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# FLAME UNDER THE SEA



*There was a glitter in the man's hand. A knife*

*Lieutenant Ridgway Dives into a  
Battle Royal when Submarine  
Disaster Stalks the Deep!*

By **ALLAN  
R. BOSWORTH**

*Author of "Highroad to Heaven,"  
"Fist Feud," etc.*

**A**FTERWARD, Ridgway could never remember that there had been any warning. He didn't even feel the slightest premonition of the disaster which was so near.

He stood in the control room, a tall, commanding figure in dungarees, and the hum of the motors was music in his ears. Everything was like a dream come true. He was skipping the *Coral*, the latest submarine afloat, and in a couple of days they'd shove off on her shake down cruise.

Ridgway was a lieutenant and only thirty-two, but he had been in the navy long enough to know that any ship is what her captain and crew

make her. So the *Coral* would be a happy ship, and a taut one. Of the more than fifty men aboard, forty were old-timers in the pigboat service—they would be pigboat sailors till they retired. And with the recent invention of "X-21"—the only name so far given the new torpedo explosive—submarines in Uncle Sam's service were going to be far more important than ever before.

The *Coral* was swimming easily at forty feet, off San Lucas Island. Ridgway's blue-gray eyes flicked over the array of dials. He tried, modestly, to keep pride from being too apparent in his voice:

"Take her up to periscope depth. Handsomely, now. Don't let her broach!"

"Aye, aye, sir!" Ensign Herrick, the watch officer, spoke into the voice tube.

Water ballast was expelled with a rumble. The steel floor came alive under Ridgway's widely planted feet with a surge of steady, even lift. She was a good ship.

"Up periscope!"

HE glued his eye to the sighting socket. Water filmed from the glass, the sunshine of Lower California broke through. There was San Lucas a quarter mile distant and on the starboard beam. Ridgway could see the little straggle of fishing shacks on the rocky steep.

It happened, then.

From the after portion of the ship came the strange, water-dulled roar. Ridgway felt it more than he heard it.

The concussion was like the flat of a man's hands striking both ears at once. The floor bucked and twisted, and men with white faces were suddenly sprawling, sliding in a helter-skelter fashion against the port bulkheads.

Ridgway gripped the periscope wheel and kept his balance. He swung around and saw the gear fall and noted, curiously, that the mouths of men were open. He heard neither their yells nor the clatter of the gear adrift on the crazily heaving floor.

The roar drowned everything. It

was continuous, awful. Its concussive force was pent within chambered steel: it seemed to be rolling from bulkhead to bulkhead as the tangle of men rolled.

The trim was entirely gone, and the *Coral* shuddered and ceased wallowing. She slanted sharply astern, like a lean greyhound stricken with paralysis in his hind legs.

Ridgway heard his own voice first: "Blow main ballast!"

Men were scrambling back to their posts. "Aye, aye, sir! Blow main ballast!"

A rumble, and the ship struggled against dead weight. The depth gauge needle quivered from twenty to fifteen, and then went swiftly back to twenty-five. Thirty-five. Forty again, and the lights going dim.

The roar had ceased. It was like a picture of a mob scene, in which the sound track goes haywire and there is a blank space where people move their lips and nothing is heard—it was as if the roar had been a silence, and now the sound was cutting in. There were men scrambling forward, grabbing handholds as the floor slanted more steeply. Larsen, the first-class ship's cook, was out of his galley, a ladle held incongruously in one hand. Other men came from the crew's quarters, half-clad. They had been off watch.

Beyond the crew's quarters was the engine room. Nobody came out of the engine room. Instead, there was a wave of pressure to crowd the ear drums, and when Ridgway swallowed and could hear again, there was an ominous swish and gurgle in the crew's quarters.

The lights failed completely, and the hum of the motors was gone. With a dreadful certainty, Ridgway knew that there never would be anybody coming from the engine room. "Secure that galley door!" he barked.

Somebody's flashlight penciled the blackness and found the depth gauge. Ninety feet!

THE *Coral's* crippled after portion jarred against bottom. She didn't level off; the buoyancy forward held

her slanted at twenty degrees. The emergency lights were switched on; brilliance came back on white, strained faces.

Hanson, the junior grade lieutenant and executive officer, spoke. "Fourteen men missing, sir." His voice was flat, distorted by the pressure. "What do you suppose that explosion—how, I mean—"

"I don't know!" Ridgway was curt, thinking of those fourteen. And of the new "X-21" heads on those after torpedoes. The *Coral* had been issued the new war heads for an actual test of the explosive before she left on her shakedown. "I don't know."

Ridgway only knew that he had lost fourteen good men. And a good ship—his first command.

The emergency lights wouldn't last forever. He jerked his bowed head erect; there was still the responsibility of saving forty men. They crowded the control chamber breathing heavily, disciplined men who looked to him for orders.

"Mr. Hanson," Ridgway said, "take charge of issuing the Momsen lungs."

San Lucas was within swimming distance, and there might be fishing boats—someone should see the buoy, with its smoke bomb and telephone. On the other hand, all the shacks on the island might be deserted.

One by one the men went forward, through the officer's quarters, into the forward torpedo room. One by one they donned the lungs that looked like a gas mask, with clothespin nose-clamp and hard rubber mouth tube. Ridgway picked up the ship's log, with only a few entries in it, and wrapped it and other papers in waterproof silk.

When they had flooded the chamber until water came over the skirt of the escape hatch and the air pocket against the curved overhead had built up to more than forty pounds pressure, the water stopped coming in. Hanson ducked under the skirt of the hatch, cracked open the water-tight seal, and let the escape buoy rise to the surface.

After that, the men went up, singly and at intervals. Gripping the line with feet and hands, stopping each

time their hands encountered a wooden block—breathing five complete breaths at these stops to allow the nitrogen to work out of their bodies.

Ridgway was last, as was his due. He swung the beam of his flashlight around him for a last look at the interior of the ship that had been his brief pride; the gleam caught the dark water, and he could imagine the white, dead faces in the engine room's black flood. They would be swaying with the surge of the tide through the gaping hole in the steel shell.

Ridgway's breath was like a sob. He clamped the clothespin on his nose and bit hard into the mouthpiece. With the log and his papers tied to his belt, he ducked under the escape hatch skirt and caught the buoy line.

SUNSET lay on the surface, and the tide was running strongly when Ridgway's head broke water. He shut off the fluttering escape valve on his Momsen lung and thereby converted it into a life preserver. The sun was down behind the ragged bulk of the island. He could see men swimming.

And then, beyond them, a boat appeared. A tuna clipper, by the looks of her, swinging around the island. Shouts lifted and were answered from the deck; the craft's Diesels throttled down, she lost way, and Ridgway saw the first man go over her side.

"Captain—Captain! Are you all right?"

It was Ensign Herrick. He swam toward Ridgway, and the older man waved him back. His arm struck something. Rope. He tried to thrust it aside and discovered it was a portion of a fishing net that drifted with the tide. Over to his left was a cork buoy.

The tuna clipper moved toward him, picking up men as it came. It swung a searchlight into play as the shadows deepened, and a hearty voice kept booming from the deck.

"Thirty-six, now! That leaves four, according to your count, Lieutenant Hanson. We'll have them all in a jiffy."



Ridgway caught a line and was hauled up the side of the little ship. The men of the *Coral*, shivering on her deck, cheered him. A big man with a reddish beard bulked in the glare of the light. He wore a peaked officer's cap, and duck trousers that had once been white. His blue shirt was open at the throat, revealing a sunburned expanse of powerful neck.

He stepped forward; that was his voice that had been booming. "Captain Ridgway, eh? I'm Kieldson—owner of this fish boat, the *Sea Diamond* of San Pedro. Your men have told me. Very sorry to have you aboard under such circumstances, but glad as hell we happened to be coming back to the base when we did. Anything I can do for you, sir?"

He gripped Ridgway's wet hand in a huge fist.

"Thank you," said the lieutenant. An utter weariness descended upon him, now that it was all over. "Have you a radio?"

Kieldson shook his head. "Unfortunately, we haven't—not on the *Sea Diamond*. I have another clipper, the *Sea Pearl*. She'll be here at the island some time tomorrow, and she's wireless equipped. It so happens that I'm going to stay on the island and wait for her, and I can send any message you want to leave with me."

"Leave with you?" Ridgway repeated.

"The *Sea Diamond's* loaded with tuna," explained Kieldson. "She's due to head for San Pedro at once. Of course, we would send her, anyway, in view of what's happened, and I'll have Captain Maseldi make San Diego with you and your men. It's two hundred miles and a little over—Maseldi can make it by mid-afternoon tomorrow."

Ridgway considered. He had that peculiar sense of loss in leaving the shattered *Coral* behind; on the other hand, there was nothing to gain by waiting. In the absence of radio reports, the navy would know, by midnight, that something had happened. And meanwhile, the survivors could be that much nearer home.

"Thank you," he said again. "We appreciate your kindness. I'll write

a report for you to have transmitted when your other clipper comes."

"Glad to," said Kieldson heartily. Then a curiosity edged his voice: "They tell me some sort of a mysterious explosion occurred, Captain. Come into Maseldi's cabin."

RIDGWAY nodded. "I can't tell you anything," he said wearily. "I don't know what happened, myself."

"Of course—I understand. I was just a bit curious, because I remember reading about the *Coral*. She was to carry that new type of torpedo, wasn't she?"

Ridgway could see no harm in confirming this. It had been in the papers.

Kieldson switched on a light in the cubbyhole of a cabin, and indicated a chair before the small desk. "We pick up a torpedo now and then—lost by the destroyers at practice, you know. There's a reward, so my men are always on the lookout. But I understand the new type is something greatly improved. I wondered if you'd considered the possibility of that new explosive going off. You know—sabotage, perhaps?"

The navy man met Kieldson's eyes. "Sabotage is always the first thing the public thinks when there's a navy disaster!" he said tersely. "Frankly, I don't know anything and I couldn't tell you if I did. If your men have picked up lost torpedoes, you should know the navy doesn't carry warheads in peace time. And I've lost fourteen men—"

He thought he saw something strange in Kieldson's face. The big man hastily interjected: "I'm sorry, Captain! I'll leave you now to write your report, and I'll take it ashore with me."

He was back later with Maseldi, a black-browed, squat and saturnine man who smelled of fish. Later, Kieldson rowed himself ashore in a dingey. The navy men drank black coffee and made themselves as comfortable as possible on the crowded deck. And the *Sea Diamond* got under weigh for San Diego.

Straining his eyes back into the

darkness, Ridgway imagined he could see the telephone buoy bobbing on the black waters, marking the tomb of fourteen men. His men. For the first time he had a chance to think. He remembered Kieldson's words. Sabotage scarcely seemed likely: the *Coral* had undergone her trial tests after leaving the yard, and since then she had been manned by her crew.

But that explosion—wherever or however it started—had undoubtedly set off the "X-21" in those torpedoes in the after portion of the ship.

Kieldson had kept his word. The navy knew by the time the *Sea Diamond* stood in off Point Loma. A destroyer came out and escorted the tuna clipper in, and asked by semaphore if all the survivors were all right. The salvage ship *Ouzel*, she said, was preparing to get under weigh for San Lucas Island.

**A**MBULANCES loaded the men and ran them to the Naval Hospital in Balboa Park, for a period of observation. But Ridgway talked fast, and convinced the senior medical officer on the dock. He was all right, and there was work to be done. Ridgway went to the commandant's office with the admiral, instead.

The stocky, gray-haired man sat across the desk from him, watching under his shaggy brows, letting Ridgway talk, and listening carefully while he fumbled with a pencil.

"It seems to me," Ridgway said, "that the bow kicked up. It did, sir! As if the stern had suddenly been depressed. The effect of an internal explosion, I believe, would have been to lift the after portion of the ship out of the water. But the stern went down, and then she rolled."

The admiral's pencil became still. "Something like the effect of a depth charge, Lieutenant?" he asked sharply.

"No, sir, not like that, exactly. But I'm convinced the explosion started from the outside and then reached the X-21 torpedoes. Please give me permission to go with the *Ouzel*, sir—to make a dive!"

The shaggy brows kitted. "But diving is a specialized job. You—"

"I've had special instruction, sir. At the diving school at Washington Navy Yard. And quite a few hours on the bottom."

"H'm. All right, Lieutenant. But, because of the fact the *Coral* was carrying X-21 torpedoes, we must be extremely careful about any hinting at sabotage or any other deliberate intent to destroy her. You understand? There are several foreign powers, Ridgway, which would give a lot to possess the formula of X-21."

"Yes, sir." Ridgway rose and breathed deeply. "I'll give out no information, sir. But I'd like to be one of the first men down to her, just as I was the last to leave."

The commandant summoned his orderly. To Ridgway, he thrust out his hand. "Good-by," he said. "And good luck."

Nothing had changed in the three days, Ridgway thought. He stood on the deck of the *Ouzel* as the salvage ship swung slowly around the rocky steep of San Lucas. The little straggle of fishing huts was still there, and the buoy made a blob against the brightness of the sea. Hendricks, the lieutenant who commanded the *Ouzel*, glanced back at the pontoons she was towing, and then turned to Ridgway.

"Better get dressed, if you want to be the first over the side," he said. "We'll be anchored in another five minutes."

Ridgway went below and put on a suit of heavy woolen underwear and two pairs of socks. When he came back topside, the "bears" began pulling a diving rig on him, piling up the weight of leaden shoes, a leaden belt, the heavy breastplate. They clamped telephone receivers over his ears. Hendricks reappeared as the anchor rattled down.

"Know how to use the underwater torch?" he inquired.

Ridgway nodded. "Yes, but—"

"You'd better take it down with you. It might be easy to go into the after section of the *Coral*, but it might be just as easy to get yourself trapped in a hole. Take the torch along."

They tested the telephone. One of the sailors had lifted the helmet

over Ridgway's head, gave it a fourth turn, and locked it in place. Ridgway valved in compressed air by turning the valve over his left breast, and the rubber suit inflated. He tried the exhaust valve on the back of his helmet, and worked the "spit" valve, which releases air as the diver thrusts his chin against it.

Ridgway lifted his hand, and two bears helped him up to the starboard. Somebody hung the lanyard of the underwater torch over his shoulder, and now there was a maze of lines to look after and keep clear on the bottom—life-line, air hose, quadruple hose of the torch, and the electrical igniter line.

He gripped the bails of the stage, and felt water close over his weighted feet. The stage halted a minute with water just over the helmet; Ridgway could see the ripples washing past his face plate, and the *Ouzel's* side became magnified and distorted. His exhaust valve fluttered; everything in his rig was working properly.

Now they waited until he said: "All right!" into his telephone set. Then he stepped off the stage.

The men on deck pulled him forward along the side of the *Ouzel* to the weighted line that had been dropped beside the buoy. He caught this with both hands, and they let his life-line go slack.

The light faded to opalescence and then a dark blue. He valved more air into his suit: it made a roaring sound, a noise that was too much like that awful, continuous roar on the *Coral*, only much less intense. The line straggled up above him into an opaque nothingness and was lost; the pressure began crowding in against him, relentlessly and from all sides, and breathing was difficult.

He thought he would never reach the bottom, and just when he thought this, the conning tower of the *Coral* loomed to his left—familiar, and yet changed. It was magnified and twisted by the illusory water. The submarine lay at nearly even keel now that her forward torpedo compartment had been flooded.

Ridgway dropped beside her until his weighted feet struck bottom. A

little swirl of "water dust" rose across his face plate, and he bounced slightly. His suit was too light; he jerked his chin against the spit valve and air rumbled out to make him heavier. The air rocked toward the surface in a trail of crystal bright bubbles.

He spoke into his transmitter. "Okay—on the bottom. Port side of the *Coral*, amidships."

"Take it easy, now, Ridgway!" Hendricks told him.

They gave him slack. He leaned against a gentle tide and walked toward the stern, straining his eyes into the gloom, anxious to see the ship's after portion and yet dreading what he knew he would find back there.

It seemed to him he had gone a long way; he counted stanchions on the railing just visible above the swell of the hull. Four, five—and then the railing was gone. Ridgway took two more steps.

HE saw, then, why there had been no one coming from the engine room; he saw why tappings on the galley door had gone unanswered, while the rest of the crew waited in the control room.

The after portion of the *Coral* was shattered into a jagged, broken, unbelievably twisted mass. Death for the fourteen had come in a thundering wink of time: none of them had known when the water came in. Ridgway stood with his heart hammering, the full sense of tragedy and loss overwhelming him. This had been his ship, new, proud, keenly alive and responsive.

His voice began steadily enough, then broke: "Her whole stern's blown away! I'm—I'm going inside. Give me slack."

"Mind your air-hose and life-lines!" Hendricks said sharply. "Don't let them get fouled. I'm sending Kelton down to secure a line on deck. He'll look for you after he's done this."

"Okay," said Ridgway. He began moving again. He came to the wrenched port shaft and climbed laboriously upon it, reaching for the

propeller guard. It had been torn from its forward support, and was twisted askew; above it and astern there was nothing—even the propeller was gone.

A brightly colored fish flicked by Ridgway's face plate, darted away, and then came back to goggle at him. He pulled in slack on his lines, and then swung his legs into the jagged hole. Torn steel had been left here with an edge dangerously sharp.

He made the interior and saw utter darkness ahead. Scrap steel and fittings littered the floor; and it was like walking through a junk pile. He collided with the unyielding bulk of an electric motor, torn free and gone adrift. And when he cautiously felt his way around this obstruction, he ran into a seemingly blank bulkhead.

It was dented and broken; when he ran his hands over it, he felt the convex surface and knew a portion of the hull had dropped into the chamber. Bending with difficulty in the inflated suit, he found a ragged hole—*dented inward!*

Hendricks heard Ridgway curse.

"What's up?" asked the man on deck.

"I don't know—yet. But it looks like a hull plate blown into the compartment. And blown in from the outside! You'll want to hoist this piece, and it's jammed tighter than hell!"

"Try the torch on the outer edges of it," suggested Hendricks.

Ridgway felt around some more. He could burn away the edges and free the section without touching the hole in its lower middle.

"Turn on the igniter!" he said.

A cold, consuming anger was possessing him. He forgot the danger here on the bottom; he forgot time and everything else. The sinking of the *Coral*—of his ship—had been deliberate. It had been done from the outside, by someone who knew where and when she was going to maneuver.

"Igniter on!"

Ridgway twisted valves on the torch. Oxygen—hydrogen and compressed air. Gas blew through the dark water in a fine, high-pressure jet. He pressed the contacts with the

igniter at the torch nozzle, and let them jump apart.

**A** SHARP crack. Flame, orange-colored, vividly bright, burned a hundred feet under the sea. Ridgway triggered oxygen into it, and the flame leaped like brilliance from a fire hose.

"Kelton's on the bottom," said Hendricks.

Ridgway didn't answer. He turned the nozzle sideward, and the flame began eating at the jammed edge of the hull plate section. With this torch you could cut a foot of steel an inch thick, every minute.

Hendricks said: "You've been down nearly an hour. You'd better come up, for this time."

"Not yet! I want to go on into the engine room. Stand by to lower a line."

There would be bodies forward of this obstruction. Ridgway's men.

"Kelton's coming aft to find you," Hendricks reported. His voice dimmed and went far away; Ridgway checked the inrush of air in his suit so he could hear, but the man on deck wasn't speaking into the transmitter. Then he came back to it, his voice agitated:

"Just received a radiogram from Eleventh Naval! They've found something, Ridgway—they're sending a destroyer down. What do you figure that means?"

The hull section wavered. Ridgway grunted against it, and it fell slowly forward. He could go on into the engine room, now.

"I don't know," he said.

"Well—" and the voice was ominous—"we're ordered to seize and detain anybody we find around here! The only thing wrong with that is the fact that nobody appears to be around. I'll send a landing party ashore, however. You'd better contact Kelton and then come on up!"

"Just a minute," grunted Ridgway. He turned the air back into his suit and throttled down the torch.

Cautiously, now, he moved forward, stooping as he climbed over other wreckage, expecting to find a body any minute. He heard Hen-

dricks calling his name, and impatiently shut off the air to answer.

"Kelton doesn't answer!" Hendricks said. "You'd better get out of there and see if you can find him—quick!"

"All right!" acknowledged the lieutenant. He turned. The torch provided light, but it was a handicap. He placed it carefully on the deck and handled his air-line and life-line as if they were spun glass, lest they come in contact with the throttled flame.

And then he straightened, sensing, rather than seeing, the presence of the other diver.

"Here he is!" he told Hendricks. "I guess his phone is just dead. He's coming into the engine room."

"Well, I don't want him down there with a dead phone," said the *Ouzel's* skipper. "Put your helmet against his and tell him you're both coming up! Tell him I—"

Hendricks' voice failed on a dead click.

"Hello!" called Ridgway. "Hello, topside! I can't hear you!"

There was no answer. The other diver moved toward Ridgway. The glow from the torch sent an eerie light through the blackness. It caught a glitter in the man's hand. A knife.

**R**IDGWAY took a step toward the newcomer, wondering vaguely what had happened to Kelton's phone. He lifted his lifeline as he turned, handling it carefully to prevent it from fouling. The rope suddenly went slack in his grasp; he dropped the torch, and pulled it. A severed end slid through his fingers.

Now he knew why his own phone had gone dead. The lifeline and its accompanying wire of communication had been cut.

Kelton was stooping, fumbling on the bottom, hunting for Ridgway's air hose. Looking beyond him, Ridgway was startled to see the bulk of another diver—a third man on the bottom, sliding down into the chamber.

Then he knew that the man with the knife wasn't Kelton, at all.

Ridgway tried to spring forward,

cursing the fluid drag of the water, the slow-motion sensation of battling it. He bumped into the stooping man with a crash of his lead belt on the other's copper helmet. There was a quick sting in his leg.

A trail of small bubbles swung up past his face; the diving suit shrank slightly, and the weird light of the underwater torch painted the bubbles with iridescence. His leg stung again, and Ridgway knew the diving suit was bleeding air from a stab that had pricked his shin.

He moved back, valving more air into his suit, realizing that his life depended on the slender air hose which the man had sought to sever. Now the mysterious attacker straightened, lunging with the knife. Ridgway saw his face dimly behind the murk of his helmet port. The man was much bigger than Kelton, and he had a reddish beard. It was Kieldson—owner of the *Sea Diamond*!

Instinctively, Ridgway reached for his own knife. His belt was empty. Perhaps he had lost the weapon as he clambered into the jagged hole of the *Coral's* stern. Kieldson was closing in, and it flashed into Ridgway's mind that the second newcomer could scarcely be Kelton, either, because Kieldson paid no heed to the man at his shoulder.

There were two to fight, then. Ridgway knew that it would be a battle to the death, here on the bottom at a hundred feet. He knew that more was at stake than his life alone, and that Kelton probably had already met these men, and died, strangling, after they cut his air hose.

The knife flashed at him. He ducked, trying to ward off the blow and get under it. Belts and breastplates hammered with a clamor; the knife glanced along his helmet. He caught Kieldson's thick wrist in his fingers and fought to twist it backward and down. Kieldson was the more powerful, and the rubber sleeve was slippery. The hold gave.

Ridgway felt another sting in his arm—if all the air bled from his suit, he would be crushed by the gigantic "squeeze" of the sea pressure. Desperately, he flung himself at Kield-

son's knees, trying to keep the pricked sleeve down so air would remain in his helmet. The other man got into the fight. Ridgway saw two pairs of legs before him, and a heavy shoe slammed against his middle and knocked him sprawling.

He struck the bulkhead and lay for a few seconds, unable to move. The other two divers advanced slowly, inexorably. They bent toward him, and the brightness of the torch reflected from their knives. The end was close; it was strange how clearly Ridgway's mind functioned. He understood things, now. He knew, with a terrible vivid clarity that Kieldson had sunk the *Coral*, that Kieldson would stop at nothing to get one of those "X-21" war-heads so that some foreign power could analyze the new explosive.

Kieldson had already killed fourteen men—fifteen, counting Kelton. One more wouldn't matter.

Ridgway's death wouldn't matter much, even to him, he thought as he watched death draw near. But the cold anger he felt a little before, when he knew for certain that the *Coral* had been sunk deliberately, suddenly fused into white heat. Here was the man who was responsible for the sinking.

Ridgway whirled over, sat up awkwardly with his back to the bulkhead, determined to fight to the last strangling breath. His outflung hand felt the heat of the torch.

That was it—the torch that split the water with a jet of high-pressure, flaming gas! His only chance. He groped, found the handle, found the trigger. His arm jerked around just as the knife was descending.

Ridgway pressed the trigger and heard the roar of orange-colored flame, lashing out like a whip, cutting the sea for a distance of six feet. He swung the jet in a vivid arc.

The flame struck Kieldson's suit just below the belt. It mushroomed against the inflated rubber, and Ridgway saw, with a terrible fascination, how the rubber gave way as if it had been so much paper—how the air went out of the suit in one gigantic bubble, murky with smoke.

Then the squeeze got Kieldson. The big man seemed to shrink. His knife dropped and he sank to the deck. His eyes, dimly seen behind his face plate, were starting from his head.

Ridgway jerked the flame around again. The other diver was turning, trying frantically to get out of range. Fleeing, in that oddly comic, slow-motion fashion in which men travel at a hundred feet down.

He had gone two or three feet before the flame overtook him. It cut his air hose first; the hose twisted behind him, and the bright bubbles feathered from it. Then the jet seared across his back. He fell.

Ridgway climbed to his feet, valving more air into his suit to overcome the loss from the tiny knife stabs. He shut off the gas pressure of the torch, and stepped over the bodies of the two men. Chambering wearily out of the torn hull, he took his bearings and walked toward the descending line. Near it was the crumpled body of a man in a diving suit. Kelton.

For the first time, Ridgway noticed the frantic tugs on his air hose—signals from the deck. He cursed grimly, answered the tugs, and felt himself being hauled up.

Then came an interminable wait on the stage, while the air roared into his suit and leaked out again, and while he was gradually decompressed. The stage went toward the surface by degrees. Another diver came down to it and pressed his face plate against Ridgway's so the officer could tell him what had happened.

The other diver communicated by telephone with the deck, and a line was lowered so he could bring up Kelton's body. Finally, Ridgway reached the brightness of sunshine, and the blessedness of air.

Hendricks helped pull him aboard and undress him. He gulped black coffee and listened.

"The landing party's back," said Hendricks. "They found four men operating a compressed air flask and gear hidden in that first shack you see by the water. The lines ran out into the sea."

"How many?" Ridgway asked.

(Concluded on page 113)

**FLAME UNDER THE SEA**

(Concluded from page 98)

"Two rigs. You got 'em both. They also found a fishing net rigged with cork buoys and supporting a brace of as wicked little submarine mines as you ever saw. One of these, no doubt, struck the *Coral*. When the destroyer gets here, we'll learn more about it. There are Intelligence men on board, and it seems they have been checking on Kieldson and his two tuna boats."

Ridgway drank more coffee, and neither tasted it nor felt it scald his throat!

"The mines—they explain that piece of fish net I found floating when I came up from the wreck," he said. "And I suppose if I'd gone forward instead of aft when I dived today, I'd have run into Kieldson and the other man trying to get one of those bow torpedoes ashore."

Hendricks nodded, a gleam of admiration in his eyes. "Well, they didn't get it! X-21 still belongs to Uncle Sam, exclusively!"

Looking out over the sea, Ridgway saw the shimmer of emerald water around the buoy that marked the *Coral's* resting place. Fifteen men dead. A new, smart ship lost—*his* ship. He drew a deep breath.

There would be other ships like her, new and smart and taut. The survivors of the *Coral* would help man them—so long as they remained in the navy, they would be pigboat men, and proud of it. Including Ridgway. He had been in the navy long enough to know that navy men carry on, and to know that any ship is what her men and her skipper make her.

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