

The sinking of HMS K-16

Introduction

This year 70 years ago on Christmas Day 1941, after a successful operation off the northern coast of Borneo the night before, HMS K-16 was torpedoed by Japanese Submarine I-66. All crew members were killed.

Contemporaries of the commander of K-16, and later commentators, criticized his actions after his successful attack on that Christmas Eve. They suggest that his actions may have led to the sinking of K-16. In my opinion a totally unjustified criticism.

The following article is a (very) short version of a comprehensive analysis that I made some years ago regarding the sinking of HMS K-16.

The analysis has not only focused on K-16 and her fatal encounter with the I-66 but was placed in the broader context of the operations of the Third Division Submarines (DOZ-3), consisting of HMS K-14, K-15 and K-16 (Commanders respectively LTZ 1 CAJ van Well Groeneveld (also division commander - CDOZ-3), LTZ and CWT Baron Boetzelaer and LTZ1 LJ Jarman).

Thus I hoped to gain a better understanding of the most probable movements of K-16 during the period immediately prior to her sinking.

Besides information that has become available from Japanese sources in the course of time my main source of information was original material from the Dutch Institute for Military History. These sources are:

Lists of telegrams,
Logbook HMS K-15,
Report by the commander of K-14, on



his successful campaign near Kuching on December 23, 1941 and a copy of the diary of KLTZ JLL Willinge, Chief of Staff Naval Task Force.

What happened before: 20 to 24 December 1941

During the afternoon of December 20 CZM (Commander in Chief Naval Forces) orders DOZ 3 to sail north because of a threat to the West Coast of Borneo. One boat has to sail through the Api-passage to a patrol area to the north of Borneo. They are ordered to attack the enemy. That evening CDOZ-3 orders K-14 to sail to the coast of Borneo through the Api-passage. K-15 and 16 are assigned patrol areas west of the Api-passage. In the morning of December 23 CZM reports sighting of three cruisers and a destroyer which are headed southwest approximately 100 miles north of Kuching and indicates that they must be attacked. So K-15 and 16 advance to the Api-passage.

Meanwhile, in her patrol area north of Kuching, K-14 succeeds in making contact with the Japanese invasion fleet, in close cooperation with the Dutch flying boat X-35. Based on the survey report of the X-35 CZM sends an enemy report in which it says that at 230744Z (15.14 local time) two

cruisers, three destroyers, two merchant ships larger and eight merchant ships less than 10,000 tons have been spotted in a position approximately 70 miles north of Kuching on course 216, speed 6, and orders DOZ3 to attack.

Then CDOZ3 asks DOZ3 to report their position. Shortly thereafter K-15 and 16 answer that they are near the island of St. Peter (West of the passage leading to the Api). In the evening of December 23 K-16 reports that it has passed Tandjung Datu (and thus the Api-passage) on course 100. The logbook of K-15 shows it passed Tg Datu about three quarters of an hour later. Nothing showed that K15 and 16 were aware of each other's proximity.

Meanwhile, approximately one hour before sunset, K-14 reported a new position, course and speed of the Japanese convoy. CZM then orders K-14 to attack (rather superfluously). The attack is launched in the evening and is highly successful. About two hours after its successful action K-14 sends an attack report in which it says that, on December 23 from 19:30 - 21:30 (local), it torpedoed and sank three large Japanese transport ships and a tanker in Sarawak. All torpedoes were launched.

It is also reported that the rest of the convoy has anchored northeast of Sarawak and that K-14 will return to Surabaya (unless otherwise ordered) to repair a diesel and to load new torpedoes. K-15 and 16 are ordered to continue the attack.

The events on 24 December 1941. K-16 attacks.

During the middle watch on December 24 K-16 leaves the Api-passage near Tg Datu and heads for the Japanese invasion fleet near Kuching. Ignorant of each other's proximity K-15 sails past Tg Datu about three quarters of an hour after K-16 and continues its course to an area north-north-east of Kuching and towards the anchored invasion fleet near Tg Sipang (peninsula north of Kuching).

During the morning watch K-15 reaches her patrol area. She patrols in daytime both submerged and on periscope depth and spots several ships at great distance. During the afternoon watch she attacks a Japanese destroyer but she fails because the destroyer steers away. After sunset she surfaces and patrols while the battery is being charged.

By the end of the morning, K-16 seems to have approached the invasion fleet and she sends an enemy report in which about 10 enemy transport ships, two destroyers on the lookout and a seaplane carrier are reported near Tg Sipang . K-16 indicates that it will attack after dark.

It seems likely that K-16, after leaving the Api-passage, chose a more westerly patrol area (compared to K-15) near Tg Sipang (roughly west of the meridian of Tg Sipang, 110-20E) and approached the Japanese fleet closer, given the fairly detailed enemy report. Unlike K-15, which patrolled underwater during daylight, K-16 explored the fleet, probably sailing most of the daytime (trimmed) on the surface, and

surveyed the situation in order to be able to strike as soon as possible after sunset, taking advantage of any moonlight.

This assumption is based on the following reason. This possible action of K-16 is similar to the action of K-14 in preparation for her attack the day before. When she contacted and approached the Japanese convoy (which at that time was still heading for Kuching) K-14 sailed on the surface and in the later stages of the approach during daylight she sailed parallel with the convoy at a distance of about 9 miles.

After sunset, still sailing on the surface, she reduces this distance to 3 ½ miles. Only at the last moment, when the attack is launched, when an enemy searchlight is switched on, she submerges. A distance of nine miles during the day (3 ½ miles at night) thus seems a safe distance to monitor a large convoy undetected and to maintain an overview. Staying on the surface provides an opportunity to ensure a full battery and a fully charged high pressure air system.

At the beginning of the first night watch (December 24) K-15 sees a large sheet of flames in the north and suspects that a fuel ship has been torpedoed. Moments later K-15 sees a destroyer in smoke and flames. Near another destroyer explosions like gunfire are observed. K-15 reports to CZM (info K-16) that, at 12.20Z (19.50 local), she sees a Japanese destroyer being destroyed by artillery fire and asks which allied forces are present in Sarawak. More than one hour later, CZM announces that it knows nothing of allied forces in Sarawak.

Around midnight (December 24 to 25) K-16 sends an attack message to CZM, CDOZ3 and Naval Task Force that she has sunk one destroyer type Amagiri and that an attack on a second destroyer has failed. Furthermore, she mentions that she has been attacked with two depth charges both of which were far off target. K-16 also says that attacks on transport ships are no longer possible because of location in shallow water and patrolling destroyers and also that still eight torpedoes remain. Official data have confirmed that the sunken destroyer was Sagiri and that it sank at 30 miles north of Kuching.

The observations of K-15, the attack message of K-16 and Japanese sources of information lead to the following possible scenario.

It is estimated that the merchant ships of the Japanese fleet were anchored between 10 and 20 meters water depth in a sector NW to NE at a distance of 6 - 8 miles from Tg Sipang. To the north anti-submarine patrols were carried out by Japanese destroyers, including Sagiri and Murakumo. As K-16 stated in her enemy report, she intended to attack after dark. She must have approached the Japanese transport fleet about one hour after sunset, probably from a NNW direction. In all probability she submerged to penetrate the anti submarine screen.

Around 19.30 K-16 launched a torpedo attack on the Sagiri which sank Sagiri. Then K-16 launched two torpedoes at the Murakumo which missed, however. Subsequently, K-16 is likely to have decided that the merchant ships could not be targeted because of their location in shallow water and she retreated to deeper water, probably at a course between N and NW.

Assessment of the events on December 25, 1941.
I-66 torpedoes K-16

In preparation for the assault on Borneo, in order to get hold of the oil fields, the 30th group (I-65 and I-66) of the 5th "Butai" submarines is directed from Camrahn-bay (Vietnam) to Borneo to reconnoître the situation near Kuching. The I-66 arrives off Kuching on December 16 and reports little activity and little military strength. The I-65 and I-66 stay in the area north of Kuching / Tg Datu.

According to various Japanese sources, I-65 reported two submarine detections on 23 and 24 December (possibly K-14 and K-15 or 16). There was no attack. Just after midnight of 24-25 December a message was sent to the I-66 to be alert for any encounter with a Dutch submarine.

From several Japanese documents it became clear that on December 25 at 11:45 (Japan Standard Time = 10.15 locally) the "I-66 sighted 35° starboard 5.0 km one large surface navigating sub, and commenced attack movement, and 11.58 (JST) fired one torpedo. After torpedo's running time she heard explosive sound, and confirmed hit". This attack is reported by the I-66 at 13.20 (JST).

After her attack on the Sagiri and Murakumo during the second dog watch/first night watch on December 24, K-16's last sign of life is her attack report which she sent around midnight, about three hours after her action. Obviously it is not known what happened on board the K-16 in the period from her attack on Sagiri and Murakumo until the time of her sinking.

In addition, the question why K-16 was sailing on the surface at that time, during daylight, can never be answered with certainty. Nevertheless, it is possible to give a reasoned assessment of what might probably have happened that (half) day.

After her attack on Sagiri and Murakumo, and the counterattack of the Murakumo on K-16, she is likely to have retreated from the action area in a northerly direction at medium speed (4-6 knots), submerged. After that it is likely that she surfaced to recharge the battery. She used this opportunity to send her attack report. In this report she also said that attacks on transport ships were no longer possible because of their location in shallow water and the patrolling destroyers. She also mentions that she has got 8 torpedoes left. This message can be seen as a request for orders. On the one hand K-16 indicates that the main targets are unreachable, on the other that she still has a considerable stock of torpedoes left. Waiting for possible orders, K-16 is likely to have kept her options open: on the one hand to stay in a position in which she could wait throughout the day to the north of and outside the Japanese anti submarine screen so as to be able, if necessary, to launch a new attack on the transport ships in the evening or night (when they might leave). On the other hand staying in a position leading to the Api-passage in case she was ordered back.

After sending the attack message, K-16 might have been detected during the night or early morning of December 25 by Japanese units in which case she subsequently submerged to avoid them.

After the threat was avoided, K-16 may have surfaced to charge the battery during daylight, also - subject to any orders from CZM - to be able to approach and attack the transport fleet in the evening with a full battery. In any case, K-16 was spotted sailing on the surface at 11:45 (JST = 10.15 locally) by I-66 and 13 minutes later she was torpedoed and sunk, roughly 60 miles NW of Kuching.

At 10.51 (LT) CZM sends a signal paying tribute to K-16 and at 11.25 (LT) CZM orders K-16 to return to Surabaya. K-15 is ordered to continue its operations for the time being in the area between Sarawak and Indo-China.

In the evening of December 25 CZM sends a message to K-14 and K-16 with instructions on the route on the way back to Surabaya. In the evening of December 28 CZM sends a message to K-16 ordering her to reply to this last message immediately.

Chief of Staff of the Naval Task Force writes in his diary on December 24: "K-16 reports to have torpedoed a destroyer type Asashio and to have missed another; she was attacked with depth charges but far away, only eight torpedoes left. At night I call DDM (Navy Department) to say that CZM should withdraw the current order to attack, as it was CZM that gave the order. Cdt K-16 (Jarman) reports that transport ships are out of reach due to shallow water. Jarman's message was sent at 12.00 HW. I phoned on (December 25) ± 01.30. The message from CZM to call K-16 back was not sent until 25 December 12.00. They have left the night go by without ordering him to return, very regrettably. Yet another error

in the command technique".

Suggestions have been made from several sides, both during and after the war, that the commander of K-16 took an unnecessary risk and seriously jeopardized the safety of his boat by sending an attack report shortly after his attack on the Sagiri and Murakumo. Dr. Ph.M. Bosscher wrote in 1986:

"I think I can say that no in itself unjustifiable risks were taken in launching this type of attack in the given circumstances. But unjustifiable risks were taken in the case of the action of K-16 off the coast of Sarawak. Reporting his success so soon after it was achieved, and while being in close proximity of the enemy formation, the commander put his boat - alas I must add, unnecessarily - in grave danger. When the naval staff at Batavia was made aware of this, the response from that side was - likewise unnecessarily - slow. Whether and, if so, to what extent, all this has contributed to the sinking of K-16 can probably never be determined".

In his diary, the chief of staff of the naval task force regularly comments on the reports from submarines (among others) on December 23: regarding the attack of K-14 near Kuching: "However, too excited about transmitting result. Let him wait until he has gone out of harm's way." On 24 December: "Message from K-16 ..., but transmits too often".

Apparently the Dutch were rather apprehensive about the capabilities of the enemy to take bearings on radio transmissions. Nothing has shown that this apprehension, especially at this stage of the war, was justified and that the radio transmissions of K-16 contributed to its sinking, directly or indirectly.

I reject the suggestion that the commander of K-16 put his boat in great danger by reporting his success shortly after his attack on the Sagiri and Murakumo when it was still near the enemy formation and that he, doing so, caused the sinking of his boat to some extent. In my opinion, that is a totally false accusation. There are, of course, risks when a submarine transmits radio signals. The commanders of K-14 and K-15 took the same or even greater risks but they were not accused of jeopardizing the safety of their boats (perhaps because they returned safe from their patrols?).

Bosscher claims that K-14, too, reported her success in a radio transmission shortly after her attacks, but she was, presumably, unlike K-16, already quite far from the action area.

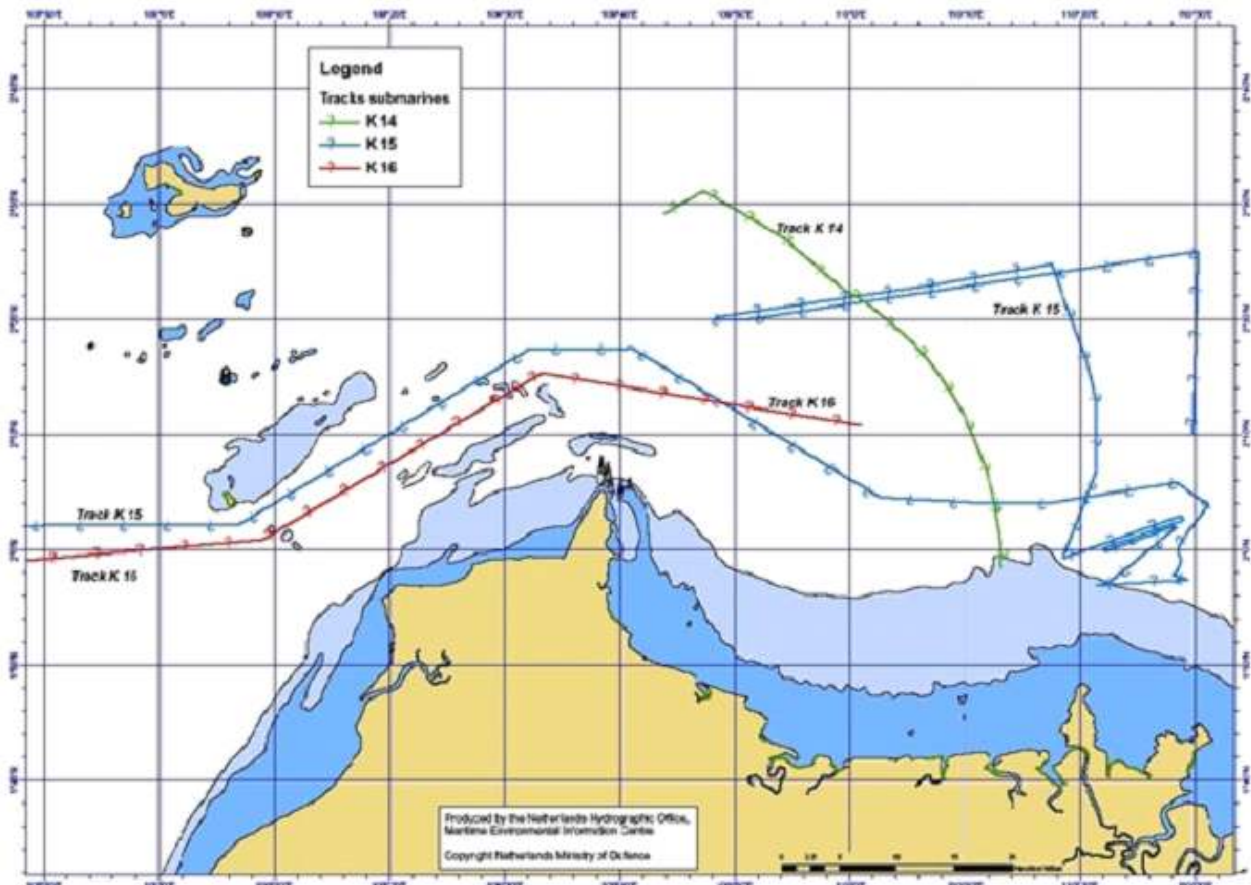
According to the reconstruction of the movements of K-14 she could not have been more than 15 miles from the (center of) the site of action at the time when she broke radio silence. Probably not much further than K-16 was when it broke radio silence after her attack.

Bosscher also claims that K-14's radio transmission had direct operational significance: "Van Well Groeneveld ordered the two boats that belonged to his division - apart from his own boat - to continue the attack." This remark is also suggestive. It creates the false suggestion that K-16 only wanted to boast her success. In fact, the order to attack had already been given (many times) by CZM. The message of K-16, too, had a direct operational significance. For she reported that attacks on transport ships were no longer possible because of location in shallow water and patrolling

destroyers and that she still had about eight torpedoes left. Implicitly she asked CZM for orders.

In his book Bosscher ignores the fact that the radio silence was broken also at other times by several submarines in the vicinity of Japanese units. K-14, in her approach of the Japanese transport fleet (escorted by destroyers) when it was headed for Kuching, sent two enemy reports and a message to DOZ3 asking what their position was. When she sent her first enemy report the enemy fleet was at a distance of 25 miles or less. When she sent her second enemy report the distance was 15 miles (and in both cases probably less). K-16, too, sent an enemy report prior to her action in the evening of December 24, along with the message that she was going to attack after dark. K-16 was, presumably, not far from the transport fleet as she might have wanted to keep an eye on the enemy during the day from a distance (up to 15 miles?). K-15, too, sent a message in the immediate vicinity of the Japanese fleet. Just about the time when K-16 had completed its attack on Sagiri and Murakumo K-15 sent the message that she sees a Japanese destroyer being destroyed by artillery fire and asked which allied forces were near Sarawak. At that moment K-15 was near, if not in (!) the area of action.

"The question whether and to what extent, all this caused the sinking of K-16" can be answered with a resounding no if "all this" means the radio transmissions of K-16. At the time when K-16 sent her attack report the I-66 was almost certainly at a distance of at least 15 miles from K-16. I-66 could not possibly have intercepted K-16 after locating her on the basis of only one



radio-bearing (if there was one at all) or at best based on using cross bearings (without a known course and speed), to get her within his torpedo range of several thousand meters almost nine hours later. As a matter of fact, the I-66 may have received a warning that an enemy submarine was operating in the area, after intercepting the message from K-16. But this was already evident from the "flaming datums" of Sagiri and the four ships that were torpedoed by K-14.

Although I wish to refrain from expressing an opinion on the "command technique" at the DDM or the headquarters of CZM, the question "whether and if so, all this ..." - when it refers to the slow recall of K -16 - , must be answered with yes. If after the telephone call from the chief of staff of the naval task force to DDM K-16 had been ordered back immediately it would probably not

have been near I-66 and not have been torpedoed by it.

The conclusion must be that the encounter of I-66 with K-16 was totally coincidental and that I-66 was (twice) lucky to detect K-16 first and to manage to sink it with only one torpedo.

"Recently there has been contact with Mr. Bosscher. Knowing what he does now Bosscher agrees with the analysis of van Rooijen and also believes that the commander of K-XVI is not to blame".

R. van Rooijen