen as a call to the Navy to remain calm in the face of a public response to Sakuma's last words that seemed to be taking on a life of its own. As it so happens, no inscription plate of the wording or artwork on the memorial exists, but following the advice of Vice Admiral Kato, the wording used was not the text from Sakuma's last notes, as originally planned, but instead a simple description of the accident and a list of the names and ranks of the crew members.[70]

Conclusion

This research focuses upon the details of a historically significant submarine accident that occurred in the last years of the Meiji Period and the response of the naval authorities. I have analyzed such issues as how the independent operation of this submarine was a subplot to the accident, how the commencement of the search and rescue operation was greatly delayed, and how the emotional scene following the submarine being lifted from the seabed as conveyed through the years differs from reality. I established that the fundamental cause of this accident was that the submarine commander chose a course of action that exceeded the bounds of the orders from his superior officer with regard to the relationship between the vessel's structure and the depth to which it submerged: "greater consideration should be given to the nature of the vessel's hull." Judging from the historical documents still in existence, I consider that the naval authorities of the day would have been able to gain an accurate grasp of the true nature of this accident.

However, the gap between the Investigative Panel's rigorous approach and hard-headed stance toward establishing responsibility, and the tone of the authorities' message to the general public, is surprising. This was a by-product of the extremely delicate domestic situation in Japan following the Russo-Japanese War, and events suggest that the naval authorities attempted to use this tragic accident to their own advantage. "It is no exaggeration to state that the Diet sessions during the eight years from 1914 to 1921 were dominated by the

[70] *Seiden Sakuma Teicho* (The Authentic Biography of Lt Sakuma), pp. 438-439. We know from a photograph taken in 1937 that the memorial constructed in 1912 was decorated with an inscription and an embossed picture of the submarine. The inscription started with the wording, "Submarine No. 6 sank off Shinminato, Yamaguchi Prefecture on April 15, Meiji 43 (1910) when it was cruising semi-submerged," listed the names and ranks of the crew, including Lt. Sakuma, and described their heroic death in the line of duty. It finished with the statement that, "this inscription shall convey this into eternity," and there was no mention of Sakuma's last notes. However, we know from the records of memorials destroyed by the Australian contingent of the British Commonwealth Occupation Force stationed in Kure City (Kure City Archives, *Kure-shshii Daisankan* (Kure City Volume 3), Kure Municipal Office, 1964) that immediately after World War II there was an inscribed plate attached that featured wording from Sakuma's last notes. This would suggest that an additional inscribed plate was attached to the memorial at some stage after the photograph was taken in 1937, but there is no record of the developments that led to this, or to the specific date that it was added. The present memorial was constructed in 1959 (Showa 34), and on it are the opening words of Sakuma's message, plus his "Public Will."

8-8 (eight battleships and eight cruisers) fleet issue,"[71] and when World War I broke out in 1914, Japan participated as an allied nation mainly through the projection of naval force, thereby enabling the IJN to confirm its status both at home and abroad. In these circumstances, in August 1915, Vice Admiral Tomozaburo Kato (Commander-in-Chief of the Kure Naval Station at the time of the accident involving Submarine No. 6) was appointed Minister of the Navy, and during his tenure a budget was secured for an "8-4" fleet in 1917, an "8-6" fleet in 1918, and finally, in 1919, plans were finally approved for the IJN's long-awaited "8-8" fleet. "The Navy was indeed about to enter a period of plain sailing."[72]

At the same time, in 1923 (Taisho 12), 13 years after the Submarine No. 6 accident, Submarine No. 70 and then No. 26 foundered, followed the next year by Submarine No. 43. Of these, that of Submarine No. 43 was a particularly tragic accident, occurring as it did after a collision with a battle cruiser during an exercise. The submarine sank to the seabed in approximately 50 meters of water, and although a large number of crew survived the collision, inadequate rescue procedures led to the smothering death of all on board.

Many last messages describing the ghastly circumstances inside the sunken vessel were retrieved, triggering a wave of criticism of the naval authorities from all corners of society. In response, the IJN took careful steps to prevent such an accident from happening again. In its report, the Accident Investigation Panel cited the main cause of the accident as the submarine commander's failure to use the periscope appropriately, and made numerous comments on the accident. The report pointed out a range of problems that existed with submarines of the day and included suggestions to resolve them, systematically covering such areas as personnel, education and vessel administration, and emphasized establishing suitability for submarine commanders,[73] reminding us of the accident involving Submarine No. 6. The terms of the Washington Naval Conference of 1922 ruled out the already approved "8-8 Fleet" plan, thereby heralding more difficult times for the IJN. The fact that the public response to the accident involving Submarine No. 43 was far stronger than anything that occurred in the last years of the Meiji Period testifies to the appearance of "Taisho Democracy," and to the reaction to scandals involving the military.[74]

In these circumstances, the efforts taken to avoid a recurrence of such accidents are conspicuously different to those taken after the loss of Submarine No. 6, also reflecting the nervousness of the naval authorities toward submarine accidents occurring one after another as the pressures of disarmament grew stronger. The transition from the Meiji Period, when society effectively allowed the authorities to do no more than glorify an accident, to the

---

[71] *Daikaigun wo Omou*, (Remembering the Navy), Masanori Ito (Bungei Shunju Shinsha, 1956), p. 294.
[72] *Nihon Kaigunshi Dai 2 Maki* (Japanese Naval History Volume 2), p. 435.
[73] *Taisho 13 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 20 Maki 40*, Disasters at Sea, The Accident Involving Submarine No. 43.
[74] *Taisho 13 Nen Kobunbiko Kansen 14 Maki 34*. Under the heading of the "Accident and Salvage of Submarine No. 43," there is a letter from someone writing under the pen-name of "*Dai-Nippon Aikokumin*" (Patriotic People of Japan) criticizing the IJN, and a report from the Imperial Army Military Police entitled, "The Impact of the Submarine Accident on Military Thinking," which covered the anti-military trends in society.

closing years of the Taisho Period, when in the context of disarmament the Navy was obliged to respond in a more realistic manner, also reflects the more mature national consciousness that came with a change in the times. In addition, as can be seen from the response to the Mihogaseki Incident of 1927 (Showa 2), when a collision occurred during a major exercise of the Combined Fleet,[75] beginning with the period in question, the naval authorities assumed a more rigid stance towards accident and moved to avoid such accidents by imposing strict punishments upon those involved. Lt. Sakuma was to be the last navy man to be glorified after losing his life in the line of duty during peacetime.

[75] Although this was an unavoidable accident that occurred during an exercise, the IJN stringently adhered to legal procedure, and the captain of the cruiser involved in the collision was to be strictly punished. On the day before the military tribunal released its verdict, the accused assumed full responsibility and committed suicide.