

H-Gram 039: World War II Focus—Significant Events in November and December 1944

26 December 2019

This H-gram covers:

- The significant U.S. submarine successes in November and December 1944, including the sinking of the battleship *Kongo* by *Sealion* (SS-315), the sinking of the aircraft carrier *Shinano* (the world's largest up to that time) by *Archerfish* (SS-311), the sinking of the new carrier *Unryu* by *Redfish* (SS-395), the sinking of the escort carrier *Shinyo* by *Spadefish* (SS-411), and the multiple lucky escapes of carrier *Junyo*
- Typhoon Cobra in December 1944, the worst natural disaster in U.S. Navy history, which caused the loss of three destroyers and almost their entire crews, a total of 790 men of the Third Fleet
- The first attacks by Japanese *Kaiten* suicide torpedoes, which resulted in the loss of the oiler *Mississinewa* (AO-59) at Ulithi (Caroline Islands) in November 1944
- The spontaneous explosion of the ammunition ship *Mount Hood*, which killed over 380 U.S. Sailors in November 1944
- "The Worst Christmas Story Ever": The Sinking of *SS Leopoldville* and the loss of 763 U.S. Soldiers on 24 December 1944



USS Santa Fe (CL-60) shown rolling about 35 degrees to starboard as she rides out a typhoon encountered in the South China Sea, probably Typhoon Cobra, 14–19 December 1944. Note that her forward 6-inch/47-caliber gun turret is trained to one side to avoid shipping water through its gun ports (80-G-700024).

U.S. Submarine Successes, November/December 1944

On 3 November 1944, the attack by *Pintado* (SS-387) on the aircraft carrier *Junyo* was thwarted when the destroyer *Akikaze* sacrificed herself by intercepting the torpedo tracks and absorbing the hits. *Akikaze* went down with all hands, but *Junyo* escaped. *Akikaze* had previously been responsible for one of the worst atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Navy: the execution of 60 civilians, including priests and nuns.

Junyo escaped two more attacks by U.S. submarines before finally being hit by torpedoes from a U.S. wolfpack on 9 December 1944, which she still managed to survive, although the damage put her out of action for the rest of the war.

On 17 November 1944, Spadefish sank the escort carrier Shinyo with heavy loss of life, while other submarines ravaged the Philippines-bound convoy that Shinyo had been assigned to protect. Two troop transports were sunk with the loss of over 5,500 Japanese Army personnel.

On 21 November 1944, Sealion intercepted a Japanese force including the battleships Yamato, Nagato and Kongo as they were returning to Japan after the Battle of Leyte Gulf. In a daring night surface attack in gale conditions, Sealion sank Kongo and the destroyer Urakaze. Kongo was the only Japanese battleship to be sunk by a submarine and the last battleship in any navy to be sunk by submarine.

On 29 November 1944, Archerfish intercepted and sank the newly constructed aircraft carrier Shinano (converted from a Yamato-class battleship hull) within hours of her leaving the building yards at Yokosuka. Shinano was the largest warship ever sunk by a submarine.

On 19 December 1944, Redfish sank the new carrier Unryu, which was on a mission to deliver Ohka rocket-propelled suicide planes to the Philippines to oppose U.S. landings on Luzon. Redfish then survived an incredible depth-charge beating that put her out of action for the rest of the war.

For more detail on U.S. submarine successes in November and December 1944, please see attachment H-039-1.

Typhoon Cobra: Worst Natural Disaster in U.S. Navy History, 18 December 1944

On 18 December 1944, elements of the U.S. Third Fleet under Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., were caught with very little warning in a typhoon off the eastern Philippines at a critical time when many ships were low on fuel due to the high combat operating tempo. Three destroyers were sunk in the typhoon, Spence (DD-512), Monaghan (DD-354), and Hull (DD-350), with almost their entire crews. Many other ships were badly

battered, including the light carrier Monterey (CVL-26), which suffered a serious fire (future President Gerald R. Ford was the officer-of-the-deck).

About 790 crewmen were killed across the entire force, including 775 aboard the three sunken destroyers, making this incident the worst loss of life aboard U.S. Navy ships in a single natural disaster. (The second worst was when the frigate Insurgent, with a crew of 340, and the brig Pickering, with a crew of 105, were both lost with all hands after leaving the U.S. East Coast in August 1800. Both vessels were probably sunk in a Caribbean storm the following month, although the whereabouts of wrecks remain unknown.) The subsequent court of inquiry found Admiral Halsey responsible, but not negligent, for the loss and damage to the fleet. (In the years afterward, Halsey would be heavily criticized.)

For more detail on Typhoon Cobra, please see attachment H-039-2. For a first-person account by the late Rear Admiral M. Dick Van Orden, which he sent to me earlier this year, please see attachment H-039-3.

First Japanese Kaiten Suicide Submarine Attack and loss of USS Mississinewa, 20 November 1944

On 20 November 1944, a Japanese Kaiten manned suicide torpedo slipped into the major U.S. Navy forward operating base at Ulithi atoll, sinking the heavily laden oiler Mississinewa. This was the first of ten major Japanese Kaiten operations in which modified conventional submarines piggybacked the weapons to their destination, and it was one of the few Kaiten successes. Before the end of the war, Japan would lose more than 100 Kaiten (and their pilots) and eight mother submarines (with over 800 crewmen), in exchange for sinking Mississinewa, the destroyer escort Underhill (DD-682) at the very end of the war, and an LCI (landing craft, infantry).

For more detail on the Japanese Kaiten program please see attachment H-039-4.

Explosion of Ammunition Ship USS Mount Hood, 10 November 1944

On 10 November 1944 at Seeadler Harbor, Admiralty Islands, the new ammunition ship Mount Hood (AE-11)

was obliterated in a massive explosion of her own cargo, which killed every one of the more than 300 crewmen on the ship (no remains of the crew were found) and killing over 80 men on the repair ship Mindanao (ARG-3), anchored 350 yards away. A major staging area for operations in Leyte and for impending operations against Luzon, numerous other small craft in Seeadler Harbor were sunk and other ships damaged, including escort carriers, a destroyer, and destroyer escorts. Although the court of inquiry was unable conclusively to determine the cause of the blast (other than that it was not caused by enemy action), numerous serious safety violations aboard the ship were identified. Information about these violations was not widely disseminated until after another ammunition ship blew up off Guadalcanal in January 1945.

For more detail on the Mount Hood disaster, please see attachment H-039-5.

“The Worst Christmas Story Ever”: The Sinking of SS Leopoldville on 24 December 1944

The surprise German counteroffensive that commenced 16 December 1944 (which became known as the Battle of the Bulge, costing over 19,000 U.S. lives, making it the bloodiest battle of the entire war for the United States) provoked a mad scramble to send reinforcements forward to counter the German advance. Elements of the U.S. 66th Infantry Division (2,235 men) were hastily loaded aboard the Belgian troopship SS Leopoldville in Southampton, England, on 24 December 1944. They were destined for Cherbourg, France, to replace the 94th Infantry Division, which had been sent forward to the battle. The voyage was a debacle from the beginning as loading had been haphazard and resulted in a complete breakdown of unit integrity and chain of command. The soldiers were given virtually no instruction for abandoning ship or in the proper use of survival gear. (SS Leopoldville had successfully transported over 120,000 Allied soldiers on previous trips. Since the D-Day landings in June, hundreds of thousands of Allied troops had crossed the English Channel without being attacked.)

When SS Leopoldville was within 5.5 miles of her destination, she was hit by one torpedo from the German snorkel-equipped submarine U-486, conducting her first war patrol. SS Leopoldville actually took over two hours to sink, but rescue was delayed by

bungled communication, language misunderstandings, badly executed abandon-ship procedures, and the early abandonment by the ship's crew (although the captain went down with the ship). It should be noted that the U.S. troops remained calm and disciplined throughout, possibly not realizing the extreme danger they were in until it was too late. Another unfortunate key factor was that many potential responding headquarters and rescue forces were undermanned and not ready due to Christmas Eve celebrations ashore.

One of the British escort ships, HMS Brilliant, came alongside and rescued about 500 soldiers, while the other escorts pursued the submarine. The U.S. tug ATR-3 reached SS Leopoldville from Cherbourg in time to rescue 69 soldiers, and PC-564 and PT-461 also contributed to the rescue of a further 1,400 U.S. soldiers. In the end 763 U.S. soldiers perished, some killed by the improper use of lifejackets (which broke their necks when the men jumped in the water), and about 300 as a result of the torpedo hit, but most of the rest died of hypothermia in the water as they awaited rescue. These deaths are not counted in the Battle of the Bulge totals, and the SS Leopold disaster was long overshadowed by other Battle of the Bulge events, such as the massacre of U.S. prisoners of war at Malmedy, Belgium. At any rate, this holiday season, it would be appropriate to remember the brave U.S. Army soldiers who didn't have a chance in the frigid winter waters of the English Channel.



World War II battle flag of USS Spadefish (SS-411) (NH 66212-KN).

H-039-1: U.S. Submarine Successes, November/December 1944

H-Gram 035, Attachment 1

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

September 2019

Attack on carrier Junyo by USS Pintado (SS-387), 3 November 1944

On 3 November 1944, Commander Submarines Pacific sent an Ultra intelligence

message to Lieutenant Commander Bernard A. Clarey, skipper of USS *Pintado* (SS-387), informing him that a Japanese carrier, three destroyers, and a battleship or cruiser were transiting southbound through the Formosa Strait. Clarey directed the other submarines in the wolfpack, *Jallao* (SS-368), which had sunk light cruiser *Tama* off Cape Engano during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, and *Atule* (SS-403) along with a second wolfpack comprising *Haddock* (SS-23), *Halibut* (SS-232), and *Tuna* (SS-203), under Lieutenant Commander John P. Roach, to form a picket line to intercept the Japanese ships.

The target of the six submarines was the aircraft carrier *Junyo*, accompanied by the light cruiser *Kiso* and three destroyers. *Junyo*, a battle-scarred veteran of the Aleutian, Santa Cruz, and Solomon Islands and the Philippine Sea was devoid of her air group, most of which had been shot down during the "Marianas Turkey Shoot" in June 1944. The half-trained replacement pilots were mostly shot down during Admiral Halsey's raids on the Ryukyus and Formosa in mid-October 1944, just prior to the Battle of Leyte Gulf. Instead, *Junyo* was transporting 18-inch shells for the super-battleship *Yamato* and large-caliber shells for the other Japanese battleships in Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's force, which had retired to Brunei following the Battle off Samar. *Junyo* also carried *Shinyo* suicide boats, other kinds of ammunition, and 800 army paratroopers, destined for Manila to oppose anticipated U.S. landings on Luzon.

At 2020 on 3 November, *Pintado* detected *Junyo*, with one destroyer ahead, one destroyer on each flank and *Kiso* in the rear. Lieutenant Commander Clarey maneuvered to set up for a shot at *Junyo*'s port side, and fired all six bow tubes. The escorting destroyer *Akikaze*, commanded by Lieutenant Commander Nitaro Yamazaki, sighted the torpedoes and deliberately put herself in the path to save *Junyo*. At 2250, *Akikaze* was hit, blew up, and sank eight minutes later with the loss of all 205 hands. *Junyo* escaped in the smoke of the sinking *Akikaze* while the other two destroyers counter-attacked and depth-charged *Pintado*, unsuccessfully. The Japanese force then escaped to the west without being hit and slipped past all six U.S. submarines.

Lieutenant Commander Clarey would be awarded his third Navy Cross for this patrol, as would two others, and a Presidential Unit Citation. (In addition to the first Navy Cross, Clarey had also received a Silver Star as executive officer of submarine *Amberjack* [SS-219]). Clarey would later receive a Bronze Star with Combat V as the executive officer of the heavy cruiser *Helena* (CA-5) during the Korean War and would retire in 1973 as the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet.

Akikaze had previously participated in sinking the U.S. submarine *Triton* (SS-201) on 14 March 1943. Although the Japanese held *Akikaze*'s sacrifice in saving the *Junyo* in the highest regard and built shrines in *Akikaze*'s honor, she had also been responsible for one of the most notorious atrocities committed by the Imperial Japanese Navy during the war, under a previous commander.

On 18 March 1943, the *Akikaze*, under the command of Lieutenant Commander Tsurukichi Sabe, removed about sixty civilians from the islands of Kairuri and Manus in the Bismarck Sea. The civilians included 44 Roman Catholic missionaries (mostly German and several U.S. nationals), including 21 nuns, several Chinese, and a few children. The Japanese supposedly suspected some of the group of spying for the Allies. After being interrogated, all of the civilians were taken one-at-a-time to the stern, suspended by the hands by a hook, executed by machine gun and rifle fire, and disposed of overboard. Three infant children were thrown overboard alive. On 2 August 1943, Lieutenant Commander Sabe was killed in an air attack that caused major damage to the bridge of *Akikaze* and resulted 22 other casualties. With Lieutenant Commander Sabe's death and the

later loss of the entire crew, no one was ever held to account for the atrocity.

After arriving in Manila on 9 November 1944 and discharging her cargo, *Junyo* departed on 11 November en route to Kure, Japan, in company with the heavy cruiser *Tone*, which had been moderately damaged by air attacks at the end of the Battle off Samar. On 12 June, the *Junyo* group was sighted by submarine *Gunnel* (SS-253) at a range of 31,000 yards, which was too far away to make an intercept and attack. *Gunnel* correctly identified the *Tone* but misidentified *Junyo* as a *Yamato*-class battleship. On 13 November 1944, the submarine *Jallao* (SS-376), commanded by Lieutenant Commander Joseph B. Icenhower, intercepted the *Junyo* group. *Jallao* had been part of the wolfpack that missed *Junyo* on 3 November 1944 during *Junyo*'s southbound transit to Manila. Icenhower's attempt to set up an attack was disrupted when *Junyo* made a sudden turn toward *Jallao*, passing within 200 yards and forcing *Jallao* to maneuver to avoid being rammed. *Jallao* fired her stern tubes at *Junyo* at a range of 1,400 yards but missed. Lieutenant Commander Icenhower had been awarded a Navy Cross for his previous war patrol on *Jallao*, when she sank the Japanese light cruiser *Tama* during the Battle of Leyte Gulf, but not for this patrol.

After a brief stop at Formosa, *Junyo* was detected by submarine *Barb* (SS-220), commanded by Lieutenant Commander Eugene Fluckey, at 2249 on 15 November. Fluckey was one of the most successful submarine skippers of the war. In this case, however, he misidentified *Junyo* as a *Shokaku*-class carrier (both of which were already sunk) *Katsuragi* (which was a new *Unryu*-class carrier, which never

deployed.) *Barb* fired five bow torpedoes and claimed one hit on the stern; however *Junyo* received no damage and escaped yet again despite pursuit by *Barb*, *Queenfish* (SS-392), *Peto* (SS-265) and *Sunfish* (SS-281). (There will be more on the legendary Eugene Fluckey and the incredible exploits of BARB in a future H-gram.)

Escort Carrier Shinyo Sunk by USS Spadefish (SS-411), 17 November 1944

On 1 November 1943, the Japanese completed conversion of the German passenger liner *Scharnhorst* to a 17,000-ton escort carrier, *Shinyo*. *Scharnhorst* had been trapped in Japan upon the outbreak of the war. Like the other four Japanese escort carriers, *Shinyo* was generally used for aircraft ferry missions, but was capable of operating about 27 aircraft. On 9 November 1944, *Shinyo*, commanded by Captain Shizue Ishii, was assigned to provide air cover for convoy HI-81, consisting of nine transports and several destroyers bound from Japan to the Philippines and Singapore with several thousand troops as well as aircraft. *Shinyo* had 14 Kate torpedo-bombers embarked to provide air cover, primarily against submarine attack. The convoy departed Imari, Japan, on 14 November 1944, under the command of Rear Admiral Tsutomu Sato.

With locating information provided by Ultra intelligence, attacks on the convoy by U.S. submarines commenced on 15 November. At 1156, submarine *Queenfish* (SS-393) hit the transport *Akitsu Maru* (actually one of two Japanese army escort carriers, being used as an aircraft ferry and troop transport) with two torpedoes, causing the ship to explode and

sink with the loss of over 2,000 personnel on board. *Shinyo's* aircraft unsuccessfully attempted to locate the attacking submarine. On 16 November convoy HI-81 and convoy MI-27 transited in close proximity, resulting in a confused intelligence picture.

Around 1800 on 17 November, just after *Shinyo* had recovered her last aircraft of the day, submarine *Picuda* (SS-382) torpedoed the troop transport *Mayasan Maru* directly ahead of *Shinyo*. *Mayasan Maru* capsized and sank in less than two minutes, taking over 3,500 men to the bottom (1,300 were rescued). At 2303, *Shinyo* was struck by as many as four torpedoes from a spread of six fired by submarine *Spadefish* (SS-411), which conducted a night surface attack on the convoy. The first torpedo hit *Shinyo* on the stern, resulting in a massive explosion of aviation gasoline tanks and a fire. A second torpedo hit amidships, knocking out the turbo-generators and all electrical power. Yet another torpedo hit forward, which also started a major aviation gasoline fire. *Shinyo* quickly went dead in the water, with uncontrolled conflagrations forward and aft and the surviving crew trapped in the middle.

Destroyer *Kashi* counter-attacked and disrupted *Spadefish* as she fired a salvo of torpedoes from her four stern tubes at transport *Shinsu Maru*, which missed. *Spadefish* lost track of the convoy after being forced to evade. Ten minutes after the torpedo hit, Captain Ishii gave the order to abandon ship as the list increased and planes began to slide over the side. At 2340, *Shinyo* went down by the stern, which stuck in the muddy bottom, leaving the flaming bow above water. Having relocated the convoy, *Spadefish* conducted a second unsuccessful attack and was pursued again by *Kashi*, which dropped 17 depth charges. As this was going

on, other submarines were attacking and sinking transport ships in convoy MI-27. Due to the continuing threat of submarine attack, *Shinyo* was left behind by the HI-81 convoy and it was several hours before any attempt at rescue was made. In the end, only 61 crewmen were rescued. Captain Ishii and about 1,165 crewmen were lost.

Spadefish's skipper, Commander Gordon W. Underwood, was awarded his second of three Navy Crosses for this patrol and became one of the most successful submarine skippers of the war, sinking 72,000 tons of shipping in only three war patrols in command. *Spadefish* was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation.

Battleship Kongo Sunk by USS Sealion (SS-315), 21 November 1944

Following the Battle off Samar on 25 October 1944, Vice Admiral Takeo Kurita's surviving force of battleships and cruisers arrived at Brunei, Borneo, on 28 October 1944. On 6 November 1944, the carrier *Junyo* arrived at Brunei with a resupply of ammunition for Kurita's Force. During the Battle off Samar, the battleship *Kongo* expended 310 14-inch rounds, 347 6-inch rounds and many thousands of anti-aircraft rounds. *Kongo* had hit both the escort carrier *Gambier Bay* (CVE-73) and the destroyer escort *Samuel B. Roberts* (DE-413) with multiple main-battery shells and was significantly responsible for the loss of both ships. *Kongo* was largely unscathed, although she had been strafed multiple times by Wildcat fighters and late in the day on 25 October suffered several damaging near-misses from an attack by 20 SB2C Helldiver dive-bombers on a long-range strike from Rear Admiral John McCain's

Task Group 38.1, reacting to Vice Admiral Thomas Kinkaid's calls for help.

On 16 November 1944, following a bombing attack by 40 U.S. Army Air Force B-24 bombers and 14 P-38 long-range fighters, which inflicted no damage, most of the Japanese force at Brunei departed for Japanese home waters. The force included the battleships *Yamato*, *Nagato* and *Kongo*, light cruiser *Yahagi*, and four destroyers and two destroyer escorts, still under the command of Vice Admiral Kurita. By the evening of 20 November, the force (minus the two destroyer escorts, which detached due to a casualty) commenced a northbound transit of the Formosa Strait. The other surviving battleship, *Haruna*, did not need any repairs and proceeded to Singapore, where she was badly damaged in a grounding. She would have to return to Japan on her own.

At 0020 on 21 November 1944, the submarine *Sealion* (SS-315), commanded by Lieutenant Commander Eli Reich, made radar contact on the Japanese force at 44,000 yards, with the signal picked up by Japanese radar-detection equipment. After sending a contact report, Reich commenced a bold night surface approach to overtake the Japanese force, and as the range closed to 35,000 yards identified the targets as two battleships and two heavy cruisers. Although *Yamato* at one point gained radar contact on the submarine, worsening sea state conditions apparently prevented accurate tracking. The Japanese were not zigzagging, attempting to speed through the danger area, assuming that the sea state would also preclude a submarine attack. At 0146, *Sealion* detected three escorts and by 0245 was in position ahead of the Japanese to attack on the surface from the port bow.

At 0256, Lieutenant Commander Reich fired all six bow tubes (Mark 18-1 electric torpedoes set at 8 feet depth) at the second ship in column, the *Kongo*, and then turned and at 0300 fired three of his four stern tubes at *Nagato*. *Nagato* and *Yamato* took immediate evasive action and the torpedoes of *Sealion*'s second salvo passed ahead of *Nagato* and hit the destroyer *Urakaze*, which was screening to starboard of the formation. *Sealion* reported three hits (actually two) on *Kongo* at 0301 and then a large explosion on the second target, which was actually the destroyer *Urakaze* on the opposite side of the formation, which was hit by *Sealion*'s last torpedo. *Urakaze* exploded and sank in two minutes with the loss of all 293 hands (her depth charges detonated, killing anyone in the water who might have survived the first explosion.) This hit on the destroyer division flagship caused the other Japanese escorts to think the attack had come from starboard and they charged off in the wrong direction.

Despite two torpedo hits, *Kongo* continued to make 16 knots, and initially it seemed the damage was manageable. Lieutenant Commander Reich thought his attack had been unsuccessful, and in the face of a mounting force five or six gale, reloaded his bow tubes and commenced a pursuit at maximum overload speed (17 knots), but took in water down her main induction valve and couldn't gain on *Kongo*. The Japanese knew *Sealion* was in pursuit.

The Japanese force commenced zigzagging and at 0450 split into two groups, with *Yamato*, *Nagato*, and *Yahagi* sprinting ahead, while *Kongo* and two destroyers fell behind at 11 knots, as the battering seas increased the

damage to *Kongo* and increased her list to twelve degrees. *Kongo*, aware that *Sealion* was pursuing the damaged battleship rather than the main body, then changed course in an attempt to reach Keelung, Formosa. Despite valiant damage control efforts, including moving the majority of the crew to the high side, the list continued until it reached 45 degrees, with cascading failures (including the suicide of the Damage Control Officer) until *Kongo* went dead in the water at 0520. At 0522, the commanding officer gave the order to abandon ship.

As *Sealion* continued to close for another attack, *Kongo* began to roll on her beam and at 0524, without warning, her forward 14-inch magazine detonated with four large explosions, followed by a massive explosion that blew the ship apart. *Kongo* went down in less than a minute, taking Vice Admiral Yoshio Suzuki (Battleship Division 3), Rear Admiral Toshio Shimazaki (*Kongo*'s recently promoted commanding officer) and 1,250 crewmen to the bottom. The two destroyers rescued 237 survivors. *Kongo* was the only Japanese battleship sunk by a submarine and the last battleship ever sunk by a submarine.

Lieutenant Commander Reich would be awarded his third Navy Cross for the attack on *Kongo*, and *Sealion* would be awarded a Presidential Unit Citation. Reich would ultimately retire in 1973 as a Vice Admiral. He had started the war as executive officer on *Sealion I* (SS-195) when she was hit by a bomb during the Japanese attack on Cavite, Philippines, on 10 December 1941, which resulted in the submarine being scuttled; she was the first U.S. submarine damaged in the war. Reich was evacuated aboard submarine *Stingray* (SS-186) just before Corregidor fell. The torpedoes fired at *Kongo* had the names

of the four crewmen killed at Cavite written on the warheads.

Regrettably, Reich and *Sealion* also unknowingly sank the Japanese "Hell Ship" *Rakuyu Maru* on 12 September 1944, which had 1,318 Allied POWs embarked (600 British, 717 Australian, and 1 American) *Sealion* ultimately rescued 54 of the POWs (although 4 subsequently died on board), and three other submarines rescued another 105 POWs. Japanese trawlers rescued a further 136 POWs after all of them had been left behind in the sea by the Japanese escorts. More than 300 POWs who had managed to make it into lifeboats were subsequently killed by Japanese machine-gun fire. In all, 1,023 POWs were lost from *Rakuyu Maru*.

Carrier Shinano Sunk by USS Archerfish (SS-311), 29 November 1944

Until the commissioning of the USS *Forrestal* (CVA-59) in 1955, *Shinano* was the largest carrier ever built, at 72,000 tons. Laid down at Yokosuka as the third sister of the super-battleships *Yamato* and *Musashi*, construction was halted in December 1941, and then after the loss of four Japanese carriers at the Battle of Midway she was re-designed to be completed as an aircraft carrier. *Shinano* had an armored flight deck and was designed to be capable of embarking an unusual air group of new-type aircraft: 18 Mitsubishi A7M Reppu "Sam" fighters, 18 Aichi B7A Ryusei "Grace" torpedo bombers, six Nakajima C6N Saiun "Myrt" reconnaissance aircraft, plus enough space to store 120 additional aircraft to be used to replace losses on other carriers.

The construction of *Shinano* was unknown to U.S. Intelligence until she was photographed

in the final stages of fitting out on 1 November 1944 by a B-29 bomber flying a reconnaissance mission. Concerned she would become a bomber target, the Japanese rushed the initial sea trials and commissioned her on 19 November 1944, with Captain Toshio Abe in command.

On 28 November 1944, *Shinano* departed Yokosuka en route to Kure with much necessary work still to be completed. She was escorted by three destroyers (which happened to be the same escorts for the sunken *Kongo*) and was carrying a cargo of 50 *Okha* rocket-propelled suicide aircraft and their *kamikaze* personnel (the "Thunder Gods") and six *Shinyo* suicide boats. In the meantime, the submarine *Archerfish* (SS-311), commanded by Commander Joseph F. Enright, had arrived off the coast of Japan with a primary mission of providing lifeguard services for B-29 bombers that might ditch. As there were no raids scheduled for 28 November, *Archerfish* was free to come off station and hunt.

At dusk on 28 November, *Archerfish* lookouts spotted what was initially thought to be a large tanker with escorts departing Yokosuka. For over six hours, *Archerfish* tracked the contact and maneuvered to get into position for a submerged attack on what Commander Enright eventually concluded was an aircraft carrier. Commander Enright ruled out a night surface attack as being suicidal given the alertness of the destroyers. In a stroke of luck, *Shinano* turned to give *Archerfish* an almost ideal shot. At a range of 1,400 yards, Commander Enright fired all six bow tubes, with the torpedoes set to run shallow, in order to hole the target just below the waterline to facilitate capsizing. After remaining at periscope depth long enough to see the first

two torpedoes hit, Commander Enright then took *Archerfish* to 400 feet to avoid a depth-charge counterattack.

At 0309 on 29 November 1944, *Shinano* was hit by four torpedoes from *Archerfish* on the starboard side, in a vulnerable spot below the waterline but above the anti-torpedo bulges. Despite severe damage, Captain Abe ordered three outboard port boiler rooms flooded to counter the list, and the huge carrier initially maintained course and speed. Nevertheless, progressive flooding continued through numerous incomplete fittings and hatches. By dawn, *Shinano* had steamed 36 miles from the torpedo strike when her boiler feed water failed and the ship went dead in the water. Two destroyers then attempted to tow *Shinano*, but were unsuccessful as the ship continued to list. At 1018, Captain Abe ordered abandon ship, and the destroyer *Yukikaze* came alongside to remove crewmen. However, at 1057, *Shinano* rolled completely over and sank by the stern. Captain Abe chose to go down with his ship, but 1,435 men were also lost; 1,080 were rescued, including 32 civilian workers, and 3 *Okha* pilots. The destroyer *Hamakaze* fished the emperor's portrait, which, amazingly, had not gone to the bottom.

Initially, *Archerfish* was given credit for sinking a cruiser, as U.S. naval intelligence was not aware of any carriers in that area, but Commander Enright produced a detailed sketch and was given credit for sinking a 28,000-ton carrier. Only after the war were the true details of the *Shinano* known. Commander Enright had previously been relieved (at his request) of command of submarine *Dace* (SS-247) for what was deemed a "timid" attempt to attack the carrier *Shokaku* in November 1943, but later

requested another command. Commander Enright would subsequently receive the Navy Cross and *Archerfish* a Presidential Unit Citation for sinking *Shinano*, the largest warship ever sunk by a submarine.

Carrier Junyo Escapes a Wolfpack Yet Again, 8-9 December 1944

Following a second logistics run to Manila, the carrier *Junyo* departed Manila on 1 December 1944 in company with three destroyers, en route return to Kure, Japan, via Mako, Formosa. At Mako, *Junyo* joined up with battleship *Haruna* (damaged in a grounding at Singapore and en route Japan for repair), embarked 200 survivors of the battleship *Musashi* (sunk in the Battle of the Sibuyan Sea in October 1944) and resumed her transit to Japan. Once again, alerted by Ultra intelligence, a U.S. submarine wolfpack was waiting for her.

Between midnight and 0330 on 9 December 1944, *Sea Devil* (SS-400), *Plaice* (SS-390) and *Redfish* (SS-395) all attacked *Junyo*. In the confusion, it is not clear which sub scored hits. Sometime during the melee, *Junyo* was hit by two, possibly three, torpedoes and the destroyer *Maki* intercepted one torpedo and was hit in the bow. *Junyo* took one torpedo in her starboard engine room, which completely flooded, and another torpedo hit right at the bow; 19 crewmen were killed. There was no fire as the aviation gasoline tanks were empty, and although the list reached 18-degrees, *Junyo's* damage control teams were able to stabilize the ship. *Junyo* was able to make half-speed and maintain a nearly straight course, proceeding into shoal water where the submarines could not follow. On 10 December, both *Junyo* and *Haruna* arrived at

Kure, Japan. *Maki* limped into Nagasaki. Although *Junyo* survived, the significant damage was never fully repaired and she conducted no further operations during the war.

Carrier Unryu Sunk by USS Redfish, 19 December 1944

During World War II, despite the severe lack of resources, the Japanese were able to complete three aircraft carriers that were basically an updated modification of the pre-war *Hiryu*-class (and *Hiryu's* near-sister *Soryu*, both sunk at Midway). The three 22,000-ton carriers were the *Unryu*, *Amagi* and *Katsuragi*. However, none of the three ever fought as aircraft carriers due to the severe losses of Japanese Navy pilots in 1944. *Unryu* was the first to be commissioned, on 6 August 1944, and for a very brief period after the Battle of Leyte Gulf (in which she did not participate) served as Vice Admiral Jisaburo Ozawa's flagship of the First Mobile Fleet (or what was left of it). Due to a lack of planes, pilots and fuel, the three carriers were mostly idle in protected waters of Japan's Seto Inland Sea.

However, with sighting reports on 13 December 1944 of General Douglas MacArthur's invasion fleet preparing for what the Japanese thought would be an assault on the main Philippine island of Luzon (the target was actually Mindoro), *Unryu* was given a special mission to transport 30 *Ohka* rocket-propelled suicide aircraft to Manila, along with suicide boats, torpedoes, ammunition, other equipment and troops. Under the command of Captain Konishi Kaname, *Unryu* departed on 17 December 1944, accompanied by the two new destroyers

Hinoki and *Momi* and the legendary "miracle" destroyer *Shigure* (survivor of numerous battles, twice as the sole survivor: Vella Gulf in August 1943 and Surigao Strait in October 1944).

As *Unryu* transited south in increasingly foul weather, Japanese radar-detectors picked up signs of U.S. radar, probably from submarines. At the time, Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet was caught in the middle of a typhoon, which sank three U.S. destroyers, and had other things to worry about than *Unryu*. At noon on 19 December, *Unryu* shifted course, right into waiting arms of submarine *Redfish* (SS-395), commanded by Commander Louis D. McGregor, which on 8 December 1944 had possibly hit the carrier *Junyo* in the bow with a torpedo and, on 19 December, alerted to the Japanese force by Ultra intelligence, was itching for more. At 1627 on 19 December, *Redfish* sighted *Unryu*. McGregor commenced an attack at maximum submerged speed, aided by the fact that at 1629, *Unryu* zigged right into an ideal firing position for *Redfish*. At a range of just under 1,500 yards, McGregor fired a spread of all six bow torpedoes. *Unryu's* sonar watch had actually detected the presence of *Redfish* several minutes earlier and also soon detected the torpedo launches. *Unryu* immediately commenced evasive action to comb the torpedo tracks, and her guns opened fire on *Redfish's* periscope.

Unryu evaded three torpedoes, but was hit by the fourth torpedo just under the island. (What happened to the other two torpedoes is unknown.) The hit was devastating, rupturing the main steam line, destroying the control room, flooding two boiler rooms, knocking out electrical power, starting a fire on the hangar deck, and causing the ship

quickly to go dead in the water. From McGregor's perspective, it appeared that *Unryu* was not sinking. As he was deciding to commence a second attack, the destroyer *Hinoki* was crossing astern of *Redfish* in an ideal position for a shot by the stern tubes, and McGregor took the opportunity. However, *Hinoki* skillfully avoided the four torpedoes.

As *Redfish* frantically reloaded torpedoes, McGregor courageously remained at periscope depth, which the Japanese escorts failed to realize as they scrambled to detect a deeper submarine. With only one torpedo reloaded in the stern tube and time running out before the Japanese destroyers caught their mistake, at 1650 McGregor fired the one torpedo at *Unryu* at a range of 1,100 yards.

Meanwhile, *Unryu's* damage control effort was making good progress and the carrier was once again underway. *Unryu's* lookouts sighted the torpedo, and her gunners fired on it, but the torpedo struck on the starboard side, just forward of the bridge. The hit caused the cargo of ammunition and the *Ohka* rocket planes to begin to explode, blowing the forward section of the ship apart, flooding all the boiler rooms, killing the men who moments before thought they had saved their ship. Within minutes, *Unryu* was listing 30 degrees, and Captain Kaname gave the order to abandon ship. The gunners refused to leave their posts, continuing to fire on the periscope until the ship went under. At 1656, the list increased to 90 degrees, and with guns still firing, *Unryu* quickly sank. Captain Kaname, the executive officer, the navigation officer, 1,238 crewmen, and an unknown number of passengers went down with the ship. Only 146 men, including 57 passengers were rescued by *Momi* and *Shigure*, while

Hinoki conducted an aggressive counterattack on *Redfish*, nearly catching her while McGregor was taking photos of the sinking *Unryu*.

As *Redfish* went deep, seven depth charges hit dangerously close, inflicting damage throughout the submarine, knocking out the sonar, jamming the rudder and the dive plane, and even activating a loaded torpedo, with one crewman badly wounded. Luckily, the submarine hit bottom at 200 feet, where she rode out another two hours of depth charges. Although *Shigure* stayed behind in hopes of trapping the submarine, *Redfish* was able to make a getaway at maximum speed on the surface after sunset on the 19 November, although her damage put her out of action for the rest of the war. *Shigure* then suffered an engineering casualty and had to return to Japan. *Momi* and *Hinoki* continued via Cam Ranh Bay to the Philippines, where *Momi* was sunk by a U.S. aerial torpedo with all 210 hands on 5 December 1945, and *Hinoki*, badly damaged in the same attack, was then sunk by torpedoes from U.S. destroyers on 7 December, also with all hands, in what was the last surface battle between U.S. and Japanese ships. In effect, *Shigure* was once again a sole survivor.

Commander Louis McGregor would be awarded his second of two Navy Crosses in command of *Redfish* for the sinking of *Unryu*, along with a previous Silver Star in command of *Pike* (SS-173). McGregor would retire as a rear admiral. *Redfish* was awarded a Presidential Unit Citation for her two war patrols. *Redfish* would later have a distinguished movie career as *Nautilus* in Disney's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* in 1954, and as *Nerka* in *Run Silent, Run Deep* in

1958, and several appearances in the TV series *The Silent Service*.

Sources include: "The Loss of Battleship *Kongo*," as told in the chapter titled "November Woes," in *Total Eclipse: The Last Battles of the IJN—Leyte to Kure 1944 to 1945*, by Anthony Tully, 1998; *Star-Crossed Sortie: The Last Voyage of Unryu and DesDiv 52*, by Anthony Tully, 1998; combinedfleet.com for Japanese ships; *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships* (DANFS) for U.S. vessels; and various volumes of Samuel Eliot Morison, *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II*.



USS Langley (CVL-27) rolling sharply during extreme weather conditions in the Pacific, likely Typhoon Cobra, 14–19 December 1944 (80-G-305484).

H-039-2: Typhoon Cobra— The Worst Natural Disaster in U.S. Navy History, 14–19 December 1944

H-Gram 039, Attachment 2

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

December 2019

On 18 December 1944, elements of Admiral William Halsey's Third Fleet plowed into a powerful Pacific Typhoon east of the Philippines. By the time the tropical cyclone passed, three U.S. destroyers had

been sunk, *Spence* (DD-512), *Hull* (DD-350) and *Monaghan* (DD-354) with 775 of their crewmen lost and only 91 rescued. The light carrier *Monterey* (CVL-26) suffered a serious fire during the storm, losing three crewmen and 18 aircraft. Total casualties across the entire force, including the three destroyers, included 790 killed and 146 planes smashed, washed overboard, or jettisoned. Twenty-seven ships were damaged, eleven requiring major repairs, including *Monterey*.

Following the Battle of Leyte Gulf on 24–25 October, the Third Fleet Fast Carrier Task Force (TF-38) was essentially tied down providing air cover to Leyte as the U.S. Army Air Force was unable to get onto airfields on Leyte and provide their own air-cover to troops ashore, primarily due to abysmal weather that rendered all but the airfield at Tacloban

unusable due to mud. (Tacloban had very limited capacity even under ordinary circumstances.) As a result, rather than roaming the Western Pacific, Halsey's carriers were subject to increasing Japanese kamikaze attacks while tied down off the eastern Philippines. (Actually, more U.S. ships would be sunk, put out of action, or damaged, and with more casualties in the two months it took the Army to secure Leyte, than during the Battle of Leyte Gulf itself, which will be the subject of the next H-gram.) Nevertheless, TF-38 stood in there and kept pounding Japanese airfields with airstrikes and fighter sweeps throughout the Philippines but especially on the main island of Luzon, which MacArthur had originally slated for invasion in mid-December. Halsey's carriers were conducting operations in support of this planned invasion (which would be postponed until January 1945, but that was not known yet) when the weather began seriously to deteriorate on 16 December, gravely impacting at-sea refueling operations. Many of Halsey's ships were low on fuel due to the continuous high-tempo combat operations

As of 17 December 1944, TF-38 consisted of seven *Essex*-class fleet carriers, six *Independence*-class light carriers, eight battleships, four heavy cruisers, eleven light cruisers and about 50 destroyers. TF-38 was joining with the Third Fleet refueling group that consisted of twelve fleet oilers, three fleet tugs, five destroyers, ten destroyer escorts, and five escort carriers with replacement planes.

With the technology of the time, there was little capability to track typhoons, and avoiding them depended greatly on the "Seaman's Weather Eye." The problem with this typhoon was that although it was very powerful, it was very compact and not very big, so warning signs were not apparent until the typhoon was very close, much closer than expected. Initially, as the weather rapidly deteriorated on 17 December, there were no signs that a typhoon was approaching, and the weather forecasters on the Third Fleet staff and on the carriers repeatedly misdiagnosed the situation. As seas built on the morning of the 17th, refueling became increasingly hazardous, with cases of parted hoses and lines and several near-collisions.

At 1251, Halsey gave orders to belay fueling. Halsey also gave orders for ships that had not been able to refuel to ballast down with salt water. However, several ships delayed too long in doing so in hopes that they would be able to take fuel as soon as the seas subsided. Vice Admiral John McCain, Commander of CTF-38, followed Halsey's order, except for those orders pertaining to the destroyers *Spence*, *Hickox* (DD-673) and *Maddox* (DD-731) which were so low on fuel (10-15%) that they might not make it 24 hours. The *Spence* and *Hickox* were ordered to remain with the oilers and grab fuel if the seas allowed. As a result, the three destroyers delayed ballasting down, in the case of *Spence* too long, which would prove fatal.

Several attempts by Halsey to maneuver the fleet to areas more conducive to refueling put parts of the fleet directly in the path of the storm, unfortunately. For a time, the fleet was on the same course as the storm but slightly ahead and faster, which gave a misleading impression that conditions were slowly improving. It wasn't until about 0400 on the 18th that it became apparent that the fleet had stumbled into a very serious weather condition. It wasn't until about 1000 that the barometer started falling precipitously in a manner indicative of an approaching typhoon and not just a bad weather front. By 1400 the wind reached hurricane strength, and several of the carriers were so close that they could see the eye of the typhoon on radar.

In the end, a number of ships ultimately wound up in the most dangerous quadrant, with some passing right through the eye on 18 December. Halsey's biggest mistake was waiting too long to give individual ships the okay to break out of formation to ride out the storm independently, giving the order only at 1149 (although some commanding officers were already doing so on their own initiative). Others who tried too long to stay in formation caused their ships to take an even worse beating than necessary. At 1314, Halsey issued a typhoon warning, the first official traffic referencing a typhoon. By this time, three of Halsey's destroyers had already gone down, and others were fighting to survive.

The poor sea-keeping qualities of the *Independence*-class light carriers (which had been hastily designed and built on light cruiser hulls) became readily apparent by 0900 on 18 December. All were rolling severely. *Langley* (CVL-27) rolled 70-degrees at one point. Seven planes on *Cowpens* (CVL-25) were washed overboard and one plane that broke loose started a fire that was quickly extinguished. On *San Jacinto* (CVL-30), a fighter plane broke loose on the hangar deck and smashed seven other aircraft. By contrast, the escort carriers, with their hull design based on merchant ships, actually fared better than the light carriers, suffering less damage, although about 90 of the replacement aircraft were lost.

The light carrier *Monterey* (CVL-26) fared the worst, as a plane broke free on the hangar deck and smashed into a bulkhead at 0911, starting a serious fire, that was put out only after three sailors were killed and many more injured, with 18 planes destroyed by fire or washed overboard and another 16 planes seriously damaged as they careened about the hangar bay during severe rolls, exacerbated by the fact that *Monterey* also lost steerageway when the boiler rooms were evacuated shortly after the fire started. Of note, future President Lieutenant Gerald R. Ford was serving as the General Quarters Officer of the Deck. With Captain Stuart H. Ingersoll on the bridge, Ford was ordered to go down to the hangar deck and report on the fire, noting later that he was nearly washed overboard while planes were smashing into each other. Fortunately, the crew got the fire and the planes under control along with steerage, and *Monterey* weathered the typhoon, although she required repairs at Bremerton until April 1945.

Spence (DD-512) was a new *Fletcher*-class destroyer, much more stable than the older *Farragut*-class, but she was in trouble even before the typhoon hit, with her fuel state down to 15%, which meant she had less than 24 hours' steaming time at eight knots. After unsuccessfully attempting to refuel from battleship *New Jersey* (BB-62) on the 17th, she was then ordered to accompany the oiler group to refuel at the first chance, which never came. Her skipper began water-ballasting too late and she began rolling heavily to port. Water entered

through the ventilators and short-circuited the distribution board. Then the rudder jammed hard right. At 1110, *Spence* took a deep roll to port, recovered, and then took another one from which she did not recover, going down with 317 of her crew (23 survived), the first destroyer to sink in the typhoon.

By 1100 the destroyer *Hull* (DD-350), commanded by Lieutenant Commander J.A. Marks, was in serious trouble. Marks was responsible for screening a group of four oilers and maintained station for too long. *Hull* was at 70% fuel state and had not taken on saltwater ballast in the tanks. (The Court of Inquiry determined that standard procedures at the time did not require re-ballasting with that much fuel on board, but the failure to do so nonetheless contributed to her loss. Although regulations didn't require it, re-ballasting was a lesson from an earlier typhoon that had not been learned.) In addition, as an older *Farragut*-class destroyer, *Hull* had over 500 tons of extra weapons and equipment added, making her top heavy. By 1100 the wind had reached 100 knots, and *Hull* was rolling 50 degrees, which just before noon reached 70 degrees. She survived several such rolls before a gust of wind estimated at 110 knots pinned her on her beam ends, and water poured down her funnels and into the pilothouse and she capsized and sank a few minutes after noon with 202 of her crew (62 survived.)

The *Farragut*-class destroyer *Dewey* (DD-349) almost met the same fate as *Hull*, but was saved by the prompt jettisoning of topside weights, re-ballasting with salt water, and the loss of her funnel, which reduced sail area, along with a lot of bailing and pumping. *Farragut*-class *Aylwin* (DD-355) also barely survived as she passed very close to the eye wall. By 1100, *Aylwin* had lost her engines and steering control, rolled 70 degrees to port and stayed there for 20 minutes. Regaining steering control intermittently, Lieutenant Commander W. K. Rogers, through some incredible ship handling was able to hold her up, but temperatures in the engine rooms reached 180 degrees as the blowers failed and the engine rooms had to be evacuated. The ship's engineering officer, Lieutenant E. R. Rendahl and Machinist's Mate T. Sarenski remained at their posts

despite the intense heat in order to protect the electrical circuits. When they too finally evacuated, they had to take off their life jackets to fit through the escape hatch to the deck, where they collapsed due to the temperature change and were washed overboard. Somehow, *Aylwin* managed to survive despite serious flooding.

Farragut-class destroyer *Monaghan* (DD-354) was not so lucky as *Dewey* and *Aylwin*. Her fuel tanks were 76 percent full, and although she attempted to ballast down, with great difficulty as valves stuck, it was too late. At 1130, *Monaghan* lost electric power and the steering engine failed. After several very heavy rolls she foundered just before noon along with 256 of her crew (only six survived). *Monaghan* had 12 battle stars, having sunk a Japanese midget submarine inside Pearl Harbor during the air attack, served at Midway, performed valiantly in the Battle of the Komandorski Islands, drove the Japanese submarine I-7 onto the rocks in the Aleutians and fought in other battles, but she was defeated by a storm.

By the time the typhoon moved through, numerous ships had been damaged. Those that required major repair included *Anzio* (CVE-57), *Cape Esperance* (CVE-88), *Baltimore* (CA-68), *Miami* (CL-89), *Dewey* (DD-349), *Aylwin* (DD-355), *Buchanan* (DD-484), *Dyson* (DD-572), *Hickox* (DD-673), *Benham* (DD-796), *Donaldson* (DE-44), and *Melvin R. Nawman* (DE-416.) Other ships damaged included four light carriers, three escort carriers, one battleship, one destroyer, two destroyer escorts, and an oiler.

A hero of the Typhoon was the destroyer escort *Tabberer* (DE-418), which had her foremast and radio antennas washed away, and was taking 60 degree rolls. As evening approached on the 18th, *Tabberer* encountered and rescued a survivor of *Hull*. At that point her commanding officer, Lieutenant Commander Henry L. Plage, commenced a box search, despite her own serious state. Over the next 51 hours, Plage didn't receive (or ignored) repeated orders from Admiral Halsey for all ships to regroup at Ulithi. (Halsey did not learn that any of his ships had been sunk until 0225 on 19 December.) During this period, *Tabberer* rescued 55 survivors

(41 from *Hull* and 14 from *Spence*) before being relieved by two destroyer escorts. *Tabberer* rescued ten of the *Hull* survivors at night. Many were rescued by *Hull* swimmers, who went over overboard with lines tied, in order to bring the survivors to nets and life rings on *Tabberer's* side, while other crewmen used rifle fire to drive away sharks. Lieutenant Commander Plage was awarded a Legion of Merit and *Tabberer* a Navy Unit Commendation (the first ever awarded, although others were awarded retroactively for earlier actions). The destroyer *Brown* (DD-546) rescued the six survivors from *Monaghan* and 13 survivors of *Hull*. All told, 93 crewmen who had been washed overboard or survived the sinking of their ships were rescued.

A Court of Inquiry subsequently convened at Ulithi on 26 December 1944 aboard the destroyer tender *Cascade* (AD-16), with Admiral Chester A. Nimitz in attendance and presided by Vice Admiral John Hoover. The Court of Inquiry placed responsibility for losses and storm damage on Admiral Halsey but ascribed no negligence, stating that Halsey's mistakes "were errors in judgment committed under stress of war operations and stemming from a commendable desire to meet military requirements." In retrospect, Halsey should not have attempted any refueling operations on the morning of 18 December, but that would have required him to know where the center of the typhoon was before he did. The Court of Inquiry also determined that the commanding officers of *Hull*, *Monaghan*, and *Spence* maneuvered too long in an attempt to keep station, which "prevented them from concentrating early enough on saving their ships." In the opinion of Rear Admiral Samuel Eliot Morison, it was "too much to expect of junior destroyer skippers—classes of 1937 and 1938, Naval Academy—to have pitted their brief experience against the lack of typhoon warnings and their own want of fuel."

However, in the words of Fleet Admiral Nimitz, "The time for taking all measures for a ship's safety is while still able to do so. Nothing is more dangerous than for a seaman to be grudging in taking precautions lest they turn out to have been unnecessary. Safety at sea for a thousand years has depended on exactly the opposite philosophy."



Sources are: *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II, Vol. 13: The Liberation of the Philippines*, by Samuel Eliot Morison; and the *Dictionary of American Fighting Ships* (DANFS)

H-039-3: Typhoon Cobra—

A Personal Account

M. Dick Van Orden, Ensign, U.S. Navy

H-Gram 039, Attachment 3

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

December 2019

Destroyer during heavy weather in the East China Sea, possibly during Typhoon Cobra in December 1944. Photographed from USS New Jersey (BB-62) (80-G-470284)

Replenishment day was always a welcome day of respite from the rigors of war—a pleasant time in a safe zone where there was temporary relief from the interminable recurrences of General Quarters, Torpedo Defense, Flight Quarters, and other necessary activities of an alert, ever-ready force within range of enemy aircraft. It was a holiday from the tensions, the incessant alerts, and the stresses that came from day after day of watch-standing, steaming offshore, launching air strikes, recovering aircraft sometimes shot full of holes, and performing necessary day-to-day maintenance and upkeep of ships and aircraft. A holiday spirit prevailed throughout the Task Group on these special days: Station-keeping was a bit more lax, and gun crews were off duty so that the gunners could lubricate,

adjust and bore-sight their guns. Sailors were free to laze about the decks with shirts off, smoke (when not actually alongside the oiler or ammo ship), and absorb the sun's welcome, warm rays.

Unfortunately, not all replenishment days were peaceful or relaxing. The weather occasionally didn't cooperate, and the development of storms, which could slip in undetected, spoiled some planned operations, including those necessary replenishment appointments. Although the meteorologists (called "aerologists" or "aerological officers"—or sometimes "weather guessers"—in those days) did their best with the limited information available to them, but they frequently missed on their predictions of the weather. The flagship had a weather guesser aboard, as did each of the carriers. These men frequently conferred by radio before making a joint forecast and notifying the ships of their estimates of future conditions. Sometimes, however, they didn't have enough information to predict accurately, so their joint forecasts were wrong.

In mid-December 1944, one storm slipped through while Task Force 38 was in the Philippine Sea preparing to support the landings on Luzon. Eager to replenish nearly empty fuel tanks and aviation gasoline (AVGAS) tanks depleted from earlier strafing and gunfire attacks on enemy positions on Luzon, and anxious to enter the actual landing-support operations with full tanks, Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., Commander Task Force 38, ordered a replenishment and refueling day despite heavy seas and 30 to 40 knots of wind.

The carriers always went alongside the tankers first; their need for AVGAS took priority over everything else. *Independence* (CV-22), operating only night fighters and night searchers, returned from her solo all-night operations (which placed a heavy demand on her fuel and AVGAS) and was given priority so as to be able to get her "drink" at first light. She approached a heavily-laden tanker that was wallowing in the seas and taking green water over her bow. The Chief Warrant Boatswain in the foredeck of *Indy* shook his head in disbelief at the rough conditions, and said to me, his division officer,

"This is going to be rough." I ordered all of my division on the foredeck crew to put on life jackets and safety lines as they set about getting a towline over to the oiler.

In those days it was customary to use a towline from the carrier to the tanker. It was not actually used for towing but served as a breast line to assist the officer of the deck in maintaining a safe position. Many ship commanding officers were fearful of the suction caused by the Bernoulli effect: two ship hulls proceeding close together on parallel courses at the same speed. The towline, therefore, enabled the officer on deck to hold a slight port rudder (we always fueled on the starboard side) throughout the refueling period, keeping pressure on the towline and thus avoiding getting too close and having the ships be sucked together, which would cause topside damage to both. Later in the war it was determined that the towline was unnecessary, since an attentive officer on deck and a good helmsman could keep the ships apart. In this way, the Bernoulli effect would not come into play unless the ships came very close together.

Independence used an eight-inch manila hawser for a towline. (Hawsers of that size are designated by their diameter, in this case eight inches.) The hawser was heavy and unwieldy, and the deck crew struggled manfully on this wet, stormy morning to get it ready for passing over to the oiler. After several tries the line-throwing gun got the white line over, and it was attached to a heaving line, which was attached to a three-inch manila, to which was attached the eight-inch towline. When the towline was pulled over and made fast to the oiler, the hoses went over, and fueling began. Before long the boatswain asked me to call the bridge and report that the strain on the towline was excessive. He recommended fueling be terminated as soon as possible. I conveyed the message, but the need for AVGAS was critical, so the Officer of the Deck said we should continue as long as we could.

As much AVGAS as possible was pumped rapidly. Soon I ordered all hands off the foredeck. We all retreated to a safe area between the forward 40-mm gun mount and the forward bulkhead. Within moments after the foredeck had been cleared, the

eight-inch towline parted, and whipped back across the deck and hit the 40-mm gun shield with astounding force, bending the half-inch steel armor plate. Fortunately, no one was hurt. The officer on deck on the bridge saw the casualty and immediately stopped fueling operations, breaking away while not completely topped off but with sufficient fuel and AVGAS to meet the next operation.

Meanwhile, the weather continued to deteriorate. Unknown to the forecasters and undetected by any shore-based weather stations, a full-scale typhoon was moving rapidly into the Philippine Sea and Task Force 38 was directly in its path. Most of the ships had emptied their seawater ballast in preparation for taking on fuel, and some were reluctant to add seawater ballast back into their oil tanks, both because of the possible contamination of fuel and because of the time required to pump them down again and take on fuel.

All were caught by surprise. The result was disaster. Three destroyers—*Hull* (DD-350), *Spence* (DD-512), and *Monaghan* (DD-354)—capsized and sank with heavy loss of life; six or seven other ships were badly damaged. The *Independence* lost her forward 40-mm quad gun mount, which was swept away, and the forward edge of the flight deck was rolled back about 15 feet.

The worst of the storm hit just before noon. Great pyramidal waves built up and crashed into the ship. It was frightening to look up from the flight deck, which was some 60 feet above the waterline, and see giant waves towering another 30 feet above, almost obscured by the spray and spume whipped off by a monster wind. After the fueling was finished, I was assigned to patrol the flight deck, which was rigged with vertical spoilers (six foot metal posts attached to the tie-down racks) to break up the direct wind. My orders were to check the safety of the planes and pass information to the bridge on the status of planes strapped with wires and ropes to the tie-down racks of the flight deck. On one trip around the deck, as I held on to the spoilers to avoid being blown overboard, I glanced aloft at the anemometer, its three cups whirling furiously, only to see it spin off its mounting and, still spinning

madly, fly across the flight deck and into the sea on the port side. When I went to the bridge to take the noon to 1600 officer-on-deck watch, I asked the quartermaster about the wind velocity. He reported that before the anemometer disintegrated the wind had registered 114 knots.

By this time it was no longer possible to steam in formation. After being ordered by CTF-38 to proceed independently, all ships were making their way in a northerly direction, heading into the seas and wind. As officer of the deck, I was in charge of maneuvering the ship, and avoiding other ships became my primary concern. Under the watchful eye of our captain, who was monitoring the radar repeater and incoming radio orders in the closed bridge one deck below, I, on the open bridge for better visibility, posted extra lookouts and headed into the wind and waves, crashing bow-on into each one (which caused the damage to our flight deck's forward edge) but avoiding the dangerous rolling any other course would produce. Occasionally a destroyer was sighted as it slid by, using engines and rudder to avoid collision but nonetheless almost uncontrollable. By now all ships had ballasted, either with fuel received before their hoses parted, or with salt water pumped into their tanks to fill the voids left by failure to complete fueling.

Independence was fortunate. Two planes broke loose on the hangar deck and their ruptured fuel tanks spilled many gallons of 100-octaine aviation fuel. The members of our Marine company attached to the ship, whose compartment was just below the hangar deck, smelled the gasoline fumes and came storming up their hatch to the hangar deck. There, armed with the only available bailing tools—metal dust pans to bail and galvanized steel garbage cans to bail into—they were able to collect all of the dangerously volatile liquid and dump it over the side. Fortunately there were no sparks and no fires.

Two damage-control panels stored for use in repairing battle damage—3/4-inch steel plates, 6 feet by 6 feet square—broke loose in the chief's quarters (which ran athwartship), and with each roll the plates became huge steel blades, slicing their way through all in their path and making the compartment uninhabitable. All of the legs of the tables and chairs

in the compartment were chopped off after a few rolls.

Safety returned only when one of the chief petty officers, holding a lighted welding torch and hanging from the overhead to escape the rampaging plates, managed to spot-weld them to the deck where the welds stopped their destructive trips from side-to-side.

Eventually the storm moved away. The exhausted task force made its way to safe waters and returned to Ulithi, where it spent a sad but thankful Christmas season. Finally able to replenish stores, ammunition and fuel, the crews repaired their ships' damages and prepared to support the Luzon landings.

Total replenishment at sea today is a routine procedure. However, in WW II, it was an innovation, one of the most effective new tactics perfected during the Pacific War. Not only did it enable the Fast Carrier Task Force to reach great distances from the nearest re-supply bases and to sortie its ships for more extensive campaigns, but it also permitted keeping constant pressure on the enemy for longer periods. On one such strike series, *Independence* was underway for 63 continuous days, and all needs (except rest and recreation) were satisfied by frequent replenishment at sea. As a result, there was no letup in the devastating, around-the-clock air attacks on the enemy (made possible by night-operating planes from our carriers—first *Independence*, and later joined by others), giving the Japanese no chance to regroup and repair damage between strikes. The strategy of using alternating task groups—one to strike and then to replenish while another was striking—assured ceaseless, relentless strikes from which the enemy never recovered.



USS Mississinewa (AO-59) sinking at Ulithi, 20 November 1944, after being struck by a Japanese Kaiten Type 1 manned torpedo. The capsized ship's bottom can be seen at the base of the flames and smoke pillar, with bow or stern toward the left (80-G-K-5510).

H-039-4: The First *Kaiten* Suicide Torpedo Attack, 20 November 1944

H-Gram 039, Attachment 4

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

December 2019

At 0547 on 20 November 1944, the fully laden 11,000-ton oiler USS *Mississinewa* (AO-59) was anchored at Ulithi Atoll when a manned *Kaiten* suicide torpedo hit her, resulting in a massive explosion. A second huge explosion occurred seconds later when fumes in an aviation gasoline

tank detonated. *Mississinewa* was quickly engulfed in flames, which triggered another explosion in her after magazine. Captain Philip G. Beck quickly realized the ship was beyond hope and, as he dragged an unconscious sailor to safety, he gave the order to abandon ship. Captain Beck was in the last group of five men known to have abandoned the ship about 15 minutes after the first explosion. Fleet tugs attempted to extinguish the fire, but at about 0900 *Mississinewa* rolled over and sank. Of the 20 officers and 278 enlisted men in *Mississinewa's* crew, 63 were lost. This was the first successful attack by a *Kaiten* manned torpedo. Nevertheless, the *Kaiten* program was a miserable failure, despite the courage of the pilots who rode the torpedoes to their deaths, with very few successes.

The *Kaiten* mission against Ulithi Atoll in November 1944 was the first such mission. At the time, the large lagoon (about 22 miles by 15 miles) inside the

reef of Ulithi was the major U.S. Navy forward operating base in the Western Pacific, and it was often jammed with U.S. carriers and other elements of Admiral Halsey's Third Fleet at the end of 1944 and into 1945. Numerous supply, repair, and support vessels were located at Ulithi, while Halsey's fast carrier task groups roamed the Western Pacific, repeatedly striking Japanese targets. Oilers would pick up fuel at Ulithi and refuel the carriers and other ships at sea. Although carrier task groups would rotate back to Ulithi for rest and repair, other carrier task groups continued operating. This made Ulithi a potentially lucrative target for attack, if the Japanese could find a way to get at it.

As the Japanese became increasingly desperate in 1944, ideas for manned torpedoes that had been previously rejected were then seriously considered. Actual development of the *Kaiten* began in February 1944. The first prototype was ready at the end of July 1944. Although six models were developed, only the Type 1 was ever operationally employed.

The Type 1 *Kaiten* was essentially a Type 93 oxygen-fueled torpedo (termed the "Long Lance" after the war) with a bigger warhead and, for the pilot, a compartment that included a small periscope, steering controls, controls to arm and detonate the weapon, batteries, and air filter. The Type 1 had a 3,420-pound warhead, a speed of 12 knots cruising and 30 knots maximum, a maximum range of 42 nautical miles, and a maximum operating depth of 250 feet. *Kaiten* were prone to leaks in the pilot's compartment and to spontaneous explosions caused by water seeping into the torpedo engine; none of these problems was ever resolved. The earliest Type 1 *Kaiten* had the capability for the pilot to escape as the torpedo neared the target, but this feature was never used; in the production models, the pilot was locked in. A theoretical advantage of a *Kaiten* was that if the first attempt to hit a target failed, the pilot could maneuver and attempt another attack. However, if the *Kaiten* failed to find a target, the pilot would either sink with the weapon or activate a self-destruct to detonate the warhead.

Kaiten were carried piggyback aboard modified conventional submarines. Different types of

submarines were modified and generally could carry two or four *Kaiten*, although some submarines were configured to carry six of the weapons. On some submarines, the pilot could access the *Kaiten* via a connection tube, and the *Kaiten* could be launched while the mother submarine remained submerged. Once the *Kaiten* launched, however, there could be no return. The *Kaiten* had significant depth restrictions, which also applied to the mother submarine when the *Kaiten* were embarked. This proved to be a major vulnerability and was a factor in eight *Kaiten*-carrying submarines being sunk (along with 846 crewmen on the mother submarines, in addition to the *Kaiten* pilots). Some training versions were configured to carry two or even four crewmen, and losses during training accidents were fairly high, usually caused when a training *Kaiten* collided with the practice target ship. All told, about 330 Type 1 *Kaiten* were produced, and about 100 were used, with very little success, despite Japanese reports and propaganda that wildly inflated the results.

The first operational *Kaiten* mission commenced on 8 November 1944, when the *Kikusui-tai Kaiten* Group departed from Otsujima, Japan. The group consisted of the submarines *I-47*, *I-36*, and *I-37*, each piggybacking four *Kaiten*, and each also armed with eight conventional torpedoes. The plan called for *I-47* and *I-36* to attack Ulithi Atoll with the *Kaiten*, while *I-37* attacked a different anchorage near Palau. After launching the *Kaiten*, the submarines were to proceed to Leyte Gulf to conduct conventional attacks on U.S. shipping supporting General MacArthur's ongoing operations on Leyte.

On 16 November 1944, a Truk-deployed Nakajima C6N1 "Myrt" high-altitude reconnaissance aircraft overflew Ulithi and reported four fleet carriers, three battleships, and numerous cruisers and destroyers in the northern part of the anchorage, and numerous oilers, transports, and supply ships in the southern and central sections. This intelligence was passed to the *Kikusui-tai* Group. By the morning of 19 November, *I-47* and *I-36* had reached the area of the atoll. At dawn, *I-47* approached to within 4.5 nautical miles of Ulithi and reported seeing over 200 U.S. ships in the anchorage inside the reef.

At 0030 on 20 November, *I-47* surfaced so that the pilots of two *Kaiten* could enter (only two of the four *Kaiten* were connected by underwater access tubes). In the 0300 hour, *I-47* launched all four *Kaiten*. The first to be launched was piloted by Lieutenant (j.g.) Sekio Nishina, the co-inventor of the *Kaiten* torpedo. He was carrying the ashes of Hiroshi Kuroki, the other co-inventor, who had been killed in a training accident. It is believed that this *Kaiten* hit *Mississinewa*. Although this *Kaiten* was sighted and reported heading for *Mississinewa* by alert lookouts on *USS Cache* (AO-67) and *USS Lackawana* (AO-40), there was no time to react since the ships were at anchor. Destroyer *USS Case* (DD-370), on patrol at the entrance to the channel, rammed and sank one of the other *Kaiten*. Another ran aground on the reef. Another made it into the lagoon, but was lost, probably sunk by depth charges as ships reacted to the explosion on *Mississinewa*.

I-36 conducted a similar routine as *I-47*, except that the two *Kaiten* connected by access tubes were stuck and would not release, and a third *Kaiten* developed a heavy leak in the pilot's compartment. Only one *Kaiten* from *I-36* was successfully launched, but it was never heard from again. Even so, the Japanese credited pilot Ensign Imanishi with sinking an aircraft carrier. *I-36* surfaced to recover the one pilot still stuck in his *Kaiten* and was quickly attacked by two Avenger torpedo bombers on antisubmarine warfare patrol; she crash-dived without damage.

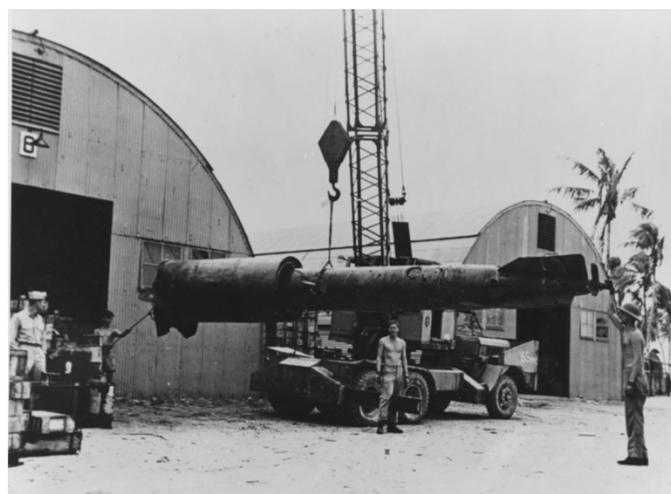
On 23 November, another Myrt reconnaissance mission over Ulithi reported a large oil slick, but no other discernable change to ship disposition. Nevertheless, at a staff conference of the Japanese Sixth Fleet (Submarine Force), the Japanese reviewed the reconnaissance reports, including *I-47*'s post-attack periscope report of a massive pall of smoke over Ulithi, and concluded that three aircraft carriers and two battleships had been sunk, and that the *Kaiten* mission had been a great success. On 24 November, *I-47* and *I-36* were directed to return to Japan to prepare for additional *Kaiten* attacks rather than proceeding to Leyte Gulf.

I-47 and *I-36* were among the few Japanese submarines to survive the war. Although *I-47*'s crew

initially refused the Emperor's order to surrender, a lack of fuel prevented her from commencing a rogue operation. *I-37* wasn't so lucky. On 19 November at 0858, 12 hours before she was to launch her four *Kaiten* at Kossol Roads, Palau, *I-37* was sighted by the net-laying ship *USS Winterberry* (AN-56). Later in the day, destroyer escorts *USS Conklin* (DE-439) and *USS McCoy Reynolds* (DE-440) located *I-37* and, after an hour of attacks, finally sank her with all hands, along with the four *Kaiten*.

During the rest of the war, the Japanese conducted 10 major *Kaiten* operations. The most significant success was sinking the destroyer escort *USS Underhill* (DE-682) on 24 July 1945, with a loss of 113 of her crew (to be covered in a future H-gram). Besides *Underhill* and *Mississinewa*, the only other U.S. ship sunk by a *Kaiten* was infantry landing craft *LCI-600*, with the loss of three men. Several other ships were damaged. These losses cost the Japanese eight *Kaiten*-carrying submarines and their crews, 106 *Kaiten* pilots (including 15 killed in training and two who committed suicide at the end of the war). A significant number of maintenance and support personnel (156) were also lost, presumably mostly on the sunken mother submarines.

Sources include: Action Report of Captain Philip Beck, 12 Dec 1944; *Kaiten: Japan's Secret Manned Suicide Submarine and the First American Ship It Sank in WWII*, by Michael Mair and Joy Waldron, Penguin Group, 2014; *Suicide Submarine! The Story*



Japanese Kaiten Type 1 manned torpedo after recovery by U.S. forces at Ulithi Atoll in 1945. This is the after half of the Kaiten. The forward portion, including warhead, forward oxygen and fuel tanks, and the crew compartment, is missing and may have been destroyed in an explosion of the warhead (80-G-350027).



USS Mount Hood (AE-11) explodes in Seeadler Harbor, Manus, Admiralty Islands, 10 November 1944, as seen from the Naval Supply Depot on Manus (NH 95404).

of Japan's Submarine "Kamikaze" Manned Torpedoes," by Yutaka Yokota and Joseph D. Harrington, Ballantine Books, 1962; combinedfleet.com for details on Japanese ship

H-039-5: The Explosion of Ammunition Ship USS *Mount Hood* (AE-11), 10 November 1944

H-Gram 039, Attachment 5

Samuel J. Cox, Director NHHC

December 2019

At 0855 on 10 November 1944 in Seeadler Harbor, Manus Island, Admiralty Islands (near New Guinea), an explosion occurred amidships near the Number 3 and Number 4 holds on the new ammunition ship USS *Mount Hood* (AE-11). Moments later, a massive blast of the 3,800 tons of ordnance aboard obliterated the ship and killed every one of her over 300-man crew who were aboard. The explosion dug a crater on the bottom, 35 feet below, 1,000 feet long, 50 feet across, and 30-40 feet deep. The largest piece of the ship found was 16 by 10 feet. No human remains were recovered.

On the nearby (350 yards) repair ship USS *Mindanao* (ARG-3), all personnel topside were killed outright by the explosion, and the ship was perforated by shrapnel. Eighty-two of *Mandanao's* crew were killed, and 100 were wounded. Twenty-two small

craft and boats were sunk. Shrapnel fell up to 2,000 yards from the center of the explosion. Personnel were knocked to the ground or deck up to 4,500 yards away. Eighteen larger ships were damaged to some degree, including the escort carriers USS *Saginaw Bay* (CVE-82) and USS *Petrof Bay* (CVE-80), a destroyer, and four destroyer escorts. In total, 372 were killed (including 327 missing) and 371 were injured. One of *Mount Hood's* crew was killed aboard *Mindanao*, and one was injured in a boat alongside *Mindanao*. Eighteen of *Mount Hood's* crew were away from the ship and survived, including a shore party of 14 men, two of whom were being taken to the brig ashore for court-martial. Their charges were dropped.

The board of inquiry was unable to determine an exact cause, but did identify numerous somewhat astonishing unsafe practices aboard *Mount Hood*—especially considering the previous ammunition-handling disasters earlier in 1944 at Port Chicago, California (over 300 killed), and West Loch, Pearl Harbor (over 160 killed). (See H-Grams 029, 032, and 033.) The board speculated that the accident could have been caused by a TPX-loaded depth bomb striking a hatch while being loaded into the Number 3 or 4 hold. The board also concluded:

- That ammunition was being roughly handled in all parts of the ship.
- That boosters, fuzes, and detonators were stowed together in one hold in a manner contrary to regulations governing transportation of military explosives.
- That broken rockets from which some of the powder was spilled had been stowed in two of the holds.
- That safety regulations for handling ammunition were not posted in conspicuous places about the ship, and there was a general lack of instruction to the crew in safety measures.
- That pyrotechnics and napalm gel incendiaries were stowed in an open temporary wood and tarpaper hut on deck

under hazardous conditions near the hatch to the Number 3 or 4 holds.

- That there was evidence that fuzes, detonators, and other ammunition were accepted on board which were definitely defective and should have been destroyed or disposed of by dumping in deep water.
- That the fire hose was not laid out. There was evidence that fire drills were infrequently held.
- That there was a lack of enforcing the prohibition of smoking in boats alongside the ammunition vessel.

Interestingly, Fleet Admiral Nimitz's endorsement of the board of inquiry findings noted, "It is the opinion of the Commander in Chief, U.S. Pacific Fleet that the question of negligence is not involved but rather that the technical mistakes by the above named officers [which are redacted] were errors in judgment resulting from a keen desire to meet necessary military commitments and move on with the progress of the war. The exigencies of war will always require the acceptance of certain operational hazards."

The summary of the report of the board of inquiry findings was sent out to the rest of the Navy, dated 15 August 1945, which proved too late to save the cargo ship USS *Serpens* (AK-97). The ship exploded and sank off Lunga Point, Guadalcanal, on 29 January 1945. *Serpens* was a Liberty Ship that had been taken into the Navy and commissioned in May 1943, but was manned by a U.S. Coast Guard crew. Three of her holds had been converted for ammunition stowage. The massive blast killed 196 Coast Guardsmen, 57 U.S. Army stevedores, a Public Health Service doctor, and a soldier ashore hit by shrapnel. Somewhat miraculously, two crewmen on the ship survived. This was the largest loss of U.S. Coast Guard life in a single incident in history. Initially the explosion was thought to have occurred due to enemy action but, after the war, was determined to be of an internal cause.

Sources include: "The Explosion of The USS *Mount Hood*" on jag.navy.mil, which interestingly redacts all the names (except casualty lists) from the report and endorsements, as if no one could figure out who "(redacted), Fleet Admiral, U.S. Navy, Commander in Chief, United States Pacific Fleet and Pacific Ocean Areas" is; NHHHC's *Dictionary of American Naval Fighting Ships* (DANFS).