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Torpedoing of the ERIE

The torpedoing of the USS ERIE and the subsequent  
valiant efforts to save her are here described by Nissen.  
The incident occurred as in the ship was coming to Trinidad.

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This is Julius H. NISSEN, Yeoman 2/C, U.S.N.R., speaking from Headquarters, Eastern Sea Frontier, on June 12, 1943. Lieutenant (j.g.) Morison and myself are going to discuss the torpedoing of the ERIE.

Lieut. Morison: Now can you begin with a little background of what the ERIE was doing before the war and then what she did during the war from the time of Pearl Harbor right on to last November?

Yeoman Nissen: Well before the war, the ERIE was used mostly for good will tours; she toured South America and Central America and held quite a few parties aboard her for different executive officers and admiralties down in South American countries. There is not much outside of a regular Navy ship which she did and the night Pearl Harbor was attacked all hands were called back and we worked until twelve or half past twelve loading ammunition and getting the ship ready to be a fighting ship instead of a pleasure ship.

Lieut. Morison: Where were you then?

Yeoman Nissen: We were down in Panama. The ERIE has been in Panama, or in the tropics rather, ever since she has been commissioned in 1936. We went back to the States about every two years for an overhaul but most of us fellows had been out of the States for over two years when we were torpedoed.

Lieut. Morison: And then did you go right on patrol duty?

Yeoman Nissen: We went right from, well our first task when the war was started, we went out and rounded up all the small fishing boats down through the Caribbean and out on the Pacific. We took quite a few prisoners aboard right after the war started and most of the fishing boats were put in

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Panama and they were used as patrol craft after awhile.

Lieut. Morison: When did you begin convoy duty?

Yeoman Nissen: I should say we began convoy duty a few months after the war started, after we had most of these fishing boats rounded up, we started right in on convoy duty and patrol duty. We set up a base down in the Galapagos Islands and we spent quite a bit of time down there. We had Marines attached to our ship and they were the fellows that really set the base up. After that it was taken over by the Army and I believe the Army is down there now.

During our operations in the Pacific, after this base was set up in the Galapagos Islands, we spent most of our time on convoy duty. We would go out with the convoy going to Australia or out in that direction. We would get a certain distance out, we had a large fuel capacity and the destroyers didn't have as large and they were more of a fighting ship than we were and we brought them alongside and we used to fuel them up at sea. Then we would turn around and head back in. During one of our trips back in, we picked up a good contact on our sound gear and the Captain went to the spot of contact and we dropped a pattern of about fourteen charges. We couldn't stick around though to find out whether or not we got the sub because we didn't have the fuel. We were signaled by a PBY - a little later while we were out on patrol duty - that they saw a lot of debris floating around and he said that he couldn't tell definitely but it looked pretty good. It was a possibility anyway. Most of the rest of our operations were pretty dull in the Pacific. We just did regular convoy duty.

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Lieut. Morison: Well then let's bring her back into the Atlantic and you were there for a month or two before you went on your final convoy?

Yeoman Nissen: That's about right. We went back to Panama and we had our major overhaul down there instead of to the States as in the past years.

When we came out of our major overhaul we went out into the Atlantic instead of the Pacific this time. We were operating between Cristobal, Guantanamo Bay and down to Trinidad. We had quite a few convoys that we went out with.

We went out alone one time with two ships and we were about six hours out of Colon when one of the ships sent up two red flares. We didn't know what it was all about. We thought they had spotted something. We circled around and after fooling around quite a bit there, we found that they had abandoned ship. We picked up survivors, talked to them and we found out that the ship had been torpedoed. I was on watch at the time myself and looking back at the ship there was a no explosion or big splash. The fellows from the ship themselves said all they felt was a thud and it blew a pretty good sized hole in the ship. She went down the next morning. She had quite a bit of lumber aboard and a lot of grain. We circled around all night. The PBY planes came out in the morning and they thought they spotted the submarine and they dropped a couple of charges and we dropped quite a few and to no avail. We really didn't get the sub, I believe.

Lieut. Morison: Did you have a contact?

Yeoman Nissen: We had a couple of contacts at different times during that morning. The other ship that was with us, she headed off in the opposite

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direction and we never did pick her up either. They say she was torpedoed later. Well from what we gathered there were thirteen ships that left Colon that day. We were one of the thirteen and we were the only one that was still afloat. That was when the submarines were pretty bad down in the Caribbean.

Morison: What month?

Nissen: That was approximately, oh, the latter part of September of the first part of October.

We picked up quite a few survivors later on. On another trip when we did patrol duty out in the Caribbean, we were called to pick up survivors from the LEBORE. She had survivors aboard from three different ships she had picked up and we brought the survivors into Cristobal. We had one little girl about nine years old and the woman and her husband on board. They were survivors from the LEBORE. The girl had been through the bombing in France, in Poland, and had been three years in trying to get to the United States. Each time they hit a different spot the Germans came in and bombed it and they had to get out of there. One of the old sailors, a merchant marine sailor, said he never saw anything like it in his life. The girl was much calmer than anyone of the fellows they had aboard, and some of their fellows had been torpedoed three and four times.

I was talking to the first mate of the LEBORE, he was in charge of a life boat and the skipper of the ship was in the life raft with the skipper of one of the ships that had been torpedoed before. When the submarine surfaced, there were three of them all told, one of them surfaced nearby the ship and there were two off in the distance. They

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turned their searchlights on the ship and the captain of the submarine, he was a pretty stout fellow, a lieutenant commander, he came out of the conning tower and he called them alongside. Well they had to go, he said, because they were afraid of being machine gunned. They went alongside and the captain asked where the captain of the tanker was, the LEBORE. The first mate used his head and said, he is on the bridge. Well the German submarine commander gave the order to open fire. He opened fire on the bridge and shelled the ship completely for about three hours until they blew the bridge all to pieces. He said he had a gun in his hand but he didn't want to use it. If he used that, he said, the Germans would probably have killed everybody aboard that they had. I met them later on about a month later in Guantanamo Bay and the first mate and the skipper of the LEBORE had gotten another ship and they happened to be down in Guantanamo Bay the same time we were. I believe that they were in the convoy that we took down to Trinidad. I am not sure. That was our last convoy though. Well I might as well get to that because I have just about led up to that.

We shoved off from Guantanamo Bay and made a trip to Trinidad. We had, not ourselves but one of the escort vessels, a contact on the way down and they went out and dropped depth charges on that. The results were unknown as far as I'm concerned. We went down to Trinidad and while we were there, laid over for a short time and then shoved off on our way back to Guantanamo Bay with a convoy. We were escort commander and we were up in front. We had the lead.

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Morison: Will you give us the composition of the convoy?

Nissen: Well, there was the ERIE, the SPRY, two or three PC boats, and a couple of SC boats. I am not sure but I think there was a destroyer there, but I wouldn't really say yes or no. And then there were about sixteen ships in the convoy itself that we were escorting.

We were out a couple of days and had warning that submarines were pretty bad up in that area by dispatch. Planes had sighted a few subs and while we were in Trinidad one plane had sunk a sub at the loss of the pilot's life. He went into a dive and couldn't pull out but he got the sub and he lost his own life in account.

We were coming into Trinidad, into Curacao, to pick up some more ships and leave some of our ships off there when, well, when it it happened. That was November 12 at 5:33 in the evening, 1733 Navy time. We were patrolling back and forth waiting for the convoy to form again and two torpedoes came from our starboard beam. They seemed to come from the middle of the convoy. It seems that the submarine got inside of our sound track somehow. This Dutch ship came out to help us patrol and also a few Dutch PT boats. We noticed one torpedo first and instantly after that we found this other torpedo about 100 feet astern of it and about 50 yards to one side. The Captain maneuvered the ship very well, missed the first torpedo and it went by our bow. It was very shiny and had a brass colored warhead on it. I imagine it was in about five feet of water and you could see it very plainly as it went by the bow. The second torpedo, well there was no hope of getting out of the way of that. It was

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headed for the crew's compartment and the fellows were all down eating chow at that time. The officers back aft, enlisted men amidships. The Captain figured there would be fewer lives lost by hitting the stern than hitting amidships so he swung the ship very sharply again, trying to put it where it would do the least damage and it hit back aft in the officers' country. It just happened to hit in our aviation gas tanks too. They went up right after the first explosion of the torpedo, there was a second explosion which was much louder than the first one. When the torpedo hit, it was more or less just a jar and quite a noise to it. But as far as knocking anybody down, I don't think it did that at all. I was on watch at the time I crouched down behind a little shelter when I saw it was going to hit and it didn't jar me at all. Well as soon as we were hit, General Quarters was sounded, in fact as soon as the torpedo was sighted it was sounded but the siren was sounded and General Quarters were sounded and the men went down to their battle stations in quite an orderly manner. We had been drilled, well, every day we would have General Quarters as a drill. In port, we had General Quarters for air raid. Just drill but that's what made our ship as good as she was.

The ship was about eleven miles from the beach when we were hit and we looked at the charts, rather the navigator did, and he found that there were no shelves that we could beach the ship on. A PC boat from down in Curacao came out and kind of guided us into the beach. Well luckily we landed on a shelf that wasn't charted. We put it there and righted the ship.



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Morison: Before you go any further, I don't think we have had the damage that was done to the ship by the torpedoes and what steps you took to fix it up.

Well, at the time nobody could tell just what the damage was, but it turned out that it blew quite a hole into the side of the ship that was about 24 feet long and I imagine 12 to 19 feet deep. It just about sheered the ship in two. It sheered our starboard shaft, and the engine room secured that right away. We still had power and the port shaft continued to turn over and brought us into the beach. The engine room was intact all the time; they kept the ship under way and followed out every command that the captain gave. When we were hit we lost control of the ship for a short time until our remote steering came in, and as we were swinging, we were swinging to avoid the torpedo, and as we were swinging, two more torpedoes passed the ship. One was on the starboard side and one on the port side and they just ran parallel to the ship. If we hadn't been swinging we would have caught two more torpedoes, but God was with us and so was everything else and we luckily missed them.

The Dutch were there and did a very good job picking up the survivors that were trapped down on the fantail. There were two gunner's mates on watch with the depth charges and there were three officers that managed to get up on the fantail and were trapped back there. They had to go over the fantail. Before they went over though, the first lieutenant and one gunner's mate set the depth charges on safe before they went over the side. We lost one depth charge which went off in the water. One of the gunner's mates was blown over the side by the explosion of the

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aviation gasoline and he said he felt the concussion from the depth charge, but he is alright today.

We lost six officers and one enlisted man. The enlisted man died on the beach later. We found the remains of only one of those officers though. After talking to the different fellows on the ship one officer was a paymaster, a lieutenant-commander, who just came aboard on this trip and was back aft. He was black from the waist up. We couldn't tell whether he was burned or whether it was oil. He was trapped back there and was going over the side. We passed him a life jacket back on a fending pole that we used for our airplane. He put the lifejacket on and got down in the life raft. But he stood up and we cut him loose as he passed over the screw. He, well, he kind of went in I guess. The screw got him. We don't really know what happened to him. That's just what the fellows told us that were back there.

Another officer, they say, they saw running around burning but there's no proof of that either. We found the remains of our engineering officer, though. Lieutenant Kunkle. He's one of the best men I ever served under. I worked as engineer's yeoman aboard ship. He must have been reading in his bunk when the torpedo hit. It carried his forward bulkhead out and when we went back aboard ship later, we found his remains, about five bones, buried in oil and a book that was open to a certain spot. He was probably reading there as I said before.

The executive officer was in his room at the time and he says he doesn't know how he got out but he remembers seeing light as he came out of his room and he just made for that light and went out. It was the

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hole the torpedo made. He says he remembered grabbing life lines and his hands were all burned from grabbing a hold of something that was very hot. I guess that's the only way he could have gotten out.

The Marine officer was taking a shower at the time. He got a sliver of steel in his back but he got out alright and went over the side too.

The first lieutenant was topside and before going over the side, a depth charge due to a jar in the ship pinned his leg between a stanchion and it sheered it off. He was going around on one leg. He had the other leg hanging there, just about six inches below the knee and when he hit the water he swam around and made sure everybody was alright before he would think of himself.

When the fellows were in the water, this gunner's mate that was blown over the side, told me that while they were waiting in the water to be picked up, they were waving their arms and about that time the merchant ships that we were conveying started opening fire. We saw them do that on the ship but we didn't know what they were firing at. They were machine gunning and they were using their large guns too and the gunner's mate told me that they were firing at the fellows in the water. He said he pulled his arm down mighty fast because he was afraid they might accidentally hit him. It couldn't have been a submarine, he said, because they had the range on the survivors more than anything else. The Dutch PT boats picked up these survivors later and brought them in and sent them into the hospital.

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Our fellows aboard ship, well we started to fight the fire with everything we had. The water main back aft was ruptured. When we went back aboard later, we found that the after bulkhead of the after magazine had been ruptured and apparently the magazine had been flooded at the time which was a stroke of luck.

Our boats were put into the water right away and we got all our abandon ship boats in the water except the captain's gig which was on the plane deck. The plane was aboard at the time also. We put the wounded, the fellows that were burned pretty bad in the boats and sent them ashore. They were also taken to the hospital. All men that were available were sent back aft to fight the fire and we had bucket brigades, hand fire extinguishers, and any other way we could carry water to get it back there seeing that the fire main was out. We passed the powder, I shouldn't say we, because I was on watch at my battle station, fellows back aft, passed the powder bags out of No. 3 handling room and threw them over the side. I imagine that they stood 10 to twelve feet away from the fire on an oily deck. One little slip and they'd all gone up. But they stood there not thinking of the danger to themselves. They were concerned about the ship more than anything else.

We finally got in where we wouldn't need our guns anymore. They secured from General Quarters and all hands went back to fight the fire. The ship was beached at this time and the list that we had was uprighted. She was on an even keel again. We started back again. The captain saw that the oil from one of the ruptured fuel tanks was circling the ship

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and it was blazing up to amidships on the starboard side. So he gave the word to abandon ship on the port side. All hands abandoned ship which was really comical in a way watching everybody go in the water; not knowing whether you were going to jump on somebody's head or whether or not you were going to have somebody land on yours. I missed one fellow by a few feet that's all. A lot of fellows who said they couldn't swim before, well they learned awful fast. This one marine was laying on his back with a life jacket on and a chief swam by him. He said, please help me Chief, I can't swim.

Alright, said the Chief, but that life jacket will hold you.

It will?

Sure, you don't have anything to worry about.

The chief told me the marine just turned over on his stomach and you couldn't find him anymore. He was on the beach ten minutes before the chief got there.

After everyone was off the ship, the captain left the ship. He was the last one to leave. There were two fellows waiting for him in a life raft up on the bow and he came down and came ashore. He was just ashore a short time, when you might say, you took your last look at the ERIE. Her stack had been just freshly painted--- she was a very efficient ship--- and the first coat of paint had peeled off and you could get a glimpse of the big red "E" on there with the two hash marks on it. Its quite a sight to remember.

Just about that time however there was quite an explosion from

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the plane deck. It was the aerial depth charges. Two bombs from the plane went off and blew the airplane over the side and also blew the stack over. What remained, well that went over too and just about cleaned the plane deck off and blew half the bridge away, and put a hole all the way down to her hull. When it went down, we were just on the beach then climbing into Army trucks and I had just gotten in with the chief boatswain's mate when the explosion occurred and I never say anyone hit the deck as fast as the fellows around there. We were all on our stomachs. The fellows in the Army didn't know what to make of it but they got down after awhile too.

We were brought to the Army base and the Red Cross treated us very well there. Gave us cigarettes, shaving gear, clothes to the fellows that needed them, shoes for the fellows. Between the Army and the Red Cross they really took care of us. They fed us for quite a few days and gave us a place to sleep. We were transferred from there to the Navy base. Thirty-seven of us. The rest of the fellows were sent back to the States a few at a time. They flew them back. The 37 of us stayed down there to work on the ship. They were going to try to save it and see if we could bring it back. We worked for about 37 or 40 days on it, I wouldn't know off hand. We worked; no matter what your rate was from early morning to late at night. The fellows that worked on the ship, we worked like dogs down there. We took the guns off to lighten the ship, pumped the fuel out of the tanks up forward that still had fuel in them, and we were going to unload

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the ammunition but we didn't have to, we got the ship light enough to slide off the beach. It was quite a problem and I thought we were going to abandon ship again but we luckily got her off and she stayed afloat alright.

We brought her in and we couldn't quite get to the drydock because there was a ship in the drydock and couldn't come out as there were repairs being made to her. We were tied up to a buoy for about three days up at the Navy base where we fellows were stationed then. We stayed there for two days and on the morning of the third day, the ship went over on her side. The marines who stood watch out there, one of them came back in and told us that they heard water rushing in somewhere. The fellows went back out to the ship to see what they could do. We brought the handy-billies and started them working and we started to pump the engine room, the fire room and the pump room. They were all intact when we slid off the beach. They had a little water in them but not enough to do any damage. The machinery was still in good shape to be used again. Well I guess it was the after bulkhead of the pumproom that gave way. Nobody ever knew about that because the ship is on the bottom right now. But we can imagine that is what it was. We pumped the compartments out. The ship righted itself and then just kept going right over. She turned over about six o'clock one morning and went down. The fellows that were left there in Curacao, most of us managed to get up to the States. They flew us all back.

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It's an experience I'll never forget and I don't think any of the other fellows will either. I don't think that if it hadn't been for our skipper that we would be alive today. Everybody owes him an awful lot I think. He's a very fine person.