

The Caiman Invades Atami, Japan

History tells us that the only Americans to land on Japanese soil during WW H were American submariners. They were crewmen of the submarine USS Barb, SS-220, who went ashore in northern Hokkaido on 23 July 1945 to blow up a train. (For details of that exploit read Chapter 27, Hear That Train Blow, of the book, *Thunder Below!*, by Admiral Eugene B. Fluckey)

It was some years after WWII, during the war on the nearby Korean peninsula, that the people of Japan's famous hot-springs resort city of Atami discovered one morning that they were being invaded by creatures from the deep.

Japan was still recovering from the devastation of WWII. The nearby war in Korea was stimulating the Japanese economy as the United Nations used Japan as a staging area, source for purchase of war materials and the maintenance of war equipment. Japan itself was at peace with world. (As the Korean Ambassador to Vietnam, General "Tiger" Lee, told me and my boss, Bill Movers, one evening in Saigon in 1967, as Japan had gotten rich off the Korean War, it was Korea's intent to get rich off the Vietnam War.)

It was a peaceful morning in the city of Atami in early 1952. Families were up and about. Fathers were on their way to work. Mothers were just sending their children off to school. It was just another quiet day in the lovely resort city, even at that time. An invasion of any sort from any source was the farthest thing from the citizens' minds.

What a startling surprise when someone looked out on beautiful Atami Bay, the water smooth as glass, and saw creatures arising from the Bay and moving slowly toward the beaches of Atami. The word quickly spread that the city was being invaded by strange creatures from the deep. Fathers on the way to work, children on the way to school, mothers relaxing after having gotten all off to work or school, rushed to where they had a good view of the city's shore line. Police were alerted.

Upon looking closer people could see that the creatures were human, with something in their mouth apparently connected to an apparatus on their chest. The humans were swimming toward shore. Who were they? Where did they come from? Were they armed? What was their intent? These and other questions raced through their minds. And then just

before the swimmers reached shore, a huge black monster arose from the Bay.

The swimmers upon reaching shore were first greeted by police with spectators crowding around. After the swimmers removed the mouth pieces of the Momsen Lungs, they identified themselves as American submariners off the black monster in the bay, the USS Caiman.

After identifying themselves, the Caimanites were treated as guests of the city. They were escorted to and permitted entry into a large onsen, a swimming pool size hot bath. (Atami has long been famous for its onsens. Atami means, hot sea.) Other Caimanites came ashore the regular way and were treated to a fine liberty. The city provided boats to and from the Caiman so sailors did not have to swim for liberty.

How did the Caiman's invasion of Atami come about? It was an outgrowth of an ASW (anti-submarine warfare) exercise. As one of the junior enlisted members of the Caiman crew, the Caiman's captain did not tell me his reason for deciding to practice escapes from a simulated sunken submarine during this particular ASW exercise.

I speculate here as to the captain's reasoning: Atami was just on the edge of ASW designated operating area, the bay was about 110 feet deep with a hard sandy bottom, perfect for laying on the bottom practicing escapes with Momsen Lungs. Submariners should practice escapes but had few opportunities. The carrier with its DD and DE escorts were having no luck in finding the Caiman so they wouldn't miss us anyway, so why not take advantage of this opportunity. He did! The Caiman slipped into Atami Bay during the darkness of night, submerged and the exercise described above commenced the next morning. The crew of the Caiman and the people of Atami benefited from the captain's imagination and initiative.

After a day or so in Atami Bay, the Caiman rejoined the ASW Carrier taskforce which was still searching for the Caiman. As far as I know the task force never found the Caiman. On the last day of the ASW exercise in Tokyo Bay, the Caiman pulled the final coup de grace. Submerged and undetected, the Caiman maneuvered so close to the carrier that through the periscope it was said only a part of the carrier's gray hull could be seen. A green flare signifying a torpedo was fired from the Caiman's After Torpedo Room signal ejector. The Caiman was

so close, still undetected, that the flare actually landed on the carrier's flight deck. Finally, they found the Caiman.

One could conclude from this story that the then US anti-submarine warfare capability was lacking in the extreme. I prefer, on the other hand, to conclude that the Caiman's crew was just super skillful.

The description of the initial reaction and attitude of the citizens of Atami was gained in large measure from their comments when I went ashore that evening after the escapees. As I recall I drank a couple of Asahi beers on the house. Also several years later, in 1955 or 56, as a student in a Japanese university on the GI Bill and a monetary scholarship from the Japanese Ministry of Education, I visited Atami. The manager (or owner) of the hotel where I stayed recalled the Caiman invasion. He described it as an exciting event in those otherwise dull times of extremely slow tourist business.

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