

REMOVAL OF THE ERIE'S HULK FROM WILLEMSTAD HARBOR (CURACAO)

The ERIE (ex-PG 50) remained in the inner harbor (Schottegat) at Willemstad for eight years, when (in 1950) the government of the Netherlands West Indies pressed for her removal, primarily in order to further develop the harbor area. Until that time, the hulk was not a hazard to navigation, but it did present some threat to public safety, since there was still a supply of munitions aboard, some of which would occasionally float to the surface.¹

At the urging of the U.S. Department of State and, in part, because the U.S. Navy saw this as excellent opportunity to train salvage personnel and experiment with a new method of raising sunken vessels, the Chief of Naval Operations authorized the removal of the gunboat by salvage vessels of the Atlantic Fleet in 1951.

The removal operation commenced in February 1952. Captain J. E. Flynn was the Salvage Officer in Charge. He was initially aided by Lt. Commander G.L. Potts, the Salvage Officer and Superintendent of the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard. Potts was brought to the scene for consultations because of his extensive experience in salvaging vessels for the Navy in World Wars I and II, and commercially. The initial plan called for completion of the mission in five months, but due to complications, the removal of the vessel took nearly 11 months.

The salvage vessels first on the scene were the U.S.S. ESCAPE and the U.S. Navy sea-going barge, the YFNB-17. They left the New York Navy Yard on January 31, 1952. On February 8 they docked at San Juan, Puerto Rico, where they took aboard Lt. Commander Potts (who had flown there from Seattle). The vessels stood out of San Juan on February 11 and arrived at Willemstad on February 13.

The initial attempt to re-float the ERIE took place on April 2, 1952. With all her spaces sealed off, the hulk pumped with air and gripped by 11 steel cables winched off the harbor shore, the bow of the ERIE slowly appeared out of the water, only to sink once more.

In the October 2006 issue of *Towline*, Raymond Heath (who was Seaman 1st Class in 1952 and aboard the ESCAPE) recollected efforts to raise the ERIE's hulk over the first six months. The following paragraphs (excerpted from his article entitled "Escape to Curacao") describe the initial work and the second attempt to re-float the ERIE:

"The ship pulled into the harbor and found the Gunboat 135 degrees upside down. What a mess. They decided to try and upright the vessel first and to do so required a lot of hard work from the crew.

First they had to bury 12 huge eel anchors in the sand on the beach. Not an easy task. Then they setup 11 winches and used anchor chain to secure them to the anchors. Now they had some pulling leverage. They ran cables from the winches to the submerged wreck and over its superstructure.

¹ The Dutch minelayer, WILLEM VAN DER ZAAAN, spent six months in the Dutch West Indies in 1949, during which time its diver teams explored the hulk of the ERIE and raised a considerable amount of munitions that remained aboard the vessel.

After some careful pulling, the Gunboat started to right itself. When the vessel was in an upright position divers descended to continue their salvage efforts. Using three diving barges, divers placed 11 chains beneath the hull, patched the holes in the compartments, and removed a lot of the superstructure.

Once the wreck was sealed it was ready to attempt a re-float. They placed 11 pontoons on each side of the Gunboat and when all was ready, they started pumping air. They filled all 22 pontoons and the patched compartments with air and at 1400 on an August afternoon the wreck popped up to the surface. It wasn't there for long when it broke all the support cables, rolled back over, and sank again to the bottom. This time it was 165 degrees upside down."

Heath's recollection of the salvage attempts is not far off the mark. According to the main Curacao newspaper, the hulk of the ERIE first emerged from the inner harbor on July 31 at 12:30 in the afternoon. The article further describes the scene after the ERIE had been on the surface for 35 seconds:

"...it turned suddenly, the ship began to shake very unstably and then capsized. The 1½ inch-thick steel cables on the bow and stern ripped apart as if they were made of rope and, as a result, the ship could no longer be secured. Effervescent air bubbles rose to the surface, under which the ERIE disappeared. Now, because of this misfortune, there is nothing more to be seen of the ERIE than the ripped apart cables at the waterside."²

After pulling a six-month stint, the ESCAPE and her crew were relieved by the U.S.S. OPPORTUNE on September 1, 1952. The OPPORTUNE assumed primary salvage responsibilities, but over the following months was joined by U.S.S. RECOVERY (ARS-43) and the U.S.S. SHAKORI (ATF-162) and several supply vessels. These vessels and the SHAKORI, an ocean-going tug, arrived at Willemstad on September 30 with additional equipment and supplies needed to raise the ERIE.

As the Salvage Officer in Charge, Capt. Flynn regularly transmitted status reports to the U.S. Navy's Bureau of Ships, the Chief of Naval Operations and the Commander of the Caribbean Sea Frontier. Most of these were brief radio messages.

Among these reports was one indicating that the hulk of the ERIE had been raised to the surface a second time, only to rather quickly plunge beneath the harbor waters. Finally, on November 21, the wreck of the ERIE was, for the third time, on the surface and securely moored.

In the first week of December, final preparations were made for hauling the wreck to its final resting place off the coast of Curacao. A number of pontoons that had aided in the raising of the ERIE were removed from the wreck, and special rigging was added in order to secure the stern to the main part of the hull. A commercial crane was used to lift out and put ashore two additional sections of the remaining superstructure, and the ship's rudder was removed. Then, charges were placed on the pontoons that helped keep the wreck afloat until she reached her last resting place. (The charges would free the pontoons from the wreck and allow it to sink to the ocean floor.)

² "De Erie kwam 35 seconden boven om weer onder te gaan," *Dagblad Amigoe di Curacao*, 1 August 1952, p 2. Article translated by webmaster.

In the early morning hours of December 9, 1952, the OPPORTUNE turned around, thus placing the hulk of the ERIE to her starboard side. Aided by two local tugs, the PARMO and the NEPTUNUS, the OPPORTUNE began hauling the wreck on its final journey out of the Schottegat (Willemstad's inner harbor) and into St. Anna Bay (the channel that divides Willemstad in two and is the inlet/outlet from and to the Caribbean Sea).

The journey out of the channel proved problematic. Swells increased, causing the stern of the wreck to pitch and roll. After clearing the channel and heading out to sea, high winds and cross-swells initially made navigation difficult. Captain Flynn ordered the OPPORTUNE and the tugs to increase their speed, believing that the stern would be no worse off over the small distance yet to be travelled.

Finally, at a position some 2.6 miles to the southeast of the harbor entrance, the two tugs cast off and stood clear, and the charges on the pontoons were fired. However, only those on the six pontoons attached to the stern section fired, after which the stern promptly pulled away from the remainder of the hulk and sank. Charges were then re-set and re-fired on the two pontoons that were still keeping the remainder of the wreck afloat, and at 1043 the wreck sank in about 300 fathoms (1,800 feet) of water, to the floor of the Caribbean Sea.

As noted above, the U.S. Navy used this training exercise to experiment with a new system for raising sunken ships. The system involved closing off all external openings in the wreck, pumping air into the vessel (creating a huge air bubble within the remains) and, assisted by a series of floating pontoons, refloating the sunken vessel. The first application on the wreck of the ERIE was deemed so successful that, in November 1955, U.S. Navy diving experts publicly expressed the belief that the LUSITANIA could be refloated using this novel system.³

The **Ship Documents** page provides a copy of Capt. Flynn's report detailing the removal and sinking of the ERIE on December 9, 1952, a Department of the Navy letter to the U.S. Department of State about the completion of the operation, and the U.S. Department of Defense press release announcing the removal of the gunboat.

On the **Photo Albums** page, visitors to the website can access photos of the work performed by the crew of U.S.S. ESCAPE in attempting to raise the sunken wreck of the ERIE in the inner harbor at Willemstad (in the album entitled **Refloating & Removal**). The album also includes a photo of the hulk of the ERIE being towed in St. Anna Bay to its final resting place and one depicting preparations to sink the hulk off the coast of Curacao.

³ See A. Hoehling, "System Devised that Could Float Liner Lusitania," *Boston Globe*, 13 November 1955, p. D26. Also, "U.S. Navy May Try To Salvage Lusitania," *Calgary Herald*, 14 December 1955, p. 28.