

This is Ben Brown, Director and Curator of the Clarke Historical Museum. In the Community Case for the month of February is an exhibit by Arlene Hartin and Milt Phegley, with help from Ray Hillman on the USS Milwaukee disaster.

In the early morning fog of December 14, 1916, the H-3 Garfish grounded on Samoa Beach near Eureka. The crew was taken off in a dramatic and heroic rescue operation by the US Coast Guard. An unsuccessful salvage attempt was made by the monitor Cheyenne and the tug Iroquois. Shortly after Christmas, the Navy called for bids to re-float the stranded submarine. Six bids ranging from \$18,000 to 72,000 were received. Most were considered too high. The \$18,000 bid from Eureka based Mercer-Fraser Company, was worryingly low and the government was skeptical that the contractor could do the work. Accordingly, the Navy decided to undertake the salvage itself.

Now supplemented by the 9,700 ton flagship of the Coast Torpedo Force, the armored cruiser Milwaukee with 21,000 horsepower, worked alongside the Iroquois and Cheyenne to pull the stranded submarine free. In dense fog on the night of January 13, 1917, after pulling two days, Iroquois's towline parted. Before another towline could be rigged, the cruiser found itself unable to maneuver and at the mercy of a strong current and was forced ashore. She grounded hard and later broke up, a total loss.

As ships stranded on sandy beaches will do, H-3 had worked her way 300 feet north and buried herself 6 feet deeper in the sand. The naval units were removed from the salvage work and a contract was negotiated with Mercer-Fraser for their original bid of \$18,000. The imaginative salvage plan called for moving the submarine overland more than a mile and launching her into Humboldt Bay. In the first of two phases, pilings were driven around the ship to support jacks used in conjunction with a timber crib and lifting slings to raise the submarine and lower it onto rollers. In the second phase, the submarine was hauled along a pine track by a winch and moved along at 550 feet per day and was launched in Humboldt Bay on April 20, 1917.

The submarine had been salvaged by a skilled and imaginative effort, but the cost of having lost the Milwaukee was high. Two lives were lost in the incident, one a seaman with the US Navy trying to get the tow line ashore; the second was part of the crew building a railroad trestle to the side of the Milwaukee for salvage by the Navy. The loss of the Milwaukee was the worst peacetime loss in the history of the US Navy to 1917, costing \$7.5 million dollars.

The Milwaukee was later stripped by building a pier to the ship and removing salvaged equipment across the beach. Mercer-Fraser was originally established in 1870 and remains in business today as a general construction contractor in Eureka. They also helped in recent years to place a large rock on the North Spit near the wreck of Milwaukee.

If you have a historically important story to our region and are interested in using the Community Case, the only requirement is that you have an active membership and are willing to plan, design and install the exhibit, exhibits stay on display for one month.

This is Ben Brown with Community Comment.