

At 9:13 a.m., the USS Skylark, a U.S. Navy submarine rescue ship, received a signal indicating that the Thresher was experiencing "minor difficulties." Shortly afterward, the Skylark received a series of garbled, undecipherable message fragments from the Thresher. At 9:18 a.m., the Skylark's sonar picked up the sounds of the submarine breaking apart.



Tragedy on the morning of April 10, 1963

The submarine USS Thresher sank 220 miles east of Boston, as it conducted deep-diving exercises off the coast of Cape Cod. Aboard were 16 officers, 96 enlisted men and 21 civilians. All died in this tragedy.



USS Thresher Disaster

The probable cause of the disaster was a leak in the engine room's sea water piping system. The pipes in this system were joined by silver brazing. While the Thresher was operating at test depth, a leak had developed at a silver-brazed joint in the engine room seawater system. The water from the leak may have short-circuited electrical equipment, causing a reactor shutdown and leaving the submarine without primary and secondary propulsion systems. The submarine was unable to blow its main ballast tanks. Because of the boat's weight and depth, the power available from the emergency propulsion motor was insufficient to propel the submarine to the surface.

Accounts of the Thresher's last moments describe the crew struggling to plug the rupture and restart the reactor. As the interior filled with mist from the jet of water, the submarine was unable to blow its main ballast tanks. Thresher rose slowly and then began its fatal descent. The hull twisted and rippled like rubber, the ship groaned and creaked, then literally blew apart. Debris was scattered across the ocean floor and several large chunks of the hull drifted down intact.



Thresher (SSN-593) entering the water for the first time

Of course, no one will ever know for sure what caused the loss of the Thresher, but the Navy's version of what happened after months of studies concluded that a failure in a segment of the vessel's internal piping system was responsible.