

A DISCUSSION OF THE USN SUBMARINE NAMING & DESIGNATION SYSTEMS

BY

DAVID L. JOHNSTON

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The scope of this website covers a period in the USN Submarine Service in which the Navy employed a seemingly schizophrenic and often-times confusing approach to naming and designating their submarines. The United States Navy commissioned its first submarine, the *Holland* on 12 October 1900. Without any precedent to guide them, the Navy simply named it after the man who invented and perfected it, John P. Holland. The standard prefix of USS (meaning United States Ship) was not in official use until 1909, so the boat was known simply as that, just *Holland*. Occasionally you would see the abbreviation “USSTB” (United States Submarine Torpedo Boat) preceding the name, but this was not an official term and was not used on any legal documents.

Subsequent submarines were given names of marine creatures and land-based stinging creatures, with examples being *Adder*, *Porpoise*, *Viper*, and *Cuttlefish*. On 17 November 1911 the Navy completely revised this system, discontinuing the accepted naming convention and substituting an alphanumeric system with a letter followed by a number. The letter represented the class that the boat belonged to, and the number representing the place within that class the boat fell into. Examples would be *A-1*, *B-3*, *C-4*, etc. This system represented the belief at the time that submarines were merely boats or craft and not befitting of a proper name, and it brought the USN in line with an accepted international convention championed mostly by the British Royal Navy and the Imperial German Navy. *Holland* was excepted from the rule for some reason, and she retained her name to the end of her service life in 1913. The first submarine authorized after *Holland* was the *Plunger*, she was renamed *A-1*. *Viper* of 1907 was the first of an improved and enlarged class and she was given the name *B-1*. This practice would continue until 1931 and would encompass the start of the fleet submarine program.

In addition to the ship’s name, the U.S. Navy was required by law to give each warship a designation so that it could be properly identified by type, thus ensuring compliance with international treaties. This system of designations originated in 1895, and took the form of “Battleship X, Cruiser X, Submarine X, etc. (with X denoted by a sequenced number within each class) For brevity’s sake it could be abbreviated as B-1, C-7, S-13, and so on. It became quickly apparent in the submarine community that this was going to cause a great deal of confusion so in most documents a submarine was referred to, as an example, USS *C-2* (Submarine No.13). By 1920 the unwieldy nature of this system became apparent, especially as the expanding Navy had new types of ships that had to be accounted for.

It is important to understand that a USN warship would have both a name, i.e. USS *Moccasin*, and a designation (Submarine No. 4).

On 17 July 1920 the Acting Secretary of the Navy issued a new instruction that was the genesis of the designation system that we still use today. Under this scheme a two letter system was instituted, with the first letter being the type, and the second letter being the subtype. For example, USS *Vestal* (Repair Ship No. 4) was redesignated as AR-4, with the first letter designating it as an auxiliary type, and the second letter showing that she was a repair ship. For ships that did not have a sub-type the first letter was reused, i.e. BB for battleship or DD for destroyer. General purpose submarines were given the designation SS. Cruiser submarines got SC, minelaying submarines got SM, and fleet submarines got SF. This system was applied to all vessels in active commission or reserve at the time. Vessels that had been decommissioned and struck from the official Navy List *did not* have this system retroactively applied. Thus, *Holland* never officially carried the designation SS-1, but for simplicity's sake many historians have applied it retroactively, albeit incorrectly. In an effort to supposedly simplify the system, the designations SC, SM, and SF were dropped on 01 July 1931 and all submarines (with one exception – *Argonaut*) were redesignated in the SS series.

As stated previously the beginning of the fleet submarine program was in 1914, and the letter-number naming scheme was still in full effect. The first class of fleet submarines had letter-number names in the AA series, quickly changed to the T series. The next class was the V-class, with the first seven boats of this class being named *V-1* to *V-7*. On 19 February 1931 the Secretary of the Navy changed the system again, ostensibly to reflect the much higher status that submarines had achieved in naval circles. Starting on that date, all submarines prior to the V-class would retain their letter-number names, and all submarines from *V-1* forward would receive new names of fish and marine creatures. This system, with a few minor variations, would remain in place until 1959. The V-class would also experience some changes in their designations as well, but for the most part the two letter designation system would remain in place. This website will refer to the boats by the name that they had at the time that a particular photograph was taken. Thus, on these pages you may see USS *V-4* also referred to as USS *Argonaut*, depending on the date of the photograph being referred to.

Examples:

Prior to 17 November 1911:

USS *Barracuda* (Submarine No. 21)

USS *Turbot* (Submarine No. 31)

After 17 November 1911:

USS *F-2* (Submarine No. 21)

USS *G-3* (Submarine No. 31)

After 17 July 1920:

USS *F-2* (SS-21)

USS *G-3* (SS-31)

On 19 February 1931:

USS *V-2* (SF-5) became USS *Bass* (SF-5) and later (SS-164)

USS V-6 (SC-2) became USS *Nautilus* (SC-2) and later (SS-168)

When the 19 February 1931 system was put into place, it was quickly realized that with nothing but the boat's name spelled out on the side of the superstructure in relatively small letters, it would be difficult to visually identify the boat when it was on the surface from distances greater than a few dozen yards. So, the Submarine Force came up with a system that allowed the boats to be easily identified at a distance. Since the names of any particular class or type all started with the same letter (i.e. *Barracuda*, *Bass*, & *Bonita*), the system dictated that painted on the side of the conning tower fairwater would be the first letter of the class followed by a number that represented that boat's particular place in the class order. For example, *Barracuda* used B1, *Argonaut* used A1, and *Perch* used P5. These "class identifiers" were large enough to be seen at considerable distances, and for a while their use satisfied the need. The system stayed in place for the fleet boats until late 1938 and the *Salmon/Sargo* class submarines. The use of S1, S2, etc. for these boats became confusing when it was realized that the USN still had many of the old S-class patrol submarines still in commission that had not been renamed in 1931. USS *Squalus* (SS-192) was launched with S11 on her hull and fairwater, but she was the last to carry the class identifier. Starting in approximately January, 1939 the Submarine Force dropped the class identifiers for the entire force and substituted the boat's hull number instead. This system has stayed in place to the present day.

It is *very important* to note that the class identifiers *were not the boat's name*. They were a simple visual expedient to allow the positive identification of the boat when it was surfaced. This point has been frequently misunderstood in the past, admittedly not without reason.

Special note concerning *Argonaut*: As stated above, on 01 July 1931 the Navy officially dropped the specialized submarine designations and redesignated all submarines in the generalized SS series. Respected submarine force historian John D. Alden has stated that *Argonaut*, with her specialized minelaying gear, was the sole exception and that she retained her SM-1 designation. The PigBoats.COM webmasters have uncovered photographs, dated approximately 1940, which clearly and unambiguously show *Argonaut* with a "166" painted on her bow and conning tower fairwater, the hull number she would have carried if redesignated in the general SS series.

In this immediate pre-WWII period the U.S. Navy was still making a valid attempt to comply with the Washington and London Naval Treaties. The designations were how specific warship types were tracked for treaty compliance verification. Since the treaties had been ratified by Congress they were essentially the law of the land and therefore violating them potentially carried legal ramifications. The *Argonaut's* Commanding Officer and crew certainly would not have taken on the legal liability of changing the hull number themselves, and it is hard to believe that even the higher echelon commands, i.e. the division, squadron, or even the fleet type commanders would have authorized it on their own. Therefore, we believe that the order originated with the Secretary of the Navy himself, acting on authorization from Congress and that a written order did actually exist. Most likely the order was issued separately, and likely several years after the 01 July 1931 order because the Navy felt that since *Argonaut* was physically different she should retain her SM number. We speculate that this was later found to be unnecessary and at some point the SecNav issued the order. The order itself may have been subsequently misfiled in the archives or unintentionally destroyed. This would account for Alden not finding it during his

research. Please see the PigBoats *Argonaut* page for the photos which show her with her 166 number.

The webmasters want to convey all of this important information, but our desire is to try to strike a balance between what is historically correct and what is reasonable and understandable to the average person. So, we have decided to adhere to several conventions for this website.

1. For names and designations to be listed, the boat would had to have carried it at some time during its commissioned life in the USN. If a name or designation was changed **before** the boat was commissioned, it will be noted in the “Design, Construction, and Naming Notes” section for each class, but not necessarily in the header for each individual boat. As an example, when her construction contract was signed, Dolphin (SS-169) was named V-7. While she was still under construction, and before she was even launched, her name was changed to Dolphin. Therefore, PigBoats.COM will only refer to her as Dolphin and V-7 will be noted in the naming notes section.
2. The name used in the caption will be the name of the boat at the time the photo was taken.
3. The naming prefix USS will be used sparingly, and only when appropriate. It is not that we don’t like or agree with using it, it is just that when used often it gets redundant and cumbersome to read. All ships commissioned into service into the USN after 1909 had this prefix as part of their official name. It is a given, therefore we do not feel the need to use it all the time.

If at any point any of our readers have questions concerning this rather esoteric topic, do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you!