

# Bravery, sacrifice under the sea

Action-filled narrative honors heroes of Long Point submarine disaster

By Rob Phelps  
Banner Correspondent

It stirred up one of the most contentious national security scandals of the 20th century. Congress subpoenaed top-level naval officers to hearings. President Calvin Coolidge called for an independent investigation. Rumors and accusations flew from well-respected news sources such as the New York Times and Scientific American, and people from Boston to San Francisco were angry, confused and deeply saddened by what they read and heard on their radios.

The Provincetown Western Union office estimated that it sent some 520,000 words of news coverage in the first few days after the U.S. Navy destroyer Paulding rammed its sister ship, the S-4 submarine, off Long Point on the afternoon of Dec. 17, 1927.

The collision sent the sub to the sea floor 102 feet below with 40 men aboard. Rescuers who scrambled to the scene determined that only six men, in the torpedo room, survived. They figured the men had roughly 72 hours left before their air supply ran out. High seas and gale force winds made the mission virtually impossible. But the rescue team never stopped trying to save the trapped men.

Meanwhile, hundreds of reporters set up camp in Provincetown's Town Hall and sent out their stories. But for days the public remained in the dark as to why the Navy, deploying all its possible resources, was failing to save the sunken six, let alone how the accident could have happened in the first place.

It was a public relations nightmare.

As nautical historian Joseph A. Williams recounts in his gripping new nonfiction book "Seventeen Fathoms Deep: The Saga of the Submarine S-4 Disaster," the officers — all the way up to the Secretary of the Navy — were simply too focused on their mission to share accounts with the press about their teams' bravery and around-the-clock brainstorming.

No doubt there were plenty of lessons to be learned and, as

## Just the facts

**What:** Joseph A. Williams, author, "Seventeen Fathoms Deep"

**Where:** Provincetown Public Library, 336 Commercial St.; St. Mary's of the Harbor, 517 Commercial St.

**When:** 6 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 12 (library); 11 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 14 (St. Mary's S-4 memorial service)

Williams describes in his book, the S-4 disaster brought about a myriad of innovations in maritime safety.

Although fresh national security scandals from Iraq to Benghazi have long since taken the place of the S-4, the story is eerily familiar. Williams' new book goes a long way to remind those of us without security clearances — no matter how diligent the press — of the bravery and honor of those serving in our armed forces even under the most dubious clouds of conflict.

Williams is coming to Provincetown to help honor the men who perished and those who tried to save them by giving two presentations this Veterans Day week — first, at 6 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 12, at the Provincetown Public Library and then as part of the annual S-4 memorial service at St. Mary's of the Harbor Episcopal Church, which begins at 11 a.m. Saturday, Nov. 14.

The fate of the S-4 is grim. But Williams, focusing primarily on the rescuers, doles out the story one challenge at a time in the style of an episodic man-against-sea saga. While it's no surprise that the six who survived the crash run out of time before they're rescued, the reader is plunged into a series of inspiring and heartbreaking adventures.

Williams also paints a vibrant picture of life in Provincetown at that time, from fishermen ferrying reporters out to the rescue site to a vigil on Sklaroff's Wharf (now Fisherman's Wharf). The author credits the town's public library for its wealth of digitized issues of the Provincetown Advocate and historical society for sharing scrapbooks that

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locals kept on the S-4. He also quotes freely from the personal accounts of Mary Heaton Vorse in "Time and the Town."

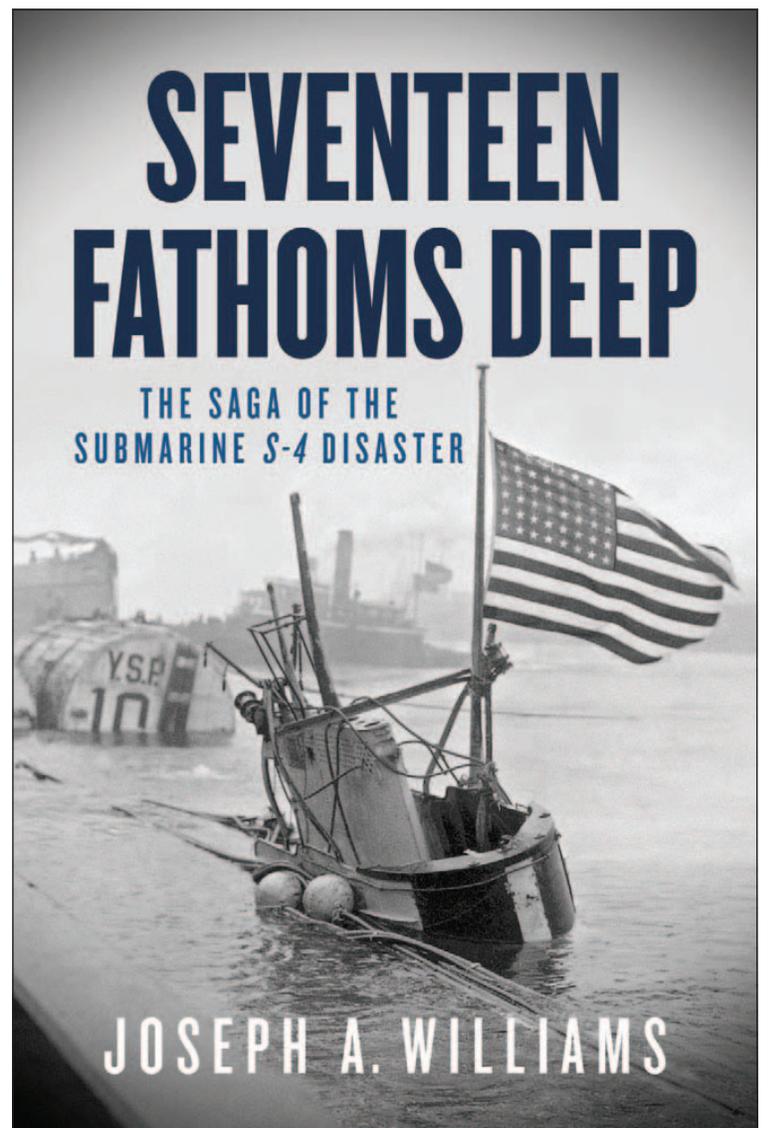
"Seventeen Fathoms Deep" is written in painstaking detail. Williams says he stumbled upon the story of the S-4 in three tightly packed cartons of documents in the basement of the Maritime College of the State University of New York, where he worked as a librarian prior to his current job at Greenwich Public Library. He was researching a book for the maritime college on its own history. Fascinated by the S-4 story, he had to put it on hold until he finished his first project.

For the college history, he says, "I found I was writing in a highly academic style because that was my background and it was rather dry." But when at last he dug into the S-4, he knew he needed to learn about storytelling. So he turned to his wife, Michelle, who had a degree in creative writing. He credits her for teaching him how to "put tension in a narrative. At some point during the process," he says, "something clicked and I started rolling with it."

As for the author's knowledge of the sea, he credits his time at the maritime college. "It was pure osmosis," he says. "That and from reading. The best stories come from the sea. Tales of survival, braving the elements — always compelling narratives."



Joseph A. Williams, author of a new book on the sinking of the S-4 submarine off the coast of Long Point.



"Seventeen Fathoms Deep: The Saga of the Submarine S-4," by Joseph A. Williams. PHOTO COURTESY / CHICAGO REVIEW PRESS

## Sea turtle 'open house' set for November 28

WELLFLEET — Wildlife experts at Mass. Audubon's Wellfleet Bay Wildlife Sanctuary are girding for a "1,000-plus" sea turtle stranding season, judging by the high number of sea turtles spotted over the summer and into the early fall.

Several turtles have already trickled in, including a four-pound Kemp's ridley found along Barnstable Harbor on Oct. 20 and another Kemp's ridley found on an Eastham bay beach the following week.

To prepare for the onslaught,

the sanctuary has doubled the size of its beach patrol and conducted extra trainings for volunteers. To get the public involved, it is offering a Sea Turtle Open House on Nov. 28. Turtle talks, a behind-the-scenes tour of the sanctuary's

wet lab, will be offered from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. In addition, leatherback turtle researcher and tracker Kara Dodge will share images and stories from her work, and sanctuary director Bob Prescott will discuss last year's massive turtle stranding

and some possible causes. Families can also walk a beach with staff to look for stranded turtles and learn what to do should they find one.

For more information, call the sanctuary at (508) 349-2615.