

## USS Erie torpedoed 70 years ago

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Amigoe di Curacao

**WILLEMSTAD — It was exactly seventy years ago - November 12, 1942 – that the ‘Battle-Lookout’ of the USS Erie alerted with surprise that he saw a torpedo approach the ship on port side at high speed. But it was too late.**

The USS Erie, a relatively new American warship with 180 men on board, had joined the convoy TAG-20 just outside the harbor of Willemstad, Curaçao, which was on its way to Quantánamo Bay in Cuba.

It was 17:33 hours and the blow of the explosion caused by the torpedo from the German torpedo U-163 was enormous. The ship had even come to a complete standstill for several moments. The shock was felt as far as the bridge and was so intense that the captain and the first officer had to hold on tight to avoid being flung to the deck. Other crewmembers were though and a lot material broke loose. A few depth charges had gone overboard, of which one very close underneath the ship. This boom exploded but there was extra damage.

The destructive torpedo that had hit the rear section caused a hole of approx. 14 meters long and 2 meters high. The largest part of the hole was under the waterline causing the ship to leak very quickly. It also appeared that the explosion had broken the propeller pipe on starboard and the ship was rudderless for a moment but the port engine and propeller stilled functioned properly and it wasn't long before the crew had control over the ship's maneuverability again. The ship had suddenly listed over considerably to starboard. This was followed by another two explosions. The oil and gasoline storage tanks on the afterdeck were split open and exploded, causing an enormous sea of flames.

To prevent the fire from spreading to the front of the ship, the captain ordered that the ship sail with the bow in the wind. Meanwhile the crew courageously battled the flames but the burning oil had spread to the front, forcing some crewmembers to jump overboard. Two men had already been thrown overboard by the explosion.

The Dutch warship H.M. van Kingsbergen, which was part of the convoy, had come to the rescue of the USS Erie, getting the crewmembers in sea on board.

The fire on the Erie had then spread more and more, followed by several explosions of ammunition lying on the afterdeck. Despite the approaching flames, the crew had dumped as much ammunition overboard as possible and those able to extinguish the flames remained but it had become clear very soon that it was a hopeless task. And yet the men had not given up, they continued their fight against the flames, heat and pitch black smoke.

However, the ship was sinking so a plan was made with the navigator to get the ship to the closest point of land.

The seriously flaming and listing USS Erie had then headed toward Piscadera and set on the reef along the (former) road to Pisacera (currently Koredor). The fire had now reached the bridge and the captain gave the order: ‘Abandon ship.’”

The crewmembers had jumped from the bow into the shallow water and walked or swam to shore.

A survivor, who was one of the last to jump overboard together with the captain, said the rubber soles of his shoes melted entirely whilst walking on the deck to the bow. As a result he had had to walk bare foot from the USS Erie on the reef along the Piscaderaweg over the coral reef scattered with sea hedgehogs to shore, causing him serious injuries. He hadn't been the only one.

Meanwhile, right along the coast, a real sea battle had been going on with warships, including the USS Spry, the USS Biddle, the Queen Wilhelmina and H.M. Van Kinsbergen, which fired depth charges, and with two patrolling bombers from Hato in search of the enemy submarine that had escaped by diver deeper. A local tugboat had arrived at the USS Erie where the latter had already succeeded in a reasonably situating itself atop the reef.

The choice to moor a 300-foot ship exactly there was a perfect one. This had saved many lives and the ship hadn't sunk and was preserved despite the enormous damage.

After a roll call was made on shore it had become clear rather quickly that six officers were not present and one assumed they were killed at sea. There were seventeen seriously injured. One of them had passed away the next day, bringing the number of casualties to seven. The military hospital in Camp Suffisant had treated another 35 minor injuries.

The aforementioned happened exactly seventy years ago in our waters. To remember this part of the Second World War history on Curaçao, the Foundation Battle-Station Blue Force Curaçao 1942 will hold a solemn ceremony this afternoon at 17:33 hours on the exact spot where the USS Erie moored on the reef in 1942 to commemorate the casualties and the warship USS Erie.